Mirjam Koppenol-van Hooijdonk

SOMEDAY HAS COME!

1,600 kilometres on a journey to myself

Memento Mori

SOMEDAY HAS COME!

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P A R T 1

France

Via Podiensis (GR65)

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

727 kilometres

6 August -12 September 2023



Le Puy-en-Velay

Here we go! *On y va!* I'm trying to talk myself up. Roel and I are standing on the platform at the rather drab station in Nevers, Burgundy, about thirty miles from where we've been staying, and my head's already racing ahead. The train to Clermont-Ferrand pulls away and I wave awkwardly through the grimy window at the man I love. See you in a few months, sweetheart. He vanishes from sight impossibly quickly.

Sitting backwards, I watch the countryside roll past. My walking stick leans against my right leg, carved with memories from every long walk I've done over the years: dark brown letters, bright bird bands, a tiny lucky charm. I bought it at a French flea market four years ago for just two euros. Back then it only had a sunflower engraved on it. I've only recently spotted the tiny letters that say *Auvergne*. The fact that Le Puy-en-Velay's in the Auvergne region? Just another coincidence on this journey of mine.

The ride's long enough to let my thoughts wander. The past few weeks play through my mind: saying goodbye to clients, colleagues, friends, and family. That wonderful week by the sea at Castricum. My dear neighbour dying. Staying at the lovely *chambre d'hôtes* run by Monique, who I used to go running with years ago. I'm still touched by the kind words people said, the questions they needed to ask: 'Will you light a candle for my son when you get to Santiago?' 'Does our friendship mean as much to you as it does to me?'

Thoughts of Bernadette drift through my mind. The girl who saw the Virgin Mary at Lourdes when she was only fourteen. This morning, just before I left Nevers station, I dragged Roel to where she's been lying for ages. Like I needed to see her one more time. Especially now.

'Je vais marcher Le Chemin de Saint-Jacques et je voudrais regarder Bernadette devant partir en train.'[1] Something along those lines is what I told the man at the door. There was a Sunday Mass going on and visitors weren't really allowed, but when I spoke those magic words, he led us straight past the crowded pews. I could barely hold back the tears. That's what the Camino does. It opens doors that would otherwise stay shut.

In the side chapel, there she was again, just like a few years ago: Bernadette Soubirous. Her body's been perfectly preserved since she died in 1879. Small and delicate, she's been lying behind glass for more than a century now. I want to believe it's really her. I could tell from the look in his eyes that Roel was just as moved. He doesn't share the same roots as me, of course. Mum would've liked that about him, I think. She never came here herself, but there's still a connection. Bernadette was from Lourdes, after all. That's where she saw Mary appear. Mum's Mary.

Back to reality, though. We had a train to catch. Out of the church whilst they were still singing, a quick stop at the gift shop, then rushing to the station, which was only a five-minute walk away. The little Bernadette statue I bought for Mum's grave has gone home with Roel now, tucked safely next to the motor oil in his crate.

The journey south goes smoothly. Despite my nerves about this whole adventure, I feel surprisingly light, hopeful even. A dream I've held onto for so long is finally happening. Someday has come!

I leave the clouds behind as we head south. When I change at Brioude for the bus to Le Puy-en-Velay, the sun's blazing high overhead. We wind through the mountains and the view out the window takes my breath away. The little town looks like it's nestled in a palm, cradled

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[1]I'm going to walk the Camino and wanted to see Bernadette before catching the train.

between two volcanic peaks. One has an enormous statue of Mary on top, the other a chapel. I can hardly believe I'm nearly there. This is the sacred pilgrimage town where my Japanese friend Huck started what he called his most beautiful walk. He told me about it five years ago, during my first short pilgrimage in France.

I like Huck from the start. We run into each other on the trail while he is sitting comfortably beside the sandy path, leaning against his rucksack. We'd slept in the same auberge the night before. The music from that evening's still echoing in my head: a table full of singing guests and our hostess Françoise, who picked up her accordion when Huck asked her to play. He had a knack for making things like that happen.

We're sitting across from each other at breakfast, at a wooden table. Yesterday's cheerfulness has given way to something more serious as he tells me his story. At seventeen, he read Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. He made a pact with his best friend: one day they would travel through Europe together. Life had other plans, though. He went to university, got married, started a family. Lost touch with his friend. Lost sight of his dream as well. I'm hanging on every word. My coffee's going cold.

When he retired at sixty, he couldn't find his footing. The old dream came back to the surface. He bought a new rucksack, a small tent, walking boots, and set off for Europe for his first pilgrimage. When he got home, he went looking for his childhood friend. I can see the grief in his eyes as he tells me what happened. His friend had taken his own life.

At seventy-four, this is his fourteenth Camino. His build's slight, almost fragile-looking. But he keeps a steady pace for two, sometimes three months at a stretch. In those twinkling brown eyes, I still see the seventeen-year-old boy: someone looking for adventure, connecting with strangers without a second thought, making everyone he meets smile. Back home, he spends months writing up his journeys. The moment he finishes one, he starts planning the next. Huck's always on the move.

I feel a kinship with this gentle Japanese man. A kindred spirit that goes beyond age, gender and cultural background. I've never felt this so strongly before.

> He doesn't need long to answer my question. 'The way from Le Puy is the most beautiful one.' And from that moment on I know: if I ever walk a proper long pilgrimage, this will be the one.

As it turned out, that was his last journey. His wife fell ill and the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a standstill. A new Camino was out of the question. I grieved with him. When his wife died, I mourned from a distance. Secretly, I hoped for a reunion. Someday, somewhere on the Camino.

The message came out of the blue, a few months ago.

> Mirjam, tell me when you plan to arrive at Santiago. From there we can walk together to Finisterre. I will walk the Via de la Plata in Spain.

I can barely believe it. I'm going to meet Huck again!

Le Puy-en-Velay is pilgrims through and through. Everywhere I look, there are images and inscriptions referring to Le Chemin de Saint-Jacques, the Camino. I try to find my bearings. The nervous tension lodged in my chest feels familiar. I pass streets strung with brightly coloured decorations and little squares with cheerful market stalls.

My booked accommodation at the *Gîte d'étape des Capucins* this Sunday is the first of a long series of dots on the map. A simple room with six steel beds. I sleep among three French women and two French men. We barely exchange a word. It's all still new.

Monday I spend exploring the town. I'm here now, with time on my hands. I fumble with packing my rucksack, because I can't get the weight distributed properly. Our friends Mario and Bart had helped me think carefully about what to take. I smile to myself thinking back to the evening they came to say goodbye.

The moment they're through the door, I ambush them with my question. Mario and I have been friends since we studied nursing together. She has her own distinctive style and untidily curly hair — I used to be jealous of it. As a student, she drove an old Citroën 2CV. When we went to Friesland to go sailing, she'd be slouched behind the wheel, her left leg propped up on the dashboard. Mario has long since hung up her nursing badge and gone after her dream; now she has her own stained-glass studio. Bart and Mario travel a great deal. Which is exactly why I put them to work. Even before the coffee is on the table among all the items laid out, the strict selection begins. Only two vests instead of three, three plasters instead of six. That lovely hair cream for my frizzy hair and my mascara can stay at home — which saves on make-up remover and cotton pads too. It's a bitter pill. Even my lightweight swimming costume is subjected to a cross-examination. No luck. Swimming is perfectly possible in one's underwear, apparently. Well then, ha. The negotiation over the extra little pink towel is my only victory. At least there'll be no agonising over clothes for the next few months, and a rucksack of roughly ten kilos.

I leave my rucksack at the hostel and head out with a lightweight daypack. Everything I need is in it. With no particular destination in mind, I wander through the historic centre. Most shops are still closed. The sounds of a city just waking drift through the air. Yesterday's nervous tension has gone. After a coffee on a little square I climb upward via narrow, cobbled streets.

Unexpectedly, the road ends and I come up against a gate. It opens onto steps leading to a steep path. I catch my breath. There, high above me against a clear blue sky, *La Notre-Dame de France* towers up. She's beautiful! Standing there in complete serenity, full of quiet confidence, watching over the city. The child carefree in her arms. The fact that I end up here first, with Mum's Mary, simply cannot be a coincidence.

The leaves of the tall trees along the old path filter the sunlight. A little later, I stand at the foot of the enormous statue — breathless. The city lies spread out below me. There's no one around. Magical! *Salve*

Regina. The words open a hatch in my memory back to childhood. A song in church.

All at once I know. This is where I'll leave the letter. There couldn't be a better place. I once wrote mum a letter to tell her everything that was troubling me and kept a copy. Shortly before setting off, I found it again in the little wooden box in our bedroom, among all sorts of things from the past: my recorder, the cassette tapes, the gold necklace from Grandma, Mum's Oil of Olaz jar that still holds her scent, the key to a diary I no longer have.

My fingertips feel for the thick packet behind the zip. Carefully, I ease the five sheets from the side pocket and unfold them. A sip of water, a breath of air, and I begin to read. By the first line I'm twenty-two years back in time…

The letter is honest and sad, less angry than I remembered. Deep inside, something wells up towards my chest: the pain she unintentionally caused me. I feel it again. The letters blur. Words dissolve in tears. Then I begin to tear and tear. The pieces remain at the foot of the Madonna, our only witness. It feels right. The wound has healed. On the way back down my daypack feels, literally and figuratively, a little lighter.

What did Mary actually mean to Mum? Suddenly there is space for that question.

That evening, I receive an alarming message from my cousin Marise. It's about her daughter Maaike, who lives in Portugal with her husband and baby.

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Marise 20:49
Hi darling, walking with you in spirit. But could
you light an extra candle there. They had to flee
from a huge fire. Had to leave everything behind. So
much already destroyed. I hope they can stay safe!
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Our fathers were brothers. A family of five boys. The two of us, as the only girls in the family, were welcomed with open arms. Since Dad died our contact has deepened into a close and precious friendship.

'Dear Dad, when I was seven years old you wrote the following in my friendship album…'

The church is full as I read aloud what I wrote at home. I know which parts will be hard, because I've read the passage out loud to Roel several times.

'When the day arrived that a baby was expected, oh how curious I was about what the stork would bring. Hurray! It was a girl. Who would have thought it. That God would give me, who'd never had a sister of his own, a little daughter.'

My cousin Marise stands just behind me, ready to take over if it becomes too much. Her presence feels reassuring, but I know I'm going to do this myself. Whatever it takes.

'You were there at my birth; it was my privilege to be there at your death on that special Christmas Eve with a full moon. The circle is complete.'

I read everything I wrote two days ago. Straight from the heart. I speak of the last years, of our bond, our conversations about death, of the family outings, of our Father's Day dinners for two, of our little holiday to Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, of how bravely Dad bore his illness. And finally I speak of Mum, of how she always stayed by his side.

'Even though she was no longer here in body, you grew old together with her. She must be here today.' And as Frans Halsema begins to sing, my youngest brother lights a candle by Mum's photograph. For her.

From the tone of her message I can tell how terrifying the fire in Portugal is. The world outside this Camino bubble just keeps turning. I pull the little curtains of my bunk closed and fall into a restless sleep. Tomorrow I start walking.