

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I had never heard of the Camino de Santiago until my daughter told me about it when she was nineteen. She said she wanted to go to Europe with her best friend to backpack over the Pyrenees and across Spain to the far reaches of the Iberian Peninsula.

The idea was outrageous until I started to read about it and discovered the Camino's long history and came to understand it was more than a backpacking adventure. The ritual of following the path of Saint James was over a thousand years old, and the experience deeply affected many who walked it.

My daughter was no exception. She came back changed. The thirty-three-day adventure turned out to be a profound coming-of-age passage for her into adulthood. She discovered how capable she was and figured out her calling. She met people from all over the world, and it widened her perspective, and ultimately transformed her destiny.

For years after, she told me I should do it. And each time I responded with "Yeah, yeah. Someday." The truth is, I had no real intention of following through. Unlike my daughter, I wasn't looking for self-discovery or enlightenment, and the idea of traipsing across a country with a backpack and sleeping in hostels surrounded by strangers didn't appeal.

Then life threw me a curveball. My husband had a health scare, and it rocked my world. I was in his hospital room a few days after we dodged a proverbial life-altering bullet, and for whatever reason, I thought about the Camino and how for years I'd been saying "someday" I would do it. Sitting there, I realized plainly that none of us really knows how many somedays we have left.

I started making plans that day.

Terrified of embarking on the journey alone, I bribed my daughter, her boyfriend, and my son to join me for the first seven days by offering to foot the bill. It was a wonderful, torturous week. I don't know if I've ever been in so much pain or pushed myself so hard, and I don't know if I've ever loved my kids so much. They were incredibly encouraging and supportive, and I knew the tables were turning. My kids were now the ones looking out for me instead of the other way around.

My daughter's two pieces of advice as they were leaving were "Don't get lost" and "Make friends."

Like a life ring, I clung to those words. I sought out yellow arrows, checking and double-checking constantly that I was on the path. And I forced myself to meet people. Each day, I would talk to anyone who spoke English. Sometimes we walked together. Other times we shared a meal.

Which is how this story came about. When I started the journey, I had no intention of writing a story about it. The Camino is actually a pretty mundane thing to try to write about. You walk. You sleep. You wake up and do it again. But storytelling is more about characters than setting, and there was no way to meet that many people and hear that many personal accounts and not wind up with a head full of ideas.

The first inspiration struck twenty-four days into the journey. I was hiking with John from Indiana and Gordon from Scotland up a grueling leg of trail. We were tired and grouchy and hadn't passed a café for hours when La Casa de los Dioses (the House of the Gods) appeared in front of

us like a mirage. It was very much like how I describe Sanctuary of the Gods, and Uncle David is based on the real-life proprietor, David Vidal (Instagram @peregrinodelavida33). When I asked the real David if the property was his, he responded, “Everything you see belongs to God,” and when he noticed Gordon was sunburned, he gave him a tube of sun lotion. And when we left, he bid us goodbye with his signature, “Have a good life.” So while Uncle David is a work of fiction, he shares the same generous, kind spirit as the real David Vidal.

The nugget of the idea for the story came a full week later. David had been swimming in my head, but he was only a character, a human embodiment of the Camino that I knew would someday make it into some future work. Then, as the saying goes, “The Camino provides.”

I was a few days from Santiago, in a crappy town, after a miserable, lonely day of hiking. I went to a small pizza restaurant for dinner and sat down alone, but within a few minutes, a pair of Americans sat down at the table beside me. Rick and Eliana, father and daughter, were from Ohio. Rick had hiked the Camino as a young man. Eliana was eighteen and was headed off to college at the end of summer. They were doing the Camino together so Eliana could experience the trip that had meant so much to her dad.

Rick pulled out his phone and showed me a photo of himself with three buddies on the trail from twenty-five years before. The muscled, grinning man was unrecognizable from the slouched, overweight man at the table beside me, and he knew it. His voice grew thick as he pointed to each of his friends and then himself, and I felt his anguish. Eliana did as well and set her hand on his arm, and in that small gesture was everything. Eliana wasn’t doing the walk for herself; she was doing it for him. Her dad had lost his way, and she was hoping returning to the trail might help him find it.

I don't know if it did. I caught a glimpse of Rick the next day, struggling up a hill. I passed with an encouraging, "Buen Camino," and that was the last I saw of him. I'm sure Eliana was way out in front of us. She was long-legged, and Rick had proudly nicknamed her "Billy Goat" for how quickly she walked.

Reina and Isabelle were inspired in part by Eliana, and Peter and Ned were inspired in part by Rick. And over a delicious dinner of pizza and wine, the idea of writing a story about two Caminos walked a generation apart was born.

I started working on the idea before I left Santiago. As always, I began with a deep dive into the topic I was writing about. And one of the first things I stumbled upon was an article titled "Murder in the Pyrenees."

It was a story from the nineties about a feud between thirteen founding families of a small village near the Spain–Andorra border. The dispute was over a developer's proposal to turn "their mountain" into a ski resort. It resulted in the murder of two men, and the ski resort was never built. Dur and the feud between Isabelle's dad and Senor Sansas are based on that story.

I loved the idea of the Camino offering refuge for someone with nothing. I wanted the tenet "The Camino provides" to be part of the story.

Writing about the Camino helped me transition back into my life. I came home in an odd state—let down, like a balloon deflated. Things felt oddly meaningless. I purged my closet. I purged my friends. I lost at games I used to care about winning. I drove slower. I walked faster. I struggled to engage. I struggled to explain the experience. I started humming.

I wear a leather bracelet with a ceramic scallop shell bead on my left wrist, which I bought on the trail and look at often as a reminder of those thirty-five strange, wondrous, exhausting, glorious days. I'm no great athlete. I have thin skin that blisters easily. My legs are shorter than most. Yet

one foot in front of the other, I climbed mountains and walked across a country. I learned how little I need and how much I have. How frail I am and how strong. I discovered things about myself I never knew. I gave myself grace, forgave myself for regrets of the past, and released grudges I didn't even realize I was holding. I discovered the lowest lows are often followed by the highest highs. I met people I otherwise never would have met. I was uncomfortable. I got lost. Eventually I found my way.

Day after day, I was stunned by the extraordinary. And the mundane. I sat beneath a shower of shooting stars. A music student from Juilliard stopped on the trail to sing me an aria. I watched an old woman in a handstitched apron pull onions from her garden. I witnessed a cow in a pasture giving birth. I was astounded. I was often bored to tears.

It was everything, and it was nothing. It took forever. It feels like a blink. Time goes on.

The Camino is a contradiction, a complicated melody known only to the person who experiences it.

For those who have walked it, I hope this story brought back some beautiful memories. For those who haven't, I hope it gives you a glimpse of the promise it holds.

Buen Camino,

Suzanne

PS This is a work of fiction. To move the story where it needed to go, I put in the scene about the hosteler attacking Isabelle, but I want to make it clear that crime on the Camino is extraordinarily rare. The Camino is safer than almost any Western city, even those with extremely low crime rates. While I was on the Camino, I never felt unsafe. There were always people around, and everyone was friendly, helpful, and respectful. I was never uncomfortable, and no one ever

did anything that was even slightly inappropriate. There were at least as many women on the trail as men, and many, like me, were traveling alone. I hope that scene does not discourage anyone from taking this remarkable journey.