

# Two Steps Onward

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Fate announced itself as a buzzing in the pocket of my jeans.

The guy running the team-building workshop for the refugee centre where I volunteered was checking off the clichés: altruism without empathy is like a ship without a rudder; a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. That one I'd lived. But since when did helping people get so complicated?

My mind was on the homework he'd set. *Be prepared to discuss three events that have defined your life.* I could only think of two.

The first was at college: I'd helped my roommate Camille get a termination. It had meant a road trip across the country, from St Louis to Los Angeles, estrangement from my religious mother, and the beginning of the kind of thinking that had brought me to where I was and who I was.

The second was the death of my husband, Keith, in a car accident. My search for answers and healing led me first to Camille's home in Cluny, in eastern France, and then to a single step that turned into a twelve-hundred-mile walk along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the ancient pilgrims' path, from Camille's door to the west coast of Spain. I had come back stronger—strong enough to say that my career was more important than moving to England to live with Martin, the engineer I'd fallen for on the walk.

But three years later, here I was, in a hotel meeting room,

surrounded by negative energy, while outside the sun caught the white caps across San Francisco's harbour. I took out my phone: an email from some guy called Gilbert Morvan with a .fr address. Were scammers now posing as Frenchmen?

Then I remembered: he was Camille's ex-husband. I typed my PIN, and fate showed its face.

*Camille will make a pilgrimage on the Chemin d'Assise to Rome to see the Pope.*

What the hell? Gilbert was Camille's *ex*. They'd split up just after I finished the Camino.

And the *Pope*? Camille was Catholic, but when we were roommates in college, the most piousness I'd seen was a quick visit to the priest for a confession so she could sin some more. Always the same sin. She liked men. Today, I'd say she was conflicted. Back then I just thought she was a hypocrite. Not for screwing around: for going to church.

Plus, the Chemin d'Assise is a *walking* track. There are only two long-distance trails that go through Cluny: the other is the Camino de Santiago. Camille had watched me pack for that walk, freaking out at the idea of living for three months without makeup. She liked discount designer labels, sexy lingerie and Chanel perfume. Not merino-wool shirts, sports bras and a chip of soap carried from hostel to hostel. No way was she walking to Rome.

I was right, but in the worst way.

*Camille has multiple sclerosis. She is unable to travel without assistance. We are reunited. We will depart Friday.*

So don't try to talk us out of it. Friday was three days away. And it seemed she was making her pilgrimage for the most traditional of reasons: the hope of a cure.

My neighbour nudged me. The facilitator was looking right at me and my phone. 'It's not enough to talk the talk...'

I stood up and headed to the door.

'Everything okay, Zoe?' the facilitator asked.

'I'm walking the walk.'

I read the rest of Gilbert's email in the street. Most of it was practical stuff. How far can one travel in a day? Is there air conditioning in the hostels? What did women wear in the evenings?

I'd heard of people doing the pilgrim trails in wheelchairs, following the cycling routes. I pictured Camille, stereotypically French in stiletto heels, being pushed by Gilbert along a dirty highway, trucks bearing down on her.

A thought struck me: maybe I could get a hold of the cart that Martin had pulled from Cluny to Santiago: it had been redesigned as an all-terrain gurney for the army. Camille could travel on the walking tracks and avoid the traffic.

I hadn't reached out to Martin for three years. He'd taken my decision to stay in San Francisco and follow my dream of being an artist as a rejection—which I guess it was. I'd told myself it was just a vacation fling. It had been harder to let go of than I'd thought it would be, but the Camino isn't life.

Camille and I had only seen each other once in twenty-eight years. That single day at her home in Cluny had been enough to send me escaping in the direction of Spain. We were different emotionally and spiritually, and at college she'd driven me nuts. Until she came to me for help.

Since then—despite sometimes going a year without hearing from her, despite not being able to remember the names of her

partners—there had been something unbreakable between us. Something I didn't have with anyone else.

I didn't need meditation or divine guidance to tell me what I knew already. I had to be with Camille on this journey too.

Even before I got home I'd called the travel editor at the *Chronicle* about doing a series of cartoons and stories from the Assisi trail and gotten a 'maybe'. A friend at the refugee organisation knew someone looking for a short-term rental. The universe was playing ball.

The time was right, too. My political cartoons were making it into print less often. I didn't like the people I was drawing, and I guess it showed. Anything I tried to do for one of my daughters made trouble with the other. And I was over the volunteering.

That left Martin. I forwarded him Gilbert's email, told him that I would be walking to Rome with Camille and, I knew it was a stretch, but if he wanted to bring his cart...Then I hit the internet to find a cheap ticket to France.

Martin got back to me while I was checking out deals. Couldn't realistically consider a walk of that length on virtually no notice. Committed to time with Sarah—his daughter. I could hear his voice in my head. Distant in every way. And the subtext: *Two days' notice—you set me up to let you down.* But the reason was the same as it was three years ago. Sarah must still be messed up. Regular college kids didn't need their parents around.

There was another option for the cart. I was friends on Facebook with Bernhard, the kid who'd helped in the design and was marketing it to the German marines. Or something like that. I messaged him and he was back to me right away.

*I will deliver a cart personally; please send the address.*

No *looking forward to seeing you again* but Bernhard wasn't that kind of guy.

The cheapest flight was with KLM. If I left tomorrow, I could have a stopover at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, a collection of modern art I'd always wanted to see.

That gave me twelve hours to get my stuff together. I spent two of them finding a gift for Camille, and one at the gear store. There, I knew exactly what I wanted: technical, lightweight, quick-dry. Two T-shirts, two thermal tops, a fleece, a waterproof jacket, walking pants with zip-off legs. The lightest hiking shoes, forget about ankle support. Three pairs of socks. Plus a new backpack, and more gifts for Camille and Gilbert.

The next morning, pitching my pack into the airport shuttle, I was amazed at how liberated I felt. So easily, suddenly, why-the-hell-didn't-I-do-this-before *free*.

I was on my way to see my soulmate of nearly thirty years, in Europe for only the second time, about to walk another camino, reliving the best me-time of my adult life—and in *Italy*. Churches filled with art, stone walls that had seen battles and plagues and the best and worst of humankind, linguine with artichokes. All in front of me. I was so high, I couldn't sleep, even on the plane, train and bus that got me from Amsterdam to Lyon, then on to Mâcon and Cluny. I hoped I could share my joy for the walk with Camille and that it might help her deal with her illness.

Cluny looked totally different to what I remembered. Instead of the winter grey, there was a vibrant central square full of cars and tourists, people eating and drinking on terraces and on the street, and flowers cascading down walls and out of window

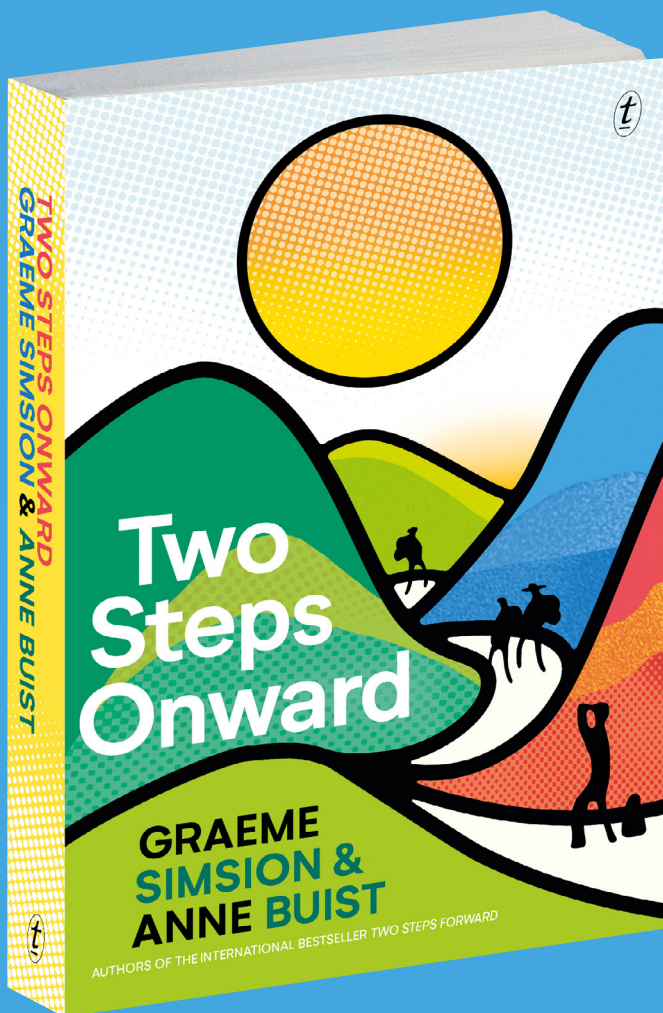
boxes. The ancient abbey walls, sombre on my first visit, had come to life.

I turned in the direction of Camille's home, and found myself facing the hill where I'd first seen Martin three years ago, half-expecting he'd be there again, hauling his cart. But there were just the trees and the wall of the cemetery.

As I looked down the empty street, my jet-lagged brain finally began to confront the reality of seeing Camille, my independent, impulsive friend now disabled and desperately turning to religion. I had to take off my pack to find the Kleenex and sat sobbing under a tree.

It was better that Martin wasn't coming. I had enough to deal with.





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