

CAMINO WANDERING
(SAMPLE FILE)

TARA MARLOW

THE MOST CRACKPOT IDEA EVER

SAINT JEAN PIED DE PORT

AUBREY LAY, heart pounding and suffering from an anxiety level she'd never experienced before. What the hell was she thinking? Did she honestly believe she could walk the entire length of northern Spain? What if she injured herself? Who would help her? Was she kidding herself, believing she could do this? She'd never been super fit, not even in her younger days. But now? Now she was fifty and her body ached at the prospect of the distance. Eight hundred bloody kilometres. Fuckity fuck, fuck.

Fact was, she was falling apart before the walk had even begun. At least mentally. What was her Plan B? What if she didn't walk the Camino de Santiago?

She rolled over on to her side and placed her hand over her pounding heart. She'd come halfway around the world to do this bloody walk. She had to do it. Besides, she'd been talking about walking the Camino for... well, months. Ever since her son Simon had shown her that bloody movie, the Martin Sheen one.

People were watching, waiting for her to fail. People at home. Friends online. She could sense their expectations, waiting for her to

quit. Yes, she had to do this, if only to prove them wrong. Because, if she didn't, they won the judgement game.

Fuck. Fuckity fuck, fuck. She flipped on to her back once more.

Besides, she thought, with a waiting list at her next night's accommodation, she had little chance of getting a bed if she changed her mind.

There was no choice. She had to swallow this angst and get on with it. Aubrey sat up on the soft double bed and placed her feet on the plain wooden floor. She looked around at the room in her albergue. Albergue. She'd have to get used to that word. It was what they called hostels on the Camino. She rolled the word on her tongue. The albergue she was now in, in Saint Jean Pied de Port in the south of France, offered private rooms, along with dorms. Most albergues on the Camino were just dorms. That she knew from her research. She'd opted for a private room for this part of her journey and was relieved she had.

She looked around the room. It was clean, basic, filled with everything a pilgrim needed, she supposed. A bed with minimal linens, a simple wooden chair, and a small bathroom containing a minuscule sink, toilet, and a decent-sized shower. It was simple, but at least she could privately deal with her pre-Camino panic.

She looked back to the rustic wooden chair in the room's corner. On the seat lay her nylon shopping bag, which held her pilgrim necessities: her English passport, European cash, a travel pack of tissues, a small stash of Nurofen, Chapstick, her Ray-Ban sunglasses and her Pilgrim Credential. She'd stopped in the Pilgrim Office the night before to pick up her Credential, a crucial part of her walk. It was the document that proved she was a pilgrim to be stamped by albergues and restaurants along the way. It would allow her both access to the albergues and ultimately, proof of her pilgrimage once she reached Santiago de Compostela. If she ever reached it, she mused.

To the left of the chair, her pristine maroon Deuter backpack sat in a large black bucket on the floor. For bedbug containment, she had surmised the night before. Her backpack was spewing open with all of its contents. She wasn't ready to contain herself to a compact space just yet, and just the thought of sharing a dorm room full of people took

her anxiety to new heights. With a shake of her head, she was relieved to have booked a private room.

Fuckity fuck, fuck was right.

Aubrey threw herself back on the bed. She was bone tired just envisioning the walk. It wasn't just the Camino. She cried when her twenty-three-year-old son had dropped her off at Melbourne airport. Not cried. Sobbed. She felt like she was leaving home, never to return. A part of her wished that was the case. There was so much she wanted to leave behind, but this adventure was only for three months. Besides, she was returning to her European roots. Well, her English roots anyway. That had exhausted her too. Seeing her dad for the first time in years had almost broken her completely. Her beautiful dad. He looked old and lonely, like a worn-out pair of boots that had been discarded into the back of the closet.

Aubrey sat back up and reached over to the nightstand for her iPhone, disconnected it from the charger and unlocked it. She looked at the clock to see what time it was at home. Seeing it was early evening, she clicked over to FaceTime to call her son.

"Hi Mum. Where are you?"

"Hi love. I'm in Saint Jean Pied de Port. I got in about seven last night. Sorry I didn't call you. Did you get my text?"

"Yeah, I got it. I wasn't sure if you were starting your walk today or tomorrow." Simon hesitated. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, love, I'm fine. It was a bit of an ordeal getting here from London yesterday. That rain from the last few weeks has done a number on transport. The rail line from Biarritz to Saint Jean was closed, so I had to work out a shuttle," she said, knowing she was rambling. "And, of course, by the time I'd stopped by the Pilgrim Office and checked in to my albergue, I was just too tired to call you. Sorry about that."

"It's fine Mum. You sound a bit, I don't know ... worried. Are you okay?"

She paused before answering, "Yes, I'm alright. Anxious I suppose." It was hard to admit this to her son. She hated him knowing she was having second thoughts.

"Why? You seemed so excited by this walk."

"Oh, I know." She said, remembering her eagerness of this adventure had blocked everything else that was going on in her life.

"How was London?" asked Simon. "How was Granddad?"

Aubrey sighed. "Hard. He looks sad, lost. It's been hard for him since Granny died. I should have stayed longer."

"Is that why you're anxious? Or..." he prodded.

Aubrey looked down and tried to smooth some wrinkles from her shirt, hesitating on her answer. She shifted focus back to the screen.

"No, it's not that," she said, not wanting to admit what was going through her mind. "I'm just worried about how much I've committed to. Whether I can do this. Eight hundred kilometres is a long way. It's like walking from Melbourne to Sydney."

"Yeah, I know. But you can do this. Put one foot in front of the other and before you know it, you'll be in Santiago," her son said.

"If only I had your spirit."

"Mum. I know you can do this. You need to do this. We both know you do. Besides, once you get going, you'll be fine," said Simon, with the confidence of youth.

"We'll see." She looked out through the French doors into the courtyard beyond; the light was peppering the opposing wall.

"We have a deal, remember?" he prodded. She remembered. She asked him not to let her quit, no matter what she said.

"You're right. One day at a time," she said, trying to boost her confidence for what lay ahead. "Okay, I need to get going. I need to pick up some snacks. Tomorrow is only eight kilometres, but it's all uphill and the next day it's longer."

"Okay. I'll let you get to it."

"Thanks love. How's everything there? Sorry, should have asked."

"All is fine. Don't worry," he said, but Aubrey also knew her son wouldn't tell her if there was a disaster either. She knew he could handle anything that might come up. "Mum, you've got this. I know you do."

"Thanks love. I needed to hear that," she said, looking down, now stretching out the wrinkles in her black merino t-shirt. "I'll reach out again when I can. From what I read Wi-Fi is sporadic over the next few days."

“No worries. Just be careful. I’ll be thinking of you, sending you positive vibes. Love you Mum! Mwah.”

“Love you too.” She paused, before adding, “Thanks again for the support.” She blew an air kiss into the phone before hanging up.

“Yes. I can do this,” she said aloud. If only she believed that. Each time she considered the walk, she felt unsure, nervous. Was it just about the walk, she wondered? She thought about Simon. He had been her rock in so much of her life, especially over the last two years.

Five minutes later, Aubrey stepped out of her albergue to join a few other backpackers in the street. Some carried the look of lost sheep, eyes wide and bulging. Others looked determined, like they’d been here before and knew exactly what they were doing. Aubrey felt akin with the lost sheep crowd.

As she walked the compact streets of the Middle Age hamlet, she wondered about the stories that lay behind the thick walls. The ancient stone buildings, stuccoed with white-wash and capped with red tiles, lined the street. Colourful shutters bordered the open windows, their residents chatting with their neighbour across the way. It was an almost party atmosphere, and it was barely nine in the morning.

Her map led her to the supermarket in the newer part of town. The market was much bigger than she imagined, and she had to remind herself of the limited space in her pack. Keeping herself in check, she purchased roasted almonds, a couple of apples, some dried bananas and a robust amount of trail mix.

Aubrey walked back to the old part of the city. She needed to buy trekking poles. Given the cost of them in Australia, plus the hassle of getting them to France, buying them here made sense. She read the St Jean Pied de Port Pilgrim Shop offered everything a pilgrim needed, so she’d start there. They had everything from the trekking poles she needed, to buffs, to even new boots. Although she couldn’t imagine starting this walk wearing new shoes of any kind. Talk about priming yourself for blisters straight off the mark!

When Aubrey stepped into the shop, a petite smiling woman greeted her in French. Crap, she thought. She should have brushed up on her French before arriving. She had taken a Spanish class, figuring she could get by on her rusty high school French, but she had not imagined a full transaction with it. Her face must have given away her

panic. The woman asked, with a knowing smile, if she spoke English. Aubrey looked embarrassed, nodded and mumbled “Petit Francais”, or little French, and a very grateful “Merci.”

The shopkeeper was gracious. She spent the next ten minutes explaining the right poles for her. She left Aubrey to try them for herself, when another pilgrim walked in. The shopkeeper offered the same greeting as she had with Aubrey, and it made Aubrey smile when the pilgrim reacted the same as she had. Like a stunned fish, she chuckled. They must get this all day, every day.

With poles and a poncho purchased, a decision she made at the last minute, Aubrey headed back to her albergue. She wanted to explore the town more, but she was so tempted to curl up on the bed for the afternoon. She wasn't jetlagged. Just emotionally exhausted. Best to keep moving, she thought, so she spent the next few hours wandering the town. She headed up the hill to La Citadelle, once a 17th Century French Military building. Now the fort was a school. The views were spectacular. She could see the details in the village below. But it was the surrounding Pyrenees countryside that had her heart in her throat. Tomorrow she would climb those mountains. The following day, she'd be on the other side. It was enough to give her an anxiety attack.