

A PATHWAY TO PEACE
WALKING A CAMINO AT 79

BY

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Chapter 1

It was about three weeks after my 79th birthday on a warm afternoon in late August that some rogue idea, some misdirected brain wave, crossed my mind. It was - El Camino. Now, I have known about El Camino de Santiago de Compostela for a number of years and have always wanted to walk it, partly because it has an intriguing history and partly because it is an amazing adventure. I took a moment to remind myself of its significance.

The Camino began as a pilgrimage around 800AD, because for centuries the faithful believed that the body of the apostle St James, after a tragic martyrdom in Jerusalem, was placed in a boat, which magically found its way from the Holy Land to the shores of Northern Spain, where St. James had once preached. His body was then buried and time passed. It wasn't until a shepherd, Pelayo, guided by a field of stars, found the ancient burial place. He notified the authorities. A monastery was built to protect the saint's relics and the town of Santiago de Compostela (St. James of the field of stars) was formed. Once the bones of St. James were properly housed, people began to make pilgrimages to his relics, hoping for miracles or in the very least the forgiveness of their sins. The various Caminos that now exist are a testament to the endurance of those journeys. Penitents came from many places. Most came from Spain along the Camino Primitivo, Del Norte, or Via de la Plata. However, pilgrims also came from England – Camino Ingles, from France – Camino France's and from Portugal – Camino Portuguese to name some of the more travelled routes.

Even if you don't consider yourself a pilgrim, the Camino is still an adventurous walk over challenging terrain for many days. The most popular Camino, the France's, for example, is about 800kms and can take a modest walker almost 40 days to complete. For anyone, either pagan or pilgrim, it is still an endurance test. However, unlike many other challenging hikes, the Camino has a unique atmosphere. You don't have to be a believer to feel a certain spiritual empathy as you walk. It may be the rich history of the path, its geological positioning over several tectonic faults or its alignment with the Milky Way that brings a mystical energy to the journey. Whatever, the cause, the Camino is a rare experience, not to be missed.

In spite of everything that makes the Camino special, my late husband, a consummate walker, was never interested in trekking The Way. I let the idea rest...in the back of my mind...for years. Until suddenly today, something dislodged it. Now who or what was shaking those loose nuts and bolts that pass for brains in the addled? There must have been a trigger. What was it?

Something on Facebook, perhaps? Had I inadvertently "liked" some generic post, as I mindlessly scrolled through the ads, the memes, the hype, the trash? I have often said that Facebook is the new oracle. So am I now a prophet reading the entrails dumped on social media? Not a great way to think of an idea to walk a sacred path. Anyway, whatever the cause, somewhere deep in the recesses of my wrinkled brain a synapse snapped and a journey began right at a time when I needed it the most!

The world was in turmoil. Everywhere, it seemed, wars were raging. People were starving. Too many had died. Elsewhere, thousands were desperate to escape punishing regimes, risking their lives to come to already over-crowded “free” countries, which were veering to the political right. Many liberties, gained over the years, were being lost. Democracy was in peril.

Stress had been building at home as well. Three years ago my husband, Denis, died of cancer. It was the most difficult eighteen months of my life. Something you never heal from is survivor’s guilt. Added to this tragedy, my youngest had lost his job, due partly to the pandemic and partly to the restructuring of the company. He survived for a few years on government assistance for COVID and fell apart, when it stopped. He was a ship without a rudder. You give up asking. “How’s the job search going?” At the same time, my eldest was struggling to get his art business off the ground. There was no money coming in. His partner was supporting both of them and I didn’t see any positives on the horizon. Even I had lost interest in my own company. I still maintained a small enterprise that distributed knitting supplies to craft stores. However, shops I had sold to for years were closing. My suppliers were changing; costs were escalating, and the price of shipping had become almost prohibitive. In addition to all of this, there were the three years of dealing with COVID and its restrictions. I needed to go somewhere far away – physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Camino lore says that your pilgrimage begins the moment you decide to walk it. I wasn’t sure, though, that I had actually decided to take on this challenge. I know I had mentioned to a few friends that I was thinking of walking a Camino, but I’m not sure I had fully committed myself to it. However, I did buy some hiking shoes because they were on sale. I then bought a backpack, also on sale and finally, I found my hiking poles. I knew I could walk 5kms in an hour. Could I walk 10kms in 2 hours? I tacked up! I walked 2kms from my house to Mt Pleasant Cemetery, where I connected with the ravine that runs through Mud Creek. Another 3kms of walking through a beautiful forested path brought me to the Brickworks – a restored quarry and ecological centre, where I had a coffee at Picnic Cafe’ and then walked back – Bingo, 10kms. Okay, I was tired, but I did it.

I also did the math. Sarria to Santiago de Compostela is the required 100kms on the Camino de Santiago to receive your certificate. I could walk 10kms a day. Actually, I could walk 10kms in two hours. I could do 100kms in 10 days and still have time left over. I started looking at airfares. TAP had a great flight from Toronto to Porto via Lisbon for \$375.00 – return would be \$750.00, with \$375.00 for medical insurance I would be a little over \$1,000.00CAD for getting there and back. I then looked at dates. I felt I had to be here for Easter. I’m not sure why. I’m not a practicing Catholic, but I do celebrate occasions and this is a festive time - the beginning of Spring. Easter the year I planned to walk – 2024 was March 31. I also know in my cache of useless information how the date of Easter is determined. If we ever meet, remind me and I will tell you. But that’s an aside – one of many, you’ll find out.

With Easter over in March, I would have the whole month of April to spend in Spain. The timing suited my obsessive-compulsive brain, so I decided to book my flights. I used a travel agent. We always have. I'm a creature of habit. However, the agent we have always used was just booking trips to Tahiti now – some people have a tough life. He referred me to a colleague, a woman, who had actually planned to walk a Camino in 2020 but didn't because of COVID. Claire found a direct flight from Toronto to Porto via Air Transat and recommended that I upgrade to allow changes to my tickets, just in case I needed to. I paid for the upgrades, before I realized that once I left Toronto, I could not change my return ticket. I'll think twice about upgrading the next time.

I knew that my visa card covered me for \$1,500.00 of trip cancellation insurance, lost luggage etc., so I paid for medical insurance only. I also read the fine print. I wanted to make sure there was an allowance for repatriation of remains. Yes, I could die on the trail. I suppose it would be somewhat akin to hitting a brick wall at full speed, which has always been my preferred cause of death, but climbing a hill at a snail's pace will do just as well.

Now, I had to get more gear and more input. I had already joined several Camino groups on Facebook and started gathering information. I kept a notebook and jotted down brand names as they were recommended. I added tips about money, places to stay, books to read, what to pack. I did, in a weak moment, think that maybe I should have a tour group handle all the arrangements. They would book my accommodation, transport my luggage and be there, if I needed help. I could justify this convenience because of my age. Well, when I looked into the cost of having someone else do all the work, I realized that this convenience came with a hefty price tag. No, I could book my own bed/room/hotel and save a lot of money.

I also started walking in earnest. I walked 10kms about three or four times a week with a 5lb backpack, which I gradually increased in weight. I was aiming for 10lbs. max. I bought merino clothing because it is light weight and quick drying. I also bought sandals, a poncho, a sleeping sheet and good socks. My son gave me his old phone, which was an upgrade from my pre-historic one, so I could download apps to book hostels and find directions. I booked accommodation in Matosinhos, a small town about 13km from the cathedral in Porto for my first night. I started telling people. My sister-in-law, who lives in Edinburgh, said that she would try to meet me in Santiago de Compostela when I arrived. She sent me a book, *The Gathering Place*, by Scottish writer, Mary Colwell, who had walked the Camino France's in 2020. I was hooked! I set up a website, caroltomany.com to communicate with family and friends as often as I could. I resurrected my husband's old iPad to use for posts. I began reading books by other authors who had written about their experiences mainly on the Camino France's. I conceived the title of this book – *A Pathway to Peace*.

Although almost five months had passed since the Camino had seeded itself inside my brain, things had not changed in the world or at home. Russia and The Ukraine were still at war. So too were Israel and Palestine. The US was on the brink of electing a potential dictator for the second time, Canada was favouring another populist, equally as

destructive, for prime minister and our provincial premier was destroying healthcare, education, the environment and anything else he could get his hands on. There was still a severe housing shortage in Toronto, even though the city was maxed out with fifty story high-rises, which no one could afford. Food prices were through the roof, taxes were escalating, while everywhere you looked the city was crumbling in decay. My youngest still hadn't landed a full time job and was balking at paying his share of the household expenses. My eldest had just had his rent increased by 25% and had decided to move back to Ontario, from Alberta and live with his partner off the grid in Northern Ontario, where today it is -25°C and the heater has failed in their trailer. I needed peace.

I needed an escape. I wasn't really running away from it all. I was recharging, recalibrating, re-establishing my relationship with myself, my understanding of reality and my connection to a higher order. If there is a God out there, how do I make contact?

Chapter 2

The Camino had not only established itself in my mind, it had crept into my soul. Never did I think, though, in all of my preparation, “Oh I’m too old for this.” In fact, I really didn’t think about my age at all. Instead, I thought about my abilities and whether I could walk the distances required. In training for my pilgrimage, I regularly walked 10kms about four times a week. I also made sure that I could walk 20kms in a day, in case I needed to, with at least a 10lb backpack. In fact, one day I managed 24kms. You don’t know what you are capable of until you “force” yourself to do it!

So how did a journey of 100kms from Sarria to Santiago morph into a 250kms trek from Porto to Santiago (375kms if I add the spiritual variant – an additional loop of 125kms through beautiful terrain including a monastery)? Again, you will find, that I never know when to stop. I was determined to fly to Portugal because of the inexpensive airfares. I looked at the logistics of getting from Porto to Sarria – doable by train with three changes. Hmmm. I could get lost, miss a connection, fall asleep, in fact, anything could happen. I posted my dilemma in a Facebook forum, hoping for ideas. One person, a Canadian woman, suggested that since I was already in Porto, why didn’t I just do the Portuguese coastal Camino because the first 6 or 7 days were flat!! We are a country of enablers. It was the flat first 100kms that got me. Why, I would then have just 150kms left to struggle through to Santiago and I would feel really good about myself for having walked that far. I am still thinking of doing the spiritual variant, but I know, the Camino will provide, when the time comes.

To pass the time before I flew to Porto, I read other people’s accounts of their Camino walks. To date, I have read 26 books and reviewed them on my website. Reading the books written by other pilgrims was a little like walking beside some of the people who had gone before me. Each book is a fascinating account of the journey and everyone’s story is different. In fact, most of the books, in their own unique way, captured the essence of the Camino. These walkers/writers put into words the magic of a pilgrimage experienced by millions of people, over countless centuries. They recreated on paper the love, the angst, the agony and often the redemption of The Way.

Along with reading the stories of other pilgrims, I also did my own research. I discovered that these paths, across northern Spain particularly, before they were Christian pilgrimages were actually mystical journeys undertaken by earlier cultures, some prehistoric, to reach what was then considered the end of the world – Finisterre. Roman pilgrims worshipped at their own shrines along the route and pre-Roman societies used the area around the Cathedral in Santiago as their burial grounds. Given the location of the path over several geological faults, under the canopy of the Milky Way, the Camino France’s especially, emanates a powerful energy that many have tried to capture in both their walking and their writing. This uninterrupted connectivity and this layered spirituality can be life changing.

Reading and walking became the main focus of my time from September to April. Fortunately, Ontario was blessed with a mild winter. I walked regularly, eventually walking 24kms one day, as I have said, with an 8.5lb backpack and no pain. I was tired,

but I wasn't exhausted. I think I was able to out walk the tendonitis and the plantar faciitis that had set me back in December. Yes, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. After a month or so of extended walks, my body started to react. I developed tendonitis. I could walk through some of it, but the going was tough. At first I stayed off my feet as much as I could. When the pain eased, I walked a little with no backpack. Gradually I increased the walking distance and finally added my backpack at half the weight. Just when I thought that the tendonitis had gone and I was close to 10lbs in backpack weight, he sent his twin brother, plantar fasciitis, to plague me. This I couldn't walk through. I could do some specific exercises, but I had to stay off my feet as much as possible until it had eased.

While putting my feet up, I did some research and found that strengthening the hips takes the stress, from the extra weight of the backpack, off the knees, ankles and feet. I started doing hip exercises. I even bought colour coded resistant bands. Mentally I decided to go all out. Physically my body said, "No." My hips ached, my sciatic nerve played up, and I was worried that I would throw out something and not be able to walk at all. I eased up. I took a break over Christmas, before I started exercising again in January, when it was too cold to walk -12°C. Believe me I could walk for miles (kilometers) and never mind the exercise at all. But to get down on the floor and do a few leg raises is anathema. I hated it. However, the Camino calls so I do them. Clam shells – ten knee lifts per side. Straight leg raises – ten lifts per side, plus a few other tortures designed by some sadistic phys. ed. teacher. I did them all, hating every move and feeling very sorry for myself.

With all these mobility complications, I weakened again and decided if I couldn't afford a tour group, I could at least afford to have my backpack transferred. I posted something to that effect in one of the groups on Facebook, hoping for some sympathy and an exemption. I'll never forget the comment from a 76 year-old woman who had walked six or seven Caminos. She said, "The day I can't carry my backpack, is the day I will give up walking Caminos." I realized then that it was not so much about the weight of the pack, but the commitment to the journey, as a challenge, a pilgrimage, a rite of passage and a verification of one's abilities. It was then that I decided, if I am going to walk this Camino, I am going to do it as authentically as possible.

In an effort to control the weight of my pack, I started to weigh every item in it on my "not for trade use" kitchen scale, recording the weights. I then purged and re-weighed. I cut a bar of soap in half. I removed my face cream – Vaseline will have to do. I ditched any "just in case extras" such as extra socks, underwear, sweater. I exchanged a multiple charging device for one with just two ports - much lighter. I scrapped my iPad keyboard for a folding one that bluetoothed to my phone, no need for an iPad. At last my pack weighed just over 10lbs. It still seemed heavy to lift, but once I had it on and concentrated on walking, it was never a burden. I needed real answers from the Camino, so I really had to give it my heart, my soul, my angst, my pain, and my commitment to walk as a true pilgrim – no guided tour, no luggage transfers, and no taxis. I did take my phone with several apps for the Camino downloaded on it. Some I know, don't even take a phone – mea culpa!

With January in full swing as exercise month, I designated February as “Learning Month.” I had to become familiar with some of those downloaded apps, take a course to perfect my website, study some Spanish, and book my accommodation for two nights in Santiago and two nights return in Porto – not actually learning per se, but I was using the app “Wise Pilgrim” for directions and accommodation. It’s all part of the learning curve.

March then became cleaning month. I always feel I have to leave the house in order when I plan to be away for some time. I often think of the saying, “If you want to save the world, start by making your own bed.” Well, I know I won’t save the world, not this one anyway. I’ll be lucky if I save myself. Cleaning, however, was a productive way of spending that anxious time before departure. I cleaned the fridge, the freezer, the stove, the shower - this was a serious disinfect, de-mold scrub – not my usual wipe down. I washed woodwork and the worst of the walls. I cleaned the dishwasher – how it ever actually cleans dishes is beyond me. I didn’t clean the car. I was flying not driving. Plus, although, this might not be exactly cleaning, or maybe it’s cleaning of different sort, I have decided, partly from reading and partly from trying to do what I can with what I have, is to pray, as I make my way from Porto to Santiago along the coastal route. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” to quote another adage. I will leave with a clean house and perhaps come back with a burnished soul.

Yes, I am very much into the spiritual aspect of the journey, as you can see. I will take my mother’s rosary with me. My mother, who was Lutheran, married an Irish Catholic. Someone, at one point, knowing she would need strength, had given her a rosary. I never remember her using it, however, I found it among her things, when she died. (The lord works in mysterious ways.) The rosary is a symbol of a journey through prayer, much as the Camino is a symbol of a journey through life. The rosary asks you to meditate on life through all its joyful, sorrowful and glorious events (mysteries). These are compressed into the fifteen decades of the rosary – five decades for each of the three phases. As pilgrims we can identify with the joyful occasions in life – birth and growth, as well as the sorrowful – agony and defeat. What we hope for, however, is the glorious – salvation and redemption. This is what is so precious about the Camino. We can live life on so many different levels

Even if we don’t use a symbol of prayer, such as a rosary, for our journey, we can still meditate on the signs of the Camino itself - the arrows being the onward passage of our lives, the crosses, the burdens we bear, and the shells, the wealth of our experiences. Symbols on the Camino are many and varied. Some carry the motifs, I have mentioned. Others carry more personal items. I saw small stuffed animals tucked into pockets, for a child lost, perhaps. I noticed hearts of every description for the love(s) we take with us, wherever we go. There were also the flags, the emblems, and the insignias that represent our lives on a daily basis - our nationality, our endeavours and our inherent identities.

In my almost eighty years, I might have added a lot of weight to my pack, if I had sewn on a patch for every twist and turn of my tangled life. I had to be selective and of course decorous, even if a little decorated. I narrowed my symbols down to five - the Canadian flag for myself, the flag of St. Andrew for my late husband, who was born in Scotland, the flags of both Portugal and Spain, the countries I would be walking through

and a Camino badge (from Etsy – mea culpa) which included the year of my walk – 2024, the phrase “The Camino Provides” and the iconic shell in all the Pride colours, for friends and family. I also had a real scallop shell given to me in a lovely ceremony at one of the pilgrim meetings in Toronto. Even though many walkers passed me with no indication of who they were, where they were from or why they were even on the Camino, everyone had the pre-requisite shell.

Chapter 3

Part of the encouragement in my pre-Camino preparation had been making contact with the Toronto Community of Pilgrims. It's an off-shoot of the Canadian Company of Pilgrims, which issues credentials – those little passports that you must get stamped twice a day in order to claim your compostela, your certificate of completion, in Santiago. I went to my first meeting on Nov 4, 2023 and then again on March 2, 2024 just before I left. Both meetings were nothing short of amazing. At the November meeting I enjoyed a presentation entitled “A Day in the Life of a Pilgrim.” It was a very informative description of what to expect on the Camino from the very basic - how to pack, where to stay and what to eat – to the mystical, presented by a lawyer, turned Anglican minister - signs, symbols and miracles on the Camino. Sue was a wonderful speaker. She gave us some of the history of the Camino including details of its religious symbolism and stories of its serendipitous magic. After her talk, one of the attendees, a former police officer, told us a story about being dispatched on a cold, wet night to a residential area of Little Portugal in Toronto. Apparently there was a woman on the veranda of one of the houses blessing people. Hundreds had gathered. His job was crowd control. In the end, she blessed him and gave him a medal. That woman was Mother Teresa. We were in awe. It was another connection, another symbol and a lot of magic. It wasn't on a Camino, but it was a Camino moment in his life. It was also a way of saying Camino miracles can happen anywhere, anytime.

At the March meeting, I helped an organizer of one of the Camino groups on Facebook, WOACA, distribute her books and badges. I even got to meet Dennis Garnhum, the author of “Toward Beauty,” a book I had read and loved. It was an exciting day and I thought to myself, “These are ordinary people doing extraordinary things.” I loved being part of the Camino vibe. As an aside, the Toronto pilgrims walk every Monday and Friday, in the city, for a good 15-20kms per walk. They also meet on the last Sunday of the month for coffee and every second Thursday of the month for a pub night. It's a very active group!!

There was still, however, work to be done before I left. I had to refine my website - my way of communicating daily with family and friends. I know there are many blogging platforms available that are easier to use and free, but I like the mental exercises inherent in the almost counter-intuitive Wordpress and let's face it, I'm a martyr. Well, I'm about to take on a pilgrimage. Only someone who loves pain and frustration would combine the two – coded website with loosely coded walk.

With the website set up. The Toronto District School Board's Adult Learning course for Wordpress completed, my Camino apps, Wise Pilgrim, Buen Camino and Camino Ninja installed, my plane tickets, medical insurance package and Visa travel insurance documents copied to my phone, as well as hard copies of each in my backpack, I entered the final stages of my preparation. About two weeks before I left, I got my hair cut, bought some basic meds – Imodium and Ibuprofen, added some more songs to my phone. Did I mention I have 407 songs listed from artists as diverse as Pete Seeger and Sinaid O'Connor to genres as different as hymns and Rhythm and Blues. I found €50 in

notes and coin from previous trips to Europe in a dresser drawer, which I added to the €200 I got from the bank. I slipped an extra credit card, copies of my health card, insurance card and two credit cards into a “money belt,” which I planned to wear under my clothing. I secured a waist pack, which I loved but which kept unclasping, with safety pins – try to find these in an age of disposable diapers. This pack held my passport, phone, wallet, plane tickets and various odds and ends. If I were hoping to find peace on the path, I wanted to make sure that I had the peace of mind of valuables secured and documents retrievable. I also fretted about how I was going to acquire hiking poles in Porto, as I couldn’t take them with me on the plane, unless I checked them in and paid extra. It wasn’t worth the price of the poles. I hoped, again, that the Camino would provide.

I also kept running across this quotation from the poet, Mary Oliver:

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life.”

I will, Mary, once I get off that plane, I plan to write everyday about this “wild and precious” journey.

Chapter 4

So it was on the afternoon of April 3, 2024, after I had shipped out three orders at work, paid my business taxes at the bank and picked up a copy of my filed personal taxes, that I packed my backpack and changed into my Camino gear. Every item I had packed had a story and every story was part of my journey, my “Pathway to Peace.”

1. I put on my Under Armour walking shoes, on sale at \$40.00 – down from \$80.00. These would be my physical contact with the Camino. They would keep me upright; receive energy from the sacred path and hopefully send some peace to my soul.
2. My merino socks that I bought at the great Canadian Sox Company for a song. These would cushion my walk, ease any pain and warm up the colder days.
3. My Stanfield merino leggings, which I was thrilled to buy for \$125.00 CAD with free shipping from Nova Scotia. Most merino basic wear was about \$200.00US and shipped from the US. Again I needed to be warm and covered. They were perfect.
4. My \$15.00 Joe Fresh black cotton dress. I actually packed two identical dresses – day dress and nightdress, which were interchangeable. Yes, I could have worn T-shirts, but I loved these dresses. They were both comfortable and comforting.
5. My black, \$42.00 Joe Fresh merino pullover. Again I packed an identical sweater, this time in blue. I wore the blue one for special occasions – like dinner. Most merino long sleeved tops were closer to \$200.00US plus shipping. These were a bargain but still looked very elegant. Peace is having some money left over at the end of the day.
6. My Teva sandals, which were never broken in because of ordering and shipping problems. They were, however, essential in the hostels in the evening. Sandals are softer on blistered feet - anything to ease the pain.
7. Toiletries – toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, facecloth, shampoo, which was also used as laundry detergent, Vaseline for face and feet – please don’t judge me. (Yes, I have been known to put my foot in my mouth), nail clippers, tweezers, small sewing kit. (I used the sewing needles to pierce and drain blisters – again please don’t judge me. The needles weren’t sterilized. I didn’t die.) Polysporin, sunscreen, band-aids, wool fibre – it’s a Camino thing to ward off blisters. Peace of mind in small things.
8. My Turkish towel – light weight and fast drying - bought from a woman running a small business from her condo a block away from my home. Many hostels do not supply towels – showers yes, towels no. It also subs as an extra layer on the bed, if it’s chilly at night or a sarong to cover up when entering a church. Did I mention it was \$20.00 cheaper than others online. To make a long story longer, I bought it from a Turkish woman, so I know it was authentic. MEC’s towels were made in China. Helping others to help themselves.

9. My undies – all cotton. I find merino still too itchy. Sweaters and leggings are OK, but clothing closer to the more sensitive areas of the body has to be cotton.

10. My electronics – charger + converter for my phone and my folding keyboard. As I mentioned earlier, I had decided not to take my husband’s old iPad for posts. It was just too heavy. I found a very light, folding keyboard at WalMart for \$30.00. It was perfect. The peace of electronics may be a contradiction in terms. However, they did relieve the stress of being away, giving me the confidence of connecting with family, when I needed to and relieving a lot of anxiety with a GPS reading when I was lost, which turned out to be often.

11. My meds – just two, fortunately, plus Imodium and Ibuprofen. I didn’t take a poetry book. If I needed solace, I had my mother’s rosary and my phone to look up any material I might need for meditation. I did write, though. It was my peace at the end of the day!!

12. My miscellany – clothes pegs, lipsil, flossers, kleenex, pee cloths in a zip lock bag (4 squares cut from a washable paper towel to be used instead of toilet paper, when caught short on the trail – never leave anything behind), Brierley guide book, which I lost – go figure and extra safety pins. Never underestimate the value of a safety pin and its ability to hold the world together at a critical moment – the other items to a lesser extent - but still essential in my book.

I remembered to take my house key, in case I arrived home and everyone was at work. I took \$15.00 CAD cash for whatever and downloaded the Uber App to my phone. I was originally planning to walk to the subway station, but it was pouring rain and I didn’t feel like putting on my poncho, figuring out how to dry it at the airport and then repacking it before my flight. The driver took me to a subway station nearby. I rode a southbound train to Union Station where I connected with the UPtrain to the airport for \$12.00. Once there, I still had to get from terminal one to terminal three via an easy to find airport shuttle. I had my boarding pass, so I whizzed through security with no line up and decided to have an early dinner.

I remember many years ago the food at the airport was quite sophisticated. It was white tablecloths, elegant tureens of cubed aspic and slices of roast beef cooked very rare. But that was then and this is now. I had the equivalent of a very tasteless egg McMuffin, loosely described on the menu as “scrambled eggs.” This is where AI misses the point entirely. I did, however, ease the pain by writing a post with my folding keyboard and chatting to a waiter, who was fascinated with the gadget – a kindred soul.

My backpack attracted the attention of some fellow passengers – all female, who were also travelling to Porto to start their Caminos. The first group I met were three women from London, ON – Sandy, Lynn and Nora. Both Sandy and Lynn were retired nurses, who had walked the Camino France’s a few years before. This was Nora’s first Camino. They were a lively trio, with lots of enthusiasm, experience and information. We were joined by two other women from western Canada – Whitehorse, in fact. This would be the second Camino for both Brenda and Donna. Again they were retired, excited to be

travelling and great company. I count my Camino as starting at Pearson International. My seven-hour flight was uneventful except for some early turbulence. The best film, on a list of nothing memorable was the three hour Oscar winning movie, Oppenheimer, with Cillian Murphy. It filled a good chunk of the time. I can't remember the meal – probably just as well and I had an aisle seat, which I didn't have to pay for. Buen Camino

Chapter 5

I landed in Porto at 8:30am Portuguese time. I met up with the other five women from the airport last night and since all of us were taking the train into the city, we were able to help each other understand the process of using the ticket machine, finding the platform and processing our tickets. At Trindade Station, we said good-bye. The other pilgrims were staying for a day or two in Porto. However, since I had booked a hostel about 13kms outside of Porto on the sea in Matosinhos, I had to get to the cathedral, get my credential stamped and head south to the Duoro river to be on my way. It was a sad good bye.

I now walked on alone. Since I wasn't up to speed on google maps, I just looked at the horizon for towers. Doesn't every cathedral have a steeple? I also followed the lay of the land. Although the church is on a hill it is in the general downward slope to the river. Eventually, I saw tour buses, large groups of people and a medieval building up ahead. That must be it.

The climb to the cathedral was significant. It wasn't difficult. I could manage it easily, but it was steeper than most of my walks during training. It was a little taste of what was to come! Though steep, the ascent did afford a splendid view of the old city and the Duoro – the river of gold. Positioning a place of worship on the highest point there is, says so much. The devout must endure some penance in the hike to the Cathedral. Their reward though is the beauty of the edifice itself, the awe of its magnificent interior and the splendor of the surrounding vista - Art and Nature combining to create a religious experience.

I paid two euros to enter the cathedral and spend some time in a sacred place. I mentally said a Hail Mary. I might have said more, but I guess Thursday was cleaning day at the church. The steady hum of the vacuum cleaner sucked out a lot of my spiritual endeavor. Well, maybe I had some more cleaning of my soul to do anyway before I reached an even more magnificent church in Santiago. I got my first stamp in my pilgrim credential from a rather surly desk clerk. I smiled. My journey had begun. The Camino was entering my soul. I tried to understand why this person was so disgruntled. Was it because I didn't make an effort to speak Portuguese? Was she tired of all these pilgrims and their lack of courtesy in a sacred place? Was she just having a bad day? I wanted to be understanding rather than judgmental. I was finding peace by mitigating negatives. It was a start.

I churned through these thoughts as I began my descent to the river. The winding back streets of Porto were very steep. I could have used a walking pole or two. I didn't find one, even though three of us went to the lost and found at the airport looking for some. Passengers cannot take walking poles on as cabin luggage. They must be checked in. Since most pilgrims carry a backpack, which can be stowed in the overhead bins, they leave their poles behind. Those who know, leave them in hostels, those who don't have them confiscated at the airport. Lost and found had no idea what we were talking about. I might have thought there was a conspiracy between them and a local vender of hiking

poles, but I was in Camino mode and being positive. It didn't help much. There were no poles. My two feet and my stubborn resolve would have to do.

Though quite a challenge, without poles, these tiny streets were very charming. Potted plants with graceful leaves and brilliant flowers, gave a garden feel to the cobblestoned paths. I meandered through small lanes, past doors adorned with polished brass and windows dressed in lace curtains. On various corners intricate wrought iron lanterns hung from lampposts, guarding the entrances to arched passageways. They were reminiscent of another time long ago and far away. In fact many of these buildings would have grown up from the harbor hundreds of years ago. They might have housed local merchants, petty clerks or even a retired seaman or two, who could have sailed on excursions organized by Henry the Navigator, a revered son. As early as the 12th century, Porto was expanding abroad and making a name for itself as a centre of commerce. This rich history added another depth to my walk. The Camino has many layers

There is something about being in a different place that takes your mind out of its usual thought patterns and places them in a new and vibrant milieu. I knew I was walking an ancient path, inhaling an almost medieval atmosphere and sensing an aura of something divine. I had to live up to this challenge. I would have to draw on my inner strength(s), as I walked with nothing more than the belongings I had packed and my determination to finish a 300kms journey in tact. My thought patterns would have to be spare and concentrated. There would be no time for pettiness or extraneous tangents of angst. I would have to be there in the moment most of the time. I could reminisce perhaps and dream while I worked through the questions I had asked of the Camino and the kilometres I had chosen to walk, but I had to remain positive, emanate kindness and absorb the power and peace of the path.

Fortunately, I managed the declines to the Duoro without a walking pole and ignored the Camino arrows which were pointing me back up to the centre of Porto and onto to the central route. When I finally reached the river, I remembered that I hadn't had breakfast. Yes, there was that bun on the plane that was edible and yes, I did eat it, but now I needed something more substantial. Keeping the river to my left, I walked toward the sea and the town of Matosinhos, waiting for a café to materialize, so I could fill the physical void in my stomach, while I nourished the spiritual void in my soul with a walk by the river. All was peaceful.

I thought of a time long ago in the 70s when I first came to Portugal with my late husband. It was August and we had a little over two weeks of vacation time from work. This would be my second time in Iberia. The first was about ten years before when I had hitched from London to Madrid and over to Valencia before heading north to Barcelona and southern France. I never made it to Portugal.

I was thrilled then to be able to have a second chance to spend time here and to spend it all in Portugal. When we arrived in the late 70s, the country was just getting back on its feet after a revolutionary war and prices had not yet reached European levels. To stay within our budget, we booked return fares with a charter company, rented an

inexpensive car and arranged for our first and last night's accommodation at a reasonable hotel. In between we just hoped for the best. We started from Lisbon and followed an article in an old Gourmet magazine, "North From Lisbon," as they mentioned great places to eat from Lisbon to Porto and beyond. On our third day of travelling, I remember we had a long and difficult drive through rain arriving in Porto about 7:00pm. My husband, who had done all the driving, was exhausted. I would now do the walking to find a hotel. As I passed through the central plaza, I couldn't help reading the headlines on the various newspapers set out in the square "Elvis Morde" they sobbed. I was in shock. A piece of my youth had gone. I would cherish even more this vacation. Life is too short!

We spent just one night in Porto heading out the next day to take a leisurely trip East up the Duoro river to Viseu. It was a beautiful drive on a sunny day in early August. Forty-six years later, on an equally sunny day in early April, I would walk West on the Duoro to the sea. I took his memory with me.

As I walked, I noticed a few fish restaurants, but they hadn't opened yet for lunch – alas. However, there were no little pastry shops or even the odd café with a biscuit or two, a double alas!! I walked on. The river was quiet and slow, the sun, warm and the scene, decidedly urban. Buildings climbed up both sides of the embankment. Most were white stucco with red tiled roofs. The walkway was beside and slightly above the river protected by a substantial railing. In fact at points the path hovered over the river and the walkway became a grate – a little unnerving on an empty stomach, I must admit. I walked on, ignoring the speeding traffic to my right.

Gradually I walked out of the city. The air changed. It was fresher. There was a scent of ocean in the breeze. I forgot my hunger. I passed men fishing along the railings. I passed locals enjoying the good weather. Unfortunately, I passed no pilgrims. The land began to open. There was more parkland and less railing. Small boats bobbed at the water's edge, and young children played in the grass. There were, however, no cafés.

I passed a small town. I knew it wasn't Matosinhos because I hadn't seen a beach or the open sea. I pressed on still quite happy and reassured that I was in the right place, at the right time. Well, I had all day. I had a booking at the Fishtail Seahouse hostel, which didn't open until 3:00pm. I ignored the fact that I had now been awake almost 24 hours (I don't sleep on planes). The breeze became a slight wind on which seagulls sailed. I passed another town. The path became a street and then disappeared. I climbed up to a road. Eureka! There was a café. I would ask directions after lunch. In broken Portuguese, I ordered a coffee and toast. I was brought a toasted ham and cheese sandwich for €7. It was delicious. I asked the waiter/owner – this was a family restaurant - if the town was Matosinhos. "No, but not too far, about six or seven." I wasn't sure if that was minutes or kilometres. I paid my bill and pressed on.

Seven minutes passed and no Matosinhos. He must have meant kilometres, which I'm sure are longer in Europe than in Canada. I came to another town. There was an aquarium nearby. I decided to ask the woman at the desk where I was. She interrupted my

half Portuguese, half Spanish with the question, "Do you speak English?" Well, yes, as a matter of fact I do. Her answer was disconcerting. "This is not Matosinhos. Keep walking." I might have said, "sadist," but my inner Camino said, she was lovely, since she had offered to speak English. You just have to keep walking. Finally, at the 13km mark on my phone, I came to a beach and a sign that said Matosinhos. To my left was the tourist office, where I got a stamp and showed them my reservation at the Fishtail Seahouse. Another lovely person gave me a map, which I followed to the hostel. I was early by an hour. No one else was there, so I went for a coffee. The weather was mild, the sun was soft and the air was salty.

I might have walked around the town a little, but it was really quite a big place, not the small fishing village I had imagined when I first looked it up in November. I could get lost and have to walk some more – no 13kms were enough for the first day. I was tired after an all night flight, a late breakfast and a long walk. I hung around the hostel door, which was actually just one door along a streetscape of similar doors. Fortunately, there was a number and a small sign that designated this particular door, as that of the Fishtail Seahouse Hostel.

Pilgrims started to arrive. First there were the two older women from Brittany. I guessed that they were in their early to late 70s. They spoke no English and my French was appalling. We smiled and nodded. The next person to arrive was a tall statuesque pilgrim, whom I found out later was from Germany, Kirsten. Another two women, although travelling separately, arrived together about five minutes later. It was now 3:30 and the door hadn't opened. Some clever person decided to ring the bell. A voice on the intercom asked for more time – sigh. We hung about. One of the two women who had just arrived introduced herself, as Corinna from Holland. She took this "time out" to go for fruit at a nearby market and offered us all clementines when she returned. I declined, but she insisted. I didn't eat the clementine then, but it sustained me the next day, again when a café was nowhere in sight.

Finally, the hostel door opened and we were admitted. I had a booking, so I had first dibs on a bed. I had paid through Booking.com in November and I think I paid about €22. The coastal way is a little more expensive because it is a vacation area and their revenue doesn't depend entirely on pilgrims. There were actually three bunks in the room I chose and another three bunks in an adjacent room. We all shared the same bathroom. Somehow the women from Brittany were last and declined upper bunks. They found another place to stay. I felt a little badly for them, but I learned several days later that they have been doing this type of hiking for 40 years. They know the ropes and perhaps secured one of the single rooms in the hostel.

Corinna and I had two of the lower bunks and another gentleman, who had stayed there before had the third. At one point quite late at night, I think someone arrived and took the bunk above me. I'm not sure. I was too tired to look.

Once settled, with my phone plugged into an outlet beside my bed and my backpack stowed in a drawer under my bunk, I went out onto the roof deck, which was

off the kitchen, to join some of the other pilgrims who were enjoying a late afternoon get-together. The space was spare, but it did have an area for drying racks, a table and several chairs. I chatted with Kirsten, another woman, Catherine, also from Germany and Corinna from Holland. They all spoke excellent English. It's times like this that I feel so limited with my one and only native language.

Conversation was light, mainly "Where are you from? Is this your first Camino? Are you walking alone?" As it happened all three of us were walking on our own and this was our first Camino. It was a magical connection. After an hour or so of conversation we went for dinner with another woman at the hostel, Anika, who was also from Germany. There were a number of expensive fish restaurants in the area, however, Kersten was vegan and since Anika was on a budget, she decided to go back to the hostel and cook herself a meal, while the rest of us looked for something cheaper and vegan.

Kersten used her phone, as we walked a few blocks here and there. Walking again after a day of walking was tiring, I hoped that we would decide soon. In fact the decision of where to eat was made for us. While looking at a menu outside a small restaurant, a rather portly gentleman convinced us that we had to eat there. He may have been the proprietor or just a regular, but he explained everything on the menu board outside and convinced Kersten that they would find something that she could eat. We went in.

As it turned out there was another special menu inside for €8.80 which included soup, a main dish and coffee. Three of us opted for this special and Kersten had a cheese sandwich. The soup, a hearty potato vegetable concoction, was delicious. We each ordered different main dishes and shared – fish fillets, kebobs and salt cod. Everything was wonderful. The cook/owner, who was from Turkey confessed that she didn't speak Portuguese. She was a delightful host. We were all in great spirits and discussed at length, over coffee why each of us was walking the Camino.

Kersten went first. Before COVID, she had been a freelancer, offering courses in business team building. Now that COVID for the most part was over, her business somehow hadn't bounced back. She was a single mom with two children. I could imagine tall, slender Kersten, probably in her early 40s leading a staff of 30 or more on various team-building exercises. She was outgoing, charismatic and kind. A friend had lent her the money to do the Camino to find out what to do next. I hoped that Kersten would succeed.

Catherine, also a very attractive woman in her 40s offered next. She was on the Camino to find out who she was. She said, "I have always been a wife, a mother and a teacher, but who am I really?" Catherine was married with three children - teens to twenties. She taught English as a second language part time and even with all of this she still didn't feel fulfilled. She was looking for something. Again I hope she finds it.

Corinna, a widow in her early 60s, had already led an unusual life. Her husband was 15 years her senior and a writer of self-help books. For many years, they had lived in a trailer, spending summers in Holland and winters in southern Morocco. She had one

child, a daughter, at university. Corinna was walking the Camino to heal from the grief of losing her husband and to put his soul to rest. I was probably closest to Corinna in many respects.

Finally, it was my turn. I began by saying, “In August, I’ll be 80...” It usually elicits a shock. Not that I don’t look 80, but that I am walking the Camino at that age. At home, I didn’t think it was such a feat. I could walk 10 to 15kms in a day. I should be able to do the same over a three week period on the Camino. For me, age was not an issue, obviously for others it was. I go on to say that I am looking for peace. I am looking for something to put the chaos of this world into perspective. I need to live meaningfully in what now seems to be a meaningless environment. What can I do for the next 10 years or however long I am spared to make things better? I also had very specific questions I had to think about and possibly find answers to, with the help of the Camino.

1. Do I sell my house?
2. Where should I live?
3. Should I move to another country? Spain came to mind.
4. Should I find volunteer work? I had thought of helping out on a Camino. Fostering something that brings peace to those who walk it.
5. Should I think of another “career”? – writer, walker, peacemaker?

In our group of four, I was the eldest. I want to maximize what is left of my time here and I am asking the Camino to help me do this. The others are looking for new directions. They were asking the Camino to help them re-set their compasses.

The conversation was very stimulating. It is what the Camino offers, insight into the inner sanctums of others, as well as your own. There are no false fronts, no cover ups. People are very real in their quest for understanding, meaning and peace in the turmoil or indifference of their lives.

Corinna gave us a name. She called us “The Mermaids” because we were staying at the Fishtail Seahouse Hostel and we were walking the coastal route. It was another way of bonding, of taking us out of the ordinary and making us magical creatures. I slept well that night, in spite of the rain. The hostel was comfortable and I was confident, after my first day of walking, that I could do this.

Chapter 6

In the morning there was a lot of activity in the kitchen. People were making breakfast and getting ready to leave. I decided that I wanted to be on the road early and walk until I found a café to have breakfast. I went back to the tourist office on the beach hoping to pick up the trail there. The path veered inland to a maze of complicated tracks. Although, the app I was using said that I was on a trail, it wasn't the one I wanted to be on. I kept walking because I had already covered about three kilometres and I didn't want to retrace my steps. I was heading north, what could possibly go wrong.

Matosinhos is a huge port town and I was walking around the extended port area instead of walking on a more picturesque path to the beach. Eventually I was walking on a sidewalk separated from a motorway by a low railing. I knew I was lost. Even if my app kept telling me I was OK, the roaring motorway to my right told me I was in trouble. I tried not to panic. In the distance I saw a car turn left. The ocean I knew was on my left even if I couldn't see it. When I reached the ramp where the car had turned, I saw a sign that said Praia – beach. I turned too and prayed. Eventually, after walking through a kilometre of “off ramp,” I found a quiet road with shops on one side and sand on the other. To the left of the sand was a boardwalk and to the left of the boardwalk was the ocean.

Thank you Santiago!

I crossed over to the boardwalk taking in the vastness of the sea. In Canada, I live a two-day drive from the ocean. I don't see the Atlantic often. However, when I do, I am always mesmerized. I love how the waves crash against rocks or slip quietly up to sand filled beaches. I am in awe of the water's constant energy - the coming and going, rising and falling, endlessly. It's hypnotic, meditative, peaceful and one of the reasons I chose walk the coastal Camino.

I now saw other pilgrims. I found a café and had a traditional pastel de nata, a small custard filled tart, which may be a metaphor for Portugal itself – something small and sweet - and a café con leite, all for €4. I met a couple – husband and wife from Michigan. We chatted and remarked on the stunning weather – sunny and warm without being too hot. They moved on and I finished breakfast. Returning to the boardwalk, I became fascinated with the people. There were a few walkers, some were locals and others were pilgrims. I passed a peregrino nursing his blisters, I wished him a Bom Caminho. I passed two male hikers pausing for a rest and they wished me the same Bom Caminho.

About a kilometre later our paths crossed. We walked on chatting. They were boyhood friends from Michigan, although one of them, Ralph, lives now in Panama City with his wife, a Rhodes Scholar and Fulbright Scholarship recipient, who was born in Panama. Ralph was a slow walker. We discussed what he taught at university – Middle English. I don't know much about that period except for The Canterbury Tales. Yes, it

was April and we were on Pilgrimage, what could be more fitting? Ralph also knew the poet John Donne, so we exchanged quotations.

“Batter my heart three person’d God.” – so apt for the Camino.

“Send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.” – one of my favourites.

I think he was the only person to confess that he brought a few books with him. What is a scholar without his books?

At a crossover on the boardwalk, we met Corinna. She joined us and started walking with Ralph, as I caught up with his friend, a high school science teacher. Mike had walked the Camino France’s a few years ago with his wife. She had decided not to walk a Camino this time, but to go on a cruise with her sister. I found out that Mike was divorced from his first wife, an alcoholic and that he and his second wife were Apostolic Christians. He played guitar in his church band, was very close to his minister and quite involved with the activities of the congregation. This commitment was how he healed from his first marriage, which gave him his two children. He and his current wife had tried to adopt an infant, but were unable to because of their age. They adopted an older child, but the adoption didn’t work out and he felt very sad about the loss. I was able to share with Mike that all my three children are adopted. We are never alone, or different, we are all part of one incredible, extended family.

We talked of other things until LaBorges, where he and Ralph were booked to stay. Corinna and I walked on. It was a brief encounter, however, the window into the lives of others, affects you. You take on their sorrow and their joy. This is an experience the Camino offers. It is perhaps where you come to accept the blessings you have been given in life, as something very special. Maybe my peace is simply embracing the gifts I have already been given.

I met both Ralph and Mike briefly, yet, I took so much from the encounter. Ralph was a reminder that we can connect in so many different ways. For us, it was through literature. He was also a reminder that there is an amazing cross-section of people walking the Camino. It is not a race and some of the slowest walkers can be the most interesting. Mike made me appreciate my three children for the very special people they are. I also grieved for all the decisions people have made in their lives that didn’t work out. The Camino offers a way of working and walking through these decisions.

As an aside, I realized that this encounter on this one afternoon near La Bruges was just one instance of so many Camino encounters, almost too many to comprehend. If these instances were multiplied by the 500,000 people slated to walk the various Caminos this year and amplified by the 1,200 years that the Camino has been in existence, I can’t begin to understand the complexity of this world - too much to walk through in three weeks. Still it’s wonderful to be able to experience even a small sliver of it.

Corinna and I walked on. It was a gorgeous day. The waves continued to entertain us with their drama - Nature's opera, with arias of bird song and choruses of seagrass rustled by the wind. The climb was also a bit theatrical. There were loose ropes, as handrails to help us over dunes the size of small hills, when the boardwalk disappeared. Added to the entertainment were Corinna's stories. She told me that her husband hated Holland. He'd had a very disconnected childhood being shuttled from one relative to another in various parts of the Netherlands and he needed to escape. As an adult he wrote books about healing from this type of dissonance. After they married, he and Corinna lived in a trailer. They summered in Holland and wintered in southern Morocco, as I have mentioned before. It was a magical existence. After his death, she sold their trailer and moved into an apartment in Holland. However, she still maintained their self-help online group and posted to it daily.

Corinna was walking the Camino to deal with her husband's passing. The rituals of death are many and varied. They are as distinctive as the individual who has passed and as unique as those who mourn their passing. Corinna carried her late husband's sandals in her backpack. She chose the Portuguese coastal walk because it was close to the sea, an element that was important to both of them. She found a place in an area named New Beach - Nova praia - which called to her. She said it had a café nearby. Her husband wasn't a walker and preferred to sit in a café while she went for a walk. She said the location was perfect. She placed his sandals on the beach, as the tide rolled in. He would soon begin another journey to a new and magical place.

Corinna and I walked 21.5kms to Vila Cha. We then walked another kilometre north from the beach to a municipal albergue, which cost €10 each for the night. The place was very clean; the showers were spotless and the water was hot. I had a most welcome shower, washed laundry, which was sure to dry on this very sunny day with a slight breeze and finally wrote a post about the day's adventures. Catherine from the Fishtail Seahouse was also staying in our albergue, so the three of us decided to have dinner together again, this time in Vila Cha. After journal writing, charging phones and packing away clean laundry, we left to buy fruit for the journey the next day and to look at the menu of the only restaurant in town.

In this tiny village, we found a very small but well stocked grocery store. It was really just the living room of their home, which the family had converted into a small shop that had everything to pack a light lunch for a walk the next day or to make a substantial dinner for an evening meal. We each bought an assortment of fruits – apples, clementines, bananas etc. Both Corinna and Catherine bought yogurt for breakfast. I often skipped breakfast in favour of a coffee and toast a little later on, so my purchases were small.

The owner of the shop and her mother were curious about our reasons for being in Vila Cha. We explained that we were walking the Camino. There was some concern about my age. It always surprised me that people found “almost 80” and walking the Camino astonishing. I considered it a challenge, but not a mouth-dropping, eye-popping

feat. Really, it's just a walk. Yes, some of the terrain is difficult, but I never considered it out of my reach or the reach of anyone, who has done some training and is reasonably fit. I am always grateful for the younger company I keep. They seemed to normalize the situation and I was not exorcised, as a witch or someone who threatened the life of "normal" people.

After reading the menu at the restaurant, we decided it would be perfect for dinner. Although a little on the expensive side at €27, it was three courses, with a glass each of wine. We decided that we deserved it, after walking 21.5kms, so we reserved a table for 7:00pm, when the restaurant opened and took a short walk through the village.

Vila Cha is a small community by the sea supported mainly by fishing and a host of suburban commuters, escaping the crowds of Porto. Fishing here is on a smaller scale than the large commercial ships that feed the port of Matosinhos. I loved seeing the colourful boats drawn up on the beach, their nets neatly stored, ready for the next tide. It's a remnant of what life might have been like years ago.

By 7:00pm, we were at the restaurant very hungry. The set menu was a salad of lettuce, shredded carrots and tomatoes to start, followed by charcoal grilled Sea Bream garnished with clams and a side of French fries. The local white wine was a perfect accompaniment. There was almost no room for the delectable dessert - a warm nutty pastry sweetened with a delicious syrup - very memorable! Even though it was early April, the evening was warm enough to sit outside in a small enclosure to ward off the elements, which fortunately kept to themselves. Our conversation was again about how we were living our lives, at present and our questions for the future, for which we hoped the Camino would provide answers. The cost of the dinner for each of us was €27, to which we each added a €3 tip – perfectly acceptable in Europe and decided it was money well spent.

We weren't, however, quite finished. Corinna had recently joined a choir in Holland and had learned a number of folk songs, one of which was Portuguese. She sang it whenever there was an audience. Our hostess knew the song and as we were leaving, started to sing it along with Corinna. It's not exactly the siren song of mermaids, but it complemented the evening, making it even more special. We walked back to our hostel in the dark. It was almost 9:00pm. Everything was quiet. I fell asleep easily.

Chapter 7

Catherine will leave us tomorrow for the central route, however, Corinna will stay on the coastal route. I missed both of them, as I left early to avoid the activity in the kitchen. I'm a morning person, but I like to be on my own at that time. Maybe I should have stayed and followed a few pilgrims out of town, because I got lost. First, I went south, back to where we had left the trail the day before to see if I could pick it up again. No. It ended abruptly at a small warehouse. I then decided to go north from the village only to meet a helpful, local woman who spoke in wild waves of her arms, pointing me to the sea – “mare, mare,” she kept saying. The only other way out of town was south-west from the hostel. It worked. The road curved north again and I was on the Camino, but had added about 2.5kms to my journey, before I even got started.

The weather, although mild, was overcast. I walked on the boardwalk, with the sea to my left and lush wetlands on my right. The path climbed significant dunes. At times the boardwalk was several inches deep in sand, as the dunes did their best to obliterate the intruding Camino. It was a tough slog. I gladly left the walk when I was close to Vila Do Condo rather than follow the ornithological route, which sounded even more remote. As the town was a little off the path, I followed a pilgrim who was using her phone, I presumed, to find directions. She nodded politely as she stopped in a central square, where I spied a café. It was indeed time for breakfast after 5 kilometers of heavy trudging and a blister starting.

I smiled and thanked her for her directions. A few minutes later, Leah came into the café too. We had a coffee together and I had some toast. I would have liked some jam (marmalada) as well, but that was a little beyond the owner this morning. Leah was lovely and a very welcome companion after several hours of no conversation, with anyone, except that person in my head who fills the void, when no one else is around. It's my Camino alter-ego. She listens to my musings, my mutterings and my moments of brilliance ☺. Would there were more of her outside of my head. That being said, I know this is why so many of us choose to walk alone. We need time to speak to our other self. We need to slip behind that “every day” persona and call up our inner being to remind us of who we really are. The Camino provided hours of quality time to be alone with that person.

However, I also needed time to be with other people. I needed to hear their stories partly because they were a kind of sounding board, helping me evaluate my own life and partly because they were pure entertainment. Everyone walking the Camino is an adventurous person. I revelled in their challenges and their anecdotes and I got to tell my story, as well. I found out that Leah was an engineer from Germany. She had just taken a new job and had a few weeks of vacation before she started work again. Walking this Camino would be her holiday. She looked tired, though. It might have been the walk, the overcast weather, or something else going on in her life. I missed the enthusiasm of the older women I had met. Leah was 32, the same age as my daughter. We come to the Camino at all ages and for all reasons. Though we may have different abilities, we all

have a common hope that life will be different in some meaningful way, after our Camino.

I sensed that Leah was going to take a longer rest, so I left her in the café, as I headed out to walk more on the boardwalk full of sand to Provoa de Varazim. Slogging through the drifts developed my blister to the extent that I was in pain and completely exhausted when I reached what should have been a pretty beach town had the sun been out. I could barely walk. Everything ached and I had logged only 15kms. Again, because I was using an inadequate app, I missed a hostel, which was right on the path. It was a donativo – pay what you can – an experience I would have liked to have had.

I missed the albergue Sao Jose Ribamar partly because of the wrong app I was using and partly because I had stumbled into the tourist office and the person there booked me into a hotel that was €40 for the night. I probably needed this respite, given the struggle of the day, but I would have preferred the donativo. The reason the tourist office gave for booking the hotel was that it was the weekend and all the hostels would be full. Later, when I met Anika on the trail, she said that the donativo was half empty. “The Camino gives you what you need, not what you want.” I needed a quiet place to collect my thoughts, a hot shower and a good night’s sleep. I may not have had these at the albergue.

Once settled in the Luso Brasileiro hotel, which was well organized and very clean, I went for a walk to buy something light to eat in my room. I was too exhausted to even think of having a meal in a restaurant. The town was welcoming with a pedestrian only centre, that had a collection of interesting shops on an easy to navigate main street. Here, I met the three Canadian women from the airport in Toronto, Sandy, Lynn and Nora. As we were chatting about our day’s adventures, Anika walked by. She was looking for friends and passed some time with us. This is part of the magic of the Camino. Friendships form instantly and thread their way through the intricacies of the winding paths, adding a familiar face, here and there, when you are navigating strange new places.

After introductions and a chat, I was pointed in the direction of the nearest grocery store. In addition to buying fruit for the next day’s journey, I bought a small wheel of cheese, a packet of crackers and a half bottle of wine. I also found an electronics store that had a charging cable for my keyboard. The cable, so far, was the only item I had left at home.

Finally back at the hotel, I looked at my blister. It was mean. It wasn’t bleeding, but it was large and wrinkled with fluid. There is a good deal of opinion on the Camino about how to treat blisters. I decided to pierce mine with a needle and forego pulling some thread through to let it drain. There wasn’t that much fluid in it anyway. I then doctored it with Polysporin, because I hadn’t sterilized the needle and covered the wound with a bandaid. I might have been able to avoid this blister, had I tied my walking shoes at the ankle with what is known as a “heel lock.” It’s a knot before the top of the shoe

that locks the heel into place and keeps the foot from sliding forward. Thin, silk inner socks would have also helped. Lesson learned.

By now I was quite tired, but I knew I had to eat. I crunched down some cheese and crackers, had two sips of wine and fell fast asleep. It was one of those “heavy” days. It hadn’t rained, but it was overcast and dreary. I’m so glad that I met up with the Canadian trio and Anika. It was a brief meeting, but it meant so much, given that apart from meeting Leah, I had walked alone most of the day. Still the Camino provided. I had a relaxing hotel room, great meet-ups with pilgrims and a good night’s sleep. Plus, I didn’t get too lost this time. I’m not sure that I am finding peace in itself, but I am being thankful for the concessions I have been given and the fact that I have had a bed every night so far and I have been able to walk the distances I’ve needed to get those beds. Peace in itself might just be having what you need at the end of the day. Today it was a hot shower, a comfortable bed, six crackers with cheese, two sips of wine, and a side of Polysporin. Bom Caminho.

Chapter 8

Fortunately, the hotel offered a free breakfast. I had coffee and toast, this time with jam. It was delicious. My blister was still tender, but I had to walk on it, such is life on the Camino. Fortunately, I could easily pick up the trail from the beach where I had left off yesterday. Unlike yesterday though, today was sunny and almost warm. The boardwalk was dotted with people. I passed a number of locals and a few pilgrims; all offered Bom Caminhos. However, I was still walking alone. Somehow, I had lost Corinna from Vila Cha, probably because I had left early, got lost and walk slower than most other pilgrims. I also immerse myself so much in the walk that I lose track of time, place, people and sometimes even myself.

I also hadn't realized that most people keep in touch on What's App, so I was missing where Corinna, Catherine and Kersten were walking, as they posted online often. Luckily, I met up with Anika, from time to time and she let the others know where I was and that I was still walking (and getting lost). I did see a Canadian flag on a backpack, as I made my way along the boardwalk and stopped to chat with a woman from Montreal, Sophia. It was a brief conversation. Some people are really engaging and others just want to be left alone. I carried on. I passed a beautiful albergue right on the beach at Aguadoura. I made a mental note to stay there, if I ever pass this way again. Mostly, however, I just enjoyed the sea, the sun and the sensations. The rhythm of walking is very soothing and the cadence of the waves, hypnotic. For me the ocean is a great therapist and the sun, a welcome tonic. As the song says, "Sunshine, almost always makes me high."

At one point the Camino left the beach and headed slightly inland to Apulia. Most of the pilgrims I saw were walking to the next stage, Esponede. However, after 13.5kms of an easy walk, I decided to stay in an albergue before Esponede. I had to walk about a kilometer off the trail and made a mental note of where I had to return to. I seem to have a knack for getting lost.

The albergue in Apulia was actually a three bedroom, condo unit with a kitchen, living room and outdoor area, all for €14. It was owned by a lovely young man, who had lived for a year in Toronto. He now lives in the unit next door to the hostel. Each bedroom had three beds – no bunks and there were two bathrooms. It felt more like a home than a hostel. Also included was the use of a washing machine for €3.5. I could hang my laundry out to dry on this lovely, sunny day.

One of my roommates was a young woman from Maryland in the US, Pat. She was in her 20s and suffering from sore feet. So she was only able to walk about 10kms a day. My other roommate was the vivacious Viki. She was a medical doctor from Sweden, who was walking the Camino to heal from the death of her mother and a year long struggle of coaching her husband out of his depression. He had abandoned his career as an oncologist and couldn't seem to commit to anything else. Finally, he accepted a position in palliative care, where he wasn't expected to cure people, he just had to see them, as best he could, through end of life. He was happy. Viki now needed a break. She

had chosen the Camino as an escape, partly for herself and partly because she knew that her mother would have loved to have had the opportunity to walk it.

Since it was Sunday, and traditionally the day when people splurged on elegant meals, Viki invited me to have a special lunch with her. There were two restaurants across the street from each other and both served sumptuous meals, as the line ups to both attested. When we finally got a table, Viki decided she wanted lobster, but they were huge. I offered to split one with her, however the waiter said that one lobster would be too much even for two. She opted for the Dorado, which was charcoal broiled and came with clams and sardines, also broiled. I had the same. Viki ordered a bottle of wine, which made our lunch that much more festive.

We chatted as we ate. We talked about family, her profession, her mother, whom Viki cared for at length before she died. Being a doctor, Viki understood the severity of my breast cancer diagnosis twenty odd years ago. We mused about the future, but mainly we enjoyed the moment. It was a lovely meal, with wonderful company. In the end Viki insisted on paying for lunch. I offered to split the bill, but she won. I covered the tip. She did, though, pay me an amazing compliment before we left. She said I want to be like you at 80. I'll never forget this. Before I left for the Camino I didn't think walking it at my age was that unusual. I easily walk, as I have said before, 10 to 15kms a day, at home and I felt that I could do it on the Camino as well. To some this was an epic adventure. I humbly accepted the compliment.

After the late lunch I fell asleep. It must have been the wine. I slept right through until the next morning. When I got up, Viki had gone and Pat was still sleeping. The forecast was for rain, so I decided to walk just 10kms to Marinhas. From the albergue, I found my way back to the trail and resumed my walk, just as it began to rain. I was in luck, though. I had remembered to pack my poncho last, so I pulled it out easily from my backpack, added my baseball cap to keep the hood of my poncho from covering my face and walked on.

Again I was using the app Camino Ninja, which said that I was on the correct path, but again there were no pilgrims and no arrows. The rain let up a little as I stopped in Esponede for coffee and toast. It was a delightful café right on the main street of what looked like a very pleasant town especially in Summer. However, somewhere after Esponede, I lost the trail again and ended up on a busy road, with lots of rain and at times gale force winds that shredded my poncho. The road, of course, had no sidewalk and a very narrow shoulder. I now have a measurement between life and death. It's six inches. The only place open was a garden centre. I went in to ask directions. They were as bewildered as I was. When I found out the name of the town I was in, I checked my Brierley guide book and realized that I had overshot Marinhas. I would now have to carry on to Ponte de Neiva, a small place just south of the only church in Portugal dedicated to Santiago. I hoped that the significance of the town made up for the strenuous hike. When I arrived at the hostel, I had walked 21.5kms with a blister, in the rain, lost and anxious, but I made it.

I made it, because at one point the true Camino path and whatever I was on merged. I noticed this because there was a sign for an albergue about half a kilometer away. I would have stayed there, but it wasn't open at the time. There was a phone number to call, but I decided that this was too complicated so I pressed on to another albergue that was listed as being just 2kms away. Again the longest two kilometres I have ever walked. The path was very narrow, through woodland laced with tree roots, blocked by boulders and generally very up and down with steep ascents and tricky descents. Did I mention that I didn't have a walking pole. When I was completely convinced that I had made a wrong turn, I bumped into Anika. She was the essence of peace on this very challenging route. I knew now I was on the right path and her presence gave me enough strength to cross a bridge with no railings over a raging river. It took three Hail Marys, but I did it. Although the path through the forest was more challenging than the roadway, it was more beautiful. It was quiet, I could hear the birdsong and I could smell the freshness of the foliage. There were elegant trees, leafy bushes and green patches dotted with flowers. This, for the most part, was the true Camino. Where the roadway gave me vistas of rolling fields and distant mountains, the forest gave me the closeness of nature. It was easier, however, walking on the asphalt of the road than the stones of the forest path. I wonder if the Camino was giving me something I needed earlier in the day.

After a very long 2kms, I finally reached the hostel. What I didn't realize was the fact that there were two albergues in this village. I stayed at the first one for €14 because it was the first, and as far as I knew the only one, in this very small almost hamlet. The hostel Don Nausti was pleasant enough. It had a bright sitting area outside and nice principal rooms, but the bedrooms with five bunk beds each felt a little crowded. There were no windows and the lighting was quite dim. Plus no one spoke English, so I was feeling a little lonely – one of the few low points of my Camino. After a much-needed rest, I walked another kilometre up a hill to a small market to buy something for dinner. I might have eaten at a nearby café, but with several columns of stacked chairs outside, it didn't look open. I opted for a baguette with meat and cheese, from the deli section of the market next door. I also bought a tomato, two apples, a clementine, and an orange drink, before I went back to the Albergue to have dinner, write my post and go to bed. I slept well.

Chapter 9

The next day, I was up early and on the road about 7:15. It was a little chilly as the sun hadn't yet crested the hill, although the forecast was for sun all day. Walking north out of the town, I passed the second albergue. It was very new with large windows and a stunning view of the sea. I earmarked this one for the "next" time. On the way out of Ponte Neiva, I passed the church of Santiago de Castelo do Neiva. It's a lovely old structure dating from 862AD and one of the few churches dedicated to Santiago outside of Spain. Many pilgrims stopped to take pictures. I was in "morning mode" and anxious to get started on my walk, so I didn't stop for long. Also there were a number of pilgrims there and somehow people first thing in the morning makes everything quite busy.

Further up the mountain the road divided and there were no Camino arrows. As much as I am a fan of Yogi Berra – When you come to a fork in the road just take it – I had to make a decision. I consulted my GPS. It took me to the left, downhill and toward the sea – the path of least resistance. I walked on pavement, through a series of small villages to Amarosa, on the coast, where I had a coffee and a small pastry. I then walked 2 kms on the boardwalk north of Amarosa, where the path suddenly ended. The boardwalk met a huge dune and decided it didn't have the energy to cross it. Neither did I. I had to double back, walk out and around Amarosa on a nasty highway with just a drainage ditch to serve as a pedestrian walkway. Ugh! Fearing for my life, I limped along to the next beach, only to find that the boardwalk was absent there as well. I decided to abandon the litoral route and walk, blister and all, to the east, where I hoped to connect with the coastal route, which had moved inland. At a rest stop, I took my first and only Ibuprofen. My blister was quite painful. I didn't notice much relief, but decided not to take another one. I'm not much of a pill taker.

I did meet a small group of male hikers – not pilgrims and asked if they knew of another way to get to Viana do Costelo. They suggested a path through a forested area. I was a little concerned since it wasn't showing on any of my apps. I decided that it was one thing to get lost in the woods and quite another to get lost on a busy highway. I opted for the highway, which meant there was more walking on roads, however this time they had a wide path for bicycles, slower vehicles and lost pilgrims. I did pass a café, where I had a coffee and toast, bought more water and used their rest rooms. The only mistake I made was I left my Brierley guide book at the café – sigh. As it turned out, this was the Camino working in mysterious ways. Not having a guidebook, forced me to use the app Wise Pilgrim and that has made all the difference.

After an exhausting walk mostly on pavement, I finally came to a bridge over the river Lima. The narrow pedestrian path beside a very busy road, of speeding traffic was a challenge. With one - sort of – handrail, the bridge arched high over a wide river with a good deal of boat traffic, giving my vertigo a workout. It took two decades of the rosary to cross this bridge.

The hospitelero at last night's albergue gave everyone directions to a hostel in Viana do Costelo – the town on the other side of the river Lima. It was a stately,

converted convent and at only €13, it was worth every centavo. The rooms were airy and spacious, with five single beds to a room, no bunks. The washrooms were very clean, although a bit of a walk through some labyrinthine halls. I managed not to get lost.

My blister, however, persists. I changed into sandals after my walk. This does help. I also walked around on my heel a lot because the blister was at the front of my foot. As a result of my pain and my peculiar way of walking, I decided not to hobble very far for dinner. Fortunately, there was a Pizza Hut two doors down from the hostel so I could have lunch – Pizza and a Pepsi for 4euros. I did the same for dinner, because, although I had the time, I didn't feel like finding my way over the freight rail tracks that bisected the town – really!

I met a chatty woman from Minnesota here, Vicki. She had started out walking with an American friend of hers, but developed a knee problem and decided to do buses and trains. She was also healing from some surgery for cancer. She did go on to say that she had been here before, except that she had arrived by boat. She had sailed through the Great Lakes, up the St Lawrence and across the Atlantic to the northern coast of Europe, making her way eventually to Porto. Her credential had an icon mine didn't. She had a sailboat. Perhaps because the Camino is an adventure, it attracts adventurous people. There is a level of fearlessness here among the pilgrims and their extended families that I haven't found often at home. I know we need those steadfast gatekeepers in our lives. The people who stoke the "home fires," making sure we always come back to a welcoming place. However, it is exciting to step out of one's comfort zone every once in a while and embrace the extraordinary. One of my favourite poems, "Ride A Wild Horse" ends with the lines:

"Before you die/ Whatever else/You leave undone/Once/ Ride a wild horse/Into the sun –
Hannah Kahn

As an aside, I remember teaching this poem, a long time ago, to a class of 15-year-olds and asking one young woman, who seemed more adventurous than the others, why she didn't find the poem exciting. Her answer was very sad. She said, "I've ridden my wild horse." I'm not sure I'm riding a wild horse right now, though some of my missteps have taken my breath away. Perspective is everything. Wild horses at fifteen and those at almost eighty must be very different breeds. The poem goes on to specify that the horse be "striped yellow and black, with purple wings except its head, which must be red." I have a feeling you won't come across these often in your lifetime. Maybe you will meet a few Mavericks, a wild Mustang or two – unbranded and unbroken individuals who make us question our concept of reality, but the surreal is just that – above and beyond anything that is of this earth. We must ride into the sun, to find it.

In Viana, I also met the Polish group of four from the albergue the night before. The husband, who spoke excellent English, asked me where I was from and why I was walking the Camino. Again he was stunned to hear that I would soon be 80 and asked if he could take my picture. I find it amusing, but also quite flattering, that people want to record the moment they have met someone my age, walking like a true pilgrim, alone,

with a full backpack, staying in hostels and managing the longer treks. I love that there is a celebration of old age here, rather than an indifference to it or worse a dismissing of it. I also believe that, like Viki, these pilgrims would like to be doing a Camino at 80 themselves. This is not a “pat myself on the back moment.” This is where I give thanks to have been spared those misfortunes that keep so many from realizing their dreams. I am forever grateful.

Chapter 10

I left Viana do Costelo the next morning around 8:00am. I tend to skip breakfast unless it's complimentary. There are just too many people in the kitchen in the morning. I also take medication that requires me to wait an hour before eating, another excuse to leave early. This morning, I followed two pilgrims out of the town to get my bearings and check that Wise Pilgrim was working. Fortunately, the start of the walk was through a lovely park with glimpses of the sea on my left and some interesting buildings on my right. My app said that I would be walking on roads a good deal of the time. Alas.

Very close to the start of my walk I was stopped by two sturdy male walkers from Latvia. They were amazed at my age – they didn't ask how old I was, but clearly I looked "old." They too asked to have their picture taken with me. Really, when I started preparing for my Camino, I didn't think that my age was anything special. There were a lot of people in their late 70s who were posting online in Camino groups, so a few years on the plus side of 75 I felt was normal. Maybe most of the pilgrims on the trail weren't in those online groups.

The picture taking episodes also reminded me of a Camino book I had read by Shirley MacLaine. I didn't particularly like her story. However, I know it would be difficult for a celebrity to walk something as obvious as a Camino without being hounded by autograph seekers, curious fans and aggressive paparazzi. Even if I didn't like her book, I could feel her angst in trying to evade the invaders.

After a few kilometers, I realized that I had lost the trail again. The arrows had disappeared and there were no pilgrims. However, there was a café in the distance so all was not lost. I got my usual coffee and toast and carried on. Toggling between my various Camino apps, I was finally able to get back on the trail in the early afternoon, after almost 10kms on asphalt. The path, I should have been following was through woodland, as I found out and I was able to savor a kilometre or two of it towards the end. However, I still couldn't find a hostel in the area on any of my apps.

I had the good luck of being joined by a handsome young man from the Czech Republic, who walked at my pace. I explained my hostel problem, as we waded through a marshy part of the trail edged by tall grasses and delicate wildflowers. Although, he wasn't planning on staying in Ancora, he did look up on his app and found a hostel that was not too far away. In fact, he walked with me right to the place using his GPS on an app called "Map.me." I tried to download it to my phone, but it required an upgraded operating system, so I was out of luck. But I was very happy for his guidance and the tip. I'll consider upgrading and getting this app, if there is another time.

I thanked him profusely. This is the type of kindness you find on the Camino. During our walk, he said that he had always wanted to see Canada, for the mountains. I wanted to give him my contact information, in case he ever did come to Canada, but he disappeared, as mysteriously as he had appeared. I was sad. He was so kind. At the end of the day, maybe peace is just finding kind people who help you sort out a problem or two.

The hostel, which was on a splendid beach was €17 for the night. The beds were adequate; the washrooms, clean and it was walking distance to a wonderful fish restaurant. While I was hanging around the common area of the hostel waiting for the restaurant to open, a friendly Russian woman, Katia, asked me to join her on the small, very small – two chairs and a drying rack - patio. We had a lovely chat. She was born in Siberia. She said that her grandmother remembers when political prisoners were sent to Siberia. She did say she has been living now in Germany for ten years with her husband and daughter. It was a delightful encounter.

Finally, at 7:00pm the restaurant opened. As usual, I was the first person in. I took a quiet table at the back, so I had a full view of all the activity of the evening. I started with olives and some warm, crusty bread followed by a salad of lettuce, shredded carrots and tomatoes, which I ate while I waited for my main course of charcoal broiled Sea Bream. Part way through my salad, I noticed that Katia had come in to the same restaurant. I invited her to join me and help me finish my salad.

We continued our conversation. Katia said that she was walking the Camino, because she was between jobs as a chemist in a lab and was thinking of retiring to do her hobby – sailboat racing - full time. She had two boats moored in Holland.

I actually knew a number of people, including myself, who had quit their fulltime jobs to follow their hobbies. The ones I knew had turned their knitting pastimes into businesses, as had I. Yes, it can be competitive, but maybe not as exhilarating as racing a sailboat on the open sea. Immediately I thought of dropped stitches. Actually, I do know of one person, who has had a knitting business for many years and who also does boating. Her on-water activity though is long boat travelling through the British canal system. From all her posts, it appears not to be a race.

I hoped that Katia finds the answers she needs from the Camino. It's brave to leave a secure position with pay to embark on something exciting, with no monetary returns and perhaps a good deal of expenses. Do you stay in your safe spot or risk it all to "Ride a wild horse into the sun?"

After a perfect dinner, I spent some time admiring the beach. It was wide with creamy white sand that stretched the full curve of the cove. People were out on the promenade, savouring the last moments of a warm, sunny day. In fact, it was now almost dark. Fishermen pulled in their lines and parents gathered their children home for the night. There is something very comforting about the daily rituals enhanced by a beautiful setting. There is time for wild adventures and there is time for the mundane tasks that keep our lives in order. Peace may be finding the balance between tedium and elation. The Camino offers both.

I was back at the hostel about 9:00pm. Given that I had walked 20kms that day, I was tired and fell asleep almost immediately. In spite of the camaraderie in the hostels, they are generally quiet after 9:00pm. Those who plan to leave early in the morning,

usually sleep in the clothes they will wear the next day and slip out silently to pack their backpacks in the larger common areas. Many were leaving at 6:00am, even though the sun wouldn't rise until almost 8:00am.

I can appreciate that the Camino affords a very inexpensive holiday and for those who can log 30 or 40kms a day, full trails can be done in less than two weeks. Walking the Camino is an amazing, reasonably priced adventure, that is accessible to anyone who has a little time, a little money, the energy, stamina, and willingness to walk a strenuous route, stay in shared accommodation and accept a spiritual quest. Having something as precious as this today is a testament to the endurance of a common need. Although the Camino has become somewhat commercialized, it is still there because people want alternatives. They want meaningful time away. They are either tired of the "packaged deal" or can't afford expensive DIY alternatives. In addition to offering the "out in nature" experience of camping, the Camino also offers hostels, cafés, bars, restaurants, architecture, museums, history and a spiritual presence. It's this contact with nature, augmented by a sacred goal and gilded with some sensual pleasures that makes the Camino so special.

I will always be inspired and humbled by the ingenuity of human endeavour. People manage to find a way to "make things work." They find ways with their own intuitive minds to circumvent limitations. I mentioned earlier the housing crisis, as a challenge to my peace. Now I see people finding alternatives. My son and his partner are prime examples. They have decided to live off the grid. It won't be easy or luxurious, but it will be exciting. Like the Camino, it will be an adventure and it will make life worth living! It is something exhilarating to do with "your one wild and precious life."

On the Camino, you live inexpensively as far as money is concerned, but you live richly as far as human experience is concerned. I believe there really is a "Santiago." He is there in the kindness of everyone who seeks him out on the Camino of life. He is there for all of those who believe he will provide, and he does, because those who believe in what he has created also provide for others. The Camino nurtures this type of compassion. I came to this journey seeking peace. I found it in knowing that we will, as a caring community, help each other through all the pain and the chaos of this world. We will survive all who would defeat us, as we have for millennia.

Chapter 11

I left the hostel a little after 8:00am the next morning. The walk out of Ancora was fairly easy and now that I am using a better app – Wise Pilgrim (for the not so wise pilgrims ☺) I haven't gotten lost. I stopped at a small, but very busy café in the next town for coffee and a croissant. They were so busy I didn't have the heart to ask for toast. The coffee was lovely, but the croissant was a little too sweet for me. Still it was breakfast in Portugal, outside, where I could see people going about their daily tasks, where I could savour the moment. In this case I was sitting across the street from a very unusual house. It was old and in need of repair, but it had classic features – a turret, a gabled roof, tall windows and a crenulated façade, if I can say that. It also had a garden with a lemon tree, an orange tree and purple wisteria. I imagined living there, fixing its broken bits and adding to its garden. I may be travelling, but I still miss a home. The Camino provided an answer to my question – should I sell my house? Maybe not yet. It needs some repair inside and out and I have to perfect its garden.

Next door to the café was a small fruit market. I went in to buy lunch, two apples and a clementine. The owner recognized my Canadian flag and told me that he was listening to a program on the radio that was being broadcast from Newfoundland. He went on to explain that he had been a sailor and travelled often to Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. It was a very sentimental moment. If there hadn't been a counter between us, I would have given him a hug. Here was the Camino answering one of my questions about where I should live for the next little while. Maybe it should be in my home, in Canada, with trips to the various Caminos, abroad from time to time.

Today, I walked through small villages. Spring flowers were everywhere. I am especially fond of Wisteria and it was in full bloom, trailing across entrances, framing archways and gracing the sides of stone walls. I often passed plots of land that might have been gardens at one time, but were neglected now. I marvelled at the fruit trees that still blossomed after their original owners had gone. I loved to see the soil tilled into furrows ready to receive their seedlings or the trellised grape vines about to bloom. This is life immemorial. This is the regeneration of everything that makes us who we are. We come back year after year, as nature does. We blossom, offer shade, bear fruit and give sustenance. Our resilience is what will survive and outlast all the forces against us. Our stamina is our peace. We must find ways of nurturing it, strengthening it, passing it on.

I was walking now to the Spanish border. The land was levelling and the terrain was easy. There were many kilometres of paved walkways with few inclines or declines. This and the earlier boardwalk out of Porto was the easy Camino of my dreams. Yes, I endured the difficult ascents and descents. One must because it is all part of the journey, so you can enjoy your rewards at the end.

As easy as this part of the Camino may have seemed, I did have one terrifying moment. I knew I was on the right path, I could find the markers, even if there weren't any pilgrims. I wasn't lost, but I was stunned when I suddenly heard gunfire. At first it was just a single shot. I reasoned that maybe I had heard incorrectly and it was a "boom"

sound made by a machine to frighten birds and small animals from farm crops. I have heard them often in the Niagara wine region at home, so I know the sound. I heard another “crack.” It was not a boom. It was a gunshot. I was in the open. I quickened my pace hoping for cover soon. I reasoned that it could be a farmer shooting rodents. At least I hoped it was a farmer shooting rodents. There was another crack. It was closer, but not close enough to hear the “whizz” of the bullet. I swallowed hard and picked up my pace, already I was walking almost as fast as I could without collapsing. I blocked the horror stories of crazies with guns. This was Europe, not America. The outskirts of a town were in sight. To my left was a high wall with turrets. It looked like the enclosure of a prison. Was there an escaped convict in the area? I peered through a wired opening, as I hurried past. I saw a playing field. Maybe it was a sports facility and someone had booked a morning of target practice. I sped on. There was another shot, but it was now behind me. I didn’t look a back. I focused on reaching a few houses in the distance. There were no more shots. I was in a residential area and I could finally breathe. It took almost a kilometre of walking to slow my heart rate and ease my anxiety. This is not something I expected on the Camino.

After another kilometre or two, things had returned to normal. I met up with a chatty Korean woman, who has lived in Germany for 40 years. She is married with an adult son who was studying Spanish in Costa Rica. She walked at my pace and talked. I love company, but sometimes, I don’t feel like talking. Soon Sang and the Camino provided; she loved to talk. I learned that Soon Sang had retired recently as a lecturer in Artistic Fashion from a university in Hanover. I must say she lived up to her calling; she was impeccably dressed. Also, Soon Sang’s English was perfect, making her a very easy companion. She did have a tour company plan her itinerary, move her luggage, and book her lodging as well as her meals, but she still had to walk, often 20kms a day and one day it was as much as 28kms. This was too much.

We walked together to Caminha to take the ferry across the river to Spain near A Garda. It was another lovely, sunny day with temperatures in the low 20°C. The sky was cerulean, the grass, emerald, and flowers, glistening gems of red and gold. This is a precious walk. The land is quiet and the wind whispers. We walk on ancient stones and we talk of elements eternal – of family, of friends, of ideas, of plans and of no planning, of just being here in this moment on this path traversed so often, by so many, for so long. It is very difficult to describe the power of the Camino. Language cannot really capture its essence. It must be experienced, inhaled, imbibed, ingested, embraced and at times endured.

Just before Caminha, we were approached by a person asking if we wanted to cross the river to Spain. We knew there was a ferry, however, I guess there are enterprising people, wanting to circumvent the rules and pirate people across for an undisclosed amount of money. We said, “no thank you.” When we arrived at the ferry terminal, we were informed that the ferry hadn’t been working for three years. Water taxis had replaced it. Fortunately the fare was still just €6. There were eight of us on board plus the “captain.” We were issued life jackets and assigned seats to balance the craft, which was the traditional rubber dinghy with an outboard motor. The trip was a

short, exhilarating hop over to Spain made even lovelier by the blue sky, warm sun and the sparkling water.

I have trouble getting up onto docks. It's my age, my balance and my lack of agility. The boatman, however, was gracious lifting me up and over the edge of the dock, the coiled ropes and various other paraphernalia that docks are famous for. Once landed our clocks rolled forward an hour, as Spain is on European time. Portugal is in a time zone with Britain and the various islands in the eastern Atlantic. I did, though, hate to lose an hour on this perfect Camino day.

Soon sang and I found the Camino arrow and proceeded to climb the path out of the harbour to A Garda. It wasn't that long, but it was steep. We walked then through woodland and forests of Eucalyptus trees. The trail was fairly easy because it was dry. Even the inclines of smooth rocks were easy. I would have had trouble in the rain. When we reached A Garda, my Korean friend treated me to a coffee at an outdoor café in the spacious main square. Parting was sad. I had enjoyed her company, She made the journey a lot of fun. We gave each other a hug, as Soon Sang left for a nearby hotel and I went looking for the municipal albergue. So much of the Camino is bracketed by "hellos" and "good byes." I will miss her.

I opened my app and found the direction I was to take out of the square. I walked along a main road. Often when I have walked for a long time, it's difficult to not think of just walking. You presume places will be a long way away. In fact, when I looked up mainly to adjust my eyes, to the sun, I was surprised to see the municipal albergue right in front of me. The sign was there about two feet over my head. In fact, if I had been looking down, as I often did, I would have missed it. I walked in, paid my €10 for a bed and had my choice of lower bunks, as I was the first pilgrim to register for the day. I picked a bed by the door – closer to the washroom and rested. I also made sure that I got a stamp in my credential, that little booklet that folds out like an accordion with 84 places for stamps. I forgot to get stamps in a few places, but I will have to remember to get two a day from now on to qualify for my compostela in Santiago. It was still early so I could wash my clothes, hang them out on the racks and be confident that they would dry on this very sunny day with a slight breeze.

At 5:00pm, I left to find a restaurant. There were a few in town, but most involved a walk down hill to the sea and uphill again to the albergue. No, I had done my walking for the day. I did find a nice little place about a block away with a menu in English that listed a few things I would like to eat. I went in. I was politely told that food wasn't served until 7:00pm. It's just as well, because all the tables were taken with groups of men drinking beer and playing cards. Dinner may be a problem.

I went back to the hostel, wrote my post for the day and checked my laundry. No one here spoke English so I was on my own for entertainment. At the end of the day, sometimes your entertainment is checking to see how your laundry is drying. Well, how often do you walk from one country to another before lunch? Maybe that's enough excitement for one day.

At 7:00pm, I went back to the bar/restaurant. The card players were gone. They were replaced by another group of men still drinking beer and watching a big screen TV. I decided to stay and eat. I wasn't really being brave; I was hungry. In fact, I was not only the only woman in the place, I was the only person eating. Still, I had a fresh tomato salad, with a gorgeous oil and vinegar dressing to start and a traditional potato tortilla to finish. With two glasses of wine, it was delicious and incredible value for €12.

I went back to the alberque, which was mercifully close. As I was still nursing a blister, I was very conscious of how far I had to walk to do anything. There were a few other pilgrims in the hostel, however since no one spoke English, I was on my own again for entertainment. Since, I'd had enough of myself for one day. I plugged my phone and keyboard into an outlet just over my head and fell asleep. In posts and books, I have read, people often complain about the snoring at night in the hostels. Either I am really as deaf as I say I am or I am not that bothered by the distant hum of another sleeping person. In fact, it is somewhat comforting to know that you are not alone in the dark. There were only about 12 pilgrims in this hostel, which could have accommodated 40. It was a converted elementary school put to good use. So far every state maintained albergue is the essence of the spirit of the Camino. The administrators are kind, welcoming, soft-spoken and understanding. The other pilgrims are also as considerate. We are all tired and suffering to some extent.

Chapter 12

I tiptoed out of the hostel the next day, as the sun was rising. Following the yellow arrows, I slipped down to the sea on a cool, crisp, morning with little wind and the promise of a clear day. I am a morning person and I mentally bond with people out walking through the long shadows of dawn. It's an eerie kind of solace. We know the sun will rise, but the fingers of night are still there. "Did you sleep at all?" I refrain from asking. "What has caused your unrest?" again unspoken. Or are you someone who can't wait to start your day, blessed with a clear conscience and an enthusiasm to *carpe diem*? As one of those walkers, I opted for the later.

At the bottom of a steep decent I passed a hostel, I had missed. I was a little disappointed I hadn't stayed there. Often at the end of the day, I would take the first accommodation available. I was always too sore and too tired to shop around. Although this hostel was in a wonderful location right on the beach, if it had been full, or closed, I would have had to walk back up the hill again to the main albergue. My blister screamed, "No more walking." Still I earmarked this one, in case I ever came back again. In fact, it had what looked like an excellent fish restaurant right next door. I salivated and it wasn't even lunchtime. My meal would not have been €12, but it would have been fresh fish, eaten in an idyllic spot. Even in the grey light of early morning the setting was perfect.

I was now in Galicia, the province of Santiago. It was once a small country unto itself, with its own language, Gallego, and its own culture, celtic. In fact, its weather is not unlike that of Ireland – cool and wet. The terrain is rocky and the mood is melancholy. A mountain broods to my right as I pick my way around a rocky trail at its base. The sea shivers on my left, rolling in waves of ice blue with snowy crests. It's not really cold; it's just distant. Portugal was warm, sunny, green and full of life. Galicia is grey and almost sad on this misty morning. Soon I will hear bagpipes – a traditional instrument – played in the forest and I will think of Ireland, of the famines, of the struggles for freedom over hundreds of years and I will wonder what tragedies befell Galicia to make it mourn in the celtic tradition.

I walk now mainly by the sea. I am at peace. I am alone, save for a few pilgrims and a fellow with a very friendly dog. Shamrocks are everywhere. Here and there are sprigs of yellow gorse and a few wild roses in bud, but not yet in bloom. This is a rugged coastline. There are few if any beaches. However, there is a gathering of rocks, a carpeting of mosses and a scattering of heathers all cut through by a path of fine shale for intrepid walkers, hoping to find breakfast.

It was almost noon before I came across a shipping container, turned restaurant. It was well stocked and offered quite a varied menu. I had coffee and a sandwich of tomato, jamon and cheese on a baguette for €7. The café was ideally located on a knoll overlooking the sea. There were tables outside with umbrellas, very welcome on what was turning out to be a quite a sunny day. I met the two women from Brittany, whom I had met in Matosinhos and Soon Sang again. It was a delightful gathering.

The walk to Oia alternated between seascape and forested path. It was peaceful, with just enough walkers to let me know I wasn't lost, however it wasn't crowded. I was hoping to secure a bed in a small albergue with two beds to a room and no bunks. It was called La Calla Inn. No doubt after the many Calla lilies that seem to spring up everywhere on the path. As wild flowers they are large and luminous spreading in massive clusters throughout the woods or gathering in striking bouquets beside the road. They reminded me of Madonna Lilies and they were a divine presence. Most of my spiritual experience so far on the Camino has been in nature. Any church I passed was either locked or secreted away behind a stone wall or metal siding. I would have loved to have spent sometime in quiet contemplation inside a sacred place. Maybe this, though, is what the Camino is saying. Nature is your sacred place. You have to find your peace here.

After lunch, I walked with Soon Sang again for a while. We never ran out of conversation. Well, collectively we would have had almost 140 years of life to share. There is something to be said about growing old. You have a host of stories and a wealth of experiences to pass on.

Just as I had been moaning the lack of a religious presence on the path, a small roadside chapel appeared near the entrance to Oia. It was a tiny stone church where I lit a candle and said a quiet prayer. I wanted more of this type of spiritual enrichment. As much as I love the earth, I need to be lifted out of it for a few moments every once and awhile. This is a different kind of peace.

We found the tourist office in Oia easily, where Soon Sang inquired about her hotel. Unfortunately, she was told it was another three kilometres further on in Mougas. I was able, however, to get a bed at La Calla Inn. It was another sad good-bye for both of us.

While checking in, I found out that the hostel was owned by a woman from the US who had lived in a number of states, before moving to Europe. It took Tanya five years to find this house in Spain, which she renovated and turned into a hostel for pilgrims. I asked her briefly about the journey. She said it was a challenge. I got the feeling that, although this might have been a dream of hers, she was tired. The booking in of pilgrims never goes away – everyday is a new day, which must be processed. Still you get to live by the sea beside a mountain in a picturesque village with an ancient monastery, several exquisite restaurants, and a handful of medieval buildings on winding cobblestoned streets. Pick your poison. Meeting Tanya was also another way of the Camino telling me, not to move to another country and start again. The reality is you are still you in the routine of daily living. Your new country might be warmer, but your demons are the same. They follow you regardless of where you are or what you are doing.

At La Calla, I shared my room with a delightful woman from Holland, Claudia. She had also met Anika at some point on the path, so there was this connection, which is so much a part of the Camino. I found out that Claudia was a grandmother. She looked

too young and energetic to be in that age bracket. That being said, my younger sister is a great grandmother of a 13 year-old. Everything is relative. Claudia did comment that I must be one of the mermaids, because I knew Anika from Matosinhos. Community is also so much a part of the Camino experience.

Once settled, a few of us walked up to the only large store in Oia. It had an eclectic mix of products reminiscent of one of those general merchandise emporiums. Here I was able to buy some fruit for the next day plus a walking pole, which I desperately needed. I decided not to buy two poles, because one was €15 and two would have been €30 – expensive enough.

Tanya, in spite of the challenge, had done a spectacular job of renovating La Calla. The bedrooms were bright, the principal rooms friendly and the patio, perfect. This hostel just seemed to attract interesting people. Here I met Alex, a woman from Australia, who was doing her second Camino, this time from Lisbon. She was very generous, buying a bottle of wine for us all to share. Sitting opposite, Alex was a charming young man, Rolf, from Holland, who was travelling with another Dutch woman he had met on the Camino. Beside Rolf was Jeff, an older man from Winnipeg. He was spending several months walking various Caminos, waiting for his partner in Canada to retire from teaching and join him. Jeff was the classic, easy-going Canadian. He talked a bit about train journeys in Canada, especially the one that goes up to Churchill to see the polar bears. It's a popular venue for Europeans vacationing in Canada. I liked Jeff. He was like finding a little piece of home in another country. In addition to my roommate Claudia, who was a lively addition to the party, there was a French woman who had walked a Camino with her dog, a purebred husky. He wasn't with her on this Camino, but you could tell she missed him.

We sat out on the patio chatting for several hours while we waited for the restaurants to open at 8:00pm. This is Spain, where a person could die of hunger, waiting for food shops to open after siesta, or restaurants to open in the evening after 8:00pm. Eventually, Claudia, Alex and I went out for dinner at the elegant Taperia A Camboa overlooking the open sea and the magnificent monastery of Santa Maria de Oia. We ordered Padron peppers to start, which unfortunately weren't available, so we had to make due with a ceviche of mixed seafood. It was okay, but I have had better. Alex and I then shared some pork ribs and Claudia had hake. We all had wine. As the sun was setting towards the end of our meal, Alex pointed out that this would likely be our last sunset by the open sea. We scrambled to take pictures, before returning to the inn.

There are many points of interest that make Oia very special. Though tiny compared to the larger centres, it has distilled much of the essence that is the coastal Camino. There is the ancient Cistercian monastery established in 1137, which is open for tours. There is the vast Atlantic Ocean, with its sandy beaches, the magnificent mountains so close you could almost touch them and there is the town itself with chic restaurants, quaint shops and accommodating inns, all collected in a maze of winding streets. It's a special place.

Breakfast at La Calla was free. It was coffee, which you made yourself in the kitchen and croissants, which were delivered fresh about 7:00am. Wise Claudia warned me to be up early and get my share before the men took most of them. As it turned out, there was plenty, but since Claudia's husband was a long distance truck driver, I think she spoke from experience. For the first time, I didn't mind the busy-ness in the morning. I enjoyed my croissant and coffee, while I wrote my post. All was relatively calm as pilgrims prepared for the day's hike.

Chapter 13

Today was an 18kms walk to Baiona. As I walk quite slowly, most of La Calla's pilgrims had moved ahead. I really don't mind walking on my own. I hate slowing others down. In any event, my company for the walk was the ocean, the fields of yellow daisies, the rolling hills and the glorious sun. Sometimes the path veered inland through some small picturesque villages, however for most of the walk it was verdant fields flowing down to the sea on my left and small farms rising to mountains on my right. With clear blue skies, the day couldn't have been more perfect, warm but not too hot, terrain more flat than steep and the love of the Camino was everywhere.

With a good breakfast I could walk until lunch without dipping into my reserves of apples and clementines. Fortunately, after about 5kms, I found a quaint café, and ordered a ham and cheese on a croissant with coffee. Here, I met a friendly Dutch woman, Martine. She was also walking on her own and loved to chat. After lunch, we set out together to walk the ascents before Baiona. Martine walked quickly, so I had to keep up. Alex from La Calla, who was also walking the path at the same time, joined us. It was a challenge to talk and walk at their pace, without losing my breath and my footing!! Martine walked ahead a bit, while Alex and I discussed last night's dinner. Suddenly we saw Martine up ahead waving frantically, "Stop! Stop!" she said. Luckily we did, because there right in front of us was a snake!! Martine had nearly stepped on it and kindly stopped to warn us. I'm not sure what kind of snake it was or if it was poisonous. In any event I am terrified of snakes and so very thankful that Martine slowed down to warn us.

A little while later the path cut inland and there were some significant climbs. I had to slow down, while the others forged ahead. I don't mind losing my walking companions. I would rather be able to walk very carefully, watching where I put my foot without the pressure of having to keep up and possibly fall – or worse. I gradually made the climbs over significant rocks and tricky crevices. I was so fortunate to have been able to buy a hiking pole in Oia. I'm not sure I could have managed the climbs without it. Still the ascents, though a challenge, were lovely. There was always the green forest that enveloped you and lifted your spirits, as you navigated the slippery rocks worn smooth by so many footfalls over so many years.

The path after the climb wound through a maze of small villages. The walk was mainly on quiet roads of asphalt, which were easier to manage than the loose stones of the forest paths. I'm always surprised when I seem to be in the middle of nowhere, and suddenly I see a trailer serving coffee or something harder – beer, wine, liquor. I think that the pilgrims might have coffee or a beer (or two), but those out for a drive would often have a tot or two of whiskey – Dutch courage to navigate those hairpin turns.

After a fairly exhausting 19kms walk. I reached Baiona. I followed a few backpackers to the first hostel, I saw. I waited in line, while younger, more able walkers were processed. I didn't make the cut. There were no more lower bunks. I wasn't too disappointed because the place looked a little dark and dreary. The hospitelero called around a few places and finally directed me to a small hotel for €40. I was actually

hoping to stay in a hotel after my arduous walk, but since the hostel was right there, I really didn't feel like looking any further. The Camino had provided.

With the use of some international sign language, the hospitelero directed me to go straight and then turn. Two waves of the hand meant that you went straight past several side streets and then turned right. I obviously misread the last shake of the hand because I turned right a little too early. A young boy about 12 stopped me and said, "no, no peregrina." I was obviously on the wrong path for the Camino. I explained that I was looking for Hotel Bayona (name change to Spanish from Gallego). He looked at his father, who was minding the kids and his drink at the same time. Dad made an EL-shaped motion with his hand. I back tracked and found the hotel easily. It was quiet, very clean and just what I needed after all those significant climbs.

I tried to stay in hostels where and when I could. But I built into the budget emergency funds. They were there, when the hostels weren't. I let the Camino provide and for the most part it did. When I was extremely exhausted, either a hostel or a hotel appeared. I decided not to go hunting for any of them. I was so thankful that the hospitelero in Baiona called around a few places and found a bed for me. For the record, this was April about 3:00pm on a weekday afternoon and the hostel had booked all its lower bunks. The Caminos can be very busy.

I particularly liked Hotel Bayona. Its rooms had all been updated. It had an elevator and helpful staff. Its only curiosity was a "pull-chain" toilet. I hadn't seen one of these since I left London in the late 60s. Of course I remember both my grandmothers had them in their homes – early indoor plumbing. I felt as though I had stepped back in time.

After a rest and a hot shower, I decided to walk around the town to find an interesting restaurant, which opened early. Baiona is the sort of place you read about in fairy tales. I marvelled at the ancient stone buildings lining the quiet waters of the estuary as I followed cobblestoned streets into grand public squares decorated with impressive crests and ceremonial flags. I meandered through arched entrances, past crenulated walls and sturdy turrets. There was a sense of magic at every turn. In fact the next day, the town was hosting a marathon race. Excitement was in the air. I'm surprised I got a room.

Baiona is also revered as the first place in Europe to learn of the discovery of America. One of Christopher Columbus' ships, the Pinta, returned to Spain to announce that a new land had been discovered. A replica of the Pinta is moored in Baiona's harbour today. The town is also considered the place of landing for the boat that brought Santiago's remains back to Spain. It's a beautiful storied town.

Eventually, I found what seemed like a nice seafood restaurant just off the main square. It was busy, usually a good sign. The menu, however, looked like the servings were mainly for two people, even though I noticed a few single women seated at small tables. The waitress assured me that I could have a half portion and would be charged accordingly. I ordered a dish of clams in a tomato sauce, as a starter and a seafood and

rice dish, as my main course. With two glasses of wine, everything was perfect until I got the bill. I was in shock; it was €62. My hotel was only €40, something was wrong. I studied it carefully. I did notice that they had charged me for two portions of bread – €1.50. I complained. The bill came back at €42. Still extortionate, but my Spanish wasn't good enough to argue, so I paid it and "ate" the difference so to speak. At a nearby table, I did chat with a woman from Montana, who was walking the Camino, with the support of a tour company. She was scheduled to walk 28kms the next day and felt it was too much. I agreed. She did say that she would take a cab for half the distance and then carry on from there – good idea!!

So far on this entire Camino the only time I felt that I had been "ripped off" was at this restaurant. In fact, wherever the Camino is the prime source of revenue for an area, the prices have been more than reasonable. Baiona is a tourist town and I happened to have a waiter who was out to make whatever he could from the marathon crowds. I chalked it up to experience. I should have been more vigilant.

I went back to the hotel, wrote a post and went to sleep. It had been a long and adventurous day of snakes, aches and takes. Buen Camino!!

Chapter 14

Some pilgrims were taking a rest day in Baiona. However, I decided to do a shorter walking day instead of a rest day and set out for Nigran, about 10kms away. It was a pleasant walk through small villages and verdant countryside. I particularly like paths where the trees arch over the trail and form a covered walkway. I like to think I'm entering a magical kingdom, where a Merlin will grant me three wishes. Sometimes, I walked by water, crossing over gurgling streams on makeshift bridges and at other times I hiked past rushing cascades deep in the darkness of the forest primeval. I walked alone most of the time and I let my mind wander. I was happy to be in another world.

The entrance to Nigran was a shock. The constant traffic and narrow sidewalks were such a contrast to the peace of the woods. It was hot and I was irritable. I checked my app for the nearest albergue. As I followed directions to it, I saw a hand written sign to a pensione about half a kilometer away. I decided to take it, if there was a room at a reasonable price. I was quoted €35 for a room with a private bath. I took it even though it was on the third floor with no elevator. Well, I had walked only 10kms that day so a few extra flights of stairs would be manageable.

I hung out my clothes that hadn't dried yesterday on one of their lines. In fact even my dry clothes from yesterday were damp. You forget that living by the sea has its challenges.

The El Retiro pensione was mainly a restaurant, which was very busy given it was a Sunday. Still they were able to find a table for me and I had a late lunch/early dinner of fresh tomato salad, breaded chicken cutlets and chips – everything comes with French fries – plus two glasses of wine. It was delicious. Walking outside most of the day makes you appreciate staying in for the evening. I spent the time adding pictures to my website, idling on Facebook and organizing my pack for the trip to Vigo the next day.

I took the advice of some other pilgrims and booked ahead for Vigo, which is a small city with an airport and many start their Camino there. I will have a 14 kilometre walk, but at least I won't have the anxiety of wondering where I am going to stay that night. I did, though, have a weak moment in Nigran. The pensione, where I was staying had a cupboard full of backpacks, when I arrived. I realized that this was one of the places that tour groups use to book pilgrims who were not organizing their own accommodation. I thought that I might ask in the morning to have my backpack transferred since I knew where I was staying the next night. Not so. Everyone staying at El Retiro was loaded into a mini bus the next day, about to head off somewhere and there was no one at reception or anywhere else on the premises to ask for help. Again the Camino told me that I had to stay the course. I couldn't weaken. It would help me when I needed it. But I was strong enough to do this on my own.

My walk to Vigo was more of the same forested paths of yesterday. There were ascents and descents, with interludes of long easy stretches. The weather continues to be warm and my blister has healed. There weren't many pilgrims on this stretch of the

Camino, because the group that oversees the Camino in Spain has created another path to bypass Vigo. It isn't marked as yet, but some may have been using an app, which included the new directions. I also noticed that some pilgrims were walking along the coast, so again there may have been alternate paths that I missed.

If entering Nigran was a shock, Vigo was a bullet to the head. The noise was deafening, cars, trucks, buses and more vehicles than I could name converged on roundabouts and sped off in all directions. There were car dealerships, gas stations, repair shops and all manner of vehicle related businesses spilling out and over the sidewalks of the Camino. I needed an escape. Fortunately the first turn off from this madhouse was to Parque de Castrelos, where I had booked my hotel. Eureka!

Confidently, I left the noise and mayhem behind and followed the directions on Wise Pilgrim to the park. However, there was no indication of a hotel nearby. I followed some backpackers, surely they must know where they were going, because I didn't. The park was massive. Off in the distance were stately homes, any of which could have been a hotel. Nothing, though, had the sign O Pazo. I finally decided to call the hotel and ask for directions. Since I hadn't bought a European sim card, my call went through my Canadian connections. This would be an expensive SOS. The front desk answered and tried to give me directions in very broken English. Finally I asked them to just send a taxi.

They said sure, "What is your address?"

"Well, I'm in a park, by a stream with a bridge and a fountain."

I left the park briefly and found a street sign, which I could give them, before we were disconnected. They did though follow through and sent me a text to say that taxi #546 would pick me outside #71 Ponte du Nuevo. Clearly this has happened before. They were, however, not paying for the cab. As it turned out the hotel was miles away or at least the cabbie made it seem as though it were miles away. After a €7 adventure, I finally reached my lodging for the night. I gave the driver €10 and hoped that he could put the tip to good use!

I booked this hotel on the advice given in the app Wise Pilgrim. The write up said that they offered a pilgrim meal for €12. Well the meal was actually €16 and it was very disappointing. Everything was out of a can, including the green beans. Still the grounds were well maintained and my room was clean and comfortable. I could hang out laundry, reorganize my backpack and generally recover from the day's misadventure.

I sent a text home to update everyone, as to my whereabouts and my son, who had been bugging me to do some "face time," which I hate, called me with face time activated. Both he and his sister had a day off work that coincided, so they decided to contact me. As he talked, he walked around the house, I could see that my indoor plants had been watered, my forsythia beside the deck was in bloom and both my children looked happy and well fed. I was a little homesick. I walked outside to my extended

balcony and showed them the gardens, the distant hills and the gorgeous blue skies of Spain before we signed off. I took this moment, as another message from the Camino. Think of what you cherish the most and keep that in your heart, and as your focus moving forward.

In preparing for the next day, I read through the information on all three apps. Wise Pilgrim said that my biggest challenge tomorrow would be getting through Vigo – ugh! I weaken. I thought what if I could just have a taxi take me to the other side of the city. I looked at the route for a likely drop off spot. I identified a name Sende Aqua. It wasn't really an address so how would I indicate this place to a cabbie. I decided to silence my alter ego – the evil one that wanted to cab it across town and just go back to where I had left the path yesterday. I did though book an albergue in Redondella – La Rotunda, so I had, at least, accommodation at the end of the day.

To make up for the less than inspiring dinner, the hotel included a free breakfast. It was just as well because there were no markets around anywhere to buy food for breakfast or snacks for the day's journey. I had my usual toast and coffee and raided their fruit bowl for an apple and a banana to sustain me, in case lunch was a long way off.

The front desk called a taxi for me and I showed the driver on my phone where I wanted to go. He looked confused. I could bring up the park, but I couldn't bring up the name of the street where the first cab driver had picked me up. How come I could do it last night, but not this morning is still a mystery? He looked further along the path in Wise Pilgrim and pointed to a spot. "Aqui," he said. I said, "Sure, wherever." Ironically it was Sende Aqua. I think that he knew where I wanted to go all along, but thought that he would help me out by taking me almost out of Vigo and half way up the mountain. It was also the difference between a €7 cab fare and a €13 cab fare. I gave him €15. He may have saved my life, because as I found out later, the climb out of Vigo was brutal. I'm so glad I was spared the agony and that my conscience was clear. I did not ask to be driven across Vigo, the Camino provided.

As an aside, when I told my eldest about my adventures in Vigo, he reminded me that the evil force in one of the old Ghostbuster movies was Vigo. Where were you Bill Murray, when I needed you!!

Chapter 15

It was a little past 10:00am, when I finished the climb out of Vigo. For the most part the walk now was fairly flat and the views, magnificent. The path was quite high above the estuary, giving a fabulous vista of the city of Vigo to the West, its small islands to the north and the approaching forest reserve of Monte da Guia to the East. All separated from Vigo by wide pristine beaches and a brilliant blue sea. I was walking now on a large airy trail edged by trees and carpeted with Eucalyptus leaves. Sun streamed through an intricate pattern of lacy branches, lighting the way and lightening my spirits. Although I was alone, I knew I wasn't lost, my app said so, however, there were no pilgrims anywhere. I pressed on. The Camino signs were there, when I needed them and I had a booking for the night. All I had to do was walk, which I did relentlessly. In fact I had hiked alone for almost three hours before I saw another person. This time it was a male backpacker, who passed me and I was so elated that I said (maybe screamed), "You're the first person, I've seen in three hours!" English wasn't his language, so he gave me a half smile and a wide berth. I'm sure he thought I was a little deranged. Well, I had lost my comb a few days ago, so I hadn't combed my hair in all that time even with a hat on you can still look like an old crone or its many synonyms, witch, hag, harpy, harridan. Take your pick. I actually like occultist or sorceress, perhaps a little too pagan for the Camino.

Later a young couple passed by. They smiled, as well, and offered a Buen Camino. Things were picking up. After that beautiful stretch of flat terrain, the Camino did its usual trick of taking you down out of the mountain, only to send you back up again. I yo-yoed all the way to Redondela. Fortunately, on the last descent, I met Alex from Oia. She stopped for a brief chat, but had to hurry on because she had to do at least 30 kilometres today, in order to reach Santiago by Saturday.

My walk was a short 13kms this morning, so, in fact, I arrived in Redondela in time for a late lunch. Since the albergue wouldn't open for another hour or more, there was enough time to have a coffee and a baguette filled with some creamy avocado concoction that was delicious. I scouted out some other restaurants for dinner and found one that had an interesting dish of pig's knuckles. It sounded tasty.

Redondela is where the coastal path meets the central path out of Porto, so there are more pilgrims and more hostels. The town itself is quite lively, with shops, markets, cafe's and a host of bar/restaurants. It was pleasant to have all this activity after the solitude of the path. I bought some fruit for the next day and did a cash advance to my credit card topping up my dwindling supply of euros. €40 euros cost me \$80.00CAD with exchange and transaction fees. This was a little pricey. I have used my credit card wherever possible, but some municipal albergues take cash only and taxis, just in case I needed one, like cash. I wanted to be sure I had enough, so I paid the price.

I went back to the albergue, which was now open. It looked like the large foyer of a condo building, which had been converted into a hostel with the addition of several washrooms. There were eight beds and no bunks. I paid €17 for a comfortable spot in a

spacious niche with a coat rack, side table and charging outlet. This was luxury. There were only three English-speaking pilgrims staying here tonight. Two were actually a married couple from Oklahoma. They were in their early sixties and had left six children and a slew of grandchildren back home in the US. They were having some difficulty with the walk, though – sore feet, blisters, fatigue. In fact they were logging only 10kms a day. I felt very sorry for them.

The other English speaker was also from the US. He was retired and living in Florida, although he still maintained a home in Detroit. In five minutes, I got his entire retirement history. He had rented out his place in Detroit, bought an RV, travelled around the US for several years and finally settled in Fort Myers, which he called Paradise. Having vacationed for a number of years in Sanibel-Captiva (just over the bridge), I questioned the sanity of anyone calling Fort Myers paradise. Jeff went on to say that he was having his suitcase sent ahead because he had just finished a cruise through the Mediterranean and a suitcase was more convenient for that trip. However, he had decided to add a Camino before returning to the US, so he was doing the Portuguese Camino this year, after having done the Del Norte last year. I think he paused for a breath here. Somehow the altruism of the two Caminos hadn't yet rubbed off on him, he was still quite self centered.

After a late lunch, I could easily wait until 7:00pm for dinner. I went back to the restaurant I had identified earlier, only to find that the menu of the day, del dia, stopped serving at 4:30. I had missed the pig's knuckles and had to settle for basic bar food. I opted for a hamburger, which didn't come with fries, however, with three glasses of wine – hamburger helpers - it was fine. Well, it was a lovely evening to sit outside and enjoy the warm, almost sultry air. The patio, beside an old church, was quiet and the pedestrian traffic, entertaining, so I immersed myself in the moment, as I watched the day fade to dusk and finally disappear into night.

Walking back to the hostel was easy, it was two minutes away. The room was quiet, most pilgrims had retired for the night. With my day dress turned nightdress, I could easily slip out of underwear and slide into bed. It had been a good day. I mentally thanked the powers that be for my safe arrival, as I had done everyday so far on this Camino, as I have done everyday so far for most of my life – maybe not always an arrival, but the safe completion of another day. I take little for granted and although, I don't pray often, I always set aside a moment or two before sleep to remember that I have been blessed, where others haven't and hope that those less fortunate find peace however and wherever they can.

I left La Rotunda about 8:00am the next morning. I had spent sometime yesterday organizing my route to Santiago. I had to be there on Sunday April 21, because I had a room booked for two nights. No matter how I paced out the journey, because of availability of accommodation and difficulty of terrain, I had to walk 20kms to Pontevedra today. Fortunately it was another gloriously sunny day and I had slept well. I pressed on. The path was noticeably busier. You gave up wishing everyone you passed a "Buen Camino." There were just too many. The forest paths north of Redondela were a

little more challenging than the ones before it. In fact one trail actually posted a grade of 15%. They did give an alternate path of a 5% grade, but given that I had missed the class on slopes in Geometry after a weekend of parties, when I was 16, I didn't know which one would be the steeper – a clear case of where high school math could save your life.

Well, since most pilgrims were doing the 15% grade, I took the road more travelled and wished I hadn't. Even though I gravitated to the edge of the path where there was better traction, walking on loose shale at a 45° angle was bordering on the impossible. Death by stoning came to mind. I managed to edge my way up most of the incline with my pole and some tricks I had learned as a beginning skier. The last five metres though were very difficult. In front of me were boulders. To my right was a three foot drop and to my left was an even sharper angle with looser stones. I froze. I looked desperately for better footing. There was none. I was as close to the edge of the path, as I could get. There was no more traction. Even with a pole, if I shifted my weight, I would fall, if I didn't shift my weight I was doomed to be a living statue for however long I survived. Finally, clenching my teeth I gathered up what courage I had left and shifted my weight. The Camino provided. I didn't fall. I stumbled, but I didn't fall. I started to ease myself up the last few metres. Slowly, methodically, barely breathing, I crunched down on loose stones, slipping slightly with every step. Frightening, as it was, I had to keep the momentum going. I couldn't risk stopping again. I pushed my pole into the path, clinging to it as I shifted my weight. Left, right and left again - step, slip, pause. There were quite a few hikers on the path. I was aware that they were watching me. I think they might have tried to help, but they too were having difficulty. At last, with a combination of foolish pride and stubborn resolve, I made it.

I finally reached some level footing at the top of the climb, where I could breathe again. Exhaling, I wondered how I ever managed to live as long as I have. I wasn't expecting such a challenging ascent on the coastal Camino. Then again, I wasn't expecting all those other challenges that I managed to surmount over the years either. Yes, there was that time when I was 6 years-old that I made the mistake of arguing with a bully (when will I ever learn to keep my mouth shut?) He walked towards me forcing me to walk backwards until I fell off a 15' cliff. I landed on sand and it obviously saved my life. There was also that time six years later, when my father, needing a hand to steady a ladder while he tweaked the antenna on the roof of our bungalow, asked me to straddle the roof ridge and hold the ladder while he climbed up the 10 feet or so of a narrow steel pole that supported the receiver. I was twelve years old, a little over 80lbs and a mere 4'11", but I had for a few terrifying moments become my father's keeper – we fortunately both survived. Fast forward another six years when I was allowed to take the car at the tender age of eighteen and drive through the night with a few friends from Toronto to New York City. Miraculously, we all got back in one piece. When I turned twenty-one, I was considered an adult and had no one else to blame for all those incidents that could have been tragic, but weren't. Did I mention that I spent 2 years hitching through Europe in the late 60s? These individual events may not be as adventurous as those experienced by others, but they were still daunting at the time. So here I am at 79 and still pushing the envelope.

However, it never really gets any easier and I suppose if you keep taking on challenges there will come a time when you won't make it. I always try though to hedge my bets. I often ask myself, "What are the chances that this or that will happen?" Being in my late seventies gave me better odds than being eighty plus. Do I take on another Camino? Let's finish this one first!

There was more climbing, however, it was on large smooth rocks albeit with a stream running fiercely down the centre. My feet had more grip this time, and I could steady myself against a small rise at the side of the path. At one point, I reached for this embankment, only to find it wasn't there. I wobbled. A hand reached down to help me. It was a "Camino angel". People often mention the kindness offered on the Camino and refer to these people as "Camino angels." My angel this time was a young woman walking slightly ahead of me, who had me in her peripheral vision. She noticed when I wavered and turned to help. I grasped her hand and steadied myself. This is the magic of the Camino.

When the tract eased and I could relax again, I met two Canadian women travelling together. Catherine was from Nova Scotia and Katherine, from New Brunswick. Starting in Vigo, they had used a tour company to book their accommodation and forward their luggage. They were delightful. We stopped for coffee together in Arcade. No one mentioned the difficulty of the climb, so I decided to stay positive and keep my mouth shut. It was difficult. I found out that Catherine was actually born in Newfoundland, but relocated to Nova Scotia after university at Dalhousie. She had a daughter who was about to settle on property she had bought to live off the grid. I shared my son's story. Katherine was in a similar situation as myself with adult children and understood my need to treat all our respective children equally, as far as helping out is concerned. She also understood my need to wring every last bit of life out of the few remaining moments we all have. I would have loved to have spent more time with them, but our paths parted at one point and never crossed again. So I walked on, alone.

There was more hill climbing, but this time, it was through small villages connected by tracks over farmland. You are never too old to say, "Oh, look, horses...or sheep...or goats." At one point, I met a few guard dogs, who decided they didn't like me. I'm usually very good with dogs, but these looked particularly aggressive. Fortunately, there was a woman out feeding her chickens, who shouted to the dogs in a language they could understand. They backed off. I walked on. I still seemed to walk alone for a good deal of the time. Even though there were more pilgrims, I seem to have found the pockets of little or no people, unless it was lunchtime, where a single café could become a convention centre, especially when a church group of thirty or more Spanish woman stopped for some chaotic camaraderie before their meal. I did, though, manage to order a coffee and a croissant, pay through some sort of machine that took my cash and dispensed my change, carry my loaded tray through a frenzy of pilgrims and secure a table outside. (The lord works in mysterious ways!!)

After lunch, the path continued through more small villages. I might have gone into a tiny church in one of those villages, but there was a crowd waiting to go in, as a

crowd came out. This was April. I couldn't imagine July. I was thankful that I had booked my hostel for the night in Pontevedra. Occasionally, some cyclist would pedal past and once or twice there were a few pilgrims on horseback – alternate means of travel on The Way. But for the most part, we all just walked...and walked...and walked.

Sometimes, on a path through what might have seemed like a remote area, there would be a vendor selling handicrafts or fruit and always water. At one stall I bought a small pin for my hat. It was a miniature of the Camino shell sign for €2. This particular vendor also had a wonderful stamp for our credentials which was free – a bargain day! At 15kms I took a break to eat my apple. On a normal 15kms day, I would have reached my destination and could save my emergency rations for another day, however, on longer days, or days without lunch or a very early breakfast, I would need to stop for a snack. These would be like mini picnics beside the path. Perched on a stone wall or low bench, I could enjoy an apple or a clementine, and acknowledge passersby with a “buen Camino.” It was particularly idyllic.

The path would usually level out and vehicular traffic increase the closer you got to a larger centre. Pontevedra was no exception. I used my GPS to locate the hostel I had booked. I'm glad I had a reservation, because at 3:00pm they were turning people away. I secured a lower bunk and decided to see if I could find a restaurant with a “del dia” menu before it closed. I walked into the old town, which is a designated pedestrian area, with lots of shops, cafés, restaurants and a few more albergues. Here I found an outdoor café with a menu of the day. It was hand written in Spanish and I hadn't a clue what I was ordering. I was okay with ensalada, but the main courses were indecipherable. I pointed to something that looked as though it might be fish and ordered a glass of wine.

When my meal came, I think I may have ordered the Spanish version of the Weight Watchers' menu. There was no starch. There was lettuce, a sliced tomato and an unidentifiable fish that was long and thin and looked me in the eye. I really don't mind being served fish with the head intact, but this one looked more like eel. Now, I have had conger eel years ago and loved it, but it was marinated and I didn't realize it was eel until the waitress who took our plates away told us what we had just had as a starter.

Even though the fish had, a mild tasting, flaky white flesh that was very palatable, I gave up on my del dia after a valiant attempt to pretend it was halibut. Perhaps there is a lesson here about del dias, from pork knuckles to “maybe” eels, there is a reason the lunch is only €12. I walked back to the albergue to rest. I might have had a shower. I'm not sure. I'm picky about showers, even though the ones in the albergues are usually fine. I need to make sure that the water is hot and I have a place to put my valuables. Anyway showering everyday, I decided, is overrated. I remember when the Saturday bath was what everyone had and that was it. Anyway, booking a hotel once and a while, though a little more expensive ensures personal hygiene, whether you need it or not.

As an aside I always remember a classic line from an old folk song by the Limelighters – remember them? It was something about the cleanliness of hippies – remember them? It pretty much says it all – “Clean mind, clean body – Take your pick.”

Given the spiritual aspect of the Camino, I opted for a clean mind or at least a clear conscience and showered when the stars aligned.

Shower or no shower, I was still hungry and a little bored. No one in the hostel spoke English and I was too tired to speak Spanglish. I searched my apps for another restaurant nearby. A pizzeria came into view. It was a block away. Okay, not as close as the Pizza Hut a few days ago, but as I was to find out, it was a somewhat upscale place with wine and the most delicious individual pizzas this side of the Atlantic. I waited for it to open. I was getting used to walking around the block a few times and trying not to look obvious while “hanging out” in front of a few buildings. Nonchalance is a practised art. Carlos Pizzeria opened at exactly 7:00pm. The owner was delightful, the food was delicious and I forgot about my Del Dia disappointment earlier in the day. I went to sleep on a full stomach of Spanish pizza.

Chapter 16

It was still dark when I left the hostel at 7:00am the next morning. There was a certain eeriness to the back streets of Pontevedra in the half-light of an approaching dawn. Haloed streetlamps cast an ominous glow over cobblestones still slick from the night's damp. They barely lit the haunted archways, sculpting strange shadows in the silent cloisters. I walked cautiously. The sky grew lighter. I was now aware of distinct shapes. I passed a stone cross in the centre of several converging streets. Would this have been a marketplace at one time? I skirted an ancient fountain, empty now of water, but full of history. How many tradesmen, pilgrims, servants and countrymen/women of all classes had, over the centuries, stopped here to break their journeys? Pontevedra has kept its antiquity, its ghosts and its sense of another time and another place, well.

The sky was now a paler shade of grey. It would soon be light and I could leave those spectres behind. A darkened alley opened to a plaza in front of the Church of the Virgin Pilgrim – Iglesia de la Virgen Peregrina. I was awed by its beauty. Shaped like a scallop shell, it began construction in 1778. The origins of the church have a long and complicated history, which began with the Congregation of Our Lady of Refuge and the Divine Pilgrim – the patron saint of the Portuguese Camino. I was in good hands. It was too early for the church to be open. I would love to have spent time inside this remarkable building. I paused to take a picture, at least.

It was difficult to leave Pontevedra. I felt as though I had missed something. I wanted to experience the church. I wanted to explore the twisted lanes, the back alleys, the defunct fountains and the crumbling crosses. I think I have to come back. Life is so short and its offerings so immense it's difficult to process it all.

Musings aside, I followed two pilgrims out of the town. They stopped at a bakery, I might have as well, but I find that I like to get on the road, as soon as possible. Linger in a town just to eat only seems to delay the journey. I like to find a café somewhere enroute. Sometimes I don't, but that's my penance for being a stubborn old pilgrim. I walked again through woodland, and small villages. I followed the rise and fall of the land, the varied terrain, the pretty paths and the ugly asphalt. At one point Martine passed me. We connected again and had a great chat. She told me about her stay last night. It was a farm, where everything was organic. Her hosts grew their own food, kept chickens, made delicious meals and were most cordial. I declined to mention my pizza, nice, but probably not organic. Martine sped on. Just off the various Caminos are more elegant accommodations, which some prefer. It's wonderful to have these choices. Pilgrims have brought much needed commerce to an impoverished part of Spain. Agri-tourism can now thrive along side the hostels and the albergues. The Caminos have provided.

I was hoping to find a hostel about 15kms north of Pontevedre. Apart from meeting Martine, I didn't see many pilgrims along the way. The weather was warm and sunny, so there was little need to rush. I could just slow down and enjoy the walk. Still I had to have a focus, I knew I needed a place to stay for the night. At one point, I did see,

on my app, a municipal albergue in Braillos. Municipal hostels can't be booked. You just show up and hope for a bed. I kept my fingers crossed, but walked as quickly as I could. This hostel was a little off the path, so again I had to keep following small signposts, the distance of which often changed at whim – 800m, 500m, 700m – what happened? Finally I arrived a little after 1:00pm. I secured a lower bunk, by boldly walking in and putting my pole and hat on a bed, while I waited for the agent to arrive. My cost was €10 for a lower bunk in a clean, quite modern facility. Perfection!

Because this hostel was a little out of the way, it had its own restaurant. Now, it might have been that the restaurateur built an albergue to attract more business to his bar/café. I'm not sure which came first, but the restaurant was as accommodating as the hostel. For lunch I ordered a bocadillo – a traditional Spanish sandwich. It was huge – ham, bacon, cheese, lettuce and tomato on half a baguette. It would have fed the entire albergue. I ate half and had the other half wrapped to take away. I put it in the fridge, maybe for later.

No one, it seemed, spoke English. So I spent my social time doing laundry. I could peg out my essentials on a common clothesline in the sun, with a breeze. This was a bonus. If it had been raining, I would not have had clean/dry linen or at least clean/dry merino and cotton. The Camino makes you appreciate the gifts you have been given at the most basic level. My afternoon entertainment was watching my laundry dry. There are worse things!

Toing and froing across the lawns, I did bump into a group I had met earlier, none of whom spoke English and I didn't recognize their language, but they were friendly. They were a group of three couples in their late 50s early 60s and they were again fascinated with my age. They were kind and I secretly thought that they might have hoped to still be doing Caminos when they were my age. I loved their smiles and nods of encouragement. I felt accepted. It helped to counter my loneliness.

When my laundry had dried, my entertainment for the afternoon was over – sigh. I packed my backpack and looked over my route for the next day. I decided not to book a bed going forward and I'm not sure why. Maybe no hostels appeared on the app or they weren't easily accessible. Sometimes you just have to wing it

There was still light in the sky and I wanted to extend the evening. Since I had walked only 15kms today and arrived at my accommodation about lunchtime, I had had lots of time to rest. Fortunately the restaurant was open late. I decided to drop in. Even though I had half a baguette in the fridge, I ordered a plate of French fries with a mayonnaise dip. I needed something to soak up a glass of wine. OK, if I'd been in Canada, I might have ordered the French fries with gravy and maybe even cheese curds (poutine). But I was in Europe and mayonnaise was a lighter alternative. I took my folding keyboard, as my companion of the evening and wrote a post. I don't mind sitting by myself in a bar/café/restaurant. I love to write and I can pretend I'm a famous author. Even without my keyboard, I can still pretend I'm gathering information. Pretence is a practised art.

I finished my French fries and my post. I was now tired and night had settled in. It was a two-minute walk to the albergue. All was quiet there too. Life was good. I'm now less than 100kms from Santiago. I want to finish and I don't want to finish. I'm missing my friends from the beginning of the Camino and I'm missing my family in Canada. I want to start the path all over again and I want to go home. I have to believe that the Camino is pressuring me – agitating my mind and stirring my emotions. It wants me to feel strongly and deeply about my future. This is what I had asked for and this is what I was getting. Never underestimate the power of walking, of meditating, of being on your own for an extended length time with just a few of the basics. It can be life changing.

Chapter 17

I left Braillos about 8:00am the next morning. Again it was promising to be a wonderfully warm, sunny day. I walked along meandering paths, under trellises of grape vines and beside fields of sprouting greens – lettuce, aubergine, tomatoes. This was again the Camino of my dreams. It was an easy walk, with a few pilgrims, so I knew I wasn't lost. It was rural, so I could enjoy the escape and it was peaceful. Apart from a few small ascents and descents, this was the day's walk. At one point I had identified a hostel in San Miguel de Valga. When I arrived I couldn't find it. I found the mile marker, but there was nothing remotely resembling a place to stay in a small village with several restaurants, a monument and a gathering of people. I had to walk on to Padron, which was 5kms away. Given that I had already walked 15kms to San Miguel, I was very frustrated. However, there was nothing else to do but carry on. This is where the Camino reminds you that you have that inner strength, that resilience, to just keep walking until you reach your destination.

Martine passed me again. Camino friends just seemed to materialize out of nowhere, especially when you need them the most. I was at a low ebb. I needed a “pick-me-up” to press on, in the heat of a late afternoon. Martine, always vivacious, offered that elixir. She was walking even further than Padron. I can do this, I decided!!

The rhythm of walking took over. My mind went elsewhere. Mentally I revisited happier places. I thought of walks I had done with my late husband on the Bruce Trail in Ontario. I remembered times in Scotland with family in St. Andrews, or Edinburgh and I thought of driving to the sea in Canada – Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island. I remembered lines of poetry and lessons I had taught, especially, Hemingway's “The Old Man and The Sea.” I thought of what I might have for dinner that night, anything to take my mind off the fatigue of those last few kilometres.

Finally, I reached Padron. It was siesta and the tourist office was closed – really! My app showed a few hostels along a street that looked a little seedy. I inquired at one of the places. It was actually a bar and the rooms were upstairs. No, I didn't have a reservation. It took a while. The hostess called around. Eventually, I got the answer, “no.” I felt some panic rising. I really didn't feel like walking much farther looking for accommodation. But then again, I had no choice. I walked on. The scenery improved. The bars disappeared and some nicer buildings graced the sidewalks. Looking down a side street; I saw a sandwich board that said “hostel.” I went inside. Yes, they had a bed in a room for four. Would that do? Well, having slept in rooms for twenty-four, four was a bonus. The only negative was the fifty-four steps I had to climb to reach the room. I collapsed into my lower bunk, so exhausted that I could ignore my roommate, a sixty-something woman from Holland doing a facetime call rather loudly and for rather a long time. I was almost too tired to be annoyed. When I got to know her later in the day, she was lovely and immediately forgiven.

I dozed. I couldn't really sleep, because I knew I had to eat. After siesta, Padron came to life again. However, I was too exhausted to even think of eating at a restaurant. I

bought a huge strawberry flavoured yogurt at a small supermarket, brought it back to the hostel and ate the whole thing in one sitting, while the others in the hostel organized their dinner. After dinner, I had a lovely chat with my roommate, Carolina. I found out that her daughter was a doctor and had travelled all over the world, ministering to the sick, while learning other languages. When she had some time off she biked with her boyfriend from Holland to Singapore – WOW.

The other couple staying in the hostel were a husband and wife team from Australia, who had walked a few Caminos. After this hike they were going on a biking tour from Belgium to Holland for ten days. They were very active and lots of fun to be with. My walk to Padon pushed me past my intended itinerary. I was hoping to do three 15kms days. However, I was now about 25kms from Santiago. Even though I knew I could walk 22 kms in a day, I still felt that it would be too rushed and I would be too tired to enjoy my arrival in the Praza do Obradoiro – the golden square - in front of the cathedral. I decided to stay in a small place with a decent hostel, Faramello, even though my walk would only be about 10kms the next day. I booked a room at La Calabaza del Peregrino, just before I fell asleep. I was very tired, but very pleased with myself for having walked a little over 20kms on a very warm day.

Again, I left early in the morning without breakfast. The walk was an easy stroll through forests. Although there were some significant ascents and descents, I was getting used to them and didn't panic as much, when I looked at the elevation diagram on the Buen Camino app only to see a vertical line. C'mon nothing is a 90° angle – 45° maybe, or even 55°, but not 90°. Again it was a lovely sunny day. The terrain was a little dicey in parts with loose stones being the only place to put your foot between large rocks and huge crevices. I was getting used to walking slowly and very carefully.

I arrived in Faramello for lunch, well actually breakfast, since I hadn't passed a café along the way. There were a few places that looked promising for a coffee and a bite to eat, but, one was closed and the other, only served coffee, beer and wine. It did have a good inventory of souvenirs, though. Sorry, I wasn't adding to the weight of my pack. I ordered a coffee, sat in the garden and thought about food.

The hostel, I had booked didn't open until 2:00pm, so there was a bit of a wait. Patience is a virtue, maybe even an art form, practised on the Camino. The hospitelera, fortunately arrived on time and within a few minutes, we were all settled in rooms with bunks, above a restaurant that served a delicious lunch. I opted for chicken cutlets with chips and a side salad of lettuce and tomato. I had a coffee instead of a glass of wine, as I still had laundry to do. I have my priorities.

The four of us, myself, Carolina and the Australian couple whom I had met in Padron, sat outside at the few tables that were in front of the albergue to watch the other pilgrims pass by. One of those pilgrims was Anika. I introduced her to my friends and she decided to stay for lunch. Conversation was a mixture of English and German, as Carolina, could speak at least three languages – Dutch, German and English. It was nice

that Anika could spend some time speaking her native German. After lunch, she left for a hostel farther on.

Once all my clothes were washed and pegged out, I could relax in the garden with a glass of wine and my keyboard to write a post. Here, I met two Canadian women from Quebec. I'm not sure where they started their Camino, but it was ending today. The elder of the two was 76 and said that they were taking a cab the next day to Santiago. They'd had enough! Since the restaurant was open for dinner, as well as lunch, Carolina, the Australian couple and I didn't have to journey too far for an evening meal. We could wile away the time just sitting and chatting – one of my favourite activities.

The four of us planned to leave the hostel the next day at 7:00am for Santiago. This would give us enough time to reach the cathedral in time to attend the pilgrim mass at noon. I set my phone for 6:30am, knowing I would be awake at 6:00am anyway. I packed my bag the night before. I set out my day dress, which was washed and fresh. Arriving in Santiago would be a very special occasion. I had to be dressed for it. I thought of special occasions from my past. For my first communion, I wore a white dress and a veil. For my graduation from university, I wore a college gown with a hood trimmed in ermine (or the equivalent thereof). For my weddings (there were two) I wore dresses I had made – nothing fancy. I'm not a person who's "big" on ceremony. Something new and nice would suffice. However, to conclude my Camino, I had to make sure that it was celebrated in the cleaner of the two identical dresses I had brought. My leggings had to be immaculate or at least as spotless as a sink of shampoo and a garden hose could get them. I set aside clean socks and aired my hiking shoes. I was excited. The culmination of eighteen days of walking and the realization of a challenge was at hand. Everything had to be in order!!

At 6:30am my companions were stirring. I don't think we took time for breakfast. Maybe everyone else's stomach was as nervous as mine. We opened the door of the hostel to the pitch black of night. It would be an hour before the sun would rise. I put on my headlamp, which gave the most feeble of lights. There was a street lamp and Matt, the Australian, used the flashlight on his phone. I was fine leaving the town. The road was paved and semi-lit. However, when we left the main road to follow the Camino path, I was terrified. The descents were loose stone and I couldn't see where I was putting my foot. I had to slow down and almost feel my way. Carolina set the pace and I was trying to keep up. I had the feeling that Matt was purposely walking slower than he would have to give me some help. Intermittently, there would be some asphalt that I could speed along before I had to slow to a crawl again on uneven surfaces. There was a wash now in the sky and I knew the sun would be up soon. I pressed on. At one point the group of three stopped for a regroup at the top of a rise and I caught up with them.

There was enough light now to see the Camino signs clearly and to watch where I was putting my foot. The gap widened between the others and myself. I walked as quickly as I could, when I could and I walked very methodically when I had to. Matt had said last night that the road would be a steady uphill climb for 15kms. There were ascents but nothing more difficult than what I had managed before and there were lots of level

patches. The group now was well ahead of me and I walked, as I had done for most of the Camino – on my own. At one point I came to a Camino marker that gave me a choice of two routes, each through two different towns. It was one of those “toss a coin” moments and I lost. I took the road to the right, which went downhill – go figure and meandered through a lovely town that was way off my route, even though I had initially checked my app for directions. There were Camino signs, but again they were lures, conspiracies to get you to visit a town off the beaten track.

Finally, I made it back to the main route, but I had lost about 45 minutes. I was now in full Camino mode on my phone. I didn't need another diversion. My pace quickened as the distance narrowed between myself and Santiago. At one point a tourist said, “You're almost there.” I thanked her without taking my eyes off my phone. I entered a back street. There was a small procession of pilgrims like myself, all eager to reach this prized destination.

At the end the path, I paused for a moment before I entered the Praza do Obradoiro. I wanted to collect my thoughts. I wanted to properly savour this victory. I took a step forward. Even though I was one small pilgrim in a sea of pilgrims, this was my moment!! I had finally reached Santiago. This was the culmination of eighteen days of walking, seven months of training, thirty weeks of planning and ten years of dreaming. I cried. I stood for a while stunned and teary-eyed, taking it all in. Other pilgrims passed me and I knew I had to get my bearings. In the vast expanse of the stone plaza, banked by the magnificent Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela and fringed with a border of vaulted cloisters, I looked for people I knew. Before I could turn around, Carolina appeared out of nowhere and gave me the most amazing hug. More hugs followed from the Australian couple. The two women from Brittany insisted on a picture and Anika and Claudia had Rolf take a picture of the three of us. Everyone was hugging and very weepy. Claudia and Rolf had arrived yesterday, as had a few others. However, they came down to the square this morning to greet those who were arriving today. It was a wonderful reunion. This was the Camino of my dreams. After much celebration, I went with Anika to get my compostela. The process was very quick, very easy. Those of us, who had arrived today stowed our bags in lockers nearby and made our way to the steps of the cathedral to wait for the church to open.

In spite of my detour, I had made the 15 kms from Faramelo to Santiago in three and a half hours. This would be a record for me on this path. Carolina, the Australian couple and I spent time on the steps of the church in the sun, waiting for the doors to open. Finally, we entered the cathedral a little before noon only to find that it was packed. Carolina found me a perch at the base of one of the stone pillars. I didn't move. I knew the mass and could follow along, in spite of the Spanish liturgy. Several visiting choirs, filled the towering nave with music and sun streamed through medieval stained glass windows, as hundreds bowed in prayer. It was ethereal. The Botafumeiro was sadly out for repairs. I couldn't imagine how magnificent an experience this might have been with the spectacular swinging of the incense burner. I think I have to return to see it. Maybe another Camino is calling.

After mass, as I moved with the crowd, I stopped to light a candle and say a prayer for friends and family. Unfortunately, I lost Carolina and the others. I decided what I really needed to do was find my hotel room and rest. I went back to the lockers, picked up my pack, found a tourist facility and got a paper map. I had pre-booked the hotel Aetcal based on recommendations in one of the Camino forums on Facebook. It was €120.00 for two nights and it was luxurious.

One of the employees marshalling pilgrims at the pilgrim centre took some time to look up the address of my hotel on his phone and give me directions that were not showing on the tourist map. They were perfect. I walked the 500m or so to a street very near the cathedral and found the Aetcal Hotel. It turned out to be a small three story building on a narrow side street that was one of the pilgrim paths entering Santiago. It had a boutique hotel feel to it, as it had been an old building that was gutted and renovated with a sleek modern vibe. The walls were thick stone, the windows were floor to ceiling with French doors opening to a small patio and there was an elevator. My room for one person was small, but tastefully decorated with recessed lighting, glass shower walls and very modern bathroom fixtures. In fact, the walls of the bathroom were also glass – clearly a room for just one person! I wanted to treat myself after my eighteen day adventure and the Aetcal delivered.

Next door to my hotel was a small restaurant with outdoor tables. I ordered padron peppers - those lovely little halapenos that are charcoal grilled and covered in salt - for lunch with a glass of wine. These tables edged a busy thoroughfare that ended at the Praza do Obradoiro. I could just relax and watch the afternoon pilgrims arrive. I was surprised and very happy to see Alex from Australia walking along the path. I called to her and she came over for a glass of wine and helped me finish my padron peppers. I treated her to the glass of wine, as she had treated me to a glass of wine on the patio at the La Calla Inn in Oia. I was so happy to be able to return the favour. The Camino provided.

Later Alex sent me a text via What'sapp with the address of the restaurant that she and a few other pilgrims were going to for dinner that evening. I would have loved to join them, but it was 1.5kms away and I was tired. I went to bed early and slept through.

Chapter 18

The day after arriving in Santiago was a rest day. I was at a loose end, with no agenda, no reason to walk and no challenge ahead. I knew I wanted to buy some small souvenirs to take home with me; I wanted to spend sometime in the gardens of Santiago and I wanted to take a picture of the cathedral with the sun on it. I also needed snacks for the four hour bus journey the next day to Porto. I started with the souvenir shopping. There are hundreds of souvenir shops in Santiago and I love to window shop. It took me most of the morning to identify gifts for my three adult children and my niece. I decided on bracelets with the iconic Camino arrow for them all. They are young and they have hopefully many more years to follow the directions of their respective journeys. I chose three rather sturdy ones in browns and blacks for my youngest son and my eldest and his partner. I chose one in more feminine colours for my niece and I picked one with a cat motif rather than an arrow for my daughter. She loves cats. I bought a small hand crafted dish for a good friend, an artisan bar of soap for my sister-in-law and a tiny enamelled scallop shell charm for myself. They were small gifts, but it took me all morning to buy them.

After lunch, which was a delicious tuna salad at a nearby restaurant, I set out to find a garden or two. My sister-in-law had mentioned that there had been a BBC program about these gardens and I was intrigued. Even though I had a paper map, I got lost. I could see the large green spaces of the gardens on my map, but the streets I took towards them, never really entered the gardens. I gave up early. Later in the afternoon, just before dinner I set out to find a supermarket to buy some fruit for my bus journey the next day. For every one hundred gift shops in Santiago there is one supermarket and it's at the bottom of a steep hill. I was fine walking down to it, but then I had to walk back up – ugh! The quantity and choice of wines stacked at the entrance to the shop suggested that a lot of pilgrims partied more than they prayed on arriving in Santiago. I had to squeeze through walls of whites and reds to get to the fruit counter at the back of the store – really!

Two apples and a clementine later, I walked back to my hotel, keeping an eye out for a restaurant that might serve an early dinner. I found one that served all day and I returned to it around 6:00pm. As its name, O Piorno, suggested, it served mainly pork dishes. I had an adequate dinner outside on a very busy street, on a somewhat chilly evening. It was not a memorable dinner. In some respects, I was happy I was leaving tomorrow. Santiago is a beautiful place, but I would have liked something quieter and smaller to reflect on my journey. Perhaps this is why so many pilgrims walk on to Finisterre. It's smaller with more of an emphasis on nature and the sea.

When I first arrived at my hotel in Santiago, I asked directions to a few places including the Alsa bus stop. The terminal was an easy 1.5kms away. However, after walking almost 300kms in 18 days, I couldn't bring myself to even think of taking another step. Initially, I decided to take a taxi. However, after a day of rest, I decided that I could probably manage to walk the short distance to the bus terminal the next morning

with my backpack. It was just as well because there was no one at the desk to call a cab and I am not that up to speed on Uber.

At 8:00am I shouldered my backpack, keyed “bus terminal” into Google maps and followed the directions. I was on city streets walking towards a combination of train station/bus station, during the morning rush hour of frantic commuters. I felt like a local, except for my hiking pack...okay phone out in front of me for directions is also not “local.” I might not have been blending in, but I did feel at home, even though I was leaving. It doesn’t make sense - what does? I complain about the busy-ness of a tourist city and yet I find comfort in their daily commute. Perhaps I just like routine, the repetition of daily tasks and the comfort of the predictable.

Why then did I choose to ride a wild horse? Well, I was looking for an escape from the chaos of the world. I was looking for peace, for more of a purpose in life and a plan of how to get there. Although the Camino can be very predictable - walking is repetitious and the structure of a pilgrim’s day seldom varies. It still offers the unexpected, the special encounters, the endurance tests and the spiritual presence. I needed to step out of my comfort zone to experience something completely different in order to look at the world differently. I will now take this “wild horse” home and be open to or try to create “the unexpected, the special encounters, the endurance tests and the spiritual presence.”

I found the train station quite easily. The trick was accessing the bus station, which was on the other side of the train tracks. I nosed around the train station looking for a logical route to the bus station. Logic might not be a strong point in Spanish architecture/engineering – Gaudi comes to mind. Maybe I was just irritated because I can usually work these things out and I couldn’t this time. Finally, I caved and decided to ask for directions. The first person I approached spoke no English. – not a good start. Luckily, I had allowed a large buffer of time before my bus left. This might take longer than I thought. I then asked a security guard who pointed me to a skywalk wedged between two construction cranes – who would have thought?

I climbed back up to the main street, walked over to an entrance that I had seen before, but ruled out, because I had decided that the Latin root words did not suggest “bus stop.” So much for grade 13 Latin. This was indeed the entrance to the bus station. I had arrived in the area about an hour early. Well, I had lost half an hour at the train station. So I had just half an hour to wait for my Alsa bus to Porto. I had booked my seat online in March, so I didn’t have to find a ticket booth. In fact I’m not sure I could have even bought a ticket. It was a full bus.

My backpack is a sure sign that I’m a pilgrim and other pilgrims come over to chat. Here I met Angel from California. She and her husband had finished walking the Camino to celebrate their twentieth wedding anniversary. They were now on their way home. Angel was a consummate talker. When I yawned, she went on to talk to two Frenchmen, also pilgrims. Their limited English did not deter her. She kept on talking

and asking questions, which they politely struggled to answer. Although they were exhausting, Angel's conversations filled in the time until the buses arrived.

Finally two coaches docked at berths 19 and 20. Well, Berth 20 had a bus going to Lisbon and Berth 19 had a bus going to Porto. At least that's what their signs said. However, the bus numbers did not coincide with their destinations or the numbers on my printed ticket. Added to this confusion was the fact that the respective bus drivers did not agree with the signs on their own buses. There were the usual explosive hand movements, raised voices and contorted faces of a Spanish (heated) discussion. No one, it seemed, was agreeing to drive to Porto. The line up of passengers moved rapidly from one bus to the other and back again, only to repeat the move a minute or two later, depending on the mood of the animated conversation between the two bus drivers. It was a Monty Python moment. At last an agent from the terminal arrived to set things straight. The buses switched numbers and destinations. The seat I had booked, with much thought online in March, was no longer available. I did though secure a window seat.

I'm glad, I carried my pack with me. I noticed that some passengers were still transferring luggage from one bus to the other a few minutes before the doors closed. I hoped everyone and everything got to the right place in the end. I hate to say this, but I am sure that this has happened before and it will all happen again.

The journey to Porto was uneventful except for the one hour time change. The bus stopped first at the airport. If I had known this I might have taken the airport train into the Trindade station, which was a five minute walk from my hostel. However, since I didn't know where my hostel actually was or where the bus terminus would be in Porto, I stayed put and arrived somewhere near the river, which was a €10 cab journey to the hostel. The taxi driver was pleasant enough, but he didn't drop me in front of the New Way Hostel. I had to walk about half a block to it on a pedestrian only street. Still the hostel was open and they had my reservation. It was an eclectic place, more of a general hostel rather than a pilgrim hostel, so there were lots of young women putting on make-up for hours in the one washroom.

I did meet a couple from the US who were starting their Camino the next day. I was a little nostalgic, remembering setting out myself just three weeks earlier. She was from Florida and he was from Minnesota. It was her second Camino and his first. I wished them Bom Caminho. For the second night in Porto, I had the four bunk dorm to myself. It was fine, though a little dreary. During the day, I spent time in the principal rooms, when I wasn't out walking around Porto. On one of my strolls, I found a fabulous French restaurant on a tiny side street about a 50m walk from my hostel. I decided I would spend whatever it took for a fabulous meal that evening.

Dressed in the cleaner of my two black dresses, though how I could tell which was which at this point on my trip, I set out at 7:00pm to walk to Le Costume Bistro. I had identified earlier in the day a starter of beef carpaccio. I ordered this plus an appetizer of olives, crusty bread and marinated goat cheese. For the main course I decided to have

cheese ravioli, plus two glasses of wine. This would be my celebratory meal. My dinner in Santiago was somewhat disappointing. I had to make up for it.

My crusty bread arrived and it was still warm. I've never had marinated goat cheese drizzled with olive oil imbued with tangy herbs. It's something I will try at home. I could savour my tiny bites of bread dipped in olive oil and topped with marinated cheese while I waited for my appetizer of thinly sliced raw beef dressed also in a drizzle of olive oil, with shreds of fine cheese and slivers of onion. I should have just ordered two appetizers because the ravioli was disappointing. I was hoping for a cheese sauce, however, the broth was more of a vegetable based concoction that tasted strongly of asparagus. I'm not sure I had dessert. I always consider wine a dessert in itself. I enjoyed my dinner so much, that I went back the next day for a lunch of carpaccio of octopus. Le Costume was a great find.

During the day, I walked to the Trindade station to check out where I would get the train to the airport. It was very obvious and easy. I then walked back past my hostel to the cathedral area to walk a little on some of the side streets, which were dotted with clothing boutiques, quaint cafés and curious antique shops. I hadn't checked any guidebooks or apps in Porto so I missed a "must see" bookstore – Livraria Lello that was very close. This oversight means I will have to return!!

Breakfast at the hostel was free and early, so I could leave about 8:00am to walk to Trindade station. The trains to the airport were frequent, however, the journey itself was long and rather tedious. It was easy to transfer from the train station to the airport, as all the directions were well marked. I was very early and without a book to read, so I just had to put in time walking – sound familiar? Well, part of that time was getting my boarding pass, which for some reason I could not print out online the night before. I was told to ask at the airport. I did and got mis-directed so many times, I was beginning to think that I might actually end up staying in Portugal. Finally an Air Transat booth opened and I was processed. I then had to wait for my gate to be announced. I had an uninspiring lunch of something not memorable and bought an apple. Time lagged. Finally, my gate appeared on the screen and all those waiting rushed forward. We went through passport control into another lounge and waited again. Here I met the three women from London Ontario – Sandy, Lynn and Nora. We shared our stories. It was lovely to pass some time with them again.

On the one hand I was ready to go home, on the other I hated leaving Europe. Apart from living for two years in London in the late 60s, I have never lived for more than a month in any country in Europe. I have never worked in Europe, I have always just been here on vacation, so I have a very positive view of all things European. I have often thought of moving to France or Spain. I asked the Camino, if I should. I'll have to work through the answer later. I may need to walk another Camino. I may need to spend longer in one place abroad on my own. I'm still thinking about it.

The plane journey home was uneventful. Again I had an aisle seat, which I didn't have to pay for. Pearson International is chaos at anytime, so I expected on a Thursday

afternoon to wait in long lines of anxious travellers all jockeying for a better, shorter queue to passport control. It took about an hour, but I finally got through only to wait in another line for a limo to taxi me home. I was tired and not up to taking the train to Union Station and doing the reverse of my journey three weeks earlier.

I arrived home to a bouquet of flowers from neighbours who were following my journey. This was a wonderful surprise. My kids arrived home one at a time from work. We ordered pizza. It's a tradition. We always ordered in pizza for dinner on the day we arrived home from a vacation and this would be no exception. Things were falling into place and Normal was about to begin. It took me almost a week to adjust to the time change. I went for coffee and dinner with friends and told my story. It was hard to believe, even for myself, that I had actually done this walk and it was now over. Well the Camino is never really over. I had work to do. I had to put my affairs in order first, before I could move on. I had to perfect my own small world before I even thought of taking on something greater,

I decided to throw myself into one of the directives I got from my walk. I began to perfect my garden. It was May. The weather was perfect and I needed to be outside. So far I have added a new rhododendron bed. Expanded an established rhododendron bed. Removed beds of invasive daylilies and replanted them with better behaved daylilies. I will add a garden pond, a bench and maybe a Victorian structure of something fanciful later. Working in my garden has given me peace. I connect with the earth, with nature and with the memory of my late husband, who planted our first Rhododendron bed. People who walk past my house often comment on my front garden. They say how much pleasure it gives them. I can see how in some small way I was bringing a fleeting moment of Joy and maybe peace to a few people. This is a start.

I spent the month of June closing my company, which the Camino had recommended last September. It was difficult after almost 30 years, but it was time. I am now fully retired and writing this story. I have made contact with the Toronto Camino Community at their once a month coffee meeting and when I get up to speed with my longer walks, I will walk with them once or twice a week, as well. I want to keep in touch with my inner Camino. I want to remember the kindness, the sense of purpose I was given and the peace. As a group these pilgrims keep the magic of the Camino alive, extending its message to all who join them. They are more of a spiritual group than a religious group, helping to bring a little sanity to an insane world.

Have I found peace? In spite of the fact that wars are still raging, there is little, if any, affordable housing, tyrants continue to threaten Democracy and people are stressed beyond belief, I have come to realize that we will survive. We are resilient, capable, imaginative and unique individuals. We will, in time, outlast, outsmart, outmanoeuvre, and eventually outlast all who seek to control us. We will endure and come back stronger than ever before.

I've been thinking a lot about this quotation from Mahatma Ghandi "There is no path(way) to peace. Peace is the path." Peace may not be a destination or an achievable

commodity. It may be a never-ending journey, an eternal process rather than an end in itself. Certainly the Camino suggests this. I guess I'll just have to keep walking.

In fact, I've been toying with the idea of walking another Camino in September/25. I wanted to see my garden come into bloom first, it is a peaceful place, so I've decided not to walk next Spring. This may change, depending on the severity of the Winter and my need to escape the tedium of snow and ice. I may have tethered my wild horse for the moment, but she will need feeding and exercising to keep her fit for subsequent journeys. I may also want to tell Mary Oliver more about what I'm doing with my one wild and precious life. So until the bell tolls – Buen Camino!