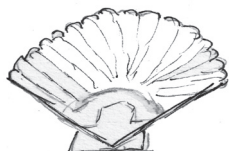


Onward, Backward!



-or-



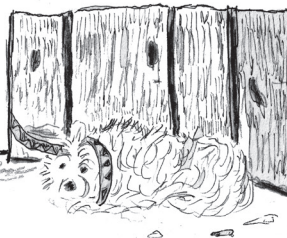
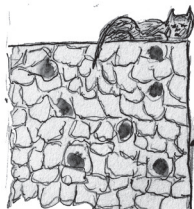
A Ramble to Santiago

Being a True Account of
a Heathen Family's 1,500-kilometer pilgrimage
to Santiago de Compostela, together with
many *Interesting Stories* and *Occasionally Useful Facts*
pertaining to *Life* along that ancient and popular *Way*.



Written, illustrated, and carefully combobulated

By Bennett Voyles



Dämmerungskollektiv
Berlin

Copyright 2020 by Bennett Voyles

Dämmerungskollektiv

Berlin, Germany

9783982258010 EPUB

9783982258003 Print



For Cybèle

Table of Contents

Preface	1
October 2011	4
November 2011	5
December 2011	9
January 2012	12
April 2012	18
May 2012	19
First Sally Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port	28
July 7. Paris to Le-Puy-en-Velay, 541 km	29
July 8. Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint-Privat-d'Alliers, 24 km	43
July 9. Saint-Privat-d'Allier to Saugues, 17.9 km	51
July 10. Saugues to Chapelle Saint-Roch, 21 km	64
July 11. Chapelle Saint-Roch to Aumont-Aubrac, 23 km	68
July 12. Aumont-Aubrac to Nasbinals, 23 km	78
July 13. Nasbinals to Saint-Chely, 17 km	83
July 14. Saint-Chely-d'Aubrac to Espalion, 21.9 km	90
July 15. Espalion to Golin hac, 23.4 km	101
July 16. Golin hac to Conques, 20.7 km	106
July 17. Conques—Day of Rest, 200 meters	116
July 18. Conques to Livinhac-le-Haut, 24 km	123
July 19. Livinhac-le-Haut to Figeac, 25 km	131
July 20. Figeac to Cajarc, 31.5 km	136
July 21. Cajarc to Limogne en Quercy, 18 km	144

July 22. Limogne-en-Quercy to Mas-de-Vers, 19.7 km	152
July 23. Mas-de-Vers to Cahors, 18.9 km	155
July 24. Cahors to Montcuq, 24 km	168
July 25. Montcuq to Moissac, 38.5 km	178
July 26. Moissac to Saint-Antoine, 25.4 km	188
July 27. Saint-Antoine to Lectoure, 23.5 km	201
July 28. Lectoure to Castelnau-sur-Auvignon, 16.5 km	207
July 29. Castelnau-sur-l'Auvignon to Montréal-du-Gers	215
July 30. Montréal-du-Gers to La Hargue, 23 km	221
July 31. La Hargue to Dubarry, 25 km	223
August 1. Dubarry to Aire-sur-l'Adour, 24 km	225
August 2. Aire-sur-L'Adour to Pimbo, 28 km	228
August 3. Pimbo to Poms, 25 km	232
August 4. Poms to Sauvelade, 26.5 km	236
August 5. Sauvelade to Navarrenx, 14 km	237
August 6. Navarrenx to Chateau de Joantho, 18 km	244
August 7. Chateau de Joantho to Ostabat-Asme, 23 km	253
August 8. Ostabat to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, 18.9 km	259
Second Sally Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Paris to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port	262
August 8. Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Paris, 818.5 km	263
August 9. 65 rue Cambronne to the Prefecture de Police, 1 rue de Lutece, Paris, 3.9 km; Paris to Bayonne, 764 km	268
Third Sally Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, France, to Santiago de Compostela, Spain	272

August 10. Bayonne to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, 54.5 km; Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Burguete, 25 km	273
August 11. Burguete to Larrasoña, 27.4 km	283
August 12. Larrasoña to Pamplona, 16.9 km	295
August 13. Pamplona to Puente La Reina, 24.2 km	302
August 14. Puente La Reina to Los Arcos, 43.7 km	313
August 15. Los Arcos to Najera, 58 km	329
August 16. Najera to Belorado, 43.6 km	339
August 17. Belorado to Burgos, 46 km	348
August 18. Burgos to Boadilla del Camino, 67.6 km	360
August 19. Boadilla del Camino to Sahagún, 62.9 km	368
August 20. Sahagún to León, 64 km.	372
August 21. León, 0 km	375
August 22. León to Santa Catalina de Somoza, 60 km	379
August 23. Santa Catalina de Somoza to Villafranca del Bierzo, 56 km	393
August 24. Villafranca del Bierzo to Triacastela, 47.3 km	405
August 25. Triacastela to Portomarin, 50.7 km	412
August 26. Portomarin to Melide, 44.7 km	415
August 27. Melide to Santiago de Compostela, 55.9 km	421
Afterword	425
Acknowledgements, bibliography, and further notes	431
Index	455

A reflective pilgrim on the road to Santiago always makes a double journey when he tries to collect his memories —the backward journey through Time and the forward journey through Space.

Walter Starkie

The Road to Santiago: Pilgrims of St. James

Preface

In which a whim takes root.

I first read about the Camino de Santiago in a New York Times travel story 12 or 13 years before we tried it. I know it was long enough ago that my wife, Cybèle, asked me whether I thought we could do it with strollers. In any case, after we read that story, walking the Way of Saint James was an idea that took root and eventually grew into a low-grade obsession.

A thousand-year-old pilgrimage trail might seem like an unlikely thing to capture the imagination of a couple of secular Manhattanites, but we each had our reasons.

To begin with, I liked to walk.

Like most Americans, I grew up in a place where most of the walking we did was from the house to the car or the parking lot to the store. The one exception, because we lived on the Oregon coast, was an occasional stroll down the cold, windy beach. This had its points—when I was little, I liked balancing on the logs that washed up all over the beach or playing Lewis and Clark with my best friend, the conveniently named Mike Clark, and when I was older, it was a great place for a bout of adolescent self-pity—but otherwise I hardly ever went there. The Pacific is beautiful but the water is freezing, you can only walk in two directions—either up or down, like a sentry on a very long wall—and either way, the view mostly reinforced my feeling that I lived on the Edge of the World.

I really contracted the habit of walking when I went back east to college, on the opposite coast, at Yale University. I would go out for a few hours every Saturday afternoon—longer if the weather was good, but again along a narrow track (mostly because New Haven, Connecticut, in the 1980s was a dangerous city), up Yale's Hillhouse Avenue, then out St. Ronan Street to the Hamden Reservoir, and occasionally, the top of East Rock, which had a view of the campus, the city, and Long Island Sound. I kept up this routine after graduation, when I took a job as a reporter

about an hour inland, at *The Middletown Press*, making my way along the Connecticut River in Haddam or the fields outside the village of Portland, but here too, there were limits. A young man on foot was an object of suspicion in those little towns, even if the young man in question was a mild-mannered reporter with no viable alter ego.

Then I moved to New York City, which was much better for walking. For one thing, I didn't have any old ladies peering at me over their hedges as I ambled by. For another, there were many more things to see—all the buildings and the parks, but also the odd shop window, too many used books, and snatches of bizarre conversations that came up so often I started packing one of the reporter's notebooks I'd filched from the *Press*. And best of all, I found some company: Cybèle, the best walker I've ever known. Our first dates usually started out with a walk, and my solitary constitutionals became all-day conversations that stretched from brunch to midnight, winding through squares and streets and galleries. Even after our daughters came along, our walks continued, but turned now into Saturday saunters over to the story hour in Central Park, and eventually, Monday morning dashes to P.S. 87, the William Tecumseh Sherman School, on West 78th Street.

The Camino appealed to me for a second reason as well: I had majored in English and in history, mostly medieval (because the medievalists were all brilliant, funny, and told the best stories). Ever since those studies, part of me still *longen ... to goon on pilgrimages*.

I also may as well admit that in the best medieval tradition, I thought it would be fun. Most people are drawn to the Camino as an opportunity for introspection and renewal, but to me it Rioja—a thousand-year-old circus with a thousand-mile midway.

Cybèle liked the idea of the Camino too, but for somewhat different reasons. First, we would really be all together all day long—she hated vacations where everyone spent their days separately and met only at dinner. Second, her workaholic husband would have to take an actual break to get to our next destination, and

not just work at a different desk in a different room. Third, we would be outside all day.

This last feature attracted her most. Cybèle had grown up in New York and Paris, but she had always spent every minute she could outside. Nor had motherhood slowed her down. Even when our three daughters were small, even in the worst weather, my huckleberry friend was always happiest outdoors. If you ever saw her striding down Columbus Avenue behind our double stroller—the two younger girls sitting side by side; the oldest clinging to the rigging behind them, athwart a running board we called the pirate step—you would have noticed a certain glint in her eye that always made me think of Mongols on horseback. For Cybèle, the Camino sounded less like a holiday than the way she was meant to live.¹

1 Left to her own devices, she might have turned into a nomad. Once or twice, I even saw her nurse *en route*.

October 2011

In which various obstacles hinder us.

But circumstances prevented us from exorcising this particular obsession for a long time: the girls were little; I had only two or three weeks off a year; and we lived in New York, a long way from northern Spain.

Eventually, the obstacles began to fall away. The girls got bigger. The dotcoms that ate my thirties collapsed, and I parlayed a night school MBA and a short stint with the Economist Intelligence Unit into a career of sorts as a freelance business writer, writing for trade magazines, big companies, and business schools. My work became incredibly portable; I still couldn't take much time off, but I could take off (and did: in 2006, we moved to Paris). We were also living in the age of universal Wi-Fi, and it was now possible to work almost as well on a hillside as at home—at least theoretically.

Then the fates started to trip us up again. One year, Cybèle developed a stress fracture. Another summer, I had a similar injury. A third year, I twisted my ankle. A fourth year, Cybèle had had an ankle problem too: a skin cancer whose removal laid her up for a month. And besides our ailments, we had pilgrimages back to the States that were not to be missed if we didn't want to be excommunicated from our families.

Finally, in late 2011, I began to think we might have an opportunity: Cybèle and I were simultaneously ambulatory, our families had made no claims on the upcoming summer, and the girls had no plans.

The girls were also good walkers now. For years, they had walked 20 minutes to and from school every day, lugging backpacks big as anvils, and in any case, with Cybèle for a mother, they had never stayed off their feet for long.

But at the same time as hiking the Camino began to feel more possible, it had also begun to feel more urgent. Cybèle and I

weren't so young anymore. Our daughters were growing up fast—soon, they would have their own plans, which would probably not involve us. With our 50s just around the corner and our daughters out the door very soon, it really did seem that there would be no time like the present for this trip, or more precisely, no time but the present. Before we went our separate ways, I wanted to end our family adventures with something audacious, and a 1,500-kilometer trek across France and Spain fit the bill.

November 2011

In which we hatch a plot to ruin our children's summer.

Cybèle and I began conspiring in earnest in November. A four-day test run she had made in October with her friend Caroline had gone well—Cybèle at least had come back glowing—but the idea seemed crazy enough that we kept it to ourselves until we worked out our plan. When your children, your parents, and most of your friends are saner than you are, you can't be too careful.

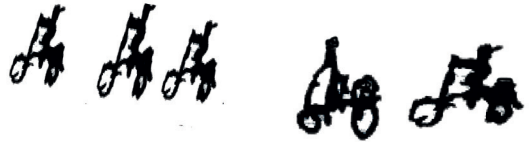
We each had our own worries about the project. Marginally more rational than I am, Cybèle worried about selling the girls on the idea. I didn't; I assumed there would be moaning. I worried about the distance.

From the French point of view, the *chemin de Compostelle* (at least the most popular route, the *Via Podiensis*) begins at Le Puy-en-Velay in south-central France and runs to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, on the near side of the Pyrenees. At that point, it meets the trail-head of the *Camino francés* (the French Way), which climbs over the Roncesvalles Pass and then runs almost the whole breadth of northern Spain, to Saint James's tomb in Santiago de Compostela. Taken altogether, the two trails add up to 1,516 kilometers. No matter how Cybèle divided the stages, there wouldn't be time to walk both legs. Even if we left as soon as school ended and returned the day before the *rentrée* (back to school—one of my favorite French words), she couldn't get the mileage to work out.

“Maybe we can do just the first half this summer?” Cybèle asked, reasonably enough. “The girls would really like it if we spent a few weeks at the beach. Or maybe we can plan on the French Camino and then just go as far as we can on the Spanish?”

I kept shaking my head no. My feeling was that if we planned an epic, we had to do the whole thing. Not doing the whole thing would be like watching half a movie, writing half a book, or leading an expedition to the North Pole that stopped at Montreal. It might be a nice trip but it would still be just a trip.²

Then one day I had an idea: bicycles! People often made the pilgrimage on bicycles. We would walk from Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and over the Pyrenees to Pamplona, where we could rent bicycles. That way, we could finish the whole thing, and still have one and a half or maybe even two whole days before school started! My finger slid across the map from Le Puy, over three dark mountain ranges, and on to Santiago. No problem.



² For the record, this is nonsense. You can start in Lapland if you like, but at least according to the Catholic Church, if you manage the last 100 kilometers to Santiago in some nonmotorized way, you have officially “done” the Camino.

I wonder how many disasters have started with a finger on a map. *Invalidate Russia? How hard could it be?*



Paris



FRANCE

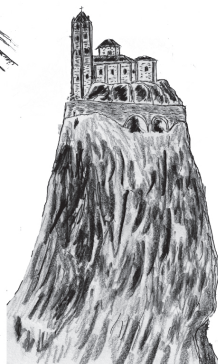


Bordeaux

Garonne River



AUBRAC



Conques



Le Puy-en-Velay



Espalion

Cahors

Lot River

Canal du Midi

The MIDI

The Pyrenees

MEDITERRANEAN

SAINT-Jean-Pied-de-Port



AIN

December 2011

In which our daughters hear the most dreadful news.

We made our announcement at dinner, a week or two before Christmas.

Our girls glanced at each other. They didn't like the sound of this.

"You'll love it," their mother said brightly. "We'll take the train to Le Puy, walk five weeks, whip through Spain on bikes the last two weeks, and get back in time for school."

Silence.

"It will be fun," she said again.

Sure, they thought.

She went on dictating the rest of the brochure: the walking itself would not be hard. The 20–27 kilometers a day she had planned would probably only take the morning, so they would have the afternoon free to swim or read or do whatever they liked. While they walked, they could listen to music, or even books on their iPods. And we would be walking through gorgeous landscapes—with castles, cathedrals, beautiful old villages—

She was on a roll—I sometimes think it's a shame she went into art instead of sales.

"Just imagine, we'll be walking over the Pyrenees into Spain!" Cybèle said, with that familiar glint in her eye that always put them on their guard. "Right over the mountains! It will be an adventure!"

I winced, the way you do when a skater misses her triple axel. The judges were not going to like this—the "A word" always made them bristle.

They looked at each other: *1,500 kilometers? They can't be serious.* And then: *Oh, but of course they are. You know them. They never joke*

about trips.

Their mother might make it sound like we would be the Von Trapps gamboling over the Alps in three-part harmony, but they knew better. They were no longer taken in by what they called *mommaganda*. They remembered the night they had to sleep on the deck of the ferry to Palermo, and the night in Egypt at the Horus House—the hotel where Thea found a giant cockroach on her pillow, like a six-legged chocolate, a place Dad insisted was not a brothel, even though the doors in the hall slammed open and shut all night. And that time on the Trans-Siberian Railway when Dad had somehow screwed up the codes on both their ATM cards at a convenience store in Ulan-Ude and they had to live on instant soup and oatmeal for two days until the train reached Vladivostok.

As for the idea that the Camino would be a mobile beach vacation, they knew from experience that their mother was either being delusional or out-and-out lying. They had visited cathedrals, mosques, and monkey-god temples. They had toured coal mines and kremlins, car factories and concentration camps. They had seen cacti and catacombs, wild horses and wild flowers. But as for relaxing beaches, that kind of holiday had been limited mostly to visits with their grandparents—rare intervals when Mom and Dad had tried to pass for normal. Whatever happened this summer, it was unlikely to involve anything most people would consider relaxing.

With respect to the Camino in particular, they may have also remembered the minor detail that by the third day of their mother's four-day trial run in October, Caroline's feet had started to bother her and Mom had to carry half her pack.

All in all, where Cybèle and I envisioned a chance for the family to grow closer and a metaphor that would give us all a sense of possibility—after all, if you can walk a thousand miles, what can't you do?—the girls saw the theft of their holiday and outright sadism, the Trans-Siberian all over again, but this time

without the train, a Bataan Death March of summer vacations.³

Over the next few weeks, Cybèle kept trying to stoke their enthusiasm, but didn't make much progress.

One night at dinner, Masha, our 15-year-old (10th grade), told us she had talked to a girl at school whose family had started the walk only to quit the second day, when she and her brother had staged a sit-down strike on the trail.

"What happens if we just stop?" asked Thea. As the youngest, she was always the quickest to seize on precedent. Although she was only 11 (6th grade), she had my vote for most likely to go to law school.

Charlotte, 13 (8th grade), looked up, interested again in the conversation.

I stayed calm and shrugged. After six years in France, I could almost do the Gallic shrug: "You'll get hungry, then cold. But you sing well. Maybe people will give you some change—"

As an alternative, Thea and Masha suggested that we rent a house near a lake or by the sea and take some day hikes. Wouldn't that make more sense than walking the whole day before collapsing at some smelly hostel, then getting up in the morning and doing the same thing all over again? Then we wouldn't have to rent bikes either. And wouldn't that be easier for your work, Dad?

Cybèle countered with an intense salvo of pictures of the lovely summer out on the Camino: the amazing scenery, the long, lazy

3 They were right to be wary. Even in the old days, not everyone had a great time. In 1520, travel writer Andrew Borde advised friends against making the pilgrimage to Santiago overland. He wrote that he would prefer to murder them himself at home than have them die out on that trail. "I had rather to go five times out of England to Rome – and so I have – than one to go from Orleans to Compostel . . . by water it is no pain, but by land it is the greatest journey that an Englishman may go." Chaucer, however, wrote a poem about the grimness of making the pilgrimage by ship, so I'm not sure the sea voyage was always much fun either; the poem's main subjects are seasickness and the smell of the cabin:

*For when that we shall go to bedde,
The pompe was nygh oure beddes hede;
A man were as good to be dede
As smell therof the stynk.*

afternoons—

Throughout the whole barrage, Charlotte said nothing. When it came to discussing the Camino, Charlotte never said anything. Her silence rattled me much more than her sisters' protests, and I asked her about it one night as I tucked her in.

"What's the point?" she asked. "You're going to do what you want anyway, whatever we say."

I found this funny and repeated it to Cybèle, but she didn't laugh. She had higher aspirations for parenthood than I did; she liked to think of us as flexible parents who listen to our kids.

"Don't worry," I told her. I remembered plenty of family projects growing up—houses torn down, decks added on, hedges ripped out—that I hadn't cared for at the time but in retrospect were among the most vivid and in certain respects even happiest of my childhood memories. Whatever the Club Med or Disney World posters suggest, happy, in my experience, always tends to be more of an accident than a destination.

As usual, Cybèle didn't let my philosophizing deflect her. "They really might mutiny," she whispered.

"Don't worry," I said, "it'll work out. Things always work out."

A day or two later, I stepped off a curb and sprained my ankle.

January 2012

Wherein we organize the expedition.

Our preparations began in January.

The biggest I made was to lose weight. Obesity is an occupational hazard when you work at home that is probably trebled if you live in Paris, and I had gained steadily over the six years since we had moved into our apartment on rue Cambonne—slowly when I was walking, more quickly during a hobbling period like the one I was going through now—and at this point I needed to

lose about 40 pounds of excess baggage before we made the hike or face utter humiliation on the first hot day.

An earlier attempt with a Japanese diet book called *Sayonara, Mr. Fatty* hadn't worked out so well, so now I decided to try the South Beach Diet. This regimen also made me fairly grumpy to be around but it did have the advantage of actually working. You should try it sometime—but only if you need to lose a lot of weight in a hurry and really, really like eggs.

Cybèle, meanwhile, kept thinking about how she could make the expedition more tolerable to the girls. Ice cream breaks would get stale quickly, and they were too old now for *I Spy* and *Statues*. Really, the only thing that might work, she concluded, would be if a few other people joined us. We all tended to be on better behavior with witnesses. Maybe Carson and Leen, our old friends and frequent traveling companions, would be interested.⁴ They were New Yorkers; if they came, maybe they could bring along Lola, Masha's old friend, a girl she had known since West Side Montessori—?⁵ Leen and Carson did not know Lola, but as they lived three blocks away from each other on the Upper West Side, it wouldn't be much trouble to arrange. And there was Della, our Canadian friend from Cybèle's French class, and her youngest daughter Enya, who sometimes took the after-school art classes Cybèle taught in our apartment. Maybe, if our girls were walking with kids their age, who were there voluntarily, it would be a lot tougher for ours to classify the expedition as child abuse.

So Cybèle put her persuasive skills to work on our friends, with better effect—Della and Enya decided to join us for the first five days; Carson, Leen, and Lola for the first two weeks. By then, maybe we would have gained enough momentum that we could manage the remaining month and a half on our own.

4 Very old friends: Cybèle and Leen met at Yale in the early 80s, when Leen was the first deaf law student at Yale Law School and Cybèle was the first deaf undergraduate, and they had been fast friends ever since.

5 Not long before, Lola's father had sent me an old picture of Lola and Masha sitting at a little table at the school, both aged four: Lola drawing intently, Masha in her tiara staring dreamily into space. Neither had changed much since then, aside from the fact that Masha didn't wear tiaras much anymore as far as I knew and now wrote her imaginings down.

One morning in March, my ankle operational again and our friends all signed up, I started making the calls for the French side (Cybèle is a better linguist than I am, but because of her deafness, I always get the telephone duty)—34 bookings in all, one for every night in France. Many pilgrims stop wherever they happen to find themselves, but with eight of us (Della wanted to book her own rooms), Cybèle and I didn't want to take any chances.⁶

Most of the hostels were mom-and-pop operations—a surprising number didn't even have email—and the reservation process was a little old-fashioned. Some places wanted deposits, but rather than take credit card numbers, they asked that I send them a check—which was a tricky business for me. The hosts often had long French names with silent letters that had to be spelled out, the amounts of the checks all varied, and French numbers can be surprisingly treacherous—92, for instance, is *quatre-vingt douze*—literally, four 20s and a 12. Occasionally, these checks were for 30 or 40 euros but more often they were for odd amounts—11.72, say, for reasons I never understood.

The further down my list we got, the more rural the walk seemed to become. Once I heard cows in the background. The booking itself became easier too: my French is not good, but farther south, the accent turns to more of a slow singsong—like the American South in that way—and I could follow more easily.

South of the Pyrenees, I began to have a harder time again. The Spanish clerks often sounded like they were having trouble hearing me over the noise of a restaurant kitchen. On the bright side, they didn't have this check system—which was lucky, because despite the common currency, French checks aren't good in Spain. Instead, the people at the *albergues* often just took our

6 This is the cheapest way to organize the hike, but far from the only way. The Camino is a big enough business that a number of specialized travel agencies have formed that will take care of all these details for you. There are also tour operators who will lead you in a group, companies that will haul your luggage from hotel to hotel, and agencies that will rent you bicycles, horses, or mules. No one has reinvented the business that developed in the Middle Ages of hiring someone to do the walking for you too, but I am sure it is only a matter of time. Someone out there is probably testing an all-terrain Roomba as we speak.

name. I liked the informality, but I worried about whether they had actually written anything down. The fact that I had to make most of the reservations in Spanish didn't reassure me either—the average Zorro movie *hablas* more *espagnole* than I have in my repertoire.

We also started buying hiking equipment. We needed everything: backpacks, hiking boots, hiking socks, and quick-dry clothes. We also needed bedding (at most of the hostels where we were staying, you had to bring your own towel and sleeping bag—or “sleep sack” in hostelese—a body bag with an opening at one end).

We found almost all this gear in two places. The first was a big box store that everyone in France loves, a chain called Decathlon, which is a little like Target if Target were devoted entirely to sporting goods and camping equipment. It's one of the few cheap stores in France, and it's always crowded with people buying sneakers and polar fleece.

The Decathlon we went to most often was in an enormous basement not far from the Madeleine. Ironically, given their outdoor theme, Decathlons are always about as pastoral as a bomb shelter. They never have any windows or even daylight—at the Madeleine outlet you can walk straight in from the Métro.

The girls hated this place, and never found anything there almost on principle. They had always tended to be much more stylish than either Cybèle or me and defended their outfits fiercely. Ma-sha was the most vociferous. Normally, she was a very sweet girl, but when it came to clothes, she had the soul of a diva. At three years old, she would roll her eyeballs when I suggested an outfit, and at six we often got into trouble with her teachers for letting her go to school in the dead of winter in princess dresses, no tights, and ruby slippers—but you try telling Maria Callas she can't do something. Ten years later, she had grown somewhat more reasonable, and announced in advance that she would only wear a small leather backpack, leather hiking boots, a tiny tank top, and jean shorts. Thea said she would not wear anything from Decathlon, period. And as usual, Charlotte said nothing.

On the other hand, Cybèle and I liked the place. Cheap is always appreciated when you're multiplying by five, and the store had most of what we needed: aluminum canteens, rain jackets that could be packed in a pouch, light fleece cardigans with extra-strong zippers, tiny rubbery camp towels that looked like something Santa's elves would take to the beach in the off-season. I also picked up a pair of shorts, and a pair of pants with many pockets and zip-off legs—I had always wanted an excuse to buy pants with zip-off legs. I found water-resistant T-shirts too, most in horrible Day-Glo colors whose only virtue was that they would make search and rescue easier. Not elegant but for three euros instead of thirty, I could live with it.

After some hesitation, we splurged on silk sleeping bag liners. This was my proudest new possession. The silk sacks were soft and very light—only 200 grams, as opposed to the kilo or so of the conventional cotton sleep sack—and their very possession made me feel more professional, as if we were outfitting ourselves for a real expedition. *Commodore Voyles (far left) pictured in anorak of his own devising.*

Our second stop was at a more upscale store called *Au Vieux Campeur* – “At The Old Camper”—for our backpacks and boots.⁷ *Au Vieux Campeur* is an odd outlet because it is located in and around Boulevard Saint-Germain, some of the most expensive real estate in Paris. Rather than build a big box on the edge of town, generations of old campers have slowly expanded into 30 smallish shops, each specialized in something different. This might sound charming—the company's marketers call it “a village”—but it gets old quickly: when you go in and ask for something, they invariably direct you to another store two blocks up, three blocks right, on the far side of the street.

First, we went to the backpack store and bought our packs. Cybèle had wanted us to get good-quality packs that would not glue to our backs on hot days. Then we went to the boot store next door, where they sold only heavy-duty hiking boots, the kind

7 Decathlon has perfectly good packs and boots too, but we did not want to take any chances because ours had to last at least 700 kilometers.

you see on Swiss travel posters. As we weren't planning to scale any glaciers, we asked the clerk if they had any lighter-weight walking shoes. She directed us to the running shoe store, but once we got there, the clerks frowned when Cybèle told them what we were doing and sent us back to the serious hiking boot store—that was the *correct* place for us to buy our boots.

This took care of everybody but me. As befits a stylish nation, the French have very slender feet— you generally can't even find wide sizes—but unfortunately, I don't; my feet are shaped more or less like a baby elephant's. I tried on roughly 20 pairs of shoes at the *Campeur*, tramping painfully up and down their special test ramp, before I finally gave up.

Luckily, Cybèle's French teacher, Isabelle, told her about a store near her home in the Sixteenth Arrondissement that catered to elephant men and other orthopedic curiosities. I visited Babar & Fils the following Saturday and walked out with a very expensive but extremely comfortable pair of squat shoes made by the BÄR (that is, "Bear") company in Germany that swaddled my feet so well I didn't care how they looked.

They were so comfortable, in fact, that Cybèle inspected them with deep suspicion when I got home. Between what she had learned from orthopedists when she was recovering from her stress fracture and more recently from the salespeople at the *Vieux Campeur* about the *correct* choice for our hike, she had become such a believer in firm, unsupple soles that she thought the soft BÄR boots might kill me.

But I loved my new boots, and I wasn't going to give them up without a fight. I showed her their entry in BÄR's online catalog, which described the square-toed, black, semi-military boots as a retro design (retro to what period I was afraid to ask), and pointed out to her that they were classified as hiking boots.

When that didn't convince her, I emailed the company, told them our plan, and asked if they thought these boots would be up to the job. A week or so later, the president wrote back. Herr Bär saying that he had hiked the Camino himself nine years before

in his own boots and they had worked just fine. I should have no problem. Buen Camino!



Die Bären

April 2012

Wherein yet another complication ensues.

Complicating everything that spring was an even bigger problem: preparing Masha for a new school.

For six years, Masha and her sisters had been at a school I will call the *École Jeunesse Dorée*, an English-French bilingual school with a French heart. It had gone very well at first—Masha and her sisters had all learned to speak beautiful French and plenty of other things besides—but after that glorious first year, things had gone steadily downhill for Masha, academically and socially, gradually at first, and now at an accelerated pace. By May, we had begun to feel that if we were going to rescue her last two years of high school, she needed to start fresh somewhere else, and as soon as possible.

Masha, a big Harry Potter fan, suggested English boarding

school, and we reluctantly agreed to look into it. We didn't like the idea of her leaving home at 16 or our paying the ruinous tuition, but after she and Cybèle took the Eurostar to London and visited one of the few schools that still had spaces available for the fall, she started to seem happier, and a few weeks later, when her admission to a school in Surrey arrived and she bounced through the following week happy as a convict who learns a pardon is on the way, Cybèle and I knew we had to follow through.

This gave us still more logistics to worry about. Her new school started one day after we were supposed to get back from Spain, which meant that over the next two months, we had to get her visa, her uniform, and what amounted to a scholarly trousseau together, all before we left town.

Between getting Masha organized, getting the apartment ready for our soon-to-arrive visitors, trying to deal with the British authorities for Masha's visa, doing my own work, planning our trip—and, on top of everything, preparing for the one-week art camp Cybèle and her friend Cathy ran at the end of every school year—we were now almost out of our minds with worry about various details, large and small.

At this point, reasonable people would have canceled the walk or scaled it back, but as you will have gathered by now, “reasonable” isn't one of my strong suits. In fact, I became even more determined to do the walk, as Masha's life away from home would now begin two years ahead of schedule. Ready or not, our life together was not going to last much longer.

May 2012

In which we discover we don't like walking or bicycling all that much.

If you are not already used to walking or used to carrying a rucksack day in, day out, get in plenty of practice before you go. Consider joining your local rambling club at least six months in advance and go out with them as often as you can . . . start increasing the amount of weight and luggage you take out with you until you can carry what you need.

-The Way of Saint James—Le Puy to the Pyrenees, Alison Raju

All the guidebooks we read (or rather, Cybèle read, then read aloud to me, selectively: I have a deep aversion to guidebooks and tend to lose them en route or even pre-route) suggested a serious training regime. Some people even take a long pre-hike hike to build up their strength and break in their boots. In a brochure we ordered about biking the Camino, *The Cycling Pilgrim*, the author, the inauspiciously named John Curtain, said that in preparation for his trek he had bicycled to and from work four miles a day, swam three times a week, gardened, walked his dog 40 minutes, and cycled “20 miles on bridleways and hilly ground on Saturdays with the bike fully laden for about two months before departure.”

Cybèle wanted to start training immediately, but I kept putting it off. Back in New York, I once spent a few months training to run the marathon, only to tear up my knee the week before the race. There is a little glory in collapsing on your 22nd mile, but none if you collapse the week before the big day. You just end up with physical therapy bills and a T-shirt you can never, ever wear. Instead of drawing the correct conclusion that I should have trained more, and more carefully, I had deduced that it sometimes paid to prepare less.

In the end, we compromised.

One Saturday afternoon in May, we rented bikes from the Vélib’ (vélo + liberté = bicycle + freedom) stand, the city’s amazing municipal bike rental system. Vélib’ had been around for four or five years, but we had tried it only once. At that time, the bike lane doubled as the bus lane on the bigger streets, and the idea of swimming with steel killer whales alarmed me. First, I am not very brave, and second, although Cybèle is much braver than I am, I thought it could be much more dangerous for her as she is deaf; she can’t hear an engine or even a car honk if she is not listening for it.⁸

That first outing, Thea and Masha were staying over with friends,

⁸ In fact, it turns out that bicycling in Paris really isn’t all that dangerous—the year before, in 2011, not a single cyclist died in Paris, according to French police statistics.

so we only had Charlotte with us. She normally wouldn't have been too happy about this, but we bribed her by making our destination W.H. Smith, the English bookstore on rue de Rivoli. Cybèle and I had trouble unlocking the heavy gray bikes from their stands but fortunately Charlotte figured the system out right away. (I don't know if she is all that mechanically inclined, but compared to us she is a little Leonarda.)

Then we were off, and on our way down busy rue Cambronne. As we went, between the traffic and car doors opening and closing and Cybèle not hearing the honks, the *mot de Cambronne* kept crossing my lips.⁹ From Place Cambronne we bore left on rue de Laos and down past Avenue Suffren¹⁰ to the Champ de Mars—the long field that stretches from the École Militaire, France's West Point, to the Eiffel Tower—and then a right along the quay and across the bridge farther down to the Place de la Concorde to Smith's, where we bought Charlotte's reward (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*) and headed home.

Masha's turn came later. This was a more delicate mission because riding bikes on streets terrified Masha. She had seen Thea almost run over by a taxi once back in New York, and this memory had morphed into a general fear of her sisters being run over and then a specific phobia about bicycling. Cybèle had decided that to get Masha used to cycling again without being distracted by worries about her sisters' survival prospects, she needed to take her out alone one day after school.

They went with Cybèle's friend Sadie, an experienced city bik-

9 That is, *merde*. The euphemism comes from a popular account of the response of Brigadier General Pierre Cambronne, one of Napoleon's generals at Waterloo, to a message the British sent him, pointing out that he and the last of his army were surrounded and ought to surrender. While he supposedly used *merde* to mean, "Go to Hell," it has shifted usage over time. Now you can describe something as being "a load of old Cambronne" or use the *mot* as a verb, *cambronniser*. It was a perfect address for a business writer.

10 Sometimes I think half the streets in Paris are named for glorious losers. The namesake of this street, for instance, the gouty and disagreeable Vice-Admiral Pierre Suffren (1729-1788)—Admiral Satan to those who knew him best—was considered brilliant strategically but not a great leader of men. Military historians say he lost more battles than he should have because his captains resented his bullying and contempt. Charlotte's favorite place name in this genre was the *Square des Écrivains Combattants Morts pour la France*—the Square of Fighting Writers Who Died for France.

er with nerves of steel who whipped across the first intersection just as the light changed. Masha started after her, but right in the middle of the avenue, saw the oncoming cars and froze. Fortunately, Cybèle saw this and quickly pedaled up alongside her, grabbed her handlebars, and pulled her the rest of the way across moments before the traffic passed the intersection.

Masha froze once more on that outing—not a good sign—but when Cybèle told me about it in the evening, I rationalized that the Camino would be nothing like Paris. There wouldn't be nearly as many cars out in the country. And anyway, it would be good if Masha got over her old fears and learned to feel comfortable on a bike. Wasn't that one of the things you were supposed to learn as a kid, right up there with swimming? How could we let her go off to school without mastering such a basic skill?

The following Sunday afternoon, all five of us rode Vélib's to the Bois de Boulogne, five whole kilometers from our apartment.

This did not go especially well either. Charlotte and Thea dueled over who would go in front and who would go behind; Charlotte complained that the bike hurt her knees; and Masha was annoying just to make sure she wasn't overlooked. We didn't last more than three hours, in the end, and that was on more or less flat ground, and including a sullen coffee break.

We also hiked once. This went somewhat better. After dinner one golden night in June, we walked all the way to the Luxembourg Gardens in our hiking boots. I carried my pack too, to make for a more accurate simulation. It was a strenuous 37 minutes, after which we stopped for an ice cream at Amorino, the girls' favorite ice cream parlor, sauntered through the soft dusty paths of the old park, walked out the gates on the other side, and started back home. The girls turned crimson every time we passed a sidewalk café on our way through Montparnasse, but I observed no physical injuries.

I was red too by the time we got back—not out of wounded *amour propre* but because although it was not a hot evening, I was sweating like a pig.

I began to have second thoughts. What were we doing, leading an expedition like this when we had never even walked more than a day? And not only with the girls, but our friends? What had I been thinking? Could I even do this?

Then, to add another worry to all the others, just a few days before Leen, Carson, and Lola were supposed to arrive from New York, Cybèle came home wincing. She had been on her feet at her art camp that day and now felt some twinges.

“What kind of twinges?”

“Stress fracture twinges.”

Oh no. We had been through this before. At best, a stress fracture meant six weeks of sitting. At best.

We whispered alternatives to each other that night, after the girls had gone to bed. She would stay in Paris and rest up a little. No, she would take a taxi from stage to stage, and we would meet her at the end of the day. Maybe she could ride a bike? Le Puy had a Decathlon; she could buy a bike in Le Puy. We considered every possible option before concluding that the best thing would be to try to walk the first few days, and if it was getting worse, she could take a bus back to Le Puy and pick up a bike.

But for now, we agreed that we wouldn’t breathe a word of this to anyone. Leen, Carson, and Lola were arriving in the morning, and in fact were probably in the air now— and between the girls’ continuous search for a way out and Leen and Carson being prudent adults, one word about Cybèle’s foot could be a disaster.

The arrival of the New York delegation didn’t reassure me. On the bright side, the girls, especially Masha, were glad to see them, especially Lola, who was excited about the walk, so we would probably have less to worry about on the kid management front. Leen and Carson, on the other hand, made me a little nervous, even though I had known them for at least 20 years, before they’d gone gray and I’d gone bald, almost as long as I had known Cybèle. My concern was that they were very observant people. There was something quick and birdlike about

them both, not so much physically, though Carson was on the delicate side, as in the earnest way they paid attention to things. They lived in a world where everything was foreground, every detail important because every detail could kill you. Carson had become more that way over the last 20 years, as she had developed various allergies, from gluten to sunshine. As for Leen, I think was just born that way. Their capacity for detail didn't usually bother me much, but now, given what I knew about Cybèle's foot, made me giddy with anxiety that with once ungarded wince, we would be found out.

The night before we left, Cybèle laid everything out on on the living room floor to make sure we had absolutely everything we needed but nothing more. Leen, Carson and I stood and supervised. It was an impressive sight, and calmed me a little, as it seemed to me that Cybèle had worked out every detail. I felt as proud as Mamie Eisenhower the night before D-Day.

For the girls, she had picked the smallest backpacks she could find—18 liters, not much bigger than a daypack—and 22 liters for the two of us.

Cybèle had each of us pack just two T-shirts, two changes of underwear, three pairs of socks, a tiny rubber towel, a pair of flip-flops, a sun hat, a swimming suit, a one-liter aluminum water bottle, a polar fleece cardigan, and a rain poncho. She had had to push the girls hard to pack only those items, particularly the big floppy sunhats, but having seen her friend Caroline suffer the previous fall from a too-heavy pack, she was determined that each girl's pack would weigh less than four kilos (about nine pounds), and ours no more than seven (around 16 pounds).

We also made sure the girls' Kindles and iPods were in working order. Lola would keep them entertained for the first two weeks,¹¹ but after that, they would need other distractions. Some

11 Lola really was entertaining—a born storyteller with intense, deep-set gray eyes, who talked in a conspiratorial mumble. She was a font of information who had entertained the girls with facts about pyramids and mummies when she was younger and had now moved on to indie bands and no doubt shocking goings-on at the New York Performing Arts High School I never managed to overhear.

past holidays, we had had to pack a whole suitcase just for their books. Charlotte reads very quickly. Masha, the most literary of the three, tends to want to pack books too, but in a different way—usually new ones along with some old favorites, which she likes to keep with her like a cellulose security blanket. And Thea, not quite at the same stage as the other two, had tended to read their books but also had her own separate stack.

Besides her clothes, Cybèle carried a camera, a pack of cards, bandages, blister medicines, a box of hearing aid batteries, enough Pepto-Bismol for an army, and three guidebooks.¹²

Cybèle, Charlotte, and Thea also each carried a journal. My father had told me once that Jefferson had encouraged every literate member of the Lewis and Clark expedition to keep his own journal, because he believed that each point of view could be valuable, and I thought it would be interesting to have those other perspectives when we got back. I wanted this badly enough that I had succeeded in bribing Charlotte and Thea to do it. Only Masha refused. She'd done enough writing to know that I was

12 A French guide called *Miam Miam Dodo* (baby-French that translates roughly to “yummy-yum, nighty-night”), that ran from Le Puy to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, on the Spanish border, and *The Way of St. James*, an English guide with pictures by Alison Raju. *Miam Miam* was better on food and lodging, but the English guide had more detail about the history of the chapels and villages that we would pass on the trail. As for the Pepto-Bismol, I had asked Lola to bring some along with her. They have stuff like Pepto-Bismol in Europe, of course, but I had found it was just not the same, at least not to this American stomach.

talking about real work.¹³

I had a headset for telephone calls, a tiny school-bus-yellow foot pedal I had ordered from Germany (because I sometimes interviewed people over Skype, then work up a transcript from the recording), and a tiny green notebook. I had my iPhone too, on which I had downloaded an audio book of *Don Quixote* and a lecture series on Cervantes delivered by an old professor of mine. And, of course, my laptop.

Leen and Carson looked skeptically at our backpacks. They thought we needed a larger size, with a heavier-duty belt to keep the weight off our shoulders, the kind they and Lola had. Leen also worried that Cybèle was carrying too much and thought the girls should carry more, but Cybèle refused to make any adjustments.

Their skepticism worried us. Leen and Carson are the kind of people who know things that are actually useful to know—*Consumer Reports* subscribers who stay at the cutting edge of sensible-shoe technology. It was Carson who had originally diagnosed Cybèle's first stress fracture, not the doctors Cybèle had seen

13 I'm glad I did that, because it did give me a good sense afterward of what Cybèle and the girls had been thinking. For example, Thea's journal begins with a title page, My Compostello Summer, written inside a neatly drawn scallop shell, and the following lists:

Why I don't want to go! Not necessarily in this order

1. I have to be wearing ugly clothes all summer.
2. I have to walk not shop.
3. I have to WALK!! all summer!
4. I have to wash my own dirty Underwear!
5. I have to wear Biking shorts for the last 2 weeks.
6. I can't go on the computer all summer.
7. I have to carry all my stuff on my back.
8. I only get back 3 days before school starts.
9. I CAN'T GO SHOPPING!!
10. I HAVE TO WEAR HIKING BOOTS!

Why I might want to go

1. I might get tan.
2. I will get Blonder!!
3. I will get very strong (fit)!
4. I will get very skinny!!

about it—and she even did it over the phone.¹⁴

In any case, it was too late to go back to the Old Camper to exchange our packs; we were supposed to be on the train to Le Puy in seven hours.

“How’s your foot?” I whispered to Cybèle, as we got ready for bed.

She grimaced. “We’ll see,” she said.

14 Cybèle and I, on the other hand, tend to be overinvested in what Nabokov calls “unreal estate” and underinvested in the practical, a preference that had left odd gaps in the girls’ education. I remember one summer, for instance, on a morning after we had moved into a furnished apartment out in the country, when the girls came to us with a strange object they had found in the closet—a long, folding table covered with padded fabric that was too tall to sit behind and too narrow to be a bed—and asked us if we had any idea what it was. Nor was this aversion to practical things like ironing boards an isolated incident. Charlotte claims, for example, that she once changed a burned-out lightbulb that her parents had forgotten to replace for three years, but this is a gross exaggeration.

First Sally

Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of the roar that lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well-waddled with stupidity.

George Eliot
Middlemarch

July 7. Paris to Le-Puy-en-Velay, 541 km

Wherein our journey begins.

Over the years, I had gotten into the habit of pulling myself out of bed at 4:30 every morning to get a chance to draw and write without feeling I was stealing time from the family business.

At this point, I had become a bit vain about this perverse ability, the way some people are about drinking black coffee or downing vodka shots. The truth is, it wasn't so hard anymore. I slept lightly most of the time, and our two cats often started campaigning for breakfast around four, giving me a treatment that began typically by sprinting up and down the steep, glorified stepladder that led to the girls' rooms upstairs, a scamper that sounded like someone playing scales on the marimbas, and then, once Max, the fat marmalade, had built up some momentum, concluded by dive-bombing our bed.

But this morning, for the first time in months—maybe because Max and Ruby were already with our cat sitter, Agnès—on the one morning I had a real justification for my masochism, the unthinkable happened.

It gets light early in France in the summer, and I could tell I had overslept because it was now almost full daylight. I looked up from our futon in the living room (we had lent our bedroom to Leen and Carson so I could stick to my routine) and saw that Carson was in the kitchen, making coffee. I looked at my phone: 5:25—and our taxis to the train were supposed to arrive at 5:45! I nudged Cybèle awake, threw on my old bathrobe and the worn-out Birkenstocks I use as slippers, hurried up the stepladder, and woke the girls.

"Time to walk to Spain," I told Thea.

She growled.

A few minutes later, the girls came down the stairs in one Lionel Hampton cadenza, still pulling themselves together. Thea was having a minor fit about her hiking outfit.

“It’s on the edge of retardedness!” she shrieked.

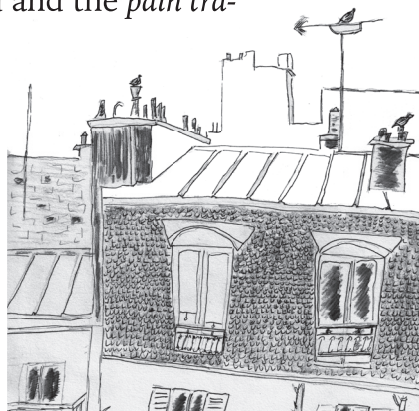
For the record, I thought the girls all looked good and told them so, but as usual, nobody believed me.

“The edge of retardedness!” Thea shrieked again, this time more because she liked the sound of the phrase than genuine fashion trauma. Meanwhile, our other two girls and Lola said nothing.

I kicked off my faithful Birkenstocks and laced up *die Bären*.

I felt excited but also unsettled—there are people under house arrest who get out more than I do. All the apartment’s familiar things: the ancient toilet that you had to flush carefully, squeezing the handle like a clutch, or risk having the water geyser Old Faithful-style all over the bathroom; our closet-sized kitchen and the jazz station I liked to listen to while I cooked, whose purring DJs seemed to organize their playlists by stream of consciousness; the red-framed watercolor of the little red teapot Cybèle had painted for me when we first got together, which had stayed above all my desks ever since; the pigeons on the chimney pots across the street; beneath them, under the gray mansard roof, the old couple who spent their days watering their red geraniums, endlessly moving things on and off their terrace; and six floors below and two blocks down, the white-smocked, red-handed girls of the Boulangerie Pichard and the *pain tradition*, the third-best baguette in Paris – that whole world of rue Cambronne would have to get on without me for two months.

Boots on, packs zipped, we stumbled down the six flights of stairs to meet our taxis. We had a few minutes before our scheduled pickup but we knew the cabs



The view from 125 rue Cambronne.

would already be there¹⁵ Cybèle had wanted to walk—Cybèle *always* wants to walk—but as we were taking a 6:30 train out of the Gare de Lyon, about six kilometers from rue Cambronne, Carson and I had persuaded her that just this once we ought to do it the easy way.

The one good part about having to take a cab was that we were in Paris, and if you happen to be going to the Gare de Lyon quite early one morning in July and find yourself gliding along the smooth green Seine, past the Assemblée Nationale, past the Musée d'Orsay, past Notre Dame, you're likely to feel more optimistic than usual about the human race. Even Thea's groans didn't bother me.

Meanwhile in the other cab, Masha confessed to Leen and Carson that she was afraid the walk would make her ugly. "Oh no," Leen said, "you'll be all toned and tan by the time you get to Santiago—*sinewy*," she said. (Leen is a lawyer; Carson is a writer—they both choose their words very carefully.)

"*Sinewy*!" Masha said. "But I don't want to be *sinewy*!"

We met Della and Enya in front of the old station, under the caryatids.

"Howdy, Pilgrim," I said, a joke I thought was pretty good for 6:15, but fell flat just then—maybe because it was too early or maybe because nobody else had watched as many John Wayne movies as I had.

Cybèle introduced Della and Enya to Carson and Leen. Della was as affable as ever—she should have been in the Canadian diplomatic corps. She had three daughters, like us, but the other two were older and in college. Enya was 15 and had grown a head or so taller since I had seen her last. She had switched out of our girls' school the year before, and I had missed this spurt. We had known her ever since we moved to Paris six years before,

15 As a rule, Parisian cabbies like to come early and start the meter running before the passenger arrives. But there wasn't really an alternative at the time: in New York, even toddlers learn how to hail a taxi, but in Paris you almost always needed to order cars by phone.

when she was a little dimpled thing, and it startled me now to see her so tall.

The grownups were all trying to be jolly—Carson and Leen were such old friends that having good-humored outsiders present made us all more sociable for this early in the morning—but Lola and our girls were quiet and sullen, especially Thea, who looked at me with a deep, abiding disdain.

Thea had always had an expression of flat-out contempt in her repertoire that I found unnerving, a nonplussed look that reminded me of the girl in *Paper Moon*, who keeps reminding her conman father throughout the movie that he owes her, say, forty-two dollars and thirty-seven cents, or whatever his current debt to her happens to be, and she had that "death to fools" glare on at full strength that morning.

On my way through the station door, I reached into a side pocket of my backpack for some water and suddenly felt something cool jet all over my hand. I turned my hand around, and it sprayed again. Now I pulled my hand back and stood contemplating the cool white stuff for a few seconds before I realized I had just sprayed a perfect pyramid of shaving cream all over my palm.

Thea roared, which under the circumstances was an unexpected bonus, like hearing Garbo laugh.

After I cleaned myself up in the restroom and bought the paper, we picked up croissants and coffee and walked to our platform. Cybèle, who remembered that Lola could be as absent-minded as Masha, warned her not to put her hat on the luggage rack, where she might forget it.

We didn't have much time to wait, which was too bad because the Gare de Lyon is a beautiful old station. It has the high spidery glass ceiling familiar from spy movies, and in the hall where they sell the tickets, a long mural of various landmarks in southern France, with real palm trees to put you in the mood. Like all the French train stations, it plays a jolly three-note riff before every train announcement—*ba Ba ba, the train to Lyon is departing in two minutes*—that sounds like a clip from a happy scene in an

old New Wave movie, the interlude of cavorting in the park before the couple gets down to the real business of pouting and throwing things at each other.

Despite the foreboding I read into those three jolly notes, the train ride itself was a treat, as usual. I love the TGVs, the *Trains à Grande Vitesse*, which slice straight through the countryside at 300 kilometers per hour (186 miles per hour). Generally, by the time you finish your paper, you're halfway there, wherever you're going. The TGV is modern France's idea of what modern France should be—smooth, quiet, elegant—part of a 1975 future that somehow actually exists, except that on your return trip to Paris you can no longer transfer to the Concorde.

A few hours later, at the TGV station outside Lyon, we switched to a smaller, slower train, and the girls moved into the next car where Lola (still in her blue straw hat, which she had left on her head the whole trip, to make sure she didn't forget it) could continue her entertaining and no doubt highly educational seminar without any risk of being overheard by the Grups. By 11:30, we were winding the last 30 kilometers or so up a sparkling river gorge speckled with boulders, swimmers, and a few fly fishermen. Ten minutes before we reached Le Puy-en-Velay, I texted Thea: "Enjoy your last motorized transport for the next 1000 miles."

Out in front of the station, Cybèle took a picture of us with our packs under the LE PUY EN VELAY station sign: Leen squatting in front of all of us in the center, then behind her, Carson in her long-sleeved shirt to keep the sun off; Lola in her blue straw hat, her deep-set eyes watching Masha; Masha talking to me; Charlotte, looking straight at the camera with a *j'accuse* glower; Enya smiling; Thea smiling, but her arms crossed, to make sure no one took her for a *chouchou*¹⁶; Della smiling and relaxed, and behind us, a poster of Marilyn Monroe with frightened doe-eyes, an advertisement for an exhibition.

After our class portrait, the nine of us left Marilyn and made

16 "A teacher's pet." The French have better words for everything.

our way through the old southern town, with its cobblestones and orange tile roofs. We were in luck: we walked straight into the Saturday farmer's market just as it reached its late-morning crescendo, right when we had begun to think about lunch. The stands were bursting with fruit and vegetables, slippers and apple-peelers. All around us, the vendors were shouting "*Tomate tomate tomate!*" or whatever they were selling.

The girls stood talking while we shopped, joking with each other and enjoying the sun. After a while, Leen came up to me as I looked over some olives. She seemed anxious; it was about 1:30 and none of us had had anything to eat since 6:30.

"We've got to get moving," Leen said, with an edge in her voice. "The girls are getting hungry."

One was for sure, anyway, I thought.

As we left the market square to go find our *gîte*,¹⁷ Carson and I noticed that Lola was walking along the cobblestones in an odd way, pigeon-toed and on tiptoes. Blisters already? This was not good. Cybèle was feeling her foot too, but she mouthed to me that it didn't seem to have gotten any worse.

Our *gîte* was in an old pink building that looked like it might have been a school at one time, but the front desk was done in IKEA noir, all flashy chrome and black lacquer, which made me think of ABBA and the seventies. The rooms lacked charm too, but in a more institutional way. Charlotte said theirs looked like the ward in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

We borrowed some plates and silverware from the communal kitchen, joined two long tables in the gravel courtyard outside the building, and set out our picnic: two cooked chickens, a few pounds of cheese and tomatoes, two enormous loaves of bread, and a bowl of peaches.

17 A French bed and breakfast/youth hostel hybrid we saw a lot of that summer. Most *gîtes* we stayed in serve breakfast and sometimes dinner, and most rooms had four or six bunk beds. (Often, but not always – unlike hotels, *gîtes* didn't seem to follow any real pattern, except that the beds were generally hard and had no bedding and the bathroom was down the hall.)

After lunch, the first item on our agenda was to pick up our pilgrim passports—little booklets that you get stamped every place you stay and in some of the churches you visit to prove that you have made the pilgrimage. The guidebook said you could buy them in the cathedral gift shop.

To get to the church, Our Lady of the Annunciation, we walked first down into the heart of the old town, where the street names all had a medieval flavor: there was a Street of the Rope, a Street of the Ladle, a Street of Tables (as in merchants' tables), a Street of Jews, and finally, a Street of Pilgrims that led up to the cathedral.

The cathedral stands at the top of a steep volcanic hill. It's tall and domed, an enormous pile of marble zigged in black and brown candy stripes like some of the grander Italian churches. You take a long flight of 60 steps up to the dark porch of the church, which a local priest has described with slightly worrisome gusto as the Stairs of the Womb, because "you feel you are being welcomed by a mother... and feel you are entering her womb and she holds out her arms to take us in."

Although it's dark inside, and cozy as far as vast Romanesque cathedrals go, I'm not sure I would go so far as to say it is womb-like. On the other hand, you could argue that if France has a birthplace, there is enough history piled onto this one hill that Our Lady of the Annunciation would be a good candidate.

Before the French, before the Franks, before the Visigoths, before the Romans, before the Gauls, five or six thousand years ago, someone looked up at this little volcanic mountain jutting up from the floor of the Le Puy valley and said, "You know, Trog, that would be an awesome place for a megalith."

We don't know much about those megalith-makers, but when the Gauls took over the region, they kept climbing this hill, and performing their own rites next to the megalith, and when the Romans moved in during the first century, they built a temple around the stone, and around 400, after they converted to Christianity, replaced that temple with a church, still without touch-

ing the megalith.

Eventually, the bishop renamed the megalith the Throne of Mary, and a Christian pilgrimage to Le Puy began. A few centuries on, someone got the idea that worshipping a rock was somewhat pagan and had it broken up. Some bits, however, were supposedly left in the floor, near the entrance we were stepping over now—I guess to be on the safe side.

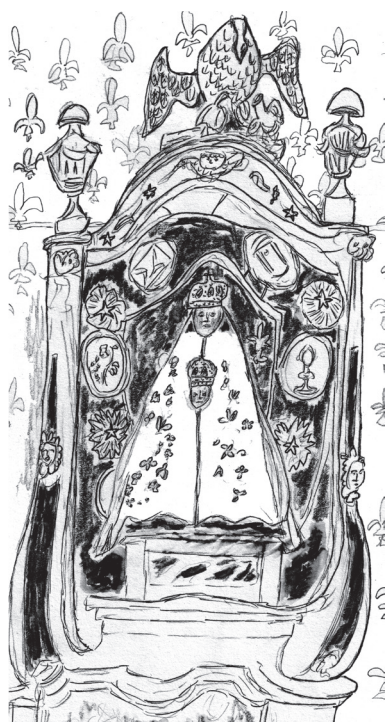
Around the year 800, the object of the pilgrimage shifted to a statue the monks called Saint Mary of the Rock. Charlemagne visited twice, and most of the French kings followed his example, even after Saint Mary was replaced in the 11th century by a black statue that came to be known as Our Lady of France. Whether they were going off to fight in Spain, heading off on a crusade, or getting back from a crusade, French kings almost always paid a visit to Our Lady of France.¹⁸ But the kings weren't the only devotees: Joan of Arc's mother made a pilgrimage here (women often prayed to Our Lady for an easy labor), and Joan herself supposedly had a special devotion to this particular Black Madonna.

Why they made Mary black is unclear. There are around 400 Black Virgins all over Europe, but for a long time, no one had a good explanation as to why. Shortly after World War II, a young American religious scholar, Leonard Ross, seeing a Black Virgin on an altar in southern Italy, asked the priest why the virgin was black, and the priest answered, "my son, she is black because she is black," an answer that didn't satisfy Ross, who went on to find a number of other equally unsatisfying answers. Some said it was the result of centuries of candle soot, but this is wrong, as most are painted black. Others have tried to explain the black virgins as images brought back from the Crusades, which doesn't work very well either, as even in Ethiopia, Mary is traditionally pictured as fairly light-skinned. Also, the features on most of the Black Virgins aren't African or Middle Eastern, and the idea that medieval sculptors didn't know what people looked like outside

18 The crusader connection is presumably why the church ended up with a lot of Arabic inscriptions, mostly fake except for one praise to Allah on a chapel door.

Europe doesn't hold up very well, as there has been more or less constant trade between Western Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa since Roman times. Nor were the Madonnas made of a black stone; most of the sculptures are in fact carved from locally available wood.

What seems most likely to scholars now is that the figure of the Black Madonna is an ancient earth-goddess pressed into Christian service. Many of those goddesses, including Artemis of Ephesus, Ceres, and Demeter (whose name is derived from Ge-meter or Earth mother), were traditionally portrayed as black, but their blackness represented not pigment but agricultural fertility. After the Christians suppressed all the pagan goddesses, "Mary, Queen of Martyrs, became the sole inheritor of all the names and forms, sorrows, joys, and consolations of the goddess mother in the Western World: Seat of Wisdom... Vessel of Honor...



The Black Virgin of Le Puy

Mystical Rose, House of Gold, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star, Refuge of Sinners... Queen of Angels... Queen of Peace," as Joseph Campbell put it in the third volume of his book *The Masks of God*.¹⁹

Le Puy's current Black Virgin looks gaunt and gothic. She wears an elaborate gold crown and a quizzical expression, like a hostess who is trying to look pleased to see you but can't quite place your face. Below her chin, the head of a little black Jesus with a matching crown peeps out of her bright embroidered robe, which was a cheerful yellow the day we visited.

I say "current virgin" because this particular figure is a 19th-century,

¹⁹ The black goddess retained her powers for Campbell, at least: his reflections on the Black Madonna at Chartres inspired him to pursue his famous studies in comparative mythology.

lead copy of the 11th-century sculpture, which was destroyed in the French Revolution. In August 1793, Jacobins tossed the original Black Virgin and Child in a manure cart and burned them in the main square. Afterward, the cathedral spent several years as a Temple of Reason, a house of worship of the state-sponsored Cult of Reason, before becoming a Temple of the Supreme Being under Robespierre, and then, under Napoleon, a Catholic church once more.²⁰

All this destruction left a permanent mark on many French churches. Even today, they tend to be more sparsely decorated than the Spanish, Italian, or even the English churches, despite Henry VIII and Cromwell. If they have been restored, as this one was in the late 1840s, they tend to have been done up very flamboyantly, in ways that have more to do with *Hunchback of Notre Dame* ideas of the medieval than the real Dark Age thing.

Carson and Thea stopped to light candles—Carson, for her father, who had died a few years before; Thea, for Paola, a very Catholic family friend who had died a number of years before that, and also just for the fun of lighting a candle in the big dark church – while the rest of us walked on past the sanctuary to the gift shop.

In France, the pilgrim passport is mostly a souvenir—every church and many hostels along the Way have their own distinctive stamp and they are fun to collect—but in Spain, the passport is a serious business and something you do not want to lose. You often need your *credencial* to register in the pilgrim-only hostels. Many *refugios* won't give you a bunk unless you have it, and

20 In their atheistic phase, the revolutionaries decreed that all statues and crosses in cemeteries had to be replaced by a single inscription, "Death is an eternal sleep," and all church bells melted down. A new set of services were to be held that included sermons in praise of atheism, a flame supposed to symbolize truth, and girls in scanty togas and tricolor sashes who circled around a costumed Goddess of Reason, often played by the wife of an official or a former prostitute. (In Le Puy, one historian assures us, the goddess was a nice, respectable girl.) All this lasted about two years, until Robespierre sent the founders of the religion-less religion to the guillotine and brought in a religion of the Supreme Being. This in turn lasted until Napoleon brought Catholicism back. The Emperor had no special liking for Catholicism, but appreciated the political advantages of organized religion. "In Egypt, I was a Musselman; here I shall be a Catholic, for the good of the people," he once said.

perhaps more seriously, at Santiago they won't give you your *Compostela*, the diploma that says you made this pilgrimage—not a big deal for infidels like us but important to devout Catholics who want to make sure they get full spiritual credit for their trouble.²¹

While Cybèle waited in line to buy the passports, Della and I browsed through the books. Holding back a smile, she nodded over toward the entrance, where a plump young nun and a skinny monk leaned on an unoccupied counter and texted on their smartphones. It must be tough to be in holy orders today—everything you do that couldn't have been done in the 13th century makes you look like a character in a Mel Brooks skit.

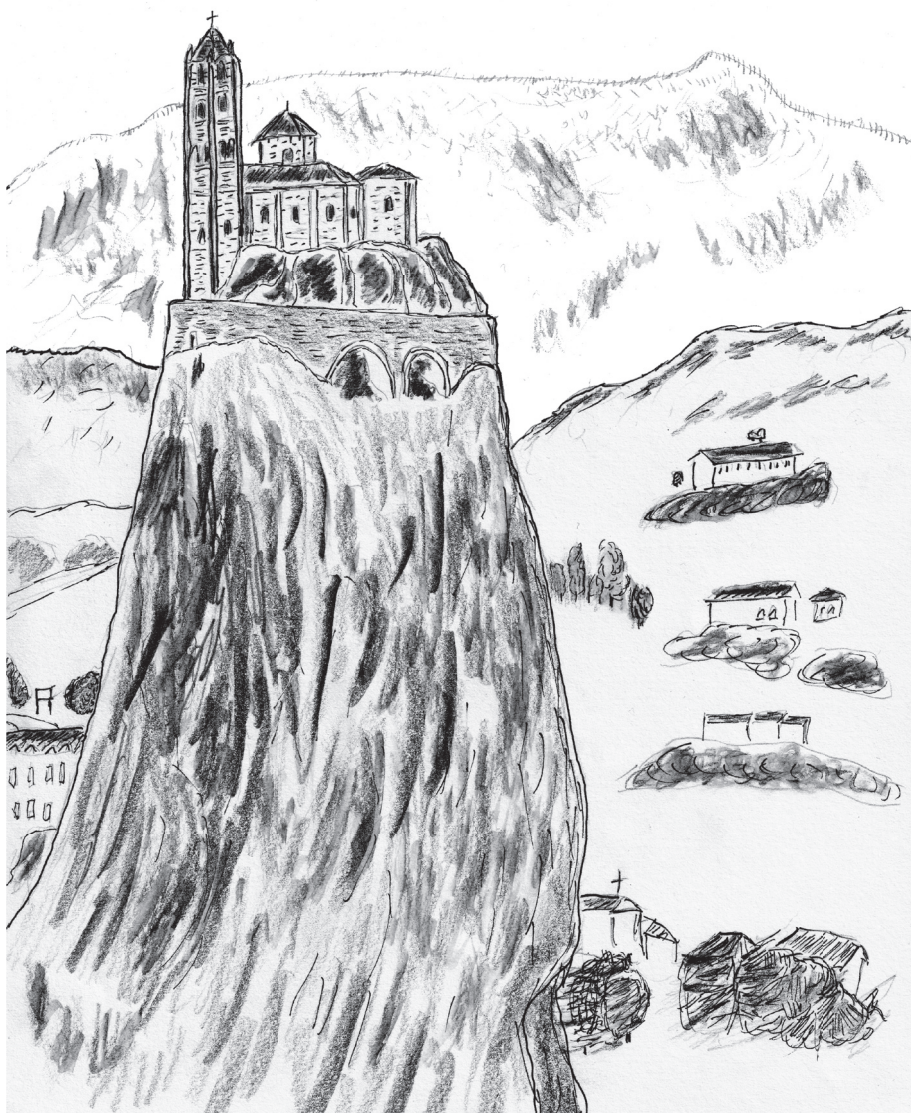
After leaving the church, we walked up an even taller volcanic butte behind the cathedral to visit another unfortunate aesthetic consequence of the *citoyens'* vandalism, a 17-meter (52-foot) statue of Mary holding baby Jesus perched like a giant terracotta lawn sculpture that looks down on the cathedral and the whole valley.²²

From the top, we could see the bell towers of the cathedral, as well as all of Le Puy and the surrounding green hills. Cybèle pointed out our pink gîte on the edge of town, but I had my eye on an ancient stone chapel to our right, which was set on top of an even more dramatic peak than the one we stood on. I suggested to Cybèle that we go there next but she thought that would

21 In addition to its role as the keeper of the Black Virgin of Le Puy, since around 1000, the church has also been a prime stop on the Camino de Santiago, one of the most important of many bonus stops pilgrims would make as they were passing through, like swinging by Mount Rushmore if you were driving out to Yellowstone.

22 Mary was partly under scaffolding for renovation while we were there, but I don't think we missed much, aesthetically speaking. The tallest sculpture in the world from 1861 until 1886, when the Statue of Liberty lifted her torch, Our Lady of France was a joint project of some nationalistic clergy and Napoleon III. The clergy were looking for ways to reintegrate the Church into French life, and Napoleon III (whose ideas about religion were similar to his uncle's), presumably saw an opportunity to insinuate himself into the royal tradition. This new, unburnable Lady of France was a gift from the nation, including 300,000 school students whose centimes paid for the base, and the Emperor himself, who contributed 10,000 francs and the iron of 213 cannons seized from the Russians at the end of the 10-month-long siege of Sebastopol in the Crimean War. Whether that was all the cannons there were in Sebastopol or the recipe just called for 213 cannons, I haven't been able to determine.

be pushing the girls too much before our first day of hiking. I glumly agreed but made a secret resolution to go take a look at the mysterious chapel later that afternoon if I had the chance.²³



Saint Michael of the Needle

23 Set on an extraordinary, 25-story-high lava butte that rises abruptly from the valley floor, the 1,000-year-old Saint-Michel d'Aiguilhe ("Saint Michael of the Needle") is only reachable by a flight of 268 steps that for some reason has yet to inspire any reproductive similes.

"We have to go up there tomorrow," Cybèle explained, pointing to a less dramatic but ultimately higher hill behind our *gîte*.

"Where?" Leen asked.

"There. That's where the *chemin* starts," Cybèle said. "That road, the long one there."

"The one that goes straight up the hill?"

"Yes."

No one but Leen liked the look of that.

As we walked back down toward the cathedral, we heard singing waft upward toward us and decided to crash the Saturday evening Mass.

This was an unusual event for all of us. Cybèle was a pagan from day one, and though a gentile, she, like many longtime New Yorkers, somehow considers the Jews to be her home team, for reasons I have never entirely understood. I was raised Catholic, but, as some Americans do, tend to describe myself as a recovering Catholic²⁴; Leen is Jewish; Carson was religious, but not in any specific way; and the rest weren't anything in particular, as far as I knew. Our girls, at least, were not.

I enjoyed hearing the Mass again, even though it was a folk mass—guitars instead of organs—a very 70s phenomenon that I had disapproved of as a kid. I'd been right about that—aesthetically speaking, felt banners and turtlenecks couldn't hold a taper to cassocks, bells and incense—but as usual, maybe I had missed the larger point.

It seemed like a warm community, perhaps because we had arrived right before the Sign of Peace, my favorite part of the Mass, the moment you shake hands with the people around you. I thought of my own candle-lighting, bell-ringing altar boyhood (*Remember the time you were swinging the incense and started seeing*

24 I have since run into a phrase I like much better: the writer Edmund White likes to describe himself as a "mystical atheist," which sort of sums up my own attitude fairly well.

swirls and almost passed out? And the way Mom always had to keep Dad and Molly separated because they would give each other the giggles whenever they sang a hymn? And the time Father Cohan's sermon was interrupted by a loud thunk and we looked around and realized that an old man had fallen asleep and tumbled out of his pew?), and felt warmly nostalgic for five or ten minutes until the girls began to get restless and we ducked back out.

Outside the church, at the bottom of the Steps of the Womb, the *Chemin de Compostelle* began. We followed a line of shiny bronze scallop shells screwed into the cobblestones all the way down the steep hill. At the moment, we were just heading back to our gîte, but technically speaking, our pilgrimage had begun. After 12 years of talking about it, we were finally on our way to Santiago.