



Leaving Golinhac, France

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Cast Iron String

I FIRST LEARNED ABOUT THE WEIGHT OF THINGS IN 1974, WHEN STEVE and I wandered through Africa. The popular myth of those times said longhaired eighteen-year-olds were unhygienic and not interested in material comforts. Not us. Raised on middle-class Sunday school values, we liked our socks fresh and our hair oil-free. So we carried a few extras—clothing, soaps, and first aid supplies. How heavy could a rucksack be? We imagined we were light enough.

I remember the goodness of the people there. “Twins?” they would ask, rightly. We would flash our mirrored grins and say mischievously, “All white people look alike.” We thought that was funny back then. So did they. “Ah oyaybo! Oyaybo!” the Yoruba would reply, but kindly, and then laughter would go back and forth like a

swinging bridge. My brother and I were naïve and somewhat *Other*, and yet the gentle people embraced us.

But the land and the sky, they were harsh. In West Africa gravity and heat worked a ceaseless shift. The land was our determined mother, the sky our stern father. Together they trained us, their surrogate children. We toiled through the lessons slowly, our bodies carrying a quarry of dust and a millstone of humidity. And the heat shrank us until we were too small for our skins. Every day was scalding. Every day was punishing. Every day we reappraised what we could discard. We became a modern rendering of a Grimm's tale, leaving a trail of miscellany behind us. In Nouadhibou I left a pair of pants on the street; one pair of shorts would be enough. In Bamako I discarded my sleeping bag; a straw mat would do. Two of anything became one. One of everything we shared. Steve carried the penlight. I carried the knife. We borrowed scissors, sadistically dull, and hacked off each other's hair. Slowly we learned to lighten, until our hard Mother seemed softer, and a glint of approval was betrayed in great Father's eye. Months later, when we came at last to the resurrecting air of Kenya, all that remained of my belongings weighed eleven pounds and a few ounces—about the combined original birth weight of us both.

What becomes of lessons, even those hard learned? They are cached away, like the photographs I put into the box, the box that lies deep in the basement. I still exhume that box from time to time. I see two brothers sitting in a long boat on the Niger River. Walking through the fish market in Dakar. Waiting out a downpour beneath a canopy in Abidjan. Standing on the Serengeti, Kilimanjaro a giant snow cone over our heads. I can see the tired droop in our ragged clothes, and how the rucksacks were only half full. Then a memory of Mother and Father Africa stirs within me and I think, That was when we learned to travel light. But what really remains? The pungency, the exactness, the enormity—these are no longer near. The red has turned to rusty ochre, the yellow to dirty white, the black to ashen gray. Gray is the pasty smell of yam fufu, the dying sighs of the ancient bus, the briny sheen on a thousand foreheads. Gray is the

doggedness of day-long waiting, the hot flames where mosquitoes siphoned my blood, the weight of heat dripping. Gray is the letting go.

In our culture it is so easy to get weighed down. We do not walk much anymore. We let the car carry everything and pull the boat too. Even when we travel by air we still pack the little extras. Batteries, hand sanitizer, Pepto-Bismol. We call it “Being Sensible”. What if the flashlight dies? What if we cannot get to a sink? What if we get the runs? Here I think of my friend Fred who, when he comes for a visit, always brings one of those ‘saw-the-woman-in-half’ trunks. Fred is powerful, but when he hoists this cumbrous piece I see veins in his forehead rising like soufflé. “Freddie,” I cry, “you’ve done it again. You’ve brought far too much.” He does a pirouette, a rather impressive fusion of athleticism and artistry from such an ungainly frame, and up onto the bed the baggage goes. He unsnaps the suitcase, which bursts like an airbag in an overturned Jeep. Out fall the cans of protein powder, the Scrabble board, the wingtip shoes, the loofah sponge. Fred does not listen to me. A man of What If, and of our cultural times, he will return next time with even more.

But a seasoned traveller knows. Unless you have a porter for every occasion baggage is a bane, as cursed as effluent or insolvency, as welcome as cramps or mould. Baggage limits. It impedes. It goes missing. It gets stolen. Its soul-bearing contents are splayed on a customs table, a blood sacrifice. But most of all, baggage is weight. Ask any burdened traveller. Ask any infantryman. Ask any pilgrim. To walk is to leave things behind.

Thirty years later I was restocked with accoutrements of every kind. That was when my pilgrim’s journey on El Camino de Santiago would teach me to let go again. Of course, I thought I had remembered the lesson, so I was careful what to take with me. A veteran of the Camino suggested that would-be pilgrims put together the minimum they think they need then reduce these items by one half. Then put what remains together and reduce that by half again. I heeded the advice. I sorted and culled and cast aside. I showed myself no pity. I also went on practice hikes, reducing the items in my

pack each time. Finally, my gear included only two day's worth of light clothing, a windbreaker and floppy cap, a small cache of toiletries and first aid kit, a camping towel and a tiny pillow, a pen light, a one-pound sleeping bag, two water bottles, pen and paper, and a pair of sandals to relieve my feet at the end of the day. Draconian and proud, I believed I had succeeded. Then a trace of pungency like Africa drifted past, and I felt ready, my pack lighter than spider silk.

It was on the third day, near Saugues, that my re-education began. My heels were chafing, and I heard Camino quietly whisper, *Pilgrim, everything weighs something*. But I was in no mood for advice. I looked skyward and said tersely, Mother, Father, Camino, that is very banal. On the fourth day, when I stopped to rest, I opened my pack. Camino says everything weighs something. I dressed my new blisters. On the fifth day my blisters erupted, and I looked inside my pack again. I looked on the sixth day too, when my wounds began to morph into a sickening mash. Spurred by my Job-like affliction, I looked more intently every day, thinking that perhaps if I could be rid of something that did not belong then I would also be rid of the blisters. It was on the tenth day, as I stared into the shadowy recess of my pack, that I saw something staring back at me. It had unblinking eyes, cold like death. I recoiled. It was a small length of string. Cast iron string. And then, incredibly, I saw something else. I saw a needless scrap of paper. Cast iron paper. In the days and weeks that followed other cold eyes shone, too. A minuscule tin of lip balm. An aluminum clip. A spare Bic pen. Wretched cast iron, demons all. With the determination of a priest, I exorcised them one by one.

But no exorcism is effortless for me. I was raised to be thrifty, to recycle, and make use of everything. I remember when I once had to dispose of the accumulation in my storage locker. It was such a cruel test. Naturally I thought all those things had value, and I was going to "get to them someday." There were picture frames without glass, scraps of wood, a broken floor lamp, a box of old term papers and tax returns, a half-completed carving and, in perfectly useful condition, a hundred perfectly useless items. At the dump there was a pet-

rifying moment when the bulldozer roared in and swept it all away. I saw huge scooping jaws like those of a sea monster bearing down on a little boat. Then the moment passed, and as I drove back home I really did feel lighter. But this releasing, it is not instinctive.

Under the pressure of the Camino I slowly became lighter. When I crossed the Pyrenees, the wind lifted me to the summit as if I were a passing thought and then hurled me down. In those mountains-like-ramparts it was good not to be burdened, and a seed of thankfulness sprouted there. Yet, I was sometimes tempted to add weight again. Many of the pilgrim shelters have a 'free table', where travellers leave for others what they no longer need. A bottle of sun-screen, a torn shirt, a romance novel, a solitary blue sock. Camino said to me, *Take nothing from the table with the enticing sign*. But not everything was easy to pass by. I saw Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. I'd left my half-read copy waiting for me at home, so I held it for a moment as though we were old lovers reunited. But then I pulled away. I knew it was not a book, but a cinder block in disguise. I saw a nice, brand name raincoat. I live in a soggy land at home, so the urge to keep it was as strong as an ocean wave. But it was not a coat, it was a lead apron.

At least once, against both Camino's counsel and all good reason, I believed the sign anyway. At the shelter in Larrasoana I paused at the free table. I saw another raincoat but reasoned, *Why carry a raincoat merely because it is well made, when it is not likely to rain?* I saw a bottle of skin lotion. With a folksy retort I said, *Why take that aloe vera when my skin is what it is and when I stink heartily from exertion anyway?* I turned to go, relieved that I had passed another test. But then, inexplicably, I looked back. And I saw sandals. They were wholesome sandals—simple, lightweight, and strong. Like a shy girl at a dance, they did not flash an inviting smile or turn a hip coquettishly but only looked briefly, so as not to seem bold. So we danced; and it was blissful and yet at the same time cheerless, too, for over the music a voice kept shouting in my head, *Why are you dancing with these sandals when you already have a perfectly good pair?*

Regression is a strange and yet integral part of my getting lighter. Who can explain it? Is it a fear, an appetite, a wilfulness, a melancholy? Whatever the reasons, I feel certain that I do not walk this zigzag journey alone. I need only look at homes and yards everywhere, festooned with the leavings of a thousand visits to the home improvement store, the department store, the dollar store. I see endless variations on a bric-a-brac theme of rusting bicycles and broken badminton nets, plastic vines and fondue pots, kitchen gadgets and plaster statuettes, acrylic throws and another dozen-pack of socks. When do we own enough? When will we walk, once and for all, past the table with the enticing sign?

We are people of our cultural times, hard-pressed to be otherwise. It really does not matter where one sits on the economic scale either. Consider, for instance, those in our society with perhaps the least material security or worth, the shopping cart people. They forage our refuse bins for their treasures; whatever they find, they claim. They make their goods safe not with motion sensor alarms or double-locking deadbolts, but instead with a vigilant eye and a rolling property border of welded wire. I was recently sitting at a traffic light when a ragged, dispossessed man came struggling across the intersection with his chattels. The mound of detritus in his cart was shockingly high. He strained under the weight of it, blocking traffic, inciting some motorists to censure him with their horns. As he moved slowly along I marvelled again how he and others like him managed such a feat, and why they bothered. I looked on him with sadness; perhaps those honking motorists looked on him with scorn. Then I suddenly came to a stark realization. I realized that he and I were not so different. He was a powerful, living reminder of our culture's cold, material way, a way I also embraced. He lives by culture's most exalted values: resourcefulness, mobility, and accumulation. He works hard. He wants to enjoy the fruit of his work. He wants his own stake in the material world. We look at shopping cart people with sadness or scorn; but perhaps it is for ourselves we should grieve and ourselves we should scorn. Because they are just like us.

But while these camouflaged materialists mirror us, they do so imperfectly, and in their flawed impersonations we are parodied. They accumulate as we do; but, without having the means to purchase new things, they play make-believe instead. Rather than gathering cars and televisions and blenders and bank deposits, they gather cardboard and cast-off clothing and empty cans and broken toys. To put it plainly, they place value in our garbage. And because the worthless residue of our consumerism is reborn in their carts, we are caricatured, we are lampooned, and even more, we are judged. As plainspoken as any biblical prophet, when they push their refuse-that-is-wealth past us, they are heralding our offense. When do we own enough? Do we hear their message?

I recently read of a poll conducted in the United States in which forty-eight percent of respondents claimed to have made voluntary lifestyle changes such as reducing work hours in order to enjoy a more balanced and less materialistic life—and this number had more than doubled from ten years previous. I like to feel that I am among those who are hearing the message. I want to believe that I heard a shopping cart man once silently speak to me as he passed, counselling to learn the lessons of Africa again. So, why was I not content on the Camino with one pair of sandals?

Camino is Africa, constant as gravity, convincing as the mid-day sun. I was still learning, still the prodigal, still given leave while Camino waited, inexorably. Thankfully, I did not keep Camino waiting long. I soon saw the sandals for what they really were. One Pair Too Many. We parted after only three days, when I dumped them on another free table.

I journeyed farther, past the ruins of Guendalain, across the Puente la Reina, over the Roman roads west of Cirauqui. I lingered over an excellent *café con leche* at Torres del Rio and put my feet into the fountain at Viana. And when I had covered so many miles and had learned the weight of string and paper and sandal trysts, I heard Camino again. *Pilgrim, you can always get a little lighter.* Baffled and a little peeved I responded, But if I become any lighter I will vanish into the ether.

Camino answered with the Meseta. I will tell you in greater detail about the Meseta as we progress, but for now let me say only that it is an expanse of emptiness that Mephistopheles has carpeted in loose stones. It is a habitation of crickets and nightmares, and over it hangs a sledgehammer sun. I crossed the Meseta in ten days, but time, as all things, melted there. One jagged step at a time, I went slowly along. Heat-addled, my thoughts became disjointed and random. Then they too slowed, until I heard only the sound of my footsteps. And when there was silence for a minute or a year, in that desolate place, I was shown inside the storage locker of my soul. Once my eyes adjusted to the dim light there, I saw a jumble of loves and hates, redemptions and losses, hopes and despairs. I saw my certitude, my stratagems, my secret stories, my cherished toxins. And cast iron fears. And cast iron shames.

How could I have missed something so plain, that it was insufficient to face my material fetishes if I did not also face what I clung to within? Does not everything, even intangibles, perhaps especially intangibles, weigh something? And is there any weight as heavy as the weighed-down soul? God knows, if the lockers of the human psyche are all like mine, they are cluttered places. I suspect this is so, for there never was a perfect childhood, a perfect family, a perfect life. On the Meseta, Camino showed me that the catharsis of walking applied to all of me, that I could only be lighter when I let go of the weights within. But I must admit that my ego resisted to let go. It wept also, for I have always placed the greatest value on the things within. I became lighter but still my ego wept.

How light can one be? When the mountains of Leon were only a day away, I heard Camino's familiar words, *Pilgrim, everything weighs something*. This time I resisted any churlish or bewildered reply. This time I knew exactly what Camino wanted from me. Before I began my trek I had read a blog by a traveller who accepted Camino's austerities with one exception: If he had it to do over again, a little pillow would be his only luxury. Now, I thought, that is Being Sensible, because if I can get my head comfortable I can sleep anywhere.

So I had brought a tiny camping pillow, such a very small luxury, and kept it safely hidden from Camino's eyes.

I never used it. Not once. As it turned out, nearly all the shelters already provided pillows, and when there wasn't one, there was always a blanket that served just as well. My pillow was just another material something to cushion me from a cast iron phantom of my own making. And to think that I walked all the way to Astorga with that pillow before I finally surrendered it. Astorga. Six hundred miles! Why did it take me so long? Many times I thought in secret, I'm going to throw away that pillow, but every time I clung to it instead. I rationalized. It doesn't really weigh anything. I worried about contingencies. What if I need it? And, as a last desperate tactic, I thought I could eventually find some worth in it. Aha! I can use it on the airplane going home. In Astorga I finally accepted the truth. It did weigh something, because everything does; there was no What If; and, as anybody who has ever flown anywhere knows, airlines already provide pillows.

