

*Opening to Damn!*

*I'm going.* I had decided, my prior silence at the table mistaken for quiet reflection instead of a bout of daydreaming.

'What, Dad?' said Anna.

'Oh nothing,' I replied, as what can you say when you've been so quiet as to make poor company?

Lunching with my family in Nuremberg, Germany, we were sitting at a park eatery south of the city – myself, Anna, her boyfriend Alex and my darling Virginia, reviewing the menu. On a warm day under light cloud, the café's large windows provided expansive parkland views. With a choice of four mains, we ordered all four so we could share a tasting.

Pleased with our treat, I had my back to the awesome darkness of the 1933 Nuremberg Rally site where hundreds of thousands of adoring Nazis once had one main course of the vengeful paranoia and the offal soup of Herr Adolf Hitler.

His grand administration building across the lake, as circular as the Roman Colosseum, now housed an exhibition on his hate-filled and murderous life. An hour before, we had visited its spacious rooms, impressed by its documents, photos and films, including the even-tempered voice of the museum narrator that allowed us to feel the full horror of Nazi reign.

Against the scale of this historic tragedy, my decision to tackle the Camino de Santiago was a mere trifle, with peaches and cream. Having twenty unscheduled days without family

or friends as companions, I made a snap decision to walk the Camino Francés pilgrimage path from the Spanish city of León to mighty Santiago de Compostela – tomorrow.

Back at our hotel, it was farewell to Anna and Alex, two aspiring opera singers living in Germany for the foreseeable future. I had selected the bare minimum of possessions and packed them into my backpack, wondering whether this undertaking would prove misguided, inspirational, or plain mad. My boots were bought in a Portuguese market a few weeks ago for fifteen euros; far from ideal, but it was too late to wear in a new pair.

Sensible Me had earlier opted for relaxing on Andalusian beaches, exploring Madrid, journeying over the warmer landscapes of Spain's south, and visiting its heritage towns and bars. For making friends, sharing local delicacies.

Ambitious Me had other ideas. It demanded purpose: *Walk the rugged sierras and high plateaux of creative endeavour*, it said; *reflect, write, seek the sublime. Besides, along the Camino you'll meet fellow pilgrims, and gain grand fraternity.*

Sensible me objected: *What's wrong with a light-hearted journey, a free spirit indulging in life's delights? Meet the Spanish, try out the tapas, maybe become flamenco?*

But my ambitious spirit insisted on a Santiago journey, long-distance walking with the added struggle of creating stories and *poetica*. *You have written two guidebooks and three novels*, the voice says. *You're a prize-winning short-story writer and maniac poet. You fail yourself if you don't take up the challenge.*

And as if that were not enough, it prattled on about *this walking business; it worked for Jean Jacques Rousseau, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Kafka and Goethe, didn't it?*

I believed.