

THE HUNGRY GODS GO ON CAMINO

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Contents

Oviedo → Grado	1
Grado → Salas	10
Salas → Tineo	17
Tineo → Borres	24
Borres → Berducedo	29
Berducedo — a rest day	34
Berducedo → Grandas de Salime	40
Grandas de Salime → A Fonsagrada	46
A Fonsagrada → O Cádavo	52
O Cádavo → Lugo	57
Lugo — a rest day	63
Lugo → San Romão da Retorta	69
San Romão da Retorta → Melide	73
Melide → O Pedrouzo	77
O Pedrouzo → Santiago	84

OVIEDO → GRADO

The rain in Oviedo is a soft, committed, Atlantic rain that has no opinion about your holiday, and it was falling on the morning we came up out of the bus station and stood on a wet pavement in the north of Spain, two men in their fifties with new packs and old knees, looking for the arrows.

Asturias is not the Spain of the brochures. It is green because it is soaked, a wet emerald hill country pinned between the Cantabrian mountains and the grey Bay of Biscay, and it smells of cut grass and diesel and the sea, and the light comes down through cloud the colour of a good wool blanket. It felt, if I am honest, a little like home, which is to say a little like the west of Scotland our grandparents left, and I said so to Andrew, and Andrew said the prices were better and kept walking, which is Andrew's way of agreeing with something he finds sentimental.

We had come for the credencial first. You cannot sleep in the pilgrim hostels without one, the little folding cardboard passport you get stamped along the road, and the office that issues it is a stone room off a side street with a ceiling fan that turns whether or not the day is warm enough to need it.

The Allfather was working the desk.

I had my question ready. I am a man who rehearses his questions, on planes and in queues and in the shower, and I had

rehearsed this one twice, and I got as far as asking how many stamps a day you needed near the end before he said, "Two, in the last hundred kilometres. One won't do," and had the two passports open in front of us, filling in the first line. I tried the second question, whether the reception office in Santiago kept the hours the guidebook gave, and he told me the hours before I reached the word Santiago. He stamped us, Oviedo, the date, a small pressed scallop shell in blue ink, and turned the passports round and slid them across the wood, and he did not ask our names, or where we had come from, or why we had come, and he gave us nothing to answer. Andrew took his and turned it over and said it was a very official-looking article for a thing that cost two euros, and the Allfather was already dealing with the German family behind us, telling the father the distance to Grado in kilometres before the man had finished unfolding his map, and then telling him where the good fountain was on the climb, and then he was on to the Frenchwoman behind the Germans. He answered and was already in the next answer. We stepped out into the rain stamped and credentialed and official, a clerk's morning's work, done.

Andrew wanted the cathedral before we did anything else, because Andrew reads.

He reads plaques and museum cards and the small print on the back of the ticket and the laminated history taped inside the door of every church we have ever stood in together, out loud, in the low voice he keeps for indoor holiness, and I have spent fifty years half a step behind him receiving this information whether I asked for it or not, and I would not trade it, though

I have never told him so and do not intend to start. So before we had walked a single metre of the actual road we went into San Salvador and stood in the cool that old stone gives off even in summer, and Andrew went along the walls reading me the history.

It is a serious old place. There has been a church on that spot since the eighth century, raised by the Asturian kings when this damp corner was one of the last Christian kingdoms left on the peninsula, and the cathedral is San Salvador, the Saviour, and Oviedo has a proverb about that, carved and repeated and sold on postcards: whoever goes to Santiago and not to the Saviour visits the servant and not the Lord. Santiago is the servant, the shrine of St James off to the west; Oviedo keeps the Lord. The town has always thought well of itself on the point, and it has the relics to argue it. Behind the altar, up a worn stair, is a chamber they call the Cámara Santa, the Holy Chamber, and inside it, behind glass and an iron grille, they keep the sudarium, the folded linen cloth the tradition says covered the face of Christ, and a great gilt chest, the Ark, said to hold a hoard of relics carried north ahead of the Moors twelve hundred years ago.

Andrew read me the date on the cloth, which is old, and the chain of custody, which a defence lawyer would take apart before lunch, and I stood beside him and felt the thing I feel in these rooms, which has no good name. Our people took the images down. Some grandfather of ours, four centuries back, helped clear the statues out of a Scottish kirk and counted it a good day's work, and here were the two of us in front of a relic

in a gold box. I did not kneel. Andrew did not kneel. But we took our caps off, which for us is a long way in that direction, and we stayed longer than the cloth required, and when we turned to go Andrew did not read the last card by the door, and left it unread behind him, which from Andrew is nearly weeping.

On the cathedral steps he took something out of the top pocket of his pack, wrapped in a rolled grey sock, and looked at it a moment in his palm, and folded the sock back over it and put it away. Spare pair, I thought, and thought nothing more of it, and we went to find our lunch.

You may as well know the shape of us.

Andrew is the elder by four years and mentions it. He was an accountant and is now a mostly retired one, an elder of our congregation, a reader of plaques, a man who has voted the same way and worshipped in the same pew and driven a sensible estate car his adult life, and who once, at our father's seventieth, gave a speech so dry and so exactly right that three people cried and none of them could have told you which sentence did it. I am the younger, a schoolteacher, geography and a little history, on the session too, and married thirty years to Ruth, who packed me a box of fig bars for this trip, the kind she buys when she is not going to say the tender thing out loud. Carol did the same for Andrew, independently, apparently, the same box, the same silence around it. Our wives let us go. Ruth went still when I first said the word Camino at the kitchen table, and then she said I should go, and she meant it, and she did not come, and she has not once asked me what two men our age

are going to find on a hill in Spain that we could not have found at home for the price of the flights. They respect this. They do not understand it. I have come to think those are two different acts of love, and that I owe her the second more than the first. And there was this, which neither of us said out loud: we had never been apart like this, Ruth and I, not in thirty years, not for more than a night or two, and we had not worked out how we would do it, whether I would phone each evening, which felt like too much, or not, which felt like too little. We left it undecided at the airport, and the not-deciding came with me onto the plane.

We were raised in a plain Presbyterian house on the Lord's Day and the Shorter Catechism, our father asking the questions on winter evenings and the two of us answering, the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever, and I could still say most of it in my sleep. Our father is eighty-one now, and he holds the banister with both hands, and our mother writes short lists so as not to forget the middle of them. Andrew's Katie moved into her own flat in the spring. My Fiona still phones on a Sunday, and our boy is off at his engineering, and the house is quieter than it has ever been, and Ruth and I have started, without discussing it, eating our supper in the front room in front of the news like people who have run out of things to save for later.

The Camino was a film. Fifteen years ago Andrew and I watched the one where the American father walks the road carrying his dead son's ashes in a tin, leaving him along the route in handfuls, at the mountain passes and at the last into

the sea. That road is the French one, the famous one, the great crowded highway of the business, and when we finally decided to come we did not go to it. Andrew said the first pilgrim of them all had walked from Oviedo, the Asturian king, when the tomb was found in the ninth century, and had made the road by walking it, and that if we were going to do a thing like this we would do it from the beginning, on the old track over the mountains, the Primitivo, which is harder and emptier and does not appear in any film. He put it in terms of the history because Andrew puts everything in terms of the history. I let him. It saved us both from saying the other thing, which was that neither of us wanted to walk in the footprints of a movie we had cried at in the dark and never mentioned again, and the mountains it was.

Gascona is the cider street, a short run of *sidrerías* with barrels for tables and the good serious smell of apples gone hard, and we took our last town meal there before the road. The pouring is a performance and a physics lesson at once. The waiter holds the bottle up at the full stretch of his arm above his head and the glass down low at his hip, looking at neither, and lets a thin bright rope of cider fall the long way into the glass so that it breaks against the rim and froths for the few seconds you are meant to drink it in. You do not sip it. You take the inch he pours, the *culín*, in one swallow while it is still alive, and you tip the last drop onto the floor to rinse the glass, and the floor of a proper *sidrería* is tacky with a hundred years of that last drop. Andrew watched a waiter pour four in a row without spilling and said the man could get work anywhere in

the world, and we ordered a cachopo, a slab of breaded veal the size of a pulpit Bible folded over ham and cheese, that beat the two of us between us and that Andrew photographed for Carol before we started, and a dish of white beans with sausage that our father would have called a proper feed. The cider went down easier than either of us admitted, and the froth on it stood a moment before it died, like the head on the one glass of stout our father used to nurse all through the Friday news. He is still with us. There is no cause to talk about him as though he weren't.

The road out of Oviedo is suburb, and then it is a climb over a rise called the Escamplero, and then it is down the far side through hamlets where the dogs have firm opinions, and it is longer than the map is willing to admit. We found the arrows quickly enough. They are yellow, painted on kerbs and walls and the backs of signs and the trunks of trees, and they always point toward Santiago, and once you have your eye in you cannot stop seeing them, a hundred small yellow insistences all aimed the same way. On a wall on the way out of the city a man was freshening one of them with a brush and a tin, the Hand, not looking up, laying the paint on over the old faded arrow without pausing to see whether he had it straight, already reaching to the next stroke before the last was down, and we said *buen camino* to his back and he did not answer and did not stop, and the arrow when we passed it was perfect.

We said *buen camino* a fair few times that first afternoon, to Germans and to a pair of Danes and to the merino Dutchman, who we would come to know, and who told us within four

minutes of meeting, unasked, that wool does not hold odour, while providing standing evidence against himself. Our bodies filed their first reports. Andrew's left heel by the top of the Escamplero, my right hip on the long grind down, the particular ache a fifty-three-year-old man earns by carrying eleven kilos up a hill he trained for on a treadmill in a church hall. We did not say much. You do not, on a first afternoon, when the size of the thing you have undertaken is starting to be a number of days rather than a good idea.

We came into Grado in the evening. It has a market on Sundays that it was not the day for, the square empty and washed and waiting, and an albergue up a stair, and the man there had us sign the book. That is where our names went down, and came back to us kindly mangled, the man reading our surname off the top of my hand in three careful and generous syllables, Bai-a-ard, and I let it stand, because a man gets to leave a few things at the trailhead and the correct pronunciation of himself is one of them, and for three weeks we were the Bairds of nowhere in particular.

A bunkroom is an education you pay for in sleep. There is a silent economy to the lower bunk, an auction conducted in nothing but where men set their packs down, and Andrew, elder by four years and never slow to price that in, took a lower without a word and left me the ladder. The merino Dutchman was across the aisle, explaining wool to a captive Korean girl. Somebody's wet socks were drying on somebody's boots. Later, in the dark, a snorer started up, a real one, a craftsman, and I lay on the high bunk with my hip singing and did the arithmetic

of the day, and then the arithmetic of the years, our father on the stairs and our mother's short lists and Fiona's Sunday phone calls and how many of them there are likely to be, and I was not unhappy about any of it. I was only awake. Somewhere below me Andrew was breathing the slow breath of a man who can sleep anywhere, which he has always been able to do and which I have never forgiven him for.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: the cider man pours it from over his head and never spills a drop, and I thought of you and the good gravy boat and the Christmas we don't mention. We got our little passports stamped. We start walking properly tomorrow.

GRADO → SALAS

It rained in the night and the trail took it to heart.

The path down out of Grado had turned to a brown that holds a boot half a second longer than you expect it to, so the first hour of the morning was a slow argument with the ground, boot and mud each making a small case at every step. There are cows in it, and the noise and the smell of cows, and the hórreos stand up out of the wet fields on their stone mushroom-caps, the raised granaries built up off the ground on staddle stones so the rats cannot climb to the grain, square dark wooden boxes on stone legs, and every third one has maize hung to dry under its eaves and a satellite dish bolted to its roof. The green is a wet, total, uncompromising green. It got into everything. By nine my socks had that particular Asturian dampness that no wool, whatever the Dutchman says, entirely holds off, and Andrew, ahead of me and stopping to wait, which produces the look of patience without the labour of it, said the countryside was very like Ayrshire only with better sausages.

We fell in for a mile with a Danish woman who was walking to decide whether to marry the man she had left at home, and who told us so inside the first five minutes, because the Camino does that to people; it slips the ordinary locks on the ordinary doors and everyone tells everyone everything. Andrew, who

will discuss the weather with a stranger for an hour and his own heart with nobody, listened and nodded and said at the end of it that she would know when she knew, which sounds wise and commits a man to nothing, and she thanked him as though he had handed her something. Then the path tilted up and she was thirty years younger than us and gone, and it was the mud and the cows and the two of us again.

We went down toward the river where the monastery is.

San Salvador de Cornellana sits low between the Narcea and a smaller water, a pale barn of a place, more farm than fortress, and it has been there since the eleventh century, endowed, the plaque told Andrew and Andrew told me, by an infanta, a king's daughter, and given later to the monks of Cluny, and it wears its thousand years like a coat that no longer fits. There is a carving over one of the doors, worn nearly smooth, of a bear with a child at her teat. The story, which Andrew read aloud and which a Dutch couple coming up behind us received whether they wanted it or not, is that a king's daughter was lost in these woods as an infant and suckled by a she-bear and lived, and grew, and gave the money for the house in thanks. The Dutchman, a new one, they come in denominations, said that bears do not do that. Andrew said, "No, but somebody needed it to be true," and went inside to look at the cloister, and I stood a moment in the doorway, because that was a better sentence than my brother usually manages before his second coffee.

The albergue is inside the monastery itself, a room of bunks under the old stone, and a woman stamped our credenciales, Cornellana, and on the wall by the door somebody had fresh-

ened the yellow arrow that morning, the paint still wet enough to shine, laid on straight over the ghost of the old one and left without a signature.

The climb after Cornellana is long, up out of the valley, and it is on the long climbs that our family conducts its business, sideways, at an angle, because we cannot do it any other way. It came round by way of the hill. Andrew said his knees were not what they had been. I said nothing, which is the correct response, an invitation rather than a wall. There was a good silence of the kind you can only keep with a brother, three hundred metres of it, and then Andrew said, to the trail and not to me, that he had been over to the house on the Sunday and their father had come down the stairs with both hands on the rail and had stopped on the landing longer than a man stops who is not counting the steps he has left. That was all of it. He did not say the word. We do not say the word in our family. You say both hands on the rail, and you leave the other man to finish the sentence privately, in his own head, in his own time, and I finished it, and we walked, and the rain held off for an hour as a kind of courtesy.

Our father was a joiner, a maker of stairs among other things, good ones, the kind that do not announce themselves, and there is a joke in there about the banister that neither of us was going to make. He built half the fitted kitchens in the parish and all of his own furniture and the pulpit fall stand in the vestry that is still there. He is a man who measured twice and cut once his whole working life and who now stands at the top of his own well-made stairs and reckons the descent. Our mother keeps

lists. They used to be for the shopping and now they are so that the middle of a sentence does not go missing between the start of it and the end, and she laughs about it, mostly, and once did not, and I was there for the once and have not told Andrew and am not going to.

When we were boys our father's workshop was the warmest room we knew, a lean-to off the back with a stove in it and the smell of pine shavings and linseed, and of a Saturday he would set the two of us some small true task, a mitre to cut, a joint to pare back, and stand over us not saying much, and take the chisel gently out of our hands when our attention wandered and show us again without a word of reproach. Andrew took to it. I did not, particularly, but I loved the being-there, the plane going shhk and the clean curl of wood coming off it and our father running a thumb along an edge and either nodding or not. He built those stairs. I have wondered since whether that is a hard thing for a man, or whether he is simply glad, at the end, of a good rail he made himself, set true, that will take his weight for as long as he needs it to. I did not ask him. You do not ask.

I had, over the winter, decided Andrew and Carol were in trouble.

I had built the case without quite meaning to. He had been quiet at Easter, quieter than the season accounts for. He had stopped mentioning her in the small automatic way married men do, the she-says and the we-were-just, the domestic weather report that tells you a marriage is running. When I first floated the trip he had said yes too fast, the yes of a man glad

of an open door. I am the kind of brother who assembles a case, quietly, over months, and I had mine assembled, folded up and carried, and I turned it over on the long climb and felt tender toward him and a little wise, with the private wisdom of a man who thinks he has understood something about someone he loves that they have not said. We are four years apart, which was an ocean when we were boys and is nothing now, and I have known him longer than I have known anyone alive except our parents, and there is a great deal I do not know about the inside of him.

Sunday caught us on that stretch, and it caught us walking, which our father would have had something to say about, gently, and our grandfather not gently at all. We were raised that the Lord's Day was the Lord's, that you did not walk out on it for pleasure or profit, that the ox in the ditch was the one exception and you had better be sure it was an ox and in a ditch. And here we were, walking for what, exactly. Not profit. I am not sure pleasure is the word either, given my hip. We did not make a show of it. But somewhere on the top road, with the wind coming across from the mountains we could not yet see, Andrew started, low, the old tune, French, the one they set the twenty-third psalm to, and I came in under him on the second line, the Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want, two Presbyterians walking a Catholic road on the Sabbath singing a metrical psalm to nobody, and it was the closest thing to worship we had, and it would do. We sang it out and then we did not talk for a while, which was also a kind of keeping it.

Salas is a handsome small town with a squat stone tower and a collegiate church and a bar with a ham clamped to the counter and a slick of spilled cider on the floor, and I went to find the hospitalero to get us beds, and I found the Seeker.

He did not appear to know anything, and I say that with real affection. I asked where a man could get his dinner, and he said the place he would have sent us to had closed last year, but the woman at the shop by the church would know who was cooking tonight. I asked about the weather over the high mountains in two days' time, and he said he did not follow the forecast himself, but the German who had left that morning kept it all on his phone and might still be down at the bar. I asked how far it was to Tineo, and he said that depended entirely on who you asked, and I should ask the sign at the edge of town, it was more reliable than he was. Every question I set down in front of him he picked up and turned and set down again pointing away from himself, toward the woman at the shop, toward the German, toward the sign, toward someone specific and elsewhere, so that after ten minutes I had learned not one thing from him directly and held a short and excellent list of four other people who between them appeared to know everything worth knowing in the town of Salas. He stamped our credenciales, Salas, and pointed me up the stairs to the beds, pointing even then, and I went up them thinking he was the most useful man I had met all day.

Andrew had his boots off on a bench in the sun that had finally, grudgingly, come out, going over the day's damage to his feet with the concentration of a surgeon defusing something,

the little scissors, the plasters, the needle and thread he swears by for a blister and that I cannot watch. This is what middle age comes to, in the end. The body files its reports now, daily, in triplicate, and you sit on a bench in a strange town in the evening and you read them, and you deal with what you can, and you carry the rest up the hill in the morning.

SALAS → TINEO

Between Salas and Tineo the road goes up and stays up, through La Espina where the sawmills are mostly closed now and the town has the look of a place the work left, and then on along a high shoulder of country with the first real sense of the mountains ahead, blue and serious to the west, and somewhere on that long rise you come to a house that other pilgrims had told us about, back down the road, in the tone people keep for a rumour they are hoping turns out to be true.

It is a donativo. You give what you decide to give, or you give nothing at all, and either way you are fed and put up for the night, and I had believed, in the abstract of the guidebook, that I understood the arrangement, and I did not.

The Conscience-Keeper keeps the place, and he came out to us on the road before we had reached the door, which nobody does, and had Andrew's pack off Andrew's back before Andrew had agreed to stop walking, and had the two of us sitting on a bench with our boots off and a bowl of bean stew each in front of us before I had finished deciding whether to be suspicious. A thing given for free trips a wire in me that has been live in our family since Geneva. We are not comfortable being given to. We are a people who would rather build you a staircase than

accept a lift, and I sat there with the warm bowl in my hands feeling the wire hum.

The house is a plain whitewashed one, a few rooms and the long table and a yard where the boots stood in a row and steamed, and through the afternoon the pilgrims came in off the road in ones and twos, footsore and grateful, and were met the same way we had been met, the pack lifted off, the bowl produced, the boots off and by the door. There was no desk, no card machine, no list of prices on the wall, nothing at all to tell a man what he owed, and that absence worked on me all afternoon like a stone in the boot, because a man brought up as I was brought up needs to know what he owes; it is nearly a moral sense with us; and here was a house run on the plain refusal to tell me.

So at the end of the evening, fed and dry and undone a little by the kindness of it, I did the thing every year of my raising had trained me to do with a gift I cannot account for. I tried to pay for it. Well past what a bed is worth. The guilt money, the offering that keeps the ledger of the soul level so a man does not have to sit inside what he has been handed for nothing. I got out the folded notes and I made the small speech about their costs, they must have costs, this is the least we can do, and I pushed the notes an inch across the table toward him.

He let me finish. He let the clumsy business run itself all the way out, the notes, the speech, the this-is-the-least, right to the end of it, and he did not cut across me once, and when I had finally emptied the sentence he said, "No." Not to me. He said it to the notes on the table, to the idea I had carried in with me

that the night was a thing that could be bought, as though my offer were a third party in the room and I had only walked it to the door. Then he told me where the box was, on the wall by the kitchen, for whatever I decided later, on my own, when nobody was watching me decide it, which is a wholly different transaction, and he turned to the couple coming in off the road behind us, and I sat there having been refused a thing I had not known my hands were closed around.

We were raised on grace we did not earn and could not buy. It is the first furniture in the house. *Sola gratia*. You cannot purchase what has already been given to you for nothing, and to try is not merely useless but a kind of insult to the giver, and I have said the words since before I could tie a lace, and a stranger on a hill in Asturias put the thing itself in front of me on a supper table and I very nearly reached for my wallet to make it go away. It is one thing to say grace at the table. It is another to be handed it by a man who will not let you pay, and to feel your hand go to your pocket out of pure Protestant terror, because a gift you cannot repay puts you in someone's debt for good, and we would rather anything than that. I dropped what I dropped in the box later, when he was not looking, which is the only honest way any of us ever gives anything, and I have thought since that he knew that, which is why the box is on the far wall.

The dinner was the best I have had in years and I could not put it in a report.

There were fourteen of us at the long table, and the Companion had cooked for all of us, and when the work was done

she sat down at the end of it and let the evening happen around her without steering it. There was wine in bottles with no labels. There was the Korean girl from the bunkroom in Grado, walking off a broken engagement and not yet ready to say so, and a retired fireman from Cork with a laugh that took the roof off, and the merino Dutchman, wool and all, and a young German couple who touched each other's hands under the table thinking nobody saw, and a Frenchwoman of about our mother's age walking her fourth Camino who had buried a husband and did not make a production of it. Somebody had a guitar. Somebody sang, badly, and then somebody sang well, and it went very late, and at some point I found I had told these strangers things I have not told my own session in twenty years on it, the front room and the news and the quiet house, and they had told me theirs, and the Companion at the end of the table said almost nothing all evening and somehow kept it all together in the one room without letting any of it spill.

The fireman from Cork had been at three fires that took people he could not reach in time, and had gone out early on the strength of them, and did not say any of that so much as let it be understood around the edges of a long story about a cat up a tree that turned out to be a story about the ones you reach and the ones you do not. The young German translated for his girl in a murmur half a beat behind everything, so that she laughed a moment after the rest of us, which was its own small music down the table. The Korean girl said she had meant to walk the famous French road, the one from the film, and had come to the old road instead because a woman in the hostel in

Oviedo told her it would be quieter, and Andrew looked at me, and I looked at Andrew, and neither of us said the thing, two men who had come the same way for nearly the same reason and would sooner walk it than announce it.

I went up to the bunk at the last of it fuller than I had been in a long time and I did not sleep well, not the arithmetic this time, something underneath the arithmetic, the particular fright a Presbyterian feels at being loved well past his deserving with no way to pay it back. She had gone on up the road by the time we were up in the morning, early, as the strong walkers do, and that was that.

The children came up at that table, which is the part I can hold on to.

Somebody asked, the easy way strangers ask, because nothing is at stake for them in the answer, and Andrew said his daughter had moved into a place of her own in the spring. He described her flat without describing it. He said it was small but it got good light, and that she had taken the good chair when she went, the one that had been their mother's, the wing chair from the front room, and that he was glad, he said, glad she had wanted it, and he turned his wine a quarter-turn on the table and said again that he was glad, which is how you know a man is not glad, or is, or is both at the one time and cannot separate them. I could not tell which. I have only ever had the outside of my brother, the turned glass and the second glad, and it has been enough for fifty years and it was not enough at that table, and I passed him the bread.

And I told them about Fiona, who still phones on a Sunday, at six, regular as the shipping forecast, and about our boy away at his engineering who phones when he needs something and is a good lad and does not yet know that the phoning-when-you-need-something is a thing you get to do only while your parents are still the people with the answers. The Frenchwoman said, in her careful English, that the trick was to become interesting to them again after they stopped needing you, and that it took some people the rest of their lives and some people never, and she said it kindly, and the table went quiet for a second under it, and then the fireman said something that took the roof off again, and we let him.

I thought about that going up to the bunk. Fiona at six on a Sunday is not a duty, or not only one; she phones because she wants to, still, and I have begun to hear, far off, the day she will phone because she ought, and then the day past that, and I would rather not count that far, though counting ahead is the family complaint and I have it worse than Andrew does. Our boy will be fine. He is the kind who is always fine, which is a thing a father is grateful for and grieves a little at once, because the children who are always fine are the ones who stop telling you the parts that are not.

Tineo is a steep grey town stacked on a hillside, and we came into it in the last of the light with our legs gone and found the albergue and signed the book, the Bairds again, of nowhere in particular. There is a monastery in it, or above it, at Óbona, off the road, and Andrew read me the sign at the edge of town. A king of León, eight hundred years ago, decreed that pilgrims

must pass through Tineo and Óbona on pain of a penalty, so that the monastery would have the custom, so that the traffic would come by their door, and Andrew read this out with real relish and said that was the oldest trick in the book, routing the pilgrims past the gift shop, and that some things do not change, and I said the church has always known where its bread was buttered, and we were both, I think, a little pleased to have said an irreverent thing about somebody else's church for once instead of our own.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: a man wouldn't take my money tonight and I behaved as if it were an insult, which in our house it half is. There was a long dinner with strangers and I talked too much and it was the best night I've had since I don't know when. Andrew said he was glad about Katie's flat, twice. Our girl still phones on Sundays. We never had to make a rule for being apart, and I find I don't know how.

TINEO → BORRES

Tineo lets you out at the top of the town and points you west, and the country changes as you go, the green turning tougher and balder, the hedges giving out, the farms drawing further apart. By the middle of the morning we could see them properly for the first time, the mountains, blue and folded and serious the length of the western sky, and it came to me that the walking so far had only been the walk to the walk.

The path runs high and open along here, on the tops of things, the valleys dropping away green on either side and the cloud shadows going over them, and we passed fewer people, and the ones we passed were quieter, saving themselves. A shepherd watched us from a gate with two dogs that did not bark, which is its own kind of judgement. Andrew, who has read every marker since Oviedo, had gone quiet too, and walked with his eyes up on the blue line to the west, and I let him be, because a man is entitled to look at a mountain without being asked what he makes of it.

Andrew had his second wind and I had my first blister, which is the usual division of labour between us, and we came by lunchtime to Campiello, which is the last of everything before the high ground. There is a shop there. Pilgrims speak of it the evening before with a certain reverence, because after

Campiello the road goes up into country that sells you nothing for a day and a half, and a man learns to take the warnings seriously or learns why he should have. We went in to lay in supplies. The shop sells everything a walker could want and some he could not, tinned octopus and bootlaces and blister plasters and hard sausage and the good local cheese and postcards of a mountain you cannot yet see for the mountain in front of it. Half the pilgrims on the road seemed to be inside it, filling baskets, weighing tins in the hand and putting them back, the small serious business of provisioning carried on by people who have all read the same warning in the same guidebook. We laid in more than we needed, because fear shops generously, and queued behind a Frenchman buying a heroic quantity of chocolate.

The Chaos-Weaver was at the counter.

I asked about the high road. There is a choice ahead, a day ahead, at a hamlet called Borres, where the old track splits: the high way over the tops, the Ruta de los Hospitales, past the ruins of the medieval pilgrim hospitals along the exposed spine of the sierra, with no water and no shelter and no way off once you are up; or the lower way, down and round through the valley and the town of Pola de Allande, longer on the map and kinder on the body. Everyone we had met was chewing the choice. So I asked him, the plain question, was the high road open, was it bad in cloud.

He did not answer the road. He was ringing up the cheese, and he said, not slowing, "It's not the going up that's the trouble, it's the coming down the far side, the ground goes to bits below

the pass and the cloud sits down in it, keep the posts on your left going up and take your time on the drop and you'll come to no harm," and he had moved to the Frenchman's chocolate before I had my change. I had asked about the weather and been given the walking, flat, as a fact, with no comfort in it. I put it away. A shopkeeper says a hundred things a day across a counter, and you take your change and go.

The last hour into Borres is a gentle one, downhill through chestnut woods with the light coming green through the leaves, a kindness laid down before a hard day, and Borres when you reach it is barely a place at all, a scatter of stone houses on a slope and a pilgrim hostel with bunks and a kitchen and a line in the yard for drying socks. We got there in the middle of the afternoon with the evening ahead to fill and nothing to fill it with but each other and the other pilgrims, which is the daily condition of the road, and one I had not known in years. Hours with no task in them. I did not know at first what to do with the time, and then I did, which was nothing, and it was a relief.

The veteran had the corner of the common room and most of the conversation. Dennis, from Birmingham, retired off the games staff of a comprehensive school, a broad genial red-faced man who had walked to Santiago five times and told us so inside the first two minutes and six times more before supper. All five had been by the French road, the famous one, the one from the film and the guidebooks and everyone's first idea of the thing. This was his first time on ours. He had the gear of a man who has monetised his hobby, a watch that told him his altitude and his heart rate and for all I know his fortune, and a

jacket with more zips than seemed strictly necessary, and he set his phone on the table with the forecast open and pronounced. The cloud would burn off by nine. It always burned off by nine. He had seen it a hundred times, the mist lying in the valleys of a morning and the sun taking it by ten, clear tops, set your watch by it. He was generous with it, and kind, and certain, and no one at the table knew enough to gainsay him, us least of all.

I did not argue with him, and the reason I did not argue was that I wanted to go up. That is the truth of it. We are careful men, Andrew and I. Andrew has been careful for fifty-seven years, an actuary of his own life, a reader of plaques and a checker of wing mirrors, a man who knows to the pound what a thing will cost before he buys it, and I am not much different, only slower to admit it. And here on the table was one day on offer when we could be some other thing, one day to go up onto the roof of the country in the cloud, past the ruined hospitals, on the hard old road the first pilgrims took because there was no other. I wanted it in a way I had not wanted anything simple in a long time. And when I looked across the table Andrew wanted it too, which surprised me. He closed the weather app without reading it, Andrew, who reads everything, and said we would go high, and it was decided, and the deciding felt less like a plan than a small quiet mutiny against the men we had turned into.

The rest of the evening was gear. There is a competitive asceticism among pilgrims that is its own quiet comedy, grown men comparing base weights as other men compare cars, hold-

ing a titanium spork up to the light like a relic, and the merino Dutchman turned up, because he always turned up, and he and Dennis found each other across the crowded room and were within the hour disagreeing happily and at length about wool. Andrew oiled his boots with the concentration he gives a tax return. I taped the blister I had and the two I could feel coming. We cooked our Campiello supplies badly on the shared stove and ate them anyway, and Andrew, over the tins, out of nowhere, said that Dad would have liked this, the walking, not the fuss, and I said he would, and we left it there, the two of us and the thought of our father at home in his chair with the stairs he can no longer take two at a time. Then somebody's phone started up a Spanish pop song and the moment went, as they do. We laid our things out for a start before light, because the day was long, and Dennis said get up and over before the sun, forgetting there might be no sun, and we did not remind him.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: we take the high road in the morning, the hard one, over the tops past the ruined hospitals, and Andrew wanted it more than I did, which I did not expect. There's a man here who's walked to Santiago five times and never once by this road and is very sure about the weather. I bought too much cheese. I'll tell you the rest from the far side.

BORRES → BERDUCEDO

We went up in the dark and the cloud did not burn off.

It was on us before the top of the first climb, a wet grey nothing that closed the world down to a circle of ten yards, and it did not lift at nine, or at ten, and Dennis, somewhere below us on the path, went quiet on the subject of when it lifts. The tops of the Hospitales are open country, treeless, high, a long bare spine of moor and rock with the ground falling away on either side into cloud you were glad you could not see down. You walk it by the posts. Somebody long ago set posts and cairns and painted stones all along the run of it, and in clear weather they say the views are the finest on any road to Santiago, and in cloud they are the only thing between you and a bad afternoon.

The ruins are up there. You come on them without warning out of the grey, low broken rectangles of stone in the heather, a wall, a corner, a doorway with no house behind it. La Paradiella. Fonfaraón. Valparaíso. Hospitals, they were, six and seven hundred years back, set on the roof of the world to take in pilgrims who would otherwise have died on these tops in weather like the weather we had, and monks kept them, and a fire, and a pot, and now they are sheep shelter and less than that. Andrew stood at the first one a while. There is nothing to read, no

plaque, no card, and I think that undid him more than any cathedral had, a holy place with the holiness weathered off it and only the walls left doing the plain work of breaking the wind, and he did not say anything, and we went on.

The Hand was on the ridge.

Working. Setting a post that had gone over in the peat, and freshening the paint on the stones with a brush from a tin, moving up the line ahead of us in the cloud, never stopping to see whether a mark was straight before going to the next, and the marks were right. We caught the same pace for a while, the Hand and the two of us, the Hand a few yards up in the grey and us following mark to mark, and it was easier walking behind the tending than in front of it. No words in it. You do not talk on that ground, you save your breath for it. For a stretch I took the posts as they came, one out of the cloud and then the next, and the man went on ahead setting them and did not finish and did not look back, and then the line of him was gone up into the grey and it was Andrew and me and the marks he had left.

At the second of the ruins I stopped. Andrew had gone on ahead into the cloud and was not looking back, and I did the thing I had carried from home to do, at the corner of a wall that had sheltered better men than me six hundred years ago, in the wet, quickly, and then I caught him up, and he did not ask and I did not say, and we came to the pass.

Puerto del Palo is the high point and the halfway, a saddle in the ridge with a modern cross and a view, on a good day, of everything. We had a view of Dennis, catching us up, gone hum-

ble, admitting the cloud had beaten his forecast. It came to me, watching him stand there apologetic and wet, that his hundred burn-off-by-nine mornings had all been on the Meseta, the high dry tableland of the French road four hundred miles east, a different country of weather, where the cloud lifts because there is nothing up there to hold it. He had brought the wrong road's certainties onto ours, which is an easy thing to do, and I did not hold it against him. We also had a view of a horse. There are wild horses on the tops, and one of them was standing square in the middle of the path at the pass, unbothered, and it would not move, and the three of us stood making the small pointless noises grown men make at a horse, and the horse regarded us the way the Almighty must regard the General Assembly, and in the end we went round it in the heather, and that was the last thing on that day that was funny.

The far side is where it goes wrong.

The descent from the pass to Berducedo is long and steep and loose, exactly the ground the man at the shop had named, a scree of broken stone and wet grass dropping off the tops, and the cloud sat on it so you could not see your feet, and we came down it slow. Andrew went first. He was three steps below me on a pitch of loose rock when his boot went out from under him on the wet, and he did not fall. He caught it, which was worse, because catching it put all of him and all his pack onto the one leg, the knee turning the wrong way as it took the weight, and I heard him make a sound I have not heard my brother make. Short. And then he was down on the stone on one knee, the

other leg straight out, both hands round it above the joint, not saying anything, breathing.

I got his pack off him. The next three hours were slow and they were frightening, and there is not much in them that the words slow and frightening do not already carry. The knee would take him if he kept it straight and would not if it bent, so we came down the mountain a foot at a time, Andrew on the poles and my shoulder, me carrying both packs one on my front and one on my back like a man wearing a sandwich board for a shop that has closed. The cloud never lifted. There was no signal, there had been no signal since Borres, and I did the sum of where we were and how far down help was and stopped doing the sum because it did not help. Andrew talked all the way down. Andrew, who says nothing, talked without stopping, about the boots and the weather and a hundred things that did not matter, and I understood that he was doing it so I would not be frightened, and I let him, because it was the only thing left that he could carry.

Berducedo is a small grey stone village that we reached in the last of the light, Andrew white and walking on two poles and one leg, and the All-Seeing had us before we were through the door.

He was watching the road, or watching the door, and he was counting, and the count was by absence. The two Belgians were not in. The Frenchman with the dog was not in. He said it flat, to himself as much as to us, the ones not down off the tops yet with the dark coming, and he had kept beds against them and against us without being asked, because he reads the

mountain off who has not come through his door, and tonight the door had not let enough people through. He took one look at Andrew's leg and had him in a chair with the leg up and a bag of something frozen on the knee before I had the packs off my back, and he asked no questions I had to answer, and somewhere in the getting of him settled I sat down on the stone floor with my back to the wall and found my hands were shaking and had been for a while.

He had been going to the doctor about that knee for three years. He had not said so at Borres. He had wanted the high road more than I did, and I had thought the wanting had been mine.

The knee was already the size of a grapefruit. Andrew looked at it and looked at me and said, "Well," which in our family is a full paragraph, and I said, "Aye," which is the reply to it.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here:

Nothing.

BERDUCEDO — A REST DAY

Morning came and Andrew could not walk.

He got as far as the edge of the bunk and set the foot down and his face did the thing a face does that a man will not let a sound follow, and he sat back down. The knee had come up in the night to something that was not the shape of a knee. It would not bend and it would not take him, and that settled the question of the day before either of us had to say it.

We are not built for stillness, our family. Work was a virtue in that house before it was a necessity, and idleness the near occasion of sin, and I had not, in fifty-odd years, sat a day idle with nothing I was permitted to be doing. I found I did not know how. I walked to the one bar and back. I read the safety card of a fire extinguisher. I re-packed both packs and un-packed them. Andrew lay with the leg up on a rolled sleeping bag and watched the ceiling and said very little, and I sat across the small room and watched him not say it, and the ridge of the day before, which had felt like a thing we had done, a small brave thing, curdled over the course of that long morning into what it plainly was, which was two men in their fifties who should have known better going up a mountain in cloud on the word of a man from Birmingham, and coming down one of them broken.

Berducedo on a rest day is a lesson in being left. The pilgrims we had walked among for days came through that morning while we sat, stamped their credenciales and drank their coffee and shouldered their packs and went on west toward Grandas and the border, and by ten the place was ours and the old people's and the road outside the door had no one on it. I had not understood until then that the Camino is a river and you are a thing floating on it, and that the moment you stop, the river does not stop with you. The fireman and the Korean girl and the merino Dutchman, all of them west by noon and gone, and the water that had been full of them the day before running empty and strange under the window.

There is an irony a Presbyterian feels keenly, and I felt it that day. We keep the day of rest, our people, keep it hard, one day in seven fenced off from work and travel and the getting and spending of the world. But it is a rest we choose, or a rest we are commanded and choose to obey, which comes to nearly the same thing. This was rest done to me. A Sabbath I had not kept but been sentenced to, with no obedience in it and no virtue, and I found I had no theology for it, and sat in it like a man in a waiting room who has forgotten what he is waiting for.

The All-Seeing had told us the night before where the doctor was, which was not near, and Andrew would not hear of it. It was a knee. He had done knees before. It wanted rest and ice and time and none of them cost anything or required a car over a mountain pass, and he said all this lying flat on his back looking at the ceiling in the voice he uses for a decision he has

made and does not intend to discuss, and I let it go, because you do not win those, and because I was not sure he was wrong.

So it was ice, and ice in Berducedo is its own small campaign. The bar had a freezer and a hard heart, and my Spanish is the Spanish of a man who did French at school forty years ago, and I stood at the counter doing a mime of a swollen knee and pointing at the ice cream chest until the woman understood me and gave me, for a coin, a plastic bag of cubes and a look that suggested pilgrims were a weather she had learned to live with. The pharmacy was closed, and would be closed, it being whatever saint's day it was, and a man at the bar who had some English told me the nearest open one was in Grandas, tomorrow's town, which did us no good today, and told me his cousin had done the same knee coming off the same descent two years back and had been right as rain in a fortnight, which he plainly meant as a comfort and which landed as a sentence with the word fortnight in it.

The Companion came in the afternoon to look at the knee. The All-Seeing had sent for her, perhaps. She came with a roll of proper bandage and a jar of something that smelled of the chemist and the farmyard both, and she sat on the low stool by Andrew's bunk and took the leg in her two hands and turned it a small careful degree each way, watching his face and not the knee, and then she bound it. She bound it as you would wish every hurt thing bound, without hurry and without pity, firm and exact, talking to Andrew all the time in Galician he could not follow and did not need to, and Andrew, who will not be fussed over, who shrugs off Carol's hand on his shoulder at a

funeral, let her hold his leg and dress it and did not once stiffen. I sat and watched my brother be cared for, and something went through me that I was not ready for, and I looked hard at the fire extinguisher until it passed. She would take nothing for it. Of course she would take nothing for it. I have stopped trying to pay these people. When she left she told me at the door, through the man with the English, that it would walk tomorrow but not far, and to send the bags ahead. She was right.

We are no good at the company of each other with nothing between us to be done. Give Andrew and me a task and we will keep at it happy for hours, a fence to mend or a boat to bail or a father's shed to clear, shoulder to shoulder and no need of talk. Take the task away and we are two men in a room. That afternoon we played cards, a game our grandmother taught us that neither of us had touched in forty years and both of us remembered to the rule, and Andrew won, because Andrew wins, and we did not speak of the mountain or the knee or Carol or any of it, and the not-speaking was, I think, the kindest thing either of us managed for the other all day.

The question of the wives came up in the evening, and we did not settle it well.

I said we should tell them. Andrew said tell them what. I said that he was hurt, that we had had a bad day, that we were a day behind. Andrew said that Carol would be on a plane by breakfast and no use to anyone and frightened for a fortnight over a knee that would be fine, and that we would tell her when it was a story with an end on it and not before, and he was probably right, and I did not phone Ruth either, and I want

to say it was for Andrew's reasons but it was also that I did not know how. There is no practice for it. In thirty years I have never once had to phone that woman across an ocean to tell her a true and frightening thing and have her be able to do nothing about it, and I sat with the phone in my hand on the step outside and could not find the first sentence of it, and in the end I put the phone away, which is not the same as deciding, and told myself the difference did not matter, and knew it did.

I looked at Andrew a long time that evening, across the room, in the last of the light, and I built a story out of the set of his jaw, that he was angry at himself, or angry at me for wanting the high road, or grieving the trip we were not going to get to have. I have always been able to read my brother. What I had that night was the reading and the quiet and no way to check the one against the other, and this besides: that our father could not have done this walk, and that our children could and would not, and that we were the ones in the middle who could and had, and had broken ourselves doing it, and that there was something in that worth knowing if I could get at it. I could not get at it, and I went to sleep.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: we didn't walk today. Andrew's knee went on the mountain, and he won't hear of a doctor, and he won't hear of me worrying Carol with it, so nobody at home knows, which sits wrong with me. I've been still all day, the first time in years, and I'm no good at it. A woman came and dressed his knee as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

I keep not phoning you, and I don't think it's cowardice, and I'm afraid it might be.

BERDUCEDO → GRANDAS DE SALIME

We sent the bags ahead in the morning, which felt like a defeat and was in fact only sense.

There is a service that will carry your pack to the next town for a few euros, a van that comes round the hostels, and we had turned our noses up at it for a fortnight in the manner of men who carry their own, and now we handed the two packs over to a cheerful boy with a clipboard and watched him drive off with them toward Grandas, and Andrew said that was that, then, we were soft now, and I said better soft than stopped, and he took the first step on the bound knee and it held, and we went, slowly, down.

It is a short day, Berducedo to Grandas, and mostly downhill, which after the day before we received as the mercy it was. The country had softened, the bare tops behind us now and chestnut and oak coming back, and the walking with no weight on my back and Andrew going careful beside me on the poles was a strange floating business, half a walk and half a convalescence, and we said little and stopped often and were passed by everyone, including, near the bottom, a pair of young Germans who wished us buen camino with what I chose not to hear as pity.

The road down loses its height in long loops, each one showing you the water again from a little lower and a little nearer, so that the reservoir grows all afternoon, green and flat and enormous between its steep wooded sides. Cars came by us now and then and the drivers waved, which they do here, the courtesy of country people used to the footsore and the foolish coming down off the mountain, and we waved back, Andrew on his poles managing a sort of royal wave that cost him nothing and pleased him no end.

And then the land opens and drops and there below you is the water.

The Salime reservoir lies in the bottom of a deep valley, a long still green-grey body of it held back by a dam, and the road down to it goes on and on, switchback after switchback, so that you have time enough to look at it as you come. Andrew stopped at the rail of the first good view and I stopped with him. The dam is a great concrete wall, higher than a wall has any business being, thrown across the throat of the valley three-quarters of a century ago and holding back all that weight of water, and it is an impressive and slightly frightening thing, the kind of thing our father would have admired the engineering of out loud while privately thinking men had got above themselves.

You cross near the top of it, on a road laid along the crest, the held water lying calm on the one side and the drop going down and down on the other to the old riverbed far below, where the river is let out again in a thin controlled white thread. It is a strange place to stand, a made thing on a scale that does not take you into account, and we stood a minute in the middle

of it, two small men on a great wall, and Andrew said they do not build them like this any more, and then said, after a moment, that perhaps that was for the best, and I could not tell whether he meant the dam, and did not ask.

There is a village under it.

Old Salime is down there, under the green water, drowned when they built the dam and flooded the valley in the years after the war, a village, its houses and church and bridge and fields, put under and left. When the water drops in a dry year, they say, things come back, a gable, the top of the church, the line of a wall, the roofs of a place nobody has lived in since before we were born surfacing grey and dripping and then going under again when the rain comes. Andrew stood at that rail a long time. Longer than the knee wanted, I think. He did not say what he was looking at, because he was looking at where a village was, which is a harder thing to look at than a village, and I stood beside him and looked at the same nothing, the smooth green surface with all of a place underneath it, still there and not reachable, and I thought about our mother and her lists, and did not say that either, and after a while Andrew said we'd best get on before the knee stiffened, and we got on.

They moved the living out before they let the water in, and gave them houses in a new Salime up the hill, and the people went, because you go. Some of them are up there still, old now, who can stand in a doorway and point across to the flat green water and name the part of it that lies over the house where they were born. Andrew read all of that on a board at the top,

naturally, and told it to me coming down. It is the kind of fact that does not need a thing said after it.

Grandas de Salime sits up the far side, the last real town in Asturias before the road climbs to the Galician border, and it has a famous museum, and Andrew, being Andrew, was not going to pass a museum.

It is an ethnographic place, the life of these hills before the road and the dam and the century got to them, and a local man made it over a lifetime out of the things his neighbours were throwing away, and it is packed to the rafters, a recreated forge and a recreated tavern and a recreated barber's with the razor and the strop and the chair, the vanished apparatus of a way of living, lovingly and slightly madly reassembled under one roof. Andrew read every card. Of course he read every card. He read them sitting down, on a bench, with the leg out straight, and I fetched and carried and reported on the rooms he could not get up the stair to see, and it was the happiest I had seen him since the mountain, my brother in a museum with a plaque to read and a bench to read it from.

The man who made the place spent a lifetime at it, a local schoolmaster who could not stand to watch the old things go into skips as the young people left for the cities and the century changed under everyone's feet, and so he gathered them, the querns and the yokes and the cider press and the wolf trap and the loom, room after room of the labour of a vanished people set up as if the people had only just stepped out. It is a monument to not letting go, and Andrew, who does not let go of a plaque or a grievance or the memory of who sat where at

a cousin's wedding in 1994, was among his own kind here, and I left him to it.

The Seeker was in a doorway on the square, and I asked him where we might find a bed for the night, and he sent me on: the woman at the albergue by the church would know if she was in, and if she was not, her sister at the shop kept the key, and if the shop was shut they would have gone to the other sister in Grandas de Arriba, and I should try the bar first because someone in the bar always knew — a chain of women and shops and sisters and not one fact of his own, and I found the bed inside ten minutes on the strength of it.

The giddiness came in the evening, the particular light-headedness of men whose bodies had braced for something far worse than they got. Andrew's knee had walked seventeen kilometres and not given out. We ate too much and Andrew, loosened by relief, did an impression of the recreated barber's dummy in the museum that should not have been funny and reduced me to the kind of helpless laughing you do at a funeral, at the wrong things, because the right things are too big, and a Spanish family at the next table watched two grey foreign men weep with laughter over nothing and smiled as you smile at weather.

Andrew phoned Carol from the museum steps while I was inside. He did not tell me he had, and I did not ask, and I knew because he was easier after, as a man is when he has set a thing down. I still had not phoned Ruth. I was starting to understand that Andrew's not-telling and my not-telling were different

animals wearing the same coat, and that his had ended and mine had not, and I could not have said what mine was.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: there's a village under the water here. They drowned it for the dam before we were born, and in a dry year the roofs come back. I bought you a postcard of a place you can't see anymore.

GRANDAS DE SALIME → A FONSAGRADA

Out of Grandas the road climbs again, up out of the reservoir's valley and back onto the high ground, toward the pass that is the border, and we took it slowly, because Andrew's knee would climb all day without complaint and only hated the coming down. Going up it had a job to do and did it. Coming down it had opinions. So we went up gladly, if that is the word for two men breathing like bellows, and by the middle of the morning we were on the tops in a wind that had come a long way to find us, with Asturias falling away behind and something new ahead.

The border is a pass called the Puerto del Acebo, and it is, like most borders reached on foot, a small letdown after the build-up. There is a sign. There is a cattle grid and a car park and a food van that was shut, and there is a line on a map that here on the ground is only more wind and the same heather, and we stood astride it, one boot in Asturias and one in Galicia, and took the photograph you are obliged to take, and felt what you feel at borders, which is that you have got somewhere and nowhere at once.

But the country did change, over the next hour, as a room changes when someone has quietly altered the light. The trees came back, and among the oak and chestnut now were the tall

pale ranks of eucalyptus, planted for pulp and gone half wild, that scent the Galician air with something between medicine and money. The hórreos changed shape, the square Asturian granaries giving way to the long narrow stone ones of Galicia, like little chapels on legs, or coffins on legs, depending on your mood. The place names on the signs went strange and soft and Celtic. And the voices in the first café we came to were speaking not Spanish but galego, which is its own language and sounds, to an ear raised on neither, like Spanish being spoken by someone homesick for Portugal.

And the mojones began.

They are stone markers, waist-high, set every half-kilometre through Galicia, each with the scallop shell carved on it and a number, and the number is the distance left to Santiago, counting down. The Hand keeps them. We came on the first one freshly done, the figure repainted that morning in Xunta yellow over the old ghost of itself, the paint not dry, and no one about who might have done it, and then another further on being seen to, a man with a brush and a pot working up the line ahead of us, not stopping to check a figure before going to the next, and the figures were right, and he did not look up. A hundred and seventy-some kilometres, the marker said. It is a strange thing to be given a number that shrinks. All my life the numbers have gone up, the birthdays and the mortgage years survived and the length of the elders' meetings, and here was one counting the other way, down toward a cathedral, and I found I did not like it as much as I had expected to, this evidence that the thing was going to end, that every half-

kilometre the road was quietly subtracting itself, and I said none of that to Andrew, who was doing his own arithmetic beside me and keeping it to himself.

The call came in the early afternoon, on the long track down toward A Fonsagrada.

Andrew's phone went in his pocket, which is a sound you notice on a mountain because there is no other, and he looked at it and something crossed his face and he answered it and stepped off the path and walked a little way down the road, away from me, with his free hand coming up to his other ear against the wind. I stopped where I was. I could not help hearing, or half-hearing, the words the wind chose to bring me. Carol's name. Then fell. Then the stairs, twice. Then a word that might have been hospital and might not, and Andrew's back very still, and his head going down, and his free hand leaving his ear and pressing flat on the top of his head and staying there.

What I did in the next two minutes, standing on a Galician hillside twenty feet from my brother, is not to my credit. I buried our father. I heard fell and the stairs and I put him at the bottom of them, and I heard the maybe-hospital and I put him in it, and I saw the flights we would have to book and the walk we would have to abandon and the phone call to my own children, and I had the funeral half-arranged, the psalm chosen, before Andrew turned round. This is the disease I have. Give me half a fact and I will build you a catastrophe, fully furnished, and move into it. I stood there in it, cold, while my brother finished the call.

He came back up the road and he was not carrying a dead father. He was carrying a bruised and mortified one. Dad had come down the last three stairs faster than he intended, was the size of it, and had cracked his hip on the newel post, the post he made, and had frightened the life out of our mother, and had been checked over and sent home the same afternoon with nothing broken and orders to use the stick he refuses to use, and was, Andrew said, more angry about the fuss than hurt by the fall, and had told Carol to tell us on no account to come home, that he had not raised two sons to turn round on a mountain in Spain over a bump, and Andrew delivered all this flatly, looking down the road, and then said, "He asked which one we were up to," meaning which stage, and I had to turn and look at a eucalyptus tree for a moment, because our father, eighty-one and sore and stubborn on his own made stairs, was following us on the map on the kitchen table, and there is only so much of that a man can take standing up.

I phoned Ruth after that. I had not phoned her once since we left, had sat with the not-doing of it like a stone, and it took our father nearly falling down his stairs to shake it loose, and I walked a little way off the road as Andrew had and I rang her and she answered and I said it's me, and she said she knew, it came up, and there was a silence, and then I told her about the fall and that Dad was fine, and she told me she'd heard, Carol had rung her, the women had had it all sorted and sifted between them while Andrew and I were still standing on the hill with our mouths open, and we talked for a while, about nothing, about the boiler, and it was not the grand reconnection

I might have made it in a film. It was two tired people who have been married thirty years saying small things down a bad line. But I had not known, until I heard her say the boiler was fixed, how much I had needed to hear her say something that ordinary, and I stood on the road after with the dead phone in my hand feeling like a man who has found a thing in his pocket he thought he had lost.

A Fonsagrada is a proper town, up on its ridge, and we came into it footsore and wrung out and glad, and the All-Seeing had the desk at the albergue.

He took our credenciales and stamped them and looked at us, or looked at the space around us, and said, in careful Castilian for the foreigners, that we should buy our food tonight. Tomorrow was Sunday. The shops would be shut, all of them, and there was nothing between here and O Cádavo that would sell us so much as a biscuit, and he knew, he said, that we had not shopped, and he was right, because he had seen the thing we were not carrying, the bag of bread and tins every sensible pilgrim came in with of a Saturday and we had not, and he told us where the one shop still open would stay open another half-hour, and went back to his book. We meant to go. We talked about pulpo, the famous Galician octopus, all through the checking-in and the boot-removing, how we would find a pulpería and have it done properly, dressed with oil and paprika on the wooden plate, and we talked ourselves so far into the octopus of tomorrow that we forgot the bread of tonight, and the half-hour went, and the shop with it.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: We crossed into Galicia and the markers count down to Santiago now, and I don't like watching the number get smaller. I meant to buy bread and bought an idea of octopus instead. I should have phoned you two weeks ago.

A FONSAGRADA → O CÁDAVO

We paid for the octopus of the mind the next morning, which dawned grey and Sunday and shopless, with a breakfast of what we had, which was two squashed fig bars of Ruth's and a heel of the good cheese gone slightly to science, and set off hungry into a Galicia that had put its weather on.

It is a day of ups and downs, A Fonsagrada to O Cádavo, the road folding through eucalyptus and small wet fields, in and out of hamlets where a single dog saw us off and a single old woman in an apron watched us pass from a doorway without a flicker, and the mojones ticked down half-kilometre by half-kilometre, and it rained the soft Galician rain that does not fall so much as hang, and we were wet through by ten and past the point where wet stops mattering. Andrew's knee, strapped and poled and carried light, held. We had that, at least, and no breakfast.

Hunger sharpens a landscape. The eucalyptus smelled of cough sweets, and the wet stone of the hórreos shone black, and the grey dripping country had a clarity to it that I have since decided was low blood sugar and nothing finer, though at the time it felt like something finer. Andrew and I walked it without talking, because there was nothing to say that a squashed fig bar would not have said better. Two hungry old men in the

rain, putting one foot down and then the other. And I was, I noticed with some surprise, happy. Not comfortable, and not fed, but happy in the plain animal manner of a body doing the one thing it is doing and no other, which is a happiness I do not get much of at home, where there is always a next thing waiting to be got to.

The shops were shut in the first village, shuttered and dark, and we told each other it did not matter, there would be somewhere in the next. The next was shut too. We stopped telling each other things. A machine outside a closed bar in the second village took Andrew's coin and returned him nothing, and he stood and regarded it with the particular stillness of a man deciding whether he is the sort of person who shakes a vending machine on a Sunday in a foreign country, and concluded, to his credit and my quiet disappointment, that he was not. By the third village we had given up talking about food, which is the hungry man's version of the drinker not talking about drink, and it was then, of course, that there was a bar, open, lit, impossible, a rectangle of warm yellow light in all the grey, and we fell on it. The woman behind it took pity, or took custom, and made us a tortilla and cut us bread and set it down without a word, and we ate like men who had learned something about provisioning and would forget it by the next Saturday, and I have never in my life tasted anything better than that unasked-for Sunday tortilla, in the rain, with my brother, hungry.

Fiona texted while we ate.

My phone lit on the table and it was her, a photograph, herself and two friends I half-recognised somewhere with a lake

behind them, and three words under it, walking somewhere lovely, and my hand went to it as your hand goes to a warm thing on a cold day, and I picked it up to answer, to ask where, to ask who the friends were, to say I was in Spain in the rain and thinking of her, to pour thirty years of watching her into a text and press send. And I put it down again. Not at the table. Not that quickly, not that much. There is an etiquette to being the parent of a grown child that nobody teaches you and you learn by getting it wrong, and the first rule of it is that you do not pounce. She had sent me a photograph and three words from a life that is now entirely her own, an offering across a distance she gets to set, and the surest way to make the offerings stop is to fall on each one like a starving man. I have photographs of her at every age on the phone in my hand, and scrolling back through them one sleepless night not long ago I had found the exact year her smile for the camera changed from the real one to the one you give a man you love who happens to be holding a camera, and I would give a lot to have the first one back, and cannot, and that is nobody's fault, only the tax on their growing that no one tells you is coming due. So I let it sit. I would answer it that night, short, warm, and let her be. The Frenchwoman at the long table days back had said the trick was to become interesting to them again after they stop needing you, and that some never manage it, and I had thought at the time she meant other people. I ate my tortilla and let my daughter be somewhere lovely without me, which is the job, in the end, done well or done badly, the long slow letting-go on the one side while your own father goes down the

stairs on the other, and you in the middle with a phone in your hand and rain down your neck, holding both.

O Cádao is a small grey place strung along the road, and we came into it in the afternoon still damp, and I went to see about beds, and about staying two of them, because the knee had done twenty-five wet kilometres and I thought a second night off it might be wisdom.

The Conscience-Keeper had the albergue. I made the case. I made it well, I thought, the knee, the mountain it was hurt on, the two nights, we would pay for two, gladly, we would be no trouble. He heard me out to the end, every word of it, and did not once look at the knee, and when I had finished he said, "No." Not to me. To the proposition, to the idea that a bed on this road could be held past its one night while others walked in the rain behind us needing it, and he said it without apology and without unkindness, as a man states a load-bearing fact, and then he told me the name of a private place up the street that would let us stay a week if we paid for it, and stamped our credenciales, and that was the end of the audience. I stood corrected, and rightly. It is a road, not a hotel. You get your night and you move on and you leave the bed warm for the next footsore fool, and there is a rule in that older than the albergue, one I was raised on and had briefly forgotten, which is that no one gets to stop the line for his own comfort.

We took the private place, in the end, for the knee, and paid the extra without complaint, and the evening was the small choreography of an injured man in a bunkroom, which we had got good at: the lower bed claimed early, the leg got up onto

it, the wet things hung to drip, the strapping unwound and the knee inspected and pronounced no worse, the pills, the ice begged off the bar. Andrew bore all of it with the patience of a man who has decided not to be a burden and is therefore, in the careful managing of it, a small and lovable one. We ate in the bar. The rain kept on. Two Germans we knew came in soaked and we made room. They were young and in love and cheerfully miserable, which the young can afford to be, and they had walked the Hospitales route a day behind us, into the same cloud, and they told us about the horses on the tops and the ruins, and I felt the odd small pang of a man hearing his own adventure given back to him by people who had had it a day later, as though we had handed the mountain on when we could not carry it any further, which in a sense we had. And late on, in the bunk, in the dark, I answered Fiona. Lovely indeed, I wrote. Raining here. Dad's fine, took a tumble, all well. Love you. Tell your brother the same. And I pressed send, and lay in the dark of a strange town in the rain a long time after, in the middle of my life, between the generation going down and the generation going away, holding the phone on my chest like a man holding the one warm thing he has left, and slept.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: we went hungry for our sins and a woman in a bar saved us with a tortilla. Fiona sent a photo from a lake and I waited eight hours to answer it, which nearly killed me and was the right thing. A man wouldn't let us have a second night and he was right. The rain here doesn't fall, it just hangs.

O CÁDAVO → LUGO

Thirty kilometres is a long way to walk on a mending knee and the memory of a tortilla, and the road from O Cádavo to Lugo is thirty kilometres, and it is the day the Camino stopped, for us, being a string of villages and became a job of work. There is no one hard thing in it. There is only a lot of it: hill after soft green hill, hamlet after hamlet, the mojones counting their patient way down through the hundred-and-thirties, under a grey sky that could not decide to rain and so did neither. By the afternoon the walking had gone into the state a long day takes you to, where the body has been handed the task and the mind is turned loose, and my mind, turned loose, is not always a place I would choose to spend an afternoon.

Andrew was better company than my own head. His knee had reached the stage of an injury where it is no longer news, where it hurts in a settled, negotiated, chronic way that a man can walk on all day so long as he does not ask it to do anything sudden, and he had found a rhythm with the poles, a four-beat thing, click and step and click and step, that ate the miles slowly and without drama. We did not talk much. You do not, on the long days. The talk you have comes in widely spaced instalments, a sentence dropped and then a kilometre to consider it, which is, I have come to think, the natural pace

of conversation between men, and the reason we get so little said at home, where the sentences come too fast and too close together to leave any room to mean them.

The day had a shape I have come to know as the shape of all the long ones: a bright start, a mid-morning of good legs and good talk, and then from about noon a long grey plateau of simply going on, past the interesting hour and short of the end, when the walking is neither hard nor easy but only endless. We stopped at a bar in a village called Castroverde and drank two coffees each and ate a bun apiece and did not talk, and started again stiff, and the afternoon closed over grey and long, and the mojones came and went, one every half-kilometre, subtracting.

Lugo announces itself as cities do, with a fraying of the country into sheds and car showrooms and roundabouts, and we came down off the last hill into the ordinary Monday traffic of a working Spanish city and felt, as you always feel coming off the trail into a town of any size, both relieved and a little bereft, glad of the coffee to come and sorry to have the green shut off behind us. But Lugo has a thing no other town on the road has. We came to it at the top of a rise in the old town, turning a corner past a bank and a shoe shop, and there it was.

The wall.

The Romans built it seventeen centuries ago, around the town they called *Lucus Augusti*, and it stands there yet, all of it, the only Roman town wall left anywhere on earth that still runs unbroken round its city, over two kilometres of it, a great grey band of stone thirty and forty feet high circling the old town like a drum, its rounded towers set at intervals and its ten gates

let into the thickness, and the modern city has simply grown up to it and through it and around it and gone on living inside and outside it as though it were a hill or a river, a fact of the landscape and not a monument. We came in through the Porta de San Pedro, the gate the pilgrims have always used, a dark stone throat in the immense depth of the wall, and I put my hand on the stone going through, which I am not given to, the touching of things, but I put my hand on it, cold and damp and older than anything I have ever touched, and Andrew, beside me, did the same, and neither of us said why.

It is a serious piece of work, close to. The Romans faced it in slate and packed the core with rubble and mortar, and it has stood through the fall of their own empire and the coming of everyone who came after, and it has been robbed for building stone and cut through for a road here and there and grown up against on both sides, and still it stands, forty feet of it in places, broad enough on top to drive a cart along, studded round with its blunt round towers, seventy-odd of them left of the eighty-odd it began with. Lugo grew up inside it and could not be held by it and spilled out through the gates and built its newer self beyond, so that the wall runs now like a seam through the middle of the city, the old town on the one side and the new on the other, and the people of Lugo cross it a dozen times a day and do not look at it, because you do not look at the thing that has always been there.

Here is a thing I felt at the wall and have not got to the bottom of. Everything else on this walk, the mountains and the drowned village and the ruined hospitals, had made me feel

the smallness of a man against time in the ordinary melancholy manner of a graveyard, or an old photograph. The wall did something else. It had been built by people as small and short-lived as we are, legionaries and slaves and engineers with knees that went and fathers who fell down stairs, every one of them dust these eighteen hundred years, and the thing they made was standing yet, still doing its plain job of being a wall, still here when every hand that laid it was gone, a permanence built out of the labour of the impermanent. I stood in the gate with my hand on the stone and could not have told you whether the feeling was a comfort or the opposite of one.

The municipal albergue is inside the walls, and the Allfather was at the desk. I had questions, because you come into a city with questions, about the cathedral and the times of things and whether the launderette a man on the road had promised us was near, and I had got out perhaps three words of the first of them before he had answered it, and the second one too, sliding a photocopied map across the desk with the launderette already ringed on it and the cathedral hours pencilled in the margin and the time of the pilgrims' Mass underlined, all of it done without a question back and mostly without looking up, the answers arriving ahead of the asking. The Companion came through while we stood there, with a lanyard and a bunch of keys, and said something to him in galego, and he answered it without looking up, and she laughed and went on, and I took my ringed map and my underlined Mass and went to find the beds.

Lugo, we discovered that evening, is a city that feeds you for drinking, and this is the custom and it is a fine one. You order a small beer or a glass of the young sharp wine and it comes with something to eat set on top of it, a saucer of octopus, a wedge of tortilla, a hunk of bread and cheese, free, included, the price of the drink and not a cent more, and the lanes of the old town around the Rúa Nova are lined with little bars all competing to give you the better free thing, so that a careful and dishonest man could eat clean across an evening for the cost of the drinks alone. Andrew, who has an accountant's soul, worked out the mathematics of this within one round and was delighted by it, genuinely, more delighted than I had seen him at any cathedral, and we went from little bar to little bar in the lamplit lanes inside the walls, a small beer and a free wonder at each, doing the sums, and it was, after thirty kilometres in the grey, a thing very close to joy.

Somewhere in the third or fourth bar Andrew got out his phone and looked up what our name would do to the Latin of the certificate they give you in Santiago. The Compostela is still written in Latin, and it puts your Christian name into the Latin as best it can, and he announced, with the gravity he brings to such matters, that we would be set down for all time as Ioannem and Andream, and that Baird defeated the Latin entirely, there having been no Romans called Baird, and we spent a happy quarter of an hour inventing the Latin for Baird, and the Latin for the boiler, and the Latin for Andrew's knee, until a Spaniard at the next table who had some English

joined in, and it was the daftest the two of us had been since the barber's dummy in Grandas.

We walked back to the beds late along the inside of the wall, which they light from below at night so that it stands up gold and enormous against the black, and we were both a little drunk and a little happy and saying less than we felt, as we do. Andrew stopped once and looked up at it, at the lit towers going into the dark, and said, "They're still here." The Romans, he meant, or the wall, or something past both, I could not have said, and I said, "Aye," which meant I had it, whatever it was, and we went in.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: there is a wall here the Romans built and it is still standing, all the way round the town, and every man who built it is gone and it is not, and I put my hand on it in the gate and thought of you, and could not have told you why.

LUGO — A REST DAY

We took two nights in Lugo, a private room this time, no one to refuse us, and gave the day to the city and the knee.

In the morning we walked the wall. You can go all the way round on the top of it, on the *adarve*, the broad stone walkway that runs right round, and it takes about an hour if you dawdle, and we dawdled, the knee permitting a slow flat circuit far better than it permitted anything with a hill in it. And the thing about the wall up top is that it is not a monument at all up there. It is a park. The people of Lugo use it. They walk their dogs along eighteen-hundred-year-old Roman fortifications and jog on them in Lycra and push prams and stop to gossip, entirely unimpressed, born to it, and we two pilgrims went round slack-jawed among them photographing everything while a woman in a tracksuit did her stretches against a Roman merlon and a man went by with three dogs of increasing size, and nobody but us found any of it remarkable, which is its own lesson in what a wonder is, a wonder being mostly a question of whether you grew up with one at the bottom of your street.

And on the wall, going round, above the roofs of the city, we had the conversation the walk had been circling for a fortnight.

It began with our father, because it always begins with our father, and Andrew said the fall had frightened him more than

he had let Carol see, not the fall itself but the meaning of it, the stairs he built with his own hands becoming a thing that might one day kill him, and I said I had thought the same, and we walked a bit. Then Andrew said the thing he had not said to anyone. He had gone up to clear a corner of the loft in the spring, before we left, and had found our childhood up there in boxes, our school jotters and our father's joinery indentures and our mother's wedding dress folded in tissue, and had sat down among it on the loft floor and not been able to get himself up again for the better part of an hour, and had told no one, not Carol, not me, until now, on a wall in Spain. I did not say anything to that. There was nothing to say to it that would not have been smaller than the thing itself. We walked. Below us the city went on about its Tuesday, oblivious, as the living are.

After a while I told him about Fiona's photograph, and the smile in it that had changed when I was not looking, and Andrew said Katie had asked for the wing chair when she moved out, our mother's chair, and that he had given it to her gladly and driven home and sat for a long time in the space on the carpet where it had stood. And there it was, the two of us on a Roman wall, our parents on their way out one door and our children out another and the two of us in the hall holding both doors open and standing in the draught.

There was no drama in it. No one was leaving anyone. No one was ill with anything that has a name and a number attached. Nobody had done a thing wrong. It was only the ordinary arithmetic of being fifty-three and fifty-seven with living parents and grown children, the sums that make no news

and no film, and we did them out loud on the top of a Roman wall because we had walked three hundred kilometres to reach a place far enough from our own kitchens to do them in, and then we came down off the wall and had a coffee.

Andrew still had the thing in the sock in the top of his pack. I had felt the shape of it when I lifted the pack for him back at Berducedo. I had left mine on the mountain, at the ruin, in the wet, and had said nothing to him, and he had his still, not yet left, and said nothing to me, and on the wall, with so much else finally out and spoken, that stayed down between us unspoken, his object and my missing one. I understood that we would not talk of it, not here, perhaps not anywhere, that it was not a thing made for words but for doing, at the end, each of us alone.

In the afternoon we went into the cathedral, out of the rain and out of curiosity, and there was a Mass on, a thin weekday Mass, a dozen old women and the two of us, and we sat down in a pew near the back meaning to wait it out and found ourselves inside it instead, the standing and the sitting, the galego and the Latin, the bell, the small grave machinery of it. When it came to the communion the old women went up, one slow one at a time, and we stayed in our pew, because that is not our table, it never has been, and a man raised as we were raised does not go to a table that has not been set for him. I had watched Andrew keep his seat at Catholic Masses the length of this trip and thought nothing of it. But here, in the dim, in the incense, with the day we had had on the wall behind us, I watched my brother watch the old women go up to the rail to

take the thing we do not take, and something moved in his face, and I built, God help me, another story. I had him losing his faith, or discovering he envied theirs, or grieving some certainty I had not known he owned and had not known he had lost. I had a crisis fully drawn up for him before the Mass was done.

When it ended Andrew got up and stretched the bad leg and said the ceiling was a later addition and spoiled the proportions, which is the kind of thing Andrew says, and I could not tell whether the man who said it had just come through a crisis of the soul or had merely been sitting in a cold church waiting for his brother to stop staring at him, and I did not ask, because you do not, and because I was not certain I wanted the answer to turn out to be the small one.

I phoned Ruth from a bench on the wall late that afternoon, and we talked for an hour, which we have not done down a telephone in twenty years, there being no call for it at home where she is only ever in the next room. I told her about the wall, and the boxes Andrew found in the loft, and Fiona's photograph, and she told me her own week, the small true news of it, and it was easy. It was only us, talking, as we have always talked. And I understood, sitting there, that the thing which had been so hard to start two weeks ago had only ever been hard to start, that once begun it was nothing, and that I had built a wall of my own out of not knowing how to begin, and had walked round and round the outside of it for a fortnight looking for the gate.

The Companion had the last bar we came to that night, a narrow deep place off the Rúa Nova with a few tables at the

back, and she was pouring, and she fed us as the city feeds you, only more, and better, until it was plainly no longer anything to do with the drinks. The place filled as the night went on with pilgrims we knew and pilgrims we did not, the two young Germans, a Canadian woman we had met up on the wall, an old Frenchman walking his last Camino and saying so without a scrap of self-pity, and the Latin game started up again and grew, the Latin for Baird and the Latin for the knee and now the Latin for the daft business we were all engaged in, and the Companion stood behind her bar and let the night rise in her keeping and did not steer it. And at some point it was very late, and I had my arm round the shoulders of a German I had known eleven days, singing something I did not know the words to, and my brother, my brother who does not sing, who shrugs off a hand at a funeral, was doing the Latin for the room in a mock-bishop's voice that had grown men weeping into their wine, holding the place in the flat of his hand, lit up, and I looked at him down the length of that bar and felt the thing rise in me that had risen when the woman bound his knee at Berducedo, the thing I have no name for and had looked at a fire extinguisher to master, only there was no fire extinguisher here, only Andrew being loved by a roomful of strangers in a bar in Lugo, and I had to go out into the lane for a minute, under the wall, and stand in the dark until I had myself back. It cost me something, that hour. It is costing me still.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: we walked round the top of the wall this morning and had the talk we came all this

way to have, about Dad and Mum and Katie and Fiona and the middle the two of us are wedged in, and it turns out you can only have it three hundred kilometres from your own kitchen. Andrew found our childhood in the loft in the spring and never breathed a word. I phoned you and it was easy, and I am sorry it took me a fortnight and a wall to find that out. The Latin for Baird, we have ruled, is Bairdus.

LUGO → SAN ROMÃO DA RETORTA

We went out of Lugo through the wall, by a gate on the far side this time, and the city let us go as easily as it had taken us in, and by the time the last of the suburbs had frayed away into fields we were two men walking again with nothing to do but walk.

It was a plain day. There were not many of them, and the plain days are the ones that go missing when you try afterward to remember a walk like this, crowded out in the memory by the mountains and the crises and the cathedrals. This was one of the good plain ones. The road ran half on quiet tarmac and half through forest, oak and the tall eucalyptus, dappled and green and smelling of leaf mould and cough sweets, and the knee was better, genuinely better, Lugo's rest having done for it what rest does, and Andrew walked almost easily, and we had the loose unhurried day of two men going somewhere at their own pace with the hard part behind them and the crowds not yet come.

Not far out of the city the mojones dropped into double figures for the first time, ninety-something to Santiago, and Andrew stopped at the one that did it, being a man who stops at a number that means something. A hundred kilometres is the figure that counts on this road — it is the least a person can

walk and still be handed the certificate at the end — and we were coming under it now, two hundred kilometres in. By the rule, Andrew said, we were only just starting. I said aye, only just starting, and we walked on into the hundred that would be counted, having done two that no one ever would.

I had listened, before we left, to a podcast about the Romans. Twelve hours of it, on the drives to and from the school, a genial Englishman narrating the rise and fall of the empire with enthusiasm and sound effects, and I had come off it a considerable authority on Rome, or felt myself one, and the wall at Lugo had set me going, and I spent much of that morning telling Andrew things about the Romans. The roads they built that are still under our roads. The concrete they made that we cannot make. The general who lost three legions in a German forest, and the emperor who beat his head on the doorposts for months after, crying out the man's name. Andrew bore it. He bore it for the better part of two hours, and then, at a crossroads, apropos of nothing, he said, "The podcast man," in the flat voice he keeps for closing a subject, and I understood I had said "the podcast said" once or twice too often, and I laughed, and held off the Romans for nearly twenty minutes, which was a personal best.

We crossed the Miño late in the morning on a Roman bridge, or a bridge on Roman footings anyway, patched and repatched down the centuries but the same crossing the legions used, low and humped over the green water, and I had a podcast fact about Roman bridges loaded and ready and looked at Andrew and did not fire it, and we stood on the parapet a

minute watching the river go under, and it was, after the great wall, a smaller and quieter meeting with the same stubborn old permanence, a thing the Romans set down that the river had not yet taken back. Andrew said it was a good bridge. He is a joiner's son, and that is the highest thing he says of any made object, that it is a good one, and he said it of the bridge, and we went on.

Somewhere in the afternoon, in the forest, we had the argument about which of us is the better son. It is an old argument and a comfortable one, worn smooth with use, and we have it about once a year, and neither of us means it and both of us do. I hold that I am the better son, because I live twenty minutes from our parents and Andrew lives two hours, and I am the one who goes when the gutter wants clearing or the car wants its MOT or Dad wants driving to the appointment he will not admit he needs driving to. Andrew holds that he is the better son, because proximity is not devotion, and that he telephones every Sunday without fail and listens right through the account of Mrs Whoever's hip, which I, twenty minutes away, do not, because I can always go round instead, which I also do not, as often as I ought. We each have a case. We made them, walking, and the making of them was, as it always is, a way of saying the thing underneath, which is that our parents are getting old and are going to die and neither of us is doing enough and no amount would be enough and we both know it, and you cannot say that to your brother in a forest in Spain, so you argue instead about who clears whose gutter, and it does the same work, and hurts less.

And that was the day. There was no cathedral in it and no ruin and no wall, no desk to be stamped at and no one to refuse us a bed, nothing arriving and nothing to reach for, only two brothers and a forest and a green river and a long quiet afternoon. I have thought since that it was the truest day of the walk, the day it stopped being about getting to Santiago and became only about the two of us being where we were, which is a thing we are almost never allowed at home, where there is always a next thing and a phone and a gutter to clear. With nothing arriving, we were only John and Andrew, brothers, in the middle of our lives, walking, and it was enough. I did not want it to end. It was going to end, because everything on this road counts down.

San Romão da Retorta, when we reached it, is barely anything, a church and a few houses and an albergue, and the woman who ran the albergue gave us our beds and stamped our credenciales and told us the bar did food at eight, and we washed our socks and hung them out and ate at eight, egg and chips and a bottle of the cheap good wine, and were in the bunks by ten. I lay in the dark full and tired and plain and content, and could not have named a single remarkable thing that had happened all day, which was the remarkable thing about it.

SAN ROMÃO DA RETORTA → MELIDE

We left San Romão in a fine morning, the knee good, the two of us rested and easy, and walked the last of the quiet country without knowing it was the last of it, because that is how the quiet always ends, without announcement. And then we came to Melide, and the world was full of people.

Melide is where the old road we had walked from Oviedo runs into the Camino Francés. The French road. The famous one, the one from the film and the guidebooks, the great river of a route that carries the bulk of everyone who has ever walked to Santiago, and the meeting of the two is not gradual. One kilometre we were two men and a Galician lane with a cow in it. The next we were in a column, a procession, a moving crowd of pilgrims hundreds strong stretching up the road ahead and back behind as far as we could see, and the quiet we had lived inside for two weeks was gone, simply gone. In its place were boots and voices and the click of a thousand poles and the smell of sun cream and crowds. We stopped where the roads join and stood a moment in the din of it, stunned, two men who had walked out of a forest into a railway station.

They were so clean. That was the first thing I noticed and the first thing Andrew said. The Francés fills up at Sarria, a hundred kilometres out, that being the least a person can walk and still

be given the certificate, and so the final hundred kilometres are thronged with people who started that morning or the day before, fresh and clean and loud, in bright unfaded gear with no mud on it and day-packs the size of a schoolbag, walking in laughing groups, and into the middle of them came the two of us, ripe and weathered and lean, Andrew on his poles and his wrecked knee, both of us burned brown and gone thin and smelling of a fortnight, and I will not pretend we were gracious about it. There is no snob on earth like a pilgrim two weeks in beholding a pilgrim two days in. We despised them. We despised their cleanness and their little bags and their springing untroubled legs, and we said unkind things to each other about them from the sides of our mouths, and it was ignoble and delicious, and I enjoyed it thoroughly and will answer for it later.

We had promised ourselves octopus a fortnight back in A Fonsagrada and been beaten to it by a shut shop, and here at last was the octopus, Melide being the octopus capital of the road, its pulperías boiling it in copper pots and snipping it with scissors onto wooden plates and dressing it with oil and paprika and coarse salt, and we queued for it among the crowds, a proper scrum, and carried our plates and a jug of young wine in white bowls to a barrel to stand at, and ate, and it was worth the fortnight's wait and the queue and the crush, tender and hot and smoky, the best thing since the Sunday tortilla, and for the length of a plate of octopus I forgave the Francés everything.

The Chaos-Weaver was working the bar. I asked him, over the heads of the crowd, where a man might find a bed in a town

this full, and he did not answer that. He said, sliding two bowls of wine down the counter to someone past me, “The ones who booked are fine and the ones who didn’t have already walked on, it isn’t tonight you want to worry about, tonight there’s room; it’s tomorrow — a few thousand came onto this road at Sarria and O Pedrouzo has a few hundred beds, that’s the sum of it, book O Pedrouzo now,” and he was gone up the bar into the press before I could thank him, and I stood there having asked about tonight and been answered about tomorrow, the hard figure of it set flat on the bar between the wine bowls, and I booked O Pedrouzo from the barrel on the strength of it.

Here is the strange thing about the crowd. I had expected to hate it, and I did hate it, the noise and the press and the loss of the quiet. But under the hating was something I had not looked for, which came on me slowly through the afternoon among the hundreds: that every last one of these people was walking to the same place for reasons of their own that they mostly were not saying, that the road was full, had always been full, of people carrying things they did not talk about, the grieving and the grateful and the lost and the merely curious, and that Andrew and I, and our failing father and our launched children and the thing in the sock in the top of Andrew’s pack, were not special. We were one small instance of a thing that was happening five hundred times over on that one road on that one afternoon. And I could not tell whether that was a comfort or a diminishment, and I cannot tell now. The two would not resolve, and I have stopped asking them to, and we went on into the town in the crowd.

Melide in the evening was a town, a real one, with traffic and shops and pilgrims spilling off every kerb, and our bed was in a big efficient private hostel with sixty bunks, and the Allfather had the desk, and he had our beds assigned and our money taken and our books stamped before I had the question out of my mouth, fast and flat and final, and there was no one to refuse us anything, because refusing is a kind of attention and this was a place past attention, no long table and no kindness that went unpriced, only a receipt and a bed number and the Allfather already looking past us to the next of the sixty. We ate a forgettable dinner in a loud bright place and went to bed among sixty strangers who did not know our names and had not been up the mountain, and I lay in the dark listening to sixty people breathe and missed, with a sharpness that took me by surprise, the small hard lonely road we had walked out of at the top of the hill that afternoon and would not walk again.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: we came out of the quiet today straight into the crowd, hundreds of them, and it was like walking into a party you weren't dressed for. We got the octopus at last and it was worth the wait. There are people here who started three days ago and look like an advertisement, and we hated them on sight, which we will answer for. It turns out we are not the only two people alive walking to Santiago with something on our minds, which I already knew and somehow didn't. Fifty kilometres.

MELIDE → O PEDROUZO

Melide to O Pedrouzo is thirty-three kilometres, the longest single day of the walk, and we did it in the crowd, on the Francés, inside the machinery.

There is a machinery to the final stretch, and we had not known it, coming off our empty old road into the middle of it. The bags go ahead in vans, a fleet of little vans running the packs hostel to hostel so the day-pack pilgrims walk unburdened, and we, who had carried ours over a mountain, now sent Andrew's on ahead for the knee's sake and felt like frauds doing it among people for whom it was simply how the thing was done. There is a bed-race, a quiet frantic thing, the crowd being bigger than the beds, so that people set off before light and push through the day with one eye on the guidebook's bed-counts and a low-grade panic running up and down the column all afternoon about whether there will be room at the end of it. And there is the rule of the two stamps, because to be given the certificate in Santiago you have to prove you walked the last hundred kilometres, and one stamp a day will no longer do, you must collect two, morning and afternoon, off a bar or a church or a hostel, so that the pilgrims go about anxiously getting their little books stamped twice a day like children filling a sticker album, and we, who had a book full

of the stamps of empty places nobody would ever check, found ourselves suddenly obliged to prove it.

It was, I realised somewhere in that long day, the very road we had gone the hard way round to avoid. Fifteen years back we had watched a film about this road, the Francés, and been moved by it, by the emptiness of it, the room in it for a man to walk out his grief, and we had come all this distance and taken the old mountain track precisely so as not to walk in the film's footprints, and here at the end the two roads had joined and set us down on it anyway, and it was not the road of the film. It was a procession. It was a queue that happened to be moving. There was no room in it for anything, and I thought of the man in the film scattering his son into the wind on an empty path, and looked at the shuffling crowd we were part of, and concluded that either the film had lied, or the road had changed, or we had simply come to it in the wrong month, and that it did not greatly matter which.

We passed through Arzúa, which is cheese country, famous for a soft pale cheese shaped, there is no polite way to say this, like a breast, which the shops sell in waxy pyramids and the pilgrims photograph and mostly do not buy, and we bought a small one and ate it on a wall with bread, and it was better than it had any right to be, and that was Arzúa.

The crowd was its own entertainment, if you were in the humour for it, and by the afternoon of a thirty-three-kilometre day I was in the humour for anything that was not walking. There was a young woman who stopped every twenty minutes to film herself, setting the phone on a wall or a marker and

strolling past it with a faraway look until she had the shot, then hurrying to catch it up and doing the same at the next good view, so that she must have walked the last hundred kilometres two or three times over in twenty-metre pieces. There was a man whose stamp-book had swollen to twice its proper thickness, who collected the sellos as other men collect anything, past all need, stopping at every bar and church and machine that offered one whether he bought a thing or not, and who would show the book to anyone who slowed enough to be shown it. And there was the bed-race, which turned mild retired people into generals, muttering over the guidebook about which hostel to make for and whether to push the extra five kilometres to beat the rush, and we caught the fever of it in spite of ourselves and found ourselves walking faster than the knee wanted for no better reason than that everyone else was.

We needed the afternoon stamp. The Seeker was selling drinks from a cool-box at the crossroads, and I asked him where the nearest one was to be had, and he sent me on — the church, or the bar past the church, or the woman with the fruit if both were shut — and one of the three was the church. He would not be paid for it. I got a coin half out of my pocket, the least you can do for a man who has just saved you an hour, and he tipped his head down the road toward the woman with the fruit, spend it on her, and was back at his cool-box, passing even the debt for his help along to somebody else, the way he passed along everything.

There was a queue in the porch for the stamp, and the Conscience-Keeper was at the head of it, the parish sello and

its ink pad on the ledge beside him. A young man two ahead of us had a difficulty. He had missed a stamp the day before, had only the one where the rule wanted two, and he laid it out reasonably and asked whether the single might be allowed to stand, he had walked every step of it, would the state of his feet not do for proof. The Conscience-Keeper heard him out to the last word, stamping the books of two others while he listened, and when the young man had finished he said, "No." Not to the young man. To the request — to the idea that a rule that exists so the certificate means something could be bent for the pilgrim who thinks to ask and kept for the one who does not. There was no unkindness in it. He told the young man there was an ermita on the hill that stamped, twenty minutes up and twenty down, and that it would put him right, and the young man went off to climb it, and we had our own two stamps put in, honestly come by, and I thought, going out into the crowd again, that a rule you can talk your way past is not a rule but a decoration, and that somewhere in that difference lay the reason we had taken the hard road when an easy one was on offer.

The mojones came thick now, one every half-kilometre and then, it felt, oftener, the numbers dropping away through the forties and into the thirties, and the Hand was at work on them all down the day, not at one marker but at a dozen — here on one knee in the verge repainting a figure gone faint, there righting a post a lorry had clipped, there setting a fresh arrow at a fork where the old one had weathered to a ghost — the Hand was all over the last hundred kilometres, keeping the

road legible for the hundreds walking it, and not once did I see the Hand finish a thing, not once a marker checked and signed off and left behind done, only the next one, and the next, the work of keeping a road a road being a work with no last stroke in it. The pilgrims flowed past on both sides photographing the markers the Hand was mending and not once seeing the mending, and the number said thirty-eight, and a kilometre on it said thirty-seven and a half, and the road went on quietly subtracting itself toward the city.

This is the thing nobody had told us about the end of a pilgrimage: that it turns, in the last days, into an administrative matter. Santiago, when we reached it, was not going to be a mountaintop. It was going to be an office. You walk into the city and you go to the pilgrims' reception office and you take a numbered ticket from a machine, or scan a code with your phone, and you queue, sometimes for hours in the high season, and when your number comes up a clerk checks your stamped book against the rules and, if you pass, writes your name out in Latin on a certificate and hands it to you across a counter, and that is the arrival, that is the thing three hundred kilometres has been walking toward, a queue and a counter and a document. Andrew read it all out to me from the guidebook, in the flat voice, on a wall outside Arzúa, and I watched the last of something go out of the two of us as he read, the last idea either of us had been quietly carrying that the end might feel like an end, and neither of us said anything, because there was nothing to say, and we shouldered up and walked on toward the office at the end of the world.

Andrew had gone quiet about the cathedral, I noticed, in a particular way. He had read me the office and the queue and the certificate flatly enough, but when the guidebook came to the cathedral itself, the tomb of the saint under the altar and the great swinging censer and the rest of it, he had gone quiet and read it to himself and not aloud, and had turned back to those pages more than once through the afternoon, and he had the thing in the sock still in the top of his pack. I understood, without being told and without asking, that my brother had settled where he meant to leave it, and that it was somewhere in Santiago, and that he was not going to say, and that I was not going to ask. I had left mine on a mountain in the wet three weeks back, on an impulse, at the first ruin that felt right. He had carried his all the way to the end and chosen the place with care. We are different men, my brother and I, even in this, even in the one thing we had both come to do, and there is no saying which of us had the right of it.

O Pedrouzo is a long roadside town that exists mostly for pilgrims, a strip of hostels and bars and shops selling blister plasters and scallop shells, and we came into it in the early evening footsore and stamped twice and got, by luck and our having booked ahead, two of the last beds in a place near the top of the town. The All-Seeing had the desk. He was checking in a long fast queue of us, and he knew things he had not been told. He told the couple ahead of us that the two friends they were holding a place for were not coming, that they had stopped back in Arzúa, that he could tell from the shape of the day's arrivals, from who had come in and who had not, and the

couple did not believe him and telephoned and found that he was right, and then it was our turn and he had our two beds assigned before I had finished asking, reading the empty places in his own hostel off the gaps the same as he read the missing pilgrims off the road.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: thirty-three kilometres today, the longest yet, in a crowd like a cup final. We are on the famous road now, the one from the film, and it turns out the film left the queue out. The Arzúa cheese is shaped like something I won't write down and tastes better than it should. The end, it turns out, is an office with a ticket machine, and I watched the two of us quietly give up the idea it would be anything grander, which was a small sadness of its own. One day now.

O PEDROUZO → SANTIAGO

We left O Pedrouzo before light on the last morning, in the cold and the dark with a few hundred others, head-torches bobbing up into the forest, everyone wanting to be in Santiago for the noon Mass. The last day of a long walk has a flat feeling to it. The end is close enough now that the walking has stopped being the point and become only the means, twenty kilometres of black eucalyptus to be got through so that the thing can be over, and we got through them, mostly in silence, in a thin drizzle that came on at Lavacolla and did not stop.

Monte do Gozo is the hill where the medieval pilgrims first saw the towers of the cathedral and, they say, wept and ran, and it is called the Mount of Joy for that reason. We came up onto it in the drizzle among a crowd, and looked for the towers, and could not for a while find them, because there is a great modern pilgrim complex on Monte do Gozo now, a hostel for hundreds and a car park and a monument the size of a battleship, and when Andrew found the towers and pointed them out to me they were a small grey smudge in the grey three kilometres off, easy to miss, not obviously a thing to weep over. We did not weep, and we did not run, our running days being behind us and one of our knees being what it was. We took a

photograph in which the cathedral cannot be seen, and went on down into the city.

You come into Santiago the back way, through suburbs and a ring road and the ordinary machinery of a city, and then quite suddenly you are in the old town, in narrow granite streets slick with rain and loud with pilgrims, and everyone is walking the one way, funnelling down through the lanes toward the cathedral, so that you are carried the last half-mile on a current of your own kind, the fresh and the footsore, the weeping and the dry-eyed, the ones who started in Sarria a week ago and the two of us who started three hundred kilometres back in the rain at Oviedo, all poured down together through a stone archway with a piper playing under it for coins, and out into the square.

The great square in front of the cathedral is called the Obradoiro, and it is a magnificent space, and half of the cathedral's front was under scaffolding and green netting when we arrived, which felt about right. Pilgrims lay on their backs on the wet stone looking up at the part of the facade you could still see. Some wept. Some did the thing everyone does, the slow turn on the spot with the phone held up. A tour group in matching ponchos received a lecture. And Andrew and I stood in the middle of it with our packs on and our sticks in our hands and looked up at the cathedral we had walked three hundred kilometres to reach, and felt very little. Tiredness. A dull relief. The flatness you feel at the top of a hill you have wanted badly to be at the top of. We had arrived, and arriving turned out to be a thing that happened to the body, in a square,

in the rain, and not the thing we had half-expected without ever saying so, and we stood in it and let it be what it was, which was not much, and then Andrew said we should go and get the certificate before the queue got worse, because Andrew is Andrew, and we went.

The Pilgrim's Office is a few streets away, a modern building with a machine at the door that gives you a numbered ticket with a code on it so that you can go away and drink a coffee while the number climbs, the queue being long enough in season to lose a morning in, and we took our ticket and did not go for a coffee because we were too far gone to trust ourselves to come back, and stood in the line, and after an hour of it we came to the counter, and the Allfather had the counter.

He took our credenciales, the little books swollen and soft with three weeks of rain and stamps, and he opened them and did not really read them, and he turned the screen to us with the question already answered. There is a box, on the form they fill, for why you walked — for religious reasons, or spiritual ones, or others — and it makes a difference to which certificate you are given, and I had been turning over for some days which of the boxes was true for us and had not settled it, and I opened my mouth at the counter to try, and found the Allfather had already put us down, had known before I did and before I could say, and was writing my name out in the Latin, Ioannem, in a hand that had done it half a million times, the name crossing the page ahead of the reason, and he asked me nothing and I told him nothing and it was, I understood, standing there, exactly what had happened at the other end of

this, three weeks and three hundred kilometres ago, at a desk in Oviedo, where another version of this same man had handed me the empty credencial before I had finished saying why I wanted it. The book was full now, was the only difference. The walk had happened in between. He stamped the last stamp, and gave us each our Compostela, the free one, the Latin one, and told us the distance certificate was three euros extra if we wanted the kilometres on a parchment, and Andrew wanted the kilometres on a parchment, of course he did, three hundred and some kilometres set down in a document, and paid his three euros, and there was a stand by the door where for a further sum you could have it laminated against the weather, and we did not, and went out with our certificates going soft already in the drizzle.

We went into the cathedral in the afternoon, before the Mass, when it was quieter. You go down under the high altar into a small stone crypt, and there is a silver casket there, behind a grille, that is said to hold the bones of the apostle, and pilgrims file past it slowly, and some kneel, and some press their hands to the grille, and Andrew and I filed past it as you file past a thing, and did not kneel, and did not press our hands to anything, because that is not our way and never has been, and stood a moment in front of it, two Protestants at the far end of everything looking at a silver box that other people's hearts were bent toward, and felt the old careful respect we have been raised to feel for another man's holy things, and no more than that, and went back up the stairs. There is a statue of the saint above the altar that you can climb up behind and embrace from

the back, the abrazo, the old gesture, and there was a queue for it, and we did not join the queue. Andrew said, on the way past, that his father made better joints than whoever hung that door, and I knew he meant our father, and I knew what he was doing, which was standing in the largest church he would ever be in and reaching, without seeming to, for the small workshop at home where a man he was losing had taught him what a good joint was, and I said nothing, and we found seats for the Mass.

The noon Pilgrim's Mass fills the cathedral. We got a pew near the back, on the aisle, for the knee, and the great space filled up around us with pilgrims and their packs and their smell and their tears, and up in the transept the huge silver censer, the Botafumeiro, hung still on its ropes, and a hush of hope went round the nearer part of the crowd about whether it would fly, cameras half-raised, and it did not fly, because it does not fly at an ordinary noon Mass, only on the feast days and when a group has paid the fee, and word of this passed back through the crowd in a dozen languages and the cameras went down again, and a small tide of disappointment moved through the cathedral that was, if you have any humour left in you at the end of a long walk, extremely funny, several hundred people who had walked across a country slightly let down that a large object was not going to be swung over their heads. The censer hung there full of nothing, and the Mass began.

And near the start of it a priest read the roll. This is the thing they do, at the Pilgrim's Mass; they read out the pilgrims who have arrived, not by name but by nation and by starting-

place, so many from Germany, so many from Korea, a pilgrim from Sydney who set out from Sarria, a family from León, and the count moves around the world and around the map, and the crowd murmurs a little each time a place is named that is theirs, and Andrew and I sat and waited for ours, and when the priest said that among the day's arrivals were pilgrims who had walked the Camino Primitivo from Oviedo, I felt Andrew go still beside me, and something rose in me that is the one thing, in all of this, I am sure of.

It was the walking. Not this. Whatever we had come the three hundred kilometres to find, we had found it back along the road and not here, in the rain and the fog and the drowned village, at a bar with a tortilla in it, on a wall above Lugo, on a mountain that took my brother's knee, and not one gram of it was here, in this, at the end, the end being only a form and a queue and a censer that would not swing, giving us nothing but the fact that it was finished. The Way had never had arrival in its gift. It had the walking, and it gave us that, all three hundred kilometres of it, and the walking was the thing, and it was enough, and it was over, and those are all true at once and I have stopped trying to make them lie down together.

We stayed in our pew at the communion. Of course we did. The old women and the Koreans and the family from León went up to the rail, and we kept our seats, as we had kept them in every church down the length of this road, guests to the end at a table that was not laid for us, and I found, this last time, that I minded it and did not mind it, both, as you can hold a thing and its opposite in one hand if you are tired enough and

far enough from home. An old woman two along in the pew sang the responses in Galician in a thin true voice, and I did not have a word of the language and was undone by it anyway, and had to look at my boots.

Afterward, in the square, the thing happened that showed me how wrong I had been.

I had thought I knew why Andrew had come. I always think I know; it is the disease in me; give me half of my brother and I will build you the other half and move into it, and the half I had built for Andrew had trouble in it, him and Carol and some quiet wrong thing at home he had come three hundred kilometres to walk off, because that is the shape of story I tell. I was wrong. I saw how wrong when the Mass let out and Andrew stepped away from me across the wet square, apart from the crowd, and took out his phone, and stood very straight with it against his ear. I could not hear him. I did not need to hear him. I have watched my brother telephone our father a thousand Sundays and I know the shape he makes when he does it, the straightness, the head a little down, and I knew he was telling the old man we had got here, that his two sons had walked to Santiago and got here safe, and I stood in the square and watched Andrew give our failing father that, across an ocean, in the rain. Not Carol, not trouble. Our father, the losing of our father, the very thing I had left at a ruin on a mountain three weeks back in the wet and never told him, so that we had walked three hundred kilometres side by side each carrying the same grief and never once said.

His pack, when he came back across the square, sat differently on him. Lighter by some small thing. I did not see where he had left it or what it was, and I did not ask, and I do not know, and it was his to leave and not mine to know, and mine I had already left, weeks ago, on a mountain, and never said either. We are not men who say. We are men who walk three hundred kilometres and carry things in socks and leave them where no one is looking. But we had done it together, the same road, the same days, and I think that is as close as two men like us are built to come to saying the thing, and it will have to do, and it does.

The Companion had the pensión we found for the last night, a narrow place up a lane off the square, and she gave us a room with two beds and a window over the lane, and when we came down wrung out, too far gone to go out again and feed ourselves, she set a plate in front of each of us at the little bar and would take nothing for it — I laid a note on the wood and she let it lie there untouched, and sat near us while we ate, not saying much, and it was the last of the road's kindness, and I did not want to leave the table. We slept. In the morning the walk was a thing that had happened to us rather than a thing we were doing, and we were only two middle-aged men in a Spanish city with a flight to catch and sore feet and a father at home who now knew we had made it, which was the point, which had been the point all along, only I had not known it, walking.

One thing I'd tell my wife, if she were here: we got here. It was a queue and a form and a Mass, and a censer the size of a boiler that didn't swing, and a man read out the places people had walked from, and when he said Oviedo I thought of you. Andrew phoned home. We fly back Thursday. I looked for something to buy you and everything was a fridge magnet of a place you'd have to walk three hundred kilometres to earn, so I bought you nothing, which I'll explain and you'll pretend I don't have to. You'd have hated the mountain and loved Lugo. I kept turning to tell you things and you weren't there. I'll see you Thursday.