

2018

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Recommended Citation

Bouldrey, Brian (2018) "Concerning the Spectacular Austerities," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol6/iss2/4>

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Concerning the Spectacular Austerities

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Modern pilgrims are the updated versions of hermit *athletae Dei*, athletes of God, as the Desert Fathers are called by Dorotheus the Theban. Are the more ascetic of religious pilgrims going too far with their spectacular austerities?

Key Words: pilgrimage, pilgrim, religious, Santiago de Compostela, Mecca, Desert Fathers, ascetism

The homeless dudes on Alameda all have legs any runway model would kill for, and sometimes I think of giving them money, but - I don't know, I've got bills to not pay, and drinks to make people buy for me. (Kris Kidd, I Can't Feel My Face)

Athletes of God

In 1996, at the dawn of UNESCO time when the route had been designated a World Heritage Site but little money had been infused into its 'improvement', I walked the Camino de Santiago, sometimes along sheep trails, sometimes along freeways, with a Flemish woman who was carrying all of her belongings in two mesh bags she lifted with rope handles. Her hands were ripped up messes. But she explained that three months before, she had started her pilgrimage with a backpack, which caused terrible back problems.

I returned home and slept in the basement on a thin mat, to keep the spirit of the Camino. My husband shouted down to me every night, don't be a fool and come up here and watch television with me! But I am a penitent. When I felt strong enough, I returned to the place where I stopped and now because of my back I carry all my things in these bags.

She arrived in Santiago on the same day I arrived. I felt she deserved her Compostela more than I did. I also felt that she was a little bit crazy.

Seasoned Camino hospitalero Martha Crites told me about some of her own experiences with ascetics while serving at Refugio Gaucelmo in Rabanal:

One evening, we hosted two different young American men. One passed me a note to get his needs met, but instead of sitting by himself in a meditative way, he sat in the middle of a large group - not speaking - which drew attention to the choice. The third was sweet and funny. He didn't speak until after 8pm each day! Then he really wanted to talk about past mental health problems which he was trying to walk out on the Camino. So all were dealing with personal problems. I was about to say, it beats doing drugs, but realized that the Camino is a drug.

Pilgrim Karen Monteith described a pilgrim who posted a sign on his pack saying that other pilgrims could only sing to him as he walked along, while he only listened and never spoke.

In the preface to her translation of *The Desert Fathers (Vitae Patrum)*, historian Helen Waddell dismisses 'the spectacular austerities which Gibbon (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) and his successors have made sufficiently familiar: they are the commonplaces of controversy' (Waddell, 1998). But Waddell does not dismiss, of course, before she makes a long list of the bizarre things the ascetics have done in the name of God and spiritual fanaticism: hermits sitting on tall pillars for years, living on nothing but locusts or communion wafers, vowing lifetimes of solitude and silence. The pilgrim, perhaps the most recognizable descendant of the ascetics, walks toward the shrine, but also away from the world. The abbot Marcus said to the hermit abbot Arsenius, 'Wherefore dost thou flee from us?' And Arsenius said, 'God knows that I love you: but I cannot be with God and with men' (Pelagius, in Waddell, 1998).

Waddell further notes that the root of asceticism, the word, did not travel far from *asceis*, ‘the training of the athlete’; the desert fathers were described by their contemporaries as the *athletae Dei*, the athletes of God. Dorotheus the Theban put it more bluntly: ‘I kill my body, for it kills me’ (Waddell, 1998).

Today, there are tales of pilgrims to Santiago running the Camino like a marathon, penitents crawling on hands and knees, or backwards, or on unicycle; walkers dressing in the garb of pilgrims from the 12th century and footwear just as basic and problematic. Even the standard pilgrim sees him/herself at a place in a hierarchy of ability and seriousness - serious pilgrims don’t start in Leon; they start in Roncesvalles. Or better, St. Jean. Or actually, Le Puy or Paris or Vezelay. Serious pilgrims don’t ride bicycles. Or even horses. As with nature writing in which the act of swimming with sea turtles somehow puts a nature lover closer to God, the efforts of some pilgrims are made to prove they are holier than, well, thou.

The first thing a pilgrim feels after blisters is special. And yet there is another desire, too, of fitting in, of being invisible. We want to both *act* and *appear*. To repurpose John Berger’s observation of women in *Ways of Seeing*, ‘whilst a pilgrim is walking across a meseta or whilst she is snoring in a refugio, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or snoring.’ Interviewed years ago on NPR, Willem Dafoe lamented that he suffered ‘the actors disease’: ‘look at me look at me why the hell are you looking at me?’ Do pilgrims suffer the actors disease? If you think so, let me spring another one on you: Dafoe repurposed the actors disease from the 12-steppers’ ‘disease of addiction’.

And here I need to insert a non-pilgrim anecdote: I have a friend, now sober, who tells the story of his last drunken binge: Stopped for driving under the influence, he made himself busy by grabbing the open bottles they had confiscated from his car while they calibrated the breathalyzer and guzzling the various last drops from each. ‘What are you doing?’, the police asked, pulling the bottle from his mouth. ‘I’m going for the record!’ he proudly announced.

In Joseph Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim*, Jim’s first trip to sea was on a boat with hundreds of Muslims heading to Mecca on the hajj. A storm blows up and the cowardly captain encourages his crew to abandon ship and all its passengers. When morning breaks, the crew, in a lifeboat, are horrified to see the ship unsunk and all the pilgrims standing on deck, a great accusation for dereliction of duty, one that sends Lord Jim on his own aimless pilgrimage to self-worth. Marlowe, who narrates Jim’s story, calls the eponymous character ‘one of us’ (Conrad, 1899: 44), and as pilgrims, when any of the ‘us’ wander off and don’t stick with the ship, we become suspect. Here’s a man who lives a life of danger. Everywhere he goes, he stays a stranger. Can we be both things, part of a group and on our own?

Certainly, the reasons for walking differ from pilgrim to pilgrim. Jewish youth are invited to take the birthright ‘Aliyah’ to Israel, but there are several different packages for that pilgrimage - there is a ‘speed dating’ tour so that you might find a significant other to return to, as well as a homeland - after seeing Masada and the Wailing Wall, there’s a big beach party in Tel Aviv. Why not? Why can’t the methods and intentions differ?

Malcolm X, wrote in his autobiography about making his way to Mecca:

We were on our plane, in the air, when I learned for the first time that with the crush, there was not supposed to have been space for me, but strings had been pulled, and someone had been put off because they didn’t want to disappoint an American Muslim. I felt mingled emotions of regret that I had inconvenienced and discomfited whoever was bumped off the plane for me and, with that, an utter humility and gratefulness that I had been paid such an honor and respect (Haley, 1965).

Like anything truly great and replenishing, we need to approach writing a novel or making pilgrimage or saving the whales with both humility and hubris, an odd combination. But think of what walking actually is. You can see a toddler discover it for the first time - they fall, and then they catch themselves, over and over. All the way to Jerusalem.

Malcolm X's great pleasure was putting on the white ihram, the long white nightshirt and skullcap that makes all pilgrims on the hajj, rich, poor, black, white, equal if not to each other, then at least in the eyes of God. The Presbyterians place the bishop's pall over a coffin, so that you do not know whether that coffin is made of alabaster or pine.

We all carry a pack, presumably with the same essentials. Yet pilgrims are always quizzing other pilgrims: how much does your pack weigh? How much did you pay for your shoes? Why are you carrying the collected works of Elias Canetti all the way to Santiago? You will be mocked for carrying a book among your things by the same guy who humped a set of marionettes to entertain his fellow pilgrims every night (another thing pilgrims must suffer). For a moment, the us of us leaves us: your essentials are less essential than mine.

There are already so many things to endure: blisters, cold showers, language barriers, dust, herds of livestock, snoring, weather, walking along freeways, the French. Heather Hemingway writes in the *Houston Chronicle*, of students making pilgrimage to Nauvoo, IL, the gravesite shrine of Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Latter Day Saints:

Giving up their electronic devices for nearly a week, more than 300 youth accompanied by 100 adult leaders, took this pilgrimage for their annual youth conference (Hemingway, 2014).

Three hundred teenagers without smart phones: now *that* is suffering. To add more seems at once masochistic and uppity. But perhaps that is the nature of the disorder.

Rebekah Scott runs a refugio out on the meseta called 'Peaceable Kingdom'. She has seen her share of ascetics, real and faux. She offers the best clarification on what's what:

A real ascetic does not usually come to the door unless he's injured or ill, or wants to hear Mass. Real ascetics bunk down in the plantillo, or in the church porch. They mind their own business. When we learn someone is sleeping rough we go and invite them to stay with us, but often as not they are happier outdoors. (When

the weather is rough we 'compel them to come in.' Occasionally the Guardia Civil will deliver them to the door!) When ascetics do stay here, they are polite and clean, often hungry, and they eat whatever is placed before them. They don't ask of things. We have to tell them what's available. Not everyone like this is an ascetic. Some are just homeless, introverts, or shy. Once in a while, they're fugitives from the law.

Sadly, I find a lot of the 'spectacular austerities' on the Camino are simply stunts undertaken by people with strange ego needs, with the Camino trail as a charming historical backdrop with an accommodating audience. They are kind, holy, and often raising funds for some worthy cause, but fundamentally they are drawing attention to themselves. I know there's a dark corner of Christian history that features this kind of thing: saints who lived atop poles, beat themselves with whips, etc.; perhaps this is the 21st century version, but with a TV crew and book deal thrown in. We had a guy here last year, a media character in his home country, on a 'vow of silence.' Still, his iPad with Auto-Translate was so well-used the letters were worn off the keys. He traveled with a rotating cast of admiring young women. Which kinda makes you wonder. To me, the Camino de Santiago is a holy place. In my opinion, 'stunt pilgrims' are latter-day charlatans, and what they do is an egregious abuse of the Camino. When these characters pop up, I let them know how I feel. They are roller-skating down the aisle of my church.

I agree, then stop myself: and who am I to judge? Who knows what struggles are going on inside, mentally and spiritually, as opposed to the struggle of the feet and back? Pilgrim Fran Rossi, who made the journey one year ago, described a fellow pilgrim she encountered:

She was Chinese, born there, but grew up in New York, and ended up in Canada by high school. Super bright, atheist, about 40 and so effing sure of herself about all. We knew her and were social with her, but she never walked with us until the step from Sarria to Portomarin. Yikes, she started getting into it with me, about God and church, but she was so into this punitive thing. She heard that someone carried my pack for part of a day when my feet were bad and she thought they spoiled me, and that God (as she imagined God) would frown upon the person who helped me and even more upon me for being 'weak.' Well, my other two friends walked ahead while I continued to talk to her. In the end, hours - exhausting hours

later - we went down this shorter but funky steep rocky path toward Portomarin. By that time, she had convinced herself that helping was good and that needing was OK. It was the weirdest day.

But we do love drama, don't we? When I signed to write a book about hiking across Corsica years ago, a friend asked, 'What do you think you will you write about?'

'I don't know,' I answered. 'I don't know what will go wrong yet.'

Geoff Dyer wrote about Wimbledon as a pilgrimage site in the New York Times Magazine: and because we are in somebody else's home, 'We are on our best behavior' (Dyer, 2017) he says, though I have heard otherwise from friends who live in that part of London. I think it's important to point out here that good behavior is not necessarily being good. Iris Murdoch points out the difference between the nice and the good. The Conradian 'us' of pilgrims always likes to single out the least of its brethren, and if the least drops out of the group, another least will be chosen.

People love to see people *not* on their best behavior. We are, as pilgrims, perpetually the guest in somebody else's home

I remember the two pilgrims we all loved to hate, the us of us would not allow into the us club, and we called them, jeeringly, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, mostly because of their build, and partly because they were actually from LaMancha. They didn't mingle much and smelled pretty bad, but that's a pot calling a kettle black. Their spectacular austerity seemed to be refusing to bathe or wash their clothes.

We sneered at their dirtiness and odd social manners - it seemed as if they didn't know how to be normal humans with normal emotions. It was only when we got to the Cruz de Ferro that I finally spent a half a day walking with them, because as they tossed many stones from their packs onto the pile, I learned, through that Andalusian Spanish with its lopped-off endings that they were two recovering heroin addicts who

had finally kicked the habit and were celebrating a new life. The stones they threw represented memorials for their several friends who were not able to get clean, and died to the addiction. Learning this fact humbled me in a radical way: I was not the pilgrim that the great Don Quixote and Sancho Panza were.

Pilgrimage is an act that not only balances on a contradiction of hubris and humility, but on innocence and experience, and ideas of home and away. Elizabeth Bishop in her poem, 'Questions of Travel', asks the us of us,

*Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of
here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play in
this strangest of theatres?'*

Pilgrimage is a kind of ascetism, and the ascetics did grapple with a great human problem. Do we get wisdom from experiencing things in the world, recovering it from all the disasters we endure? If so, it doesn't follow that we should seek out experiences that cause disaster - we can't make terror our servant, make ourselves the master of disaster. So much of my experience can be described as bundles of mistakes. Why would I ferret out even more crises to prove that I was unweak? The pilgrim becomes obsessed with being unobsessed. As JV Cunningham, another poet I love put it,

*Professionals of experience
Who have disasters to withstand them
As if fear never had unmanned them,
Flaunt a presumptuous innocence.
I have preferred indifference*

(Cunningham, 1971:110).

What then, might I suggest as an antidote to all these spectacular austerities? In the end, after all, they must be put, in a terrible irony, into the category not of ascetism but of decadence, for only those able to *afford* the extravagances of crazy self-denying diets and revolting abstinence can commit them, and presume themselves innocent. The answer lies in what modern pilgrims have removed from our journey: the long walk home.

To Seek the Holy Blissful Martyr When They Were Sick

For nearly a thousand years, pilgrims made their slow, wandering way to Santiago de Compostela - my first and most profound long walk - but also had to make their slow, wandering way back home. The elation of arriving at Santiago, at celebrating with fellow pilgrims, and perhaps proceeding to the end of the earth in Finisterre has, for modern pilgrims, been capped with a relatively quick plane ride home. And somehow, perhaps because of that quick ride home, I have felt as if I should still be on the trail - something feels forever unfinished. I'll never forget my months-long readjustment to civilian life after my first walk to that shrine: throwing everything in the basement away, suggesting to friends that we walk to the movies, a mere four miles away, and the pacing, always the pacing, around the perimeters of a room, like a panther in a cage. I hated the way the calluses on my feet and hands melted back to softer skin. I missed worrying about whether the plastic clasps and buckles on my backpack might break. Perhaps the most macho austerity is having the guts to finish the pilgrimage and say it is completed.

Chaucer had big plans for his Canterbury Tales, but I don't think one of those plans was actually finishing the project. There were 29 pilgrims, and each pilgrim was asked to tell 4 tales, two going to Canterbury, and two on the return. A projected 116 stories. That would be a lot of tales. It is fun to imagine what he might have done had he lived past the age of 60. I would especially like to hear the tales told on the return, when the pilgrim mind wasn't turned toward the worldly life lived before visiting the blessed holy martyr and instead, transformed by the experience of a physical and spiritual journey. I have a funny notion that, on the road home, they would have told stories about the fellow pilgrims, no less naughty, but perhaps less hateful. Fewer insults between the Miller and the Cook, A softening of the Knight's holier-than-thous. I think they would tell tales of body-damage brinksmanship, about who had the most blisters and who got sick on too much beer after a day in the sun. But perhaps Chaucer didn't finish

his set of tales because, well, he was afraid of ending his own pilgrimage on the page.

What sort of things, as opposed to the things you can't stop, do you wish would never end? Epic romances, that one sandwich that one time, those jeans after you'd broken them in and they weren't yet worn out? Your favorite soap opera? Night swimming, rosaries with the red hats on Wednesday nights, tubing down a river, college idealism, the early discovery of a perfect pop song, that big fat novel that just lay open on the table while you read it no-hands and eat breakfast at the same time, a big fat novel in which you recognize everybody even though the story takes place in Naples in the 50s? That night in the summer when the kids were chasing fireflies and the parents were drinking shandies and telling jokes on the porch at dusk, the grass cool and the frogs just starting up?

Each story in the Canterbury Tales, no matter how naughty (and boy-howdy, there are some naughty ones), ends, sometimes shockingly, with an 'Amen' -as if the entire yarn were a prayer, a long meditation. Some of the endings are twisted toward absolution, sinners abruptly returning to God after a wild night with the carpenter's wife; some of the endings are not much more than a foxhole prayer; but all of them are offered up to God with a dedication, and all of them are set on paper by a winking, nodding Geoffrey Chaucer, who often absolves himself from his own filth by saying, 'I'm just repeating what I heard, folks!'

I absolutely love that idea, of stories, no matter how jaunty, as prayers. Yes, yes, there is nothing more difficult, serious, meditative, and spiritually fulfilling than a pilgrimage. But also, what is spirituality? 'Religion is for those who fear hell,' goes the old saying, 'and spirituality is for those who have already been there.' That each of the pilgrims gives their bawdy little tavern story up as an offering to God strikes me as something both liberating and true. My long walks have been things both sacred and profane. I am sorry, Marcus, but you are wrong: it *is* possible to be with God and with men.

Arthur Schopenhauer, a humorless atheist, wrote that the column, in architecture, is the symbol of the will to work. ‘I am here to hold up the roof,’ says every column (Schopenhauer, 1903: 83). Many columns are fashioned into caryatids, those brawny beings who carry the weight of the building on their heads or shoulders. Think of all the columns supporting a church. Every column, then, is like a human body, so what does that suggest the capital represents? The profane supports the sacred. All of us, all of our actions, all of our passions, all of our enthusiasms, all of our silliness, all of our less than divine qualities, all of our dreams and myths and demons, all holding up the roof of one serious house. It is possible to be too serious, too austere. Did you know that tiny scorpions live in beloved old books, effectively preserving wisdom by eating book lice and dust mites?

The Song of Roland, back in the day when people still had the power to memorize things, was recited by pilgrims, to entertain themselves and others, as they crossed through the battlegrounds of that tale; it’s hardly a religious yarn. Everybody had it memorized. And it is worth mentioning here that there are nine surviving manuscripts of the Song of Roland, all of wildly different inclusions and lengths, but the one considered truest to the original—that is, truest to the one people told as they walked through France and Spain—is the one full of spelling errors and wine glass rings, the one sloppily copied by a drunk monk who didn’t bother to ‘improve’ the story with his own additions and retractions. It was the pilgrims who knew the story best (Harrison, 2002:8). Pilgrimage and the tradition of storytelling have always been two entwined things.

All along the road, you meet other pilgrims from all parts of the world, all sorts of intentions. Chaucer’s cast of characters has nothing on us. You walk alongside them each day, and before you actually speak with them, you start to have ideas about them, start to imagine stories about them in your head, and yes, you even start to judge them, mostly misjudge them, until you sit down to a big plate of carbs and realize that they are people wonderfully different than what you

thought. This is what happens if you are not foolish enough to make a vow that you will not speak to anybody.

You walk for days, and become friends, and you say, ‘Tell me stories about yourself. I have, literally, *all day*,’ because you do! And all those marvelous tales come spilling out, the wild times and the bad times and the sweet times, and while you are telling the tales to each other, you are making a new tale. I will introduce pilgrims along the way between my bawdy tales - pilgrims who I recognized as expressions of myself for good and ill. They are still out there, somewhere, making more tales, I hope.

Jesus was a Gypsy

To conclude, I offer an anecdote from the beginning of my first pilgrimage to Santiago back in 1996, a moment before the blandeur of the euro, and a moment when I encountered my first and only pilgrim who was actually walking back after reaching Santiago: I had just crossed the Pyrenees with Loek, a man from the Netherlands who had walked from his home. He was seasoned, I was his very opposite. Two days out of St. Jean Pied-de-Port, Loek must have thought I was the dopey naïve American incarnate: I’d come without a sleeping bag (several guidebooks suggested that they were a good idea, but not required), my pack was too heavy, and now this - this! - I’d walked into Spain without a single peseta.

I don’t know what I was thinking, except that perhaps Roncesvalles was a town, not just a monastery. I had visions of the way tourist towns go: restaurants that honor Visa, Coca-Cola machines, and a convenient ATM installed in the side of a church. After all, at the monastery in Samos there’s a gas station; in one of my beloved photos a shrine of the Virgin rises above an overloaded dumpster. Somehow, to my dismay, Roncesvalles remained more pure.

We’d crossed into Spain on a Saturday. Even if the villages we passed had banks, it was Sunday now, and everything was closed.

At lunchtime in Linzoain, a tiny village that venerated Saint Saturnine, Loek said, 'Good thing I am taking care of you,' and bought our bocadillos with the pesetas he'd had the foresight to change back in St. Jean. I let him chide me, although I would have liked to point out that he wouldn't have gotten his sandwich exactly the way he wanted it if I hadn't ordered for him. Loek knew a lot of languages, but not a word of Spanish.

From around the corner came a Romero, a gypsy, with a rucksack. He sat down next to us at the picnic table. I'd dealt a little with gypsies in Seville the year before. If they managed to get their sprig of rosemary into your hands, you were doomed until you gave them money. Of course, I knew all about the practice of mistrusting gypsies, but for El Americano, gypsies were mostly theoretical rather than the nuisance Europeans had made them out to be. I watched Loek shut down, as I fearlessly made conversation with the stranger, practicing my Spanish and asking far too many questions. He was a curiosity, after all. First, he was cross-eyed. Second, he was traveling alone, something I don't think many gypsies do. Most importantly, he was a pilgrim, but traveling in the opposite direction, away from Santiago. The perversity thrilled me.

'I'm going to Rome,' he explained. 'I hope to be there by Christmas.' He'd left Santiago on July 25, Saint James's Day. He showed me his compostela, the pilgrim certificate, something I looked forward to having myself. He had a pilgrim's passport, he was for real, but he was going to all the places we had already been to, and he was eager to tell me about all the places I'd be going to.

He pulled out a folded, tattered list of refugios he had stayed in and began to rate them for me. He told me a tantalizing story about the hostel in Ribadixo, hundreds of miles away in Galicia. Next to it he wrote, 'Dream of Peregrino'. He said something about rowing out to an island in a river, where the refuge was beneath - what? I was struggling with my Spanish - a trap door? I imagined a wide lake, a castle in the middle, a

boatman transporting Christians to safety for a coin. Arzua, muy mal. Puente la Reina, muchos gentes (Arzua is very bad. Puente la Reina is crowded). All the way down his ratty sheet, he'd write in si or no. He handed me his list as a gift.

I kept talking to him, and Loek looked askance. He didn't like my encouraging the Gypsy, and kept studying his own little guidebook. The Gypsy, whose name was Jesus (I have always found it interesting that certain Latin Catholic countries like Spain and Mexico have a lot of Jesuses, while other Catholic countries like Austria legally forbid christening a child with that name), wanted to know about the refugios in the other direction, what could he expect? Did he have to pay? Would they understand his Spanish? He asked me, 'How do I say this in French?' and he wrote on a slip of paper, 'Could you please give a pilgrim some money?' In English, sounding as naïve as I could, I asked Loek, 'How do you say this in French?' Loek narrowed his eyes and slipped on his backpack. 'I am going to get a head start,' he said. 'Since you are so fast, you will catch up to me soon.'

The barkeep came out, perhaps out of concern for me, left alone with the gypsy. I wondered whether Jesus could see it, was he used to the world's distrust, did he always get this reaction no matter where he went?

In the Middle Ages, gypsies surged into Spain because of the Camino de Santiago. The pope had given the king of the gypsies a letter to carry with them, giving them access to every inn and church along the way. 'Please take care of these good people,' it said. 'They are God's children, and there will be a reward for your hospitality in heaven.' The gypsies took advantage of this letter for hundreds of years before anyone wised up. The barkeep wanted to know, Is everything all right here? Do I need to get rid of this guy for you? But what he said out loud was, 'Anything else to eat?'

I wanted to show I was comfortable with the situation. I had my backpack pinned beneath my knees and if he really wanted my walking stick,

I'd find a new one eventually. 'Café con leche, por favor,' I said. I would catch up to Loek fairly quickly.

'Un bocadillo de queso,' said Jesus, and the barkeep looked at him. But he went in and made the cheese sandwich.

I turned to Jesus. He pointed at the slip of paper again. I said, 'I think you say, *Donnez-moi d'argent.*'

'Bueno,' he said, *Donnez-moi d'argent.*

'Si.'

He looked at me with those crossed eyes. 'Si. *Donnez-moi d'argent.*' I laughed, despite the situation I slowly began to understand. 'Oh, I see.' The barkeep came out with his sandwich and my coffee. 'But you see, I don't have any money,' I said to Jesus, 'Truly, none at all. In fact,' I suddenly realized in my absentminded state, 'I don't have any money to pay for this coffee.' I must have looked panicky.

This is when I experienced my first true Miracle of Santiago: Jesus, my gypsy friend, who had already given me his secret list of refugios, pulled a small coin purse out of his pocket and motioned to the barkeep, who stood in the portal of his little shop, draped with that curtain of beads right out of that Hemingway story, used, I guess, to discourage flies. Jesus pulled out the pesetas and motioned at my coffee and his sandwich. 'Todo junto,' he stated, 'all together.' And he paid for my coffee.

Essentially, a gypsy had given me money. The barkeep looked as astonished as I was.

Jesus got up, slipping on his backpack. 'Gracias,' I kept saying, and 'buen viaje.' He said the same to me. I turned, invigorated by unlooked-for generosity and café con leche, and scampered off, eager to catch up with Loek and tell him about the miraculous occurrence. It wasn't until I caught sight of Loek on the road ahead that I realized my pockets were full of francs, a currency now useless to me, but the very thing my gypsy friend needed.

Of all the pilgrims I have met on the road to Santiago - the Dutchman Loek thrown out of his home by his own wife and told to go to Santiago and get out of her hair, Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, the Flemish woman who carried all of her things in two shopping bags, all of them - the one who haunted me most was the cross-eyed Gypsy, alone, walking against the flow. His goal had come and gone, and yet he struck me as the more authentic of us, the solitary sojourner who had not turned his back on God nor the 'us' of us (in fact, he saw more of Conrad's 'us' than any of us!), but had turned desire into longing, removed the object of the end from his sight, and continued, anyway.

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