

# The Pilgrim



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*This book is dedicated to my parents,  
with whom I have walked the camino.*

*And to my girlfriend and children,  
with whom I someday hope to walk the camino.*

In this book, fact and fiction are seamlessly intertwined.

*I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.*

*I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place.  
But, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes me a long time to get out.*

*I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in. It's a habit.*

*My eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.*

*I walk down the same street.*

*There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.*

*I walk around it.*

*I walk down another street.*

**Portia Nelson**, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk:  
The Romance of Self-Discovery*

*Caminante, no hay Camino, se hace Camino al andar.*

Traveler, there is no road; you make your path as you walk.

**Antonio Machado**



## The White Wanderer (El Mono Callejero)

I walk. When I don't know what to do, I walk, usually in the evening through the city streets. The best nights are those with no wind and plenty of rain. The rain drives other people from the streets, and the pattering raindrops on my umbrella isolate me from the clamor of the city. And, if I walk long and far enough, I hope to find the answers in the calm after the storm raging in my head.

Someone calls after me, "Hola Mono Callejero, cómo estás?"

Hey, White Wanderer, how are you?

The voice sounds far away; the rain has turned into a tropical downpour. Fat droplets become jets of water falling from the heavens like strands of wet spaghetti. I look up from underneath my umbrella and see a thickset man in a pitch-black poncho, which is glistening in the rain. I stare into the dark, hollow barrel of a single-gauge shotgun resting casually on his arm,

like a child nestling in the crook of its mother's arm. The man smiles and waves at me. He is one of the many security guards who guard the apartment complex on my street. I give a small smile and wave back. I walk on because I need to do some walking tonight.

I am a walker. At least, that's what I would like to have others believe. But recently, I realize that all I do is walk away—from a fear that I don't want to feel. It's this fear that drives me through the streets of Medellín.

## **1 Familiar territory**

For a brief moment, I can't think of a single reason why I should be standing here. It can't be Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, because the airport has become an old acquaintance over the years. The invisible force driving me to the departure hall is only slightly stronger than my reticence.

I stand at the edge of the giant departure hall, look down from the departures board and stare briefly at the gleaming stone floor. My eyes follow the winding path made by a floor scrubber. The trail is fresh. When I look up again, I see people swarming all around me; they are all driven or perhaps drawn by a force just as invisible as the force pushing me onward. Wheeled suitcases roll slavishly along behind most of them. I only see a single timid couple, who I assume are in their late sixties, doing it the old-fashioned way. Wearing socks and sandals, they're dragging an old suitcase without wheels. The suitcase has been freshly wrapped in trans-

parent plastic security film. Post-war frugality is my guess at an explanation.

Just ahead, Starbucks and Burger King stare back at me. It's as if I've never left. As always, the Starbucks beckons. Not really, of course, but I can't ignore the faint yet undeniable compulsion which every coffee addict will recognize. It's as if a voice is saying, "Hi, Pelle, good to see you again, man. The usual? A double espresso for the road?" I actually shake my head, as if a real person is standing in front of me. I can't use the caffeine today.

I would normally enjoy being here, the starting point of often exciting journeys and adventures lasting months, even years; I would have hung around the tax-free shops to kill time as soon as I passed the security check. Not to look at the shops, but to watch people. The last time I was there, not too long ago, I became fascinated with a girl with a carefully constructed "poverty look". She was wearing a camo shirt with a large red heart stitched on the back and cotton-stripped pants. The wide pants legs flapped around her long legs as she passed the shops in

her sandals. She had a nice butt, round and bouncy but firm, well-defined by the thin pants. I was impressed, but something else about her drew my attention: the giant bundle of dreadlocks which were stacked on top of her head like a pile of sticks. “Hair cancer”, I heard myself whisper. That’s what a good friend of mine calls it. Funny how that works. Just like another friend of mine can’t see the numerous branches of a tree without thinking about lungs, I can’t look at dreadlocks without thinking about the words “hair cancer”.

Now I’m standing in front of the shops again. But this time, I walk right past them. I’m not in the mood for people watching. I’m even less in the mood for taking this journey. I think back to all the trips I’ve made in the past and ask myself why this one is different. They’ve always been exciting, sometimes almost too exciting. I think back to one trip I took in early March of 1995. Back then, I walked past the same shops I’m walking past today. My chest felt like it was caught in a vice that tightened every time I took a breath. My heart was doing its best to find its

way out through my throat. I only have to think about it, and that feeling comes back again.

I instantly see myself back in that departure hall, thirteen years ago, a younger version of myself wearing a green and brown camouflage uniform with a blue beret bearing the UN emblem on my shaved head. I was standing in line between other young men wearing the same camouflage uniforms and blue berets. “Fresh meat,” a sergeant called out, laughing, “ready to be shipped out.” The younger me wasn’t laughing. That sergeant would soon be on his way home, while I was being shipped off to a civil war in Bosnia. Six months earlier, I had decided to volunteer for the UN peacekeeping mission, something I would sarcastically refer to years later as “that brilliant idea.” It was clear to me that I didn’t want to spend my military service in a barrack somewhere in the Netherlands. I wanted to “make a difference” in the world. And, for my younger self, what that “difference” meant was as obvious as the fact that grass is green. People who asked me why I wanted to go to Bosnia, immediately understood my “make a

difference” explanation and sealed it with an approving nod. Six months later, heading back to the Netherlands from Bosnia in the loading bay of a Belgian Hercules troop transport—one which would crash a year later at Eindhoven Airport with an entire military band on board—the meaning of “making a difference” was a lot less clear.

But on that day in March, I still believed in “making a difference.” Although it was the last thing on my mind as the sergeant barked the platoon into motion and I marched towards a plane destined for Sarajevo. “Left! Left! Left-right-left!” the sergeant shouted as he walked next to the platoon. The heavy army-issue boots thudded rhythmically to the beat, causing the stone floor to shake. I marched on autopilot. My arms swinging back and forth to the rhythm. My head was filled with fearful fantasies as we headed toward the plane. In my mind’s eye I saw a grim-looking Serbian sniper in front of me, with stubble on his chin and wearing dirty old army fatigues, aiming his rifle scope at the forehead of an innocent, blonde

nineteen-year-old boy... The sniper briefly removes his finger from the trigger to put the bottle of bootleg vodka standing next to him to his lips. He puts the bottle down and shoves his beret, sporting a red soviet star, further back on his head. He picks up the rifle and looks through the scope once more. He aligns the black cross a second time, precisely on the forehead of that happily smiling blonde boy. The man tenses his finger around the trigger, moving it back ever so slightly, and breathes out slowly...

“HALT!” the sergeant called out at that exact moment. The platoon stopped suddenly, and I was whipped back to reality.

I can still clearly remember this vision thirteen years later. The brief and intense fear. The panic which caused me to step out of line while marching. But the fear had disappeared as quickly as it had come. It never went further than that one dark fantasy. During the journey I'm now about to make, I won't cross paths with any grim-looking men who want to put a bullet in my head. Now, something else lies in wait for me that makes me even more fearful. Just the



thought of it brings back the same brief burst of panic I felt then, and this has been going on for days now. It comes to me in waves. All the enthusiasm that I had when I planned this trip has evaporated.

I know by now that this game of second-guessing starts a few days before every trip I take. Suddenly they're there, those thoughts that inject doubt and fear like a fast-acting poison. This time they came earlier than usual, a week and a half before my departure. I was sitting on the sofa at my parents' house, reading a magazine that was telling me to discover the lost paradise of the Bay Islands off the Caribbean coast of Honduras. Images of white beaches and brightly colored clownfish swimming among swaying coral reefs were supposed to convince me. And then suddenly they were there, like visitors that come and ring your doorbell while you're taking a shower.

Why did you want to walk the Camino to Santiago de Compostela again, Pelle? You're not going to find any answers there. The solitude will slowly tear you up from the inside.

You don't have to go, just stay home. Or go to those Bay Islands, they sound pretty good. Sounds like fun, you can probably even go surfing there.

"Solitude?" Myrthe had cried out in surprise. "Are you afraid of being alone?"

Myrthe is a good friend from whom I keep no secrets. Well, almost no secrets. A week before my departure—when the first doubts started creeping in—we were standing huddled together under the patio heaters in front of a bar in the nightlife district in The Hague. It was cold outside, and the cigarette smoke was almost indiscernible from the damp of my warm breath. She noticed that I wasn't as enthusiastic about walking the Camino as I had been a few weeks earlier. After much probing, I told her what my biggest fear was when I thought about that endlessly long walk. I added that I was even more terrified than when I was shipped off to Bosnia.

"I have never met anyone who's more scared of potential loneliness than a potential bullet to the brain. You'll survive loneliness, Pelle. You won't survive a bullet in your skull."

“And it’s self-induced loneliness as well,” I added, almost apologetically.

“I think you’re afraid of what you’ll find out about yourself during these periods of loneliness.” And in the same breath: “What does your Colombian girlfriend say about you dropping off the radar for a month to walk the Camino?”

I had hoped Myrthe would have left that subject alone. She was giving me a hard time today.

“She doesn’t say much of anything. I told her that I needed a month to myself and was going off the grid for a while. She didn’t really react to that. I think she was all right with it. And I’ll see her again right after that because as soon as I arrive in Santiago de Compostela, I’ll travel to Colombia via Madrid.”

She looked at me for a while but remained silent. Myrthe took a drag from her cigarette and stared off into space as she blew the smoke upward out of the corner of her mouth into the cold night air. Her look was a touch too long and intense, just as hard as her questions had sounded. I knew she didn’t believe me. She knew the stories about my Colombian girlfriend

by now. For months, she had been privy to all our romantic issues via our weekly and, when things got nasty, sometimes daily chats. Her name was Esperanza. Esperanza Montoya-Velez. Within two weeks after I met Esperanza, Myrthe had already pointed out to me that whenever there was trouble, I was always talking about Montoya-Velez. And when things were going well, I called her Esperanza. In our chats, it was often Montoya-Velez, which quickly became MV for short.

I had met Esperanza a year earlier in Medellín, where I was still living at the time. And it hadn't been long before I met Montoya-Velez. I had been working for almost two years in Colombia, for a United Nations humanitarian organization, when I first met Esperanza. To say that the relationship was complicated from the start would be an understatement. I even dare call it an emotional rollercoaster of the most addictive kind. Myrthe didn't know my girlfriend personally; but, if my stories were anything to go by, she could figure out that Esperanza would have

had plenty to say about my month of radio silence.

“Why are you going then if you’re dreading this so much?” Myrthe kept staring off into space with a frown; she had lit another cigarette in the meantime. Before I could answer, she went on: “What on earth were you thinking when you came up with this idea?” For the second time that evening, she gave me an intense look.

## 2 The decision

To be honest, on the night that I decided to walk the Camino to Santiago de Compostela, I wasn't thinking much of anything. Six months before my Camino started, I was sitting in WOKA, my favorite bar in Medellín. The locally distilled Ron Viejo de Caldas in my fourth Cuba libre of the evening was working its magic.

I'm actually selling WOKA short by calling it a bar. It's a kitsch, five-star, open-air night club on the rooftop of a three-story building in the heart of the vibrant, local nightlife district. It was where the hip crowd came to see and be seen. Huge fake trees were scattered around the rooftop, draped with equally fake vines. On one side of the elongated space, a waterfall flowed from a balcony and on the other side stood an immense aquarium where fluorescent fish were languidly swimming to and fro. Between the trees, groups of sofas offered spectacular views of the city.

I was sitting on my regular sofa on a dais off to the side, so I had a clear view of the entire bar. I always made sure to book that spot when I was visiting with friends. That night, I was absent-mindedly watching the people at the bar. The king on his throne, as a good friend would always jest. I preferred to see myself as a high-end anthropologist who would rather mingle with the local VIPs than with some indigenous tribe somewhere in the Colombian jungle, dehydrated from diarrhea and scraping leeches off my skin.

In the two and a half years I spent visiting this bar, I had a chance to thoroughly study the locals who came here. I had subdivided them into two groups. One group consisted of the young, hip crowd: models, soap-opera actors, professional soccer players from the slums who had suddenly made it rich, or spoiled brats with rich parents. The second group consisted of repulsive middle-aged men who hid their lined faces behind moustaches and failed to stuff their paunches into their ill-fitting suit pants. They came in with stunningly gorgeous girls who

were at least 20 years younger. I had tried to see things differently, but these girls were nothing more than giggling accessories with short skirts, stiletto heels and pumped-up breasts. The men were often businessmen thriving off the growing economy, or lieutenants of the new drug barons who had divided up Pablo Escobar's cocaine empire amongst themselves. The handful of foreigners in the bar who lived in Medellín could also be divided up across these two categories. What both groups had in common was that they were *play*, as the Colombians themselves liked to call it. *Play* is when you have money and want to show the world that you've got it. I was semi-play. Tolerated-*play*, as the Dutch would say. I had a *narcoment*, a luxury apartment built by project developers who needed to whitewash their drug money, and I frequented showy bars in upscale neighborhoods where the local elite liked to hang out. My biggest shortcoming: I didn't have a *mafionetta*, one of those giant pimpmobiles with tinted windows, a must for anyone who was or



wanted to be play. I didn't fit in because I came to the bar on foot... *Mono Callejero*.

I sat slumped on the two-seater sofa. Freja was seated next to me, and Emma and Fernando were sitting on the two-seater across from me. Freja and Emma had been living and working in Medellín for a year. Freja was a young, proud Danish woman who, like me, worked for the UN. Emma was a kind-hearted Swiss who has spent years travelling from war zone to war zone for the International Red Cross. Fernando was my office's Colombian driver, who had become my best friend over the years. He had come from the other side of this immense country, dragged out from the dark volcanic earth of Mocoa near the Ecuadorian border, some 800 kilometers away. He was, like me, a sort of outsider in Medellín. I looked at them, all three of them beautiful people and good friends, but I kept my distance while they talked animatedly to each other. Fernando was teasing Emma, as usual. He was starting to tell Freja how he managed to make her blush yesterday.

“Ay Fernando,” Emma giggled shyly, turning red again.

That was the second day in a row that he’d succeeded.

So Fernando was saying how he had arranged to meet me a day earlier to get a coffee in a bar. When we arrived, we saw Emma sitting alone at a table, deeply engrossed in a magazine. When Fernando called her name, she jumped out of her chair. She cried out, “Ay *chicos*, what a nice surprise to see you here. What a coincidence, I was thinking of you two today!”

Fernando had replied in mock outrage, “Just today?”, to which he added sweetly: “I think about you at least once every day.” Her white skin had instantly turned a bright shade of red.

Freja threw her head back and burst out laughing as she slapped Emma on the knee with the flat of her hand. Emma blushed an even deeper shade of red. Fernando watched with satisfaction the effect his new round of teasing had on the girls.

I smiled. I was doing well. Very well, even. Or at least, so it seemed. I had the kind of life many

of my acquaintances could only dream of. I had a well-paid job with the United Nations and was living in luxury. I was allowed to live and travel in a spectacularly beautiful country while my boss was footing the bill. I had found a great group of friends in Medellín. Medellín, the city I had grown to love.

While the conversation faded into the background, my gaze was drawn to the nocturnal metropolis below me. The city was lying, almost literally, at my feet. The orange glow from thousands of streetlights covered Medellín like a low-hanging mist trapped in the deep valley. I thought it was a shame that people outside of Colombia often only associated Medellín with cocaine and Pablo Escobar. Pablo had been bad news for the city and had reinforced the worldwide image of the coke-dealing Colombian. A Colombian colleague once told me that every time he went to visit family in America, he was pulled out of the line by American immigration services at the border and taken into a small back room. Being very inquisitive by nature, I asked him what happened in that small back

room. My colleague remained silent, but with a telling smile, he dramatically mimed someone pulling on a thin pair of elastic gloves. Then he pretended to drop his trousers to his knees and leaned, arms outstretched, into the wall. He put a painful expression on his face and grimaced at me for a while. I must admit, he had quite a flair for drama. “I keep thinking that even 15 years after his death, I’m still being screwed over by Pablo Escobar,” he said with a wink, continuing to stand bent over against the wall.

So there I was, looking out over Medellín, which had started to become my Medellín. The city rose like a phoenix from ashes left by the wars between the drug cartels and the state. The coke was still there, but Escobar’s reign of terror was becoming nothing more than a bad memory, slowly fading, especially among the younger generation. The city was full of life. There was a change in the air, people were optimistic and enthusiastic. Medellín, the city that makes my heart beat faster. The city of contrasts. The city where love and hate go hand in hand. The city of saints and war criminals. The

city of the very rich and the very poor. The city with the most beautiful women and the ugliest men. The city of eternal spring. The city was alive, and I ordered my fifth Cuba libra of the evening.

A beautiful girl came up to us and placed four drinks on our table, two margaritas and two Cuba libres. It was Melissa. I recognized her beautiful dark-brown eyes and sensual smile from a distance. She had been working at WOKA for two years, which was how long we had known each other. We had become friends. She knew that I drank my Cuba libre with Ron Viejo de Caldas, the finest Colombian rum, Diet Coke because I was trying to slim down, a splash of lemon juice for a bit of bite, and a lot of ice. As she left, she winked at me and mimed making a phone call with her hand. I winked back and nodded absent-mindedly.

Medellín was looking at me with those twinkling dark eyes, trying to convince me to stay and laugh and dance just one more day. But that night, Medellín was no longer enough to com-

pensate for the growing disquiet that was gnawing at me from the inside. I wanted out.

### 3 Humanitarian incidents

My dissatisfaction ran deep; it had seeped into every fiber of my being. Not only because of my tiring yet exciting relationship with Montoya-Velez, but particularly because of my work. I was ashamed of feeling like this. It was a dissatisfaction borne of luxury, that typical Dutch Calvinistic “Your life is fine, so stop whining” kind of discontent.

My shame was caused in part by my salary. The UN paid five thousand dollars a month for my junior post. I also received a one-time fifteen-thousand-dollar relocation fee and a rent subsidy that increased as my rent—and the status of the neighborhood I lived in—increased. And the fact that all this was tax-free didn’t do much to alleviate my shame. I had been able to mitigate my shame somewhat by refusing to buy a tax-free *mafionetta* with tinted windows and conspicuous diplomatic license plates. What made things worse was that my salary was paid in Colombian pesos. Every month, I received a

bank statement from my Colombian bank, Banco Sudameris, telling me that my salary had been transferred on schedule, as always. “The only thing the UN does on time, is pay salaries,” I would say to anyone who was willing to listen. I didn’t even have to try to sound cynical anymore. The bank statement read twelve million Colombian pesos. I liked to stress the enormity of that amount to people: “That’s a twelve with six zeros behind it.”

A girlfriend once asked me if I ever had any problems with that. Did I realize that a Colombian working for minimum wage had to work for two years to earn what I received in one month? With a wife and at least four children to provide for as well?

“And at least two mistresses,” I had added, laughing.

My girlfriend was not amused.

I admit, earning 2400 percent more than a hard-working Colombian every month contributed to my discomfort, but it wasn’t the most important reason behind my dissatisfaction. The main reason was working for an or-



ganization which, in my opinion, achieved absolutely nothing. Everyone was always busy, as was I, in my own way. But with what, I often asked myself in despair. People were running left and right like headless chickens, and I was trying to keep up. I often imagined a box of ants, strewn on the ground, all running around in circles with no apparent purpose. With hindsight, I realized that I had made a similar observation in 1995, when I was stationed in Bosnia as a UN peacekeeper. The official name of the peacekeeping mission was UNPROFOR, but my fellow peacekeepers and I had quickly nicknamed the mission RUNPROFOR.

With everything I had experienced, I often wondered for how long someone can be genuinely surprised by the things they come across in life. Over the past few years in Colombia, the number of times that I experienced one surprise after another had increased significantly. And they weren't pleasant surprises. Just when I thought I had seen everything, the UN managed to prove me wrong. I had even thought up a name for this sensation: UN bafflement.

They were all incidents, just like the bewildering experiences I had had in other countries were incidents. One of those incidents had happened after a devastating hurricane had ravaged Honduras in the late nineties. A company had shipped 90 pallets of SlimFast, the canned diet drink, over. The label read: "Lose weight quickly and easily." Another incident was a shipping container full of used shoes, in which I found a grand total of 3 right shoes among the 12,331 left shoes. And let's not forget the well-meaning community theater project set up by Lieve, a charming young Belgian lady, in a new relocation district in northern Guatemala. It was meant to strengthen the bonds between its younger residents. The local police told me later that within a year, three quarters of the youths were involved in an international drug network. That drug network was responsible for the entire cocaine supply chain from the coca fields in Colombia to the restrooms of hip New York clubs. But look on the bright side: she did succeed in bringing people together.

I often visited rural villages dotted with rusty signs displaying a project name and a serious value in dollars, as well as a giant logo of the organization that had sponsored the project. What remained of these projects was just as rusty as the sign itself.

“How did you become so cynical, Pelle?” Freja asked me one day. She sounded genuinely worried. “I just can’t imagine you always being like that.”

“Me? Cynical?” My denial was a reflex. But she was right. I even remembered the moment when it started, ten years before.