



PARIS .....  
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TO THE .....  
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PYRENEES ...

A SKEPTIC PILGRIM WALKS THE WAY OF SAINT JAMES

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DAVID DOWNIE  
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# PARIS TO THE PYRENEES

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A SKEPTIC PILGRIM WALKS THE WAY OF SAINT JAMES

**DAVID DOWNIE**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISON HARRIS



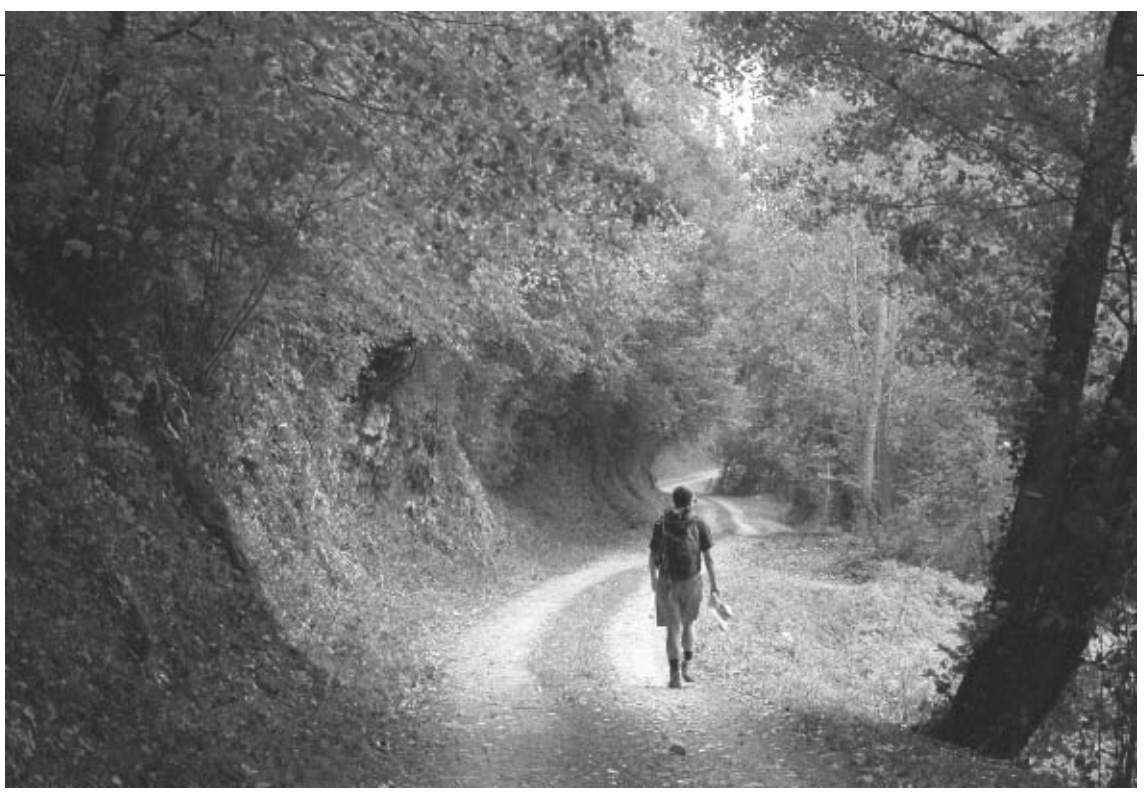
PEGASUS CRIME  
NEW YORK LONDON

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*For Alison:  
Another one from the heart.*

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# KEY PEOPLE, PLACES AND EVENTS

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**Aedui:** A Gallic tribe whose territory corresponds to the Saône-et-Loire and Nièvre administrative *départements* of central-southern Burgundy. Their capital was Bibracte. The Aedui were “friends of Rome” and, according to Julius Caesar, called upon the Romans to help them resist invasion by rival Celtic and Germanic tribes. The Roman response set in motion the Gallic Wars.

**Alésia:** Gallic fortified town where Vercingétorix (see below) and other Gallic chieftains took refuge from Julius Caesar during the final battle in the Conquest of Gaul. After a siege, the Gauls surrendered. Vercingétorix was taken prisoner, led to Rome, and murdered some years later. Alésia became a Roman city but fell into ruin in the Middle Ages. It has been excavated and transformed into a historical theme park.

**Astérix:** Fictional Gallic hero, living beyond Roman-conquered Gaul in Armorica (Brittany, western France) circa 50 BC. The name merges “asterisk” and “Vercingétorix” (see below). Originally humorous and subversive, Astérix has been adopted by the French mainstream (movies, Parc Astérix amusement park) and elements of the nationalist fringe. To some he is a symbol of resistance against foreign influence, from Caesar to immigrants and American-led globalization.

**Autun:** see Bibracte.

**Bibracte:** Important Gallic fortified city or *Oppidum*, capital of the Aedui, founded circa 200 BC and abandoned or destroyed in the 1st century AD. It crowned Mont Beuvray, a mountain in the Morvan region of Burgundy. Vercingétorix was declared leader of the Gallic resistance at Bibracte. Caesar dictated part of his chronicle, *The Conquest of Gaul*, in Bibracte. During the lifetime of Augustus Caesar (63 BC–14 AD), the city’s inhabitants were resettled in nearby Autun, originally “Augustodunum” (city of Augustus). Bibracte is a national park, comprising archeological excavations and the Celtic Civilization Museum.

**Burgundy:** Region of central-eastern France, divided into four administrative *départements*: Yonne, Nièvre, Côte d’Or and Saône-et-Loire. Celebrated for wine, it is also the heartland of ancient Gaul where decisive battles were fought between Gallic tribes and Julius Caesar’s legions.

**Julius Caesar:** Roman military and political leader, 100 BC–44 BC. Caesar led the legions into Gaul in 58 BC in a campaign lasting nearly a decade. Victory over Vercingétorix came in 52 BC.

**Celts:** Ancient peoples speaking Celtic languages, of uncertain origin, thought to have migrated into Western Europe from the Balkans starting circa 1200 BC. They settled an area occupying much of eastern-central and western Europe and came into conflict with rival Germanic tribes and the Roman Empire. Their homeland, Gaul, is today's France. The terms "Celt" and "Gaul" are interchangeable. The Gauls gave rise to the Gallo-Roman civilization.

**Charlemagne:** King of the Franks, 742-814 AD, declared Emperor in Rome in 800 AD. In 778 he led an army across the Pyrenees into Spain at the behest of Moorish rulers in conflict with the Emir of Cordoba. Charlemagne's army antagonized the Basques, who decimated its rear guard at Roncevaux. Among the dead was Roland, Duke of the Marches of Brittany. The episode inspired the epic poem *The Song of Roland*.

**Cluny:** Town of 5,000 inhabitants in the southern Saône-et-Loire département of Burgundy, site of a ruined medieval abbey, formerly the largest church outside the Vatican.

**Dumnorix:** Chief of the Aedui tribe during Julius Caesar's invasion of Gaul.

**Franco-Prussian War:** Fought between France and Prussia (a German state), 1870–71.

**Franks:** Germanic tribe of northwestern France, Belgium, Holland, and western Germany. The Franks originated the Merovingian Dynasty of France, starting circa 450 AD, and rose to prominence as leaders of western Europe under Charlemagne.

**Gaul, Gauls:** see Celts.

**François Mitterrand:** 1916–96, a former socialist president of France (1981–95). Controversial and enigmatic, his World War Two record remains the object of scrutiny.

**Morvan:** Mountainous region of Burgundy, extending from Vézelay south to Autun.

**Reconquista:** The Christian "re-conquest" of the Moorish-occupied Iberian Peninsula, 792–1492.

**Résistance:** The French armed resistance to the Nazi Occupation and collaborationist Vichy government.

**Roncesvalles:** Roncevaux in French, a Romanesque abbey in the Pyrenees, site of the ambush of Charlemagne's rear guard, and an important stopover or starting point on the Camino de Santiago or Compostela pilgrimage route.

**Berthe and Girart de Roussillon:** Founders of Vézelay Abbey, circa 855.

**Saint James the Greater:** Known as Matamoros or Moorslayer, died in 44 AD in Judea. According to legend, his remains were discovered 800 years later at Compostela, northwestern Spain. The site is now marked by the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, since the 9th century the most popular Christian pilgrimage destination after Rome and Jerusalem.

**Santiago de Compostela:** Capital of Galicia, Spain; called Saint-Jacques de Compostelle in French.



**Vercingétorix:** Gallic chieftain of Arverni tribe, led resistance against Julius Caesar at Bibract, surrendered at Alésia in 52 BC and was executed in Rome in 46 BC.

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**Vézelay:** Village in the Yonne département of northern Burgundy, site of the 9th-century Basilica of the Holy Mary Magdalene, one of the legendary repositories of the saint's relics. After centuries of decline, Vézelay is again a pilgrimage site and important stopover or starting point on The Way of Saint James.

**Way of Saint James:** Network of pilgrimage routes across Europe to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, created starting circa 880 AD.

# Paris to the Pyrenees



Paris



## BURGUNDY

Vézelay  
Marigny l'Église  
*Le Morvan*  
Mont Beuvray/Bibracte  
Autun  
Meursault  
Saint-Gengoux  
Lac des Settons  
Anost  
Beaune  
Mercrey  
Cluny  
Mâcon



## LANDES

The Pyrenees

Gulf of Lion

# PARIS PRELUDE

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We sealed our bargain in the shadow of the Tour Saint-Jacques, the flamboyant Gothic tower on the rue de Rivoli half a mile from where my wife Alison and I live in central Paris. The tower is all that remains of the celebrated medieval church and hostelry of Saint James the Greater from which pilgrims in their thousands for over a thousand years began walking south following the main European branch of The Way of Saint James—"The Way," for short—from Paris to the Pyrenees. That was where we were headed.

A few days before Easter, we strapped on our pedometers, booted up, and marched south from the tower through crowds of commuters and tourists. Crossing the Île de la Cité, we stopped for a moment of quiet reflection at Notre-Dame cathedral. Then we headed down rue Saint-Jacques, poking our heads into churches, former pilgrims' hostels, and the Paris residence of the abbots of Cluny—now Paris's museum of the Middle Ages where the enigmatic *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries hang.

The French call The Way of Saint James *le Chemin de Saint Jacques de Compostelle* while the Spanish call it *El Camino de Santiago de Compostela*. Either way, this pilgrims' highway was built on top of an ancient Roman road that linked northern Europe via Paris to the heartland of Gaul and then continued south to Spain.

Straight and true like most Roman roads, today's rue Saint-Jacques still mounts past the Pantheon then follows the edge of the Reservoir de la Vanne to the sprawling Cité Universitaire campus. It changes names four times. Beyond the university greenbelt on the pot-holed rue Henri-Vincent, my talking pedometer informed us we had walked 3.26 miles and burned 234 calories. Soon after this, we reached the point where The Way of Saint James dead-ends. It's no longer Paris's glorious roadway to Spain, but rather an off-ramp from the Boulevard Périphérique beltway, a six-lane moat isolating Paris.

As we pondered the snarled cement colossus, it seemed unlikely many pilgrims would flock to the Tour Saint-Jacques again. Questers no longer set out from Paris, we realized, a city of 12 million ringed by industry, housing projects, expressways, freeways, and railways that are lethal to even the fleetest of foot. Today's pilgrims nod at the Saint-Jacques tower and visit Notre-Dame for a symbolic bend of the knee. They then board buses or trains to other points along "The Way"—smaller, more welcoming locales such as Chartres, Tours, and Poitiers, or Arles, Le Puy-en-Velay, and Vézelay. After a sleepless night of anxious excitement, that's exactly what we did, hopping on the first train to Vézelay the very next morning at dawn.

# PART ONE

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## CAESAR'S GHOST

ACROSS LE MORVAN  
FROM VÉZELAY TO AUTUN

“Here before me now is my picture, my map, of a place and therefore of myself ... much of its reality is based on my own shadows, my inventions.”

—M. F. K. Fisher, *Two Towns in Provence*

pilgrim ... from Latin *peregrinus*, a wanderer, a traveler in foreign parts, a foreigner ...

—*Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*

## SAINTS ALIVE

The storied medieval pilgrimage site of Vézelay stretched lengthwise across a hogback Burgundian ridge like a patient on a psychiatrist's couch. At the head of the hill was the Romanesque repository of Mary Magdalene's relics. Our hotel stood near the former fairgrounds at the saint's feet. The similarity seemed imperfect. I had heard much about the site's purported psycho-therapeutic powers, though no psychiatrist's couch I've seen is ringed by tall, crumbling walls, studded with belfries and surrounded by Pinot Noir vineyards and cow-flecked pastures.

As a seriously overweight freethinker with wrecked knees, a crazed individual proposing to walk 750 miles on pilgrimage routes, perhaps my vision of Vézelay was impaired by a skeptical outlook, and I was the one who needed a therapist.

A natty innkeeper and a sculpted wooden effigy of Saint James greeted us at the Hôtel du Lion d'Or. She wore a tailored winter-weight pants suit. Saint Jacques wore his signature upturned floppy hat. He looked startlingly like the khaki-colored cotton sunhat the unrepentant optimist Alison had bought at a sports emporium in Paris. A ski cap would've been more appropriate.

I hated to disappoint James or the solicitous hotel manager, but Compostela by whatever name wasn't our goal. The Spanish section of the trail—from Roncesvalles Abbey in the Pyrenean Mountains to Santiago—is mobbed by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year. Their major preoccupation is to find food and a place to sleep each night, as we'd seen with our own eyes. Our goal was different. We wanted to cross France, not Spain, following age-old hiking trails, and do so unmolested by cars and other pilgrims, making the pilgrimage our own maverick way.

The truth is we weren't really religious pilgrims. At least I wasn't, and I could only speak for myself. Outwardly, the irrepressible desire I felt to hike across France had little to do with spirituality, a profitable concept whose meaning has never been clear to me. After twenty years of living and working in France, I simply felt the need to make my own mental map of the country by walking across it step by measured step and thereby possess it physically, intimately, something I'd failed to do through a car's windshield. I also needed to reinvent myself from the bottom up, restore something I'd lost, discover things I'd never tried to find, make an inner as well as an outer journey, and ask the big questions again, the What's-it-all-about-Alfie ones I'd stopped asking once out of adolescence. Among those fundamentals was, did I want to stay alive, or did I prefer to explode like an over-inflated balloon?

A quarter century of high living as a travel and food writer had demanded its pound of flesh. Many pounds, actually. I had become a hedonist and glutton. The cookbooks I'd written, the recipes I'd tested, the buttery croissants and fluffy mousses I'd savored in every imaginable locale, from bakeries to multiple-starred restaurant, had buried me in radial tires, like the Michelin Man. I had also consumed gallons of wine, Calvados, Cognac, and even Inspector Maigret's *Vieille Prune*, a lethal eau-de-vie distilled from plums. Though I'd often tried to repress or control my gluttonous urges, change without crisis had not occurred.

Then one fine day, while eating my way through southern Burgundy, I'd keeled over and awakened to be told I was, in essence, a walking foie gras. I'd become a life-sized, green-hued liver, an organ afflicted by something called "steatosis." A second French doctor leaned over my hospital bed and nodded with undisguised disgust. He explained that steatosis means "marbled with fatty veins and pocked with fatty globules." I also had viral hepatitis, probably from food poisoning. I was, in short, experiencing liver failure.

Not that this was the first serious health crisis I'd faced in my nearly fifty-year existence—another ignored. A decade earlier, I'd been visited by sudden-onset optic neuropathy. It had gutted my vision

leaving me blind in one eye, my addled brain permanently dazzled by twinkling, spinning lights. ~~But this tap on the shoulder with an angelic feather had not saved me. On the contrary. It had driven me to eat and drink even more, to forget my misery.~~

Still in Burgundy, trying to recover from liver disease, I vowed to change my life, seriously, this time. Really. Really. First I'd stop drinking and lose those saddlebags of fat that made me look like a pack mule. Second, I'd stay off computer screens long enough to see if my kaleidoscope vision improved. Third, I'd jump-start my jalopy and then slowly trickle-charge my batteries, and, who knows, perhaps bring a lilt back to my stride. Irreverent irony was my worst enemy. I was exhausted by flippancy and the forced cleverness of corporate magazine writing. Crossing France on foot, starting in Vézelay, was something I'd always dreamed of doing anyway, in part because Burgundy was so green and gorgeous, in part because of its historical associations with Rome and the ancient world, a lifelong obsession of mine. It seemed as good a place as any in which to force myself toward a new and improved lifestyle. I calculated that, if traversing Burgundy didn't kill me, I'd find some way to keep inching south until I'd crested the Pyrenees into Spain. Clearly, the best trails were the old Roman roads and pilgrim routes, where you could walk for miles without encountering a car. The only hitch as far as I could see was religion.

As a skeptic born and raised by skeptics in 1960s-70s San Francisco, a survivor both of the Haight-Ashbury and Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue, I felt queasy at the prospect of becoming an official pilgrim, with a pilgrim's *Crédenciel*—a handsome, fold-out passport issued and stamped by the Catholic church. The *Crédenciel* entitled you, among other things, to sleep in pilgrims' hostels along the way, for the price of a donation. But I couldn't face asking for one. I hadn't escaped the gurus and drug culture of California to wind up a Catholic in France; that was reason enough to devise my own unofficial pilgrimage, a journey into the past, to focus on the present, and, if I was lucky, to read the future.

Practically speaking, I planned to follow the 2,000-year-old Via Agrippa and pre-Roman, Gallic footpaths, routes predating Christianity, safe in the knowledge that, unbeknownst to most pilgrims, they underlie The Way of Saint James just as surely as Paganism underlies Roman Catholicism. I take the roads less traveled, the longer secondary routes from Vézelay via the ancient Gallic stronghold of Bibracte, then onwards to Autun, Cluny, and Le Puy-en-Velay. Julius Caesar and the Gallic chieftain Vercingétorix had battled along this route. Charlemagne had ridden down it for the epic Pyrenees battle against the Moors recounted in *The Song of Roland*. Cluny had been the second Rome, with the biggest abbey church in Christendom, and, despite the Internet and cellular telephones, all roads, at least metaphorically, still lead to Rome. Forget Santiago de Compostela, I told myself; I could make it across France, nothing could stop me from one day hiking across the Alps into Italy and down the boot to Rome.

So here I was, a prematurely hobbled, sardonic miscreant, an admirer of Caesar who had long hoped the Vatican would be toppled by earthquakes, about to keep my solemn promise to myself and begin a cross-country quest in the company of Saint James. Originally my plan hadn't included Alison, a professional photographer with a busy schedule and a considerably less troubled psyche. But she insisted on accompanying me, possibly because she herself had a host of family-related issues to think through, and was also an avowed walk-aholic. Mostly, I knew, Alison wanted to come along because she feared I'd die of exhaustion, be murdered, or go back to gorging myself en route. My opposite number, she was afflicted not only by quiet optimism, altruism, and wisdom, but also by chronic slimness. She'd never put on weight even though she'd eaten as much as I had for decades, earning her living by turning roast ducklings and strawberry tarts into lovely still-life photos. Her athletic

physique hid one minor flaw: an elegant, S-shaped backbone, the result, she claimed, of the wood-grade-school chairs of her youth. Two cameras, a hundred rolls of film, and a gross of digital photo-chips was all she would carry in her small knapsack. I would play not only Don Quixote to her Sancho Panza, I would also be her pack-donkey.

## COCKLES AND MUSCLES

The most appealing sign on Vézelay's steep, slippery, cobbled main street showed a familiar seascape and belonged to a *crêperie*. It was called Auberge de la Coquille—the scallop. A mouthwatering scene of melting butter, sugar, crêpes, and hot coffee blew toward us on the wintry wind. I studied the sign, hesitating. Would I ever be able to resist the temptations of gluttony and lead a normal life? There was no scope for serious doubt. I was already feeling faint from hunger. We'd left Paris on a pre-dawn train. Stiffening my resolve, I hiked on, comforting myself with thoughts not of food but of history.

As any pilgrim knows, especially if he's read up on the subject, the French call scallops *coquilles saint-jacques*—shells of Saint James. The scallop shell symbolizes this enigmatic individual. But the scallop is also the generic sign of questers of all kinds, which is why I've always loved it. Never mind that before the pilgrimage route was built, the scallop, cockle, and conch denoted Venus, born of a virginal sea-foam, immortalized in Botticelli's painting and countless myths. These shells had been signs of the divine—of fertility and love—for centuries before James joined forces with Jesus.

I felt inside the wet, clammy right-hand pocket of my wind-breaker. Though an appealing shade of red and despite the manufacturer's claims, the garment was clearly not waterproof. There I'd placed the misshapen shell I'd found years ago on Utah Beach, in Normandy, when we'd been on another kind of pilgrimage, to see the Normandy landing beaches on the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, in 1994. Using raindrops to polish the shell, I thought fondly of my father, and Alison's, both recently deceased, both World War Two vets of the best, most skeptical kind. I kept at it, stroking the cockleshell, and soon enough we were out of range of Auberge de la Coquille's dangerously calorific scents.

"I've found the technique," I said proudly to Alison. "It's my first epiphany!"

## STARRY SKIES AND COMPOST HEAPS

Despite our zealous desire to reach the basilica a quarter mile away atop the hill, the spring storm grew stronger, forcing us to seek shelter. In a cozy café we had several rounds of coffee and watched the rain turn to hail. I felt dazed and panicked. I'd pored over books and encyclopedias before leaving Paris. But somehow I hadn't been able to focus my mind on the actual reality of the journey ahead, the cast of characters. All those unfamiliar names, dates, and places, and the thought of walking for nearly three months across rural France, without access to Google, now filled me with something akin to terror. I took out the concise biography of Saint James that I'd photocopied and, squinting, read aloud to Alison. This was a novelty. She's the one who usually reads aloud to me.

Alison sipped her coffee and agreed that it was easy enough to see how Iago—pronounced Yago—became the northwestern-Spanish equivalent of the Latin name Jacobus—pronounced Yakoboos. So Sant'Iago changing to "Santiago" was a logical step.

The origin of the winning name "Compostela" was less clear. *Campus stellae* meant "field of the star" and sounded euphonic, ringing like a Catholic retrofit to explain something unsavory. The story goes that a Spanish shepherd saw unusual blazing stars pointing to a mound. Hidden by vegetation stood the ruined tomb of the saint, which the shepherd soon ensured was discovered by persons more

noteworthy than he.

~~This was certainly more uplifting a tale than the other, possibly more credible origin-myth for Santiago de Compostela and the real reason for the spot's unusual-sounding name. According to modern archeologists, the tomb of two Roman patricians named Athanasius and Theodore, discovered somewhat inconveniently under the main altar of the Cathedral of Saint James, their names sculpted on it, seems to confirm the existence of an ancient Roman villa beneath the holy shrine. The rational explanation for the name is simple enough: the villa had become a cemetery or dumping ground—*compost* heap—and the word “compost” had evolved into Compostela. I folded the photocopy and felt warm inside, encouraged by the thought that a humble compost heap had become a site of miracle—the source of hope and inspiration, misguided or not, for millions of fellow questers.~~

## BONING UP

Possibly because I spent several formative years in the mid-1960s living in Rome, and was dragged by my mother into hundreds of places of worship there, as an adult I've actively stayed out of churches. It was with trepidation that I now approached the basilica of Mary Magdalene, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Perched high on Vézelay's hill, it attracts about a million visitors each year. The façade is not handsome, despite the best efforts of architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, the 1800s over-restorer of France's monuments. He rebuilt the basilica as we see it today, rescuing a ruin while trying and perhaps not entirely failing to preserve its magic.

Tradition has it that the Saturday before Easter is a mournful day, anticipating Sunday's rising of Christ. Consequently there were no tapers to light, no flowers on the altar, and no singing. But we, the visitors shuffling down the soaring nave, made our untidy presence felt. Were pilgrims also allowed to be tourists, I wondered. And vice versa: Could tourists be true pilgrims?

We let the crowds thin before climbing down a steep staircase into the dark, damp crypt. I stumbled on the uneven stone floor. Behind bars in a niche was Mary Magdalene's reliquary, an ornate neo-Gothic arc of gilded silver borne aloft by angels and holy men. In the early 1000s, Alison reminded me, the abbot of Vézelay discovered the remains of Mary Magdalene somewhere inside the monastery, or so the story goes. What were they doing in Vézelay? To query their provenance was to doubt the miraculous nature of the discovery. And doubting raised the uncomfortable, associated question of how a saint had been made of a wild young woman of alleged loose virtue, a long-haired temptress who had dried Jesus's feet with her hair and might be on stage or in a padded cell were she alive today.

“Relax,” Alison whispered, taking my hand. “You're trembling.”

“I'm cold,” I said. But the origin of my nervousness had little to do with the temperature.

I closed my eyes, allowing the presence of Mary's relics to bestir feelings of spirituality. More tourists crowded around, some with flashing cameras. I tried to meditate, beginning with progressive relaxation, but that didn't help either. I changed tack, and thought again of history. With Mary Magdalene's bones in its crypt, Vézelay had soared in status, becoming not merely a stopover on The Way of Saint James but the starting point and, for many, the goal of pilgrimages. Here we were, Ground Zero, by the saint's bones.

Mary Magdalene's reliquary niche was designed to hold an entire skeleton. But I knew from my readings that there'd been a minor hiccup: the Vatican had de-authenticated the relics in 1295, and Mary's tomb had vanished. Happily some of the bones stayed behind and were placed in containers. We were in the presence of the largest portion of the relics. *Pop, ping, zing* went the flashes and



camera lenses. Cell phones rang. A guided tour group tramped in. Feeling like a spy in the house of love, I was swept away by disbelief.

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Another reliquary is on the ground floor, in the church's right transept. As we headed for the cloisters, we stopped to look at it. Crowned by a gaudy modern sculpture, the reliquary had been vandalized. A pocket-sized niche stood empty, a wire grate bent back. The miniature effigy of Mary Magdalene had been stolen by souvenir hunters in the early 2000s, the relics too.

"Are you sure you don't want to get a pilgrim's passport?" I asked Alison, feeling a twinge of guilt. She was a lapsed Catholic and, I reasoned, might want spiritual insurance while walking. "Just because I refuse to submit doesn't mean you shouldn't have one." But she firmly shook her head.

We found an unoccupied bench on the tree-lined road called Promenade des Fossés parallel to Vézelay's oval ramparts and enjoyed our first picnic as pilgrims, albeit unofficial pilgrims. Alison had picked up the local newspaper. It carried the Easter address by Archbishop Yves Patenôte of nearby Sens-Auxerre. He noted that our lives overflow with unanswered questions regarding mortality and the loss of loved ones. The big question was why did humans have to die? Even Jesus had asked God why he had to die. However, according to the archbishop, the good news was, Jesus and God were still among us, in the streets—alive. The joy of Easter, alas, would always be mixed with the gravity of the human condition: finitude. Mortality. But, for people of faith, with the balm of hope that they too, in some way, would rise again as Christ did.

Lingering over my apple, I contemplated the apparent infinity of the scenery, and felt the irreverence drain out of me. Skeptic or believer, there was much to chew on in the archbishop's words.

I chewed on the words as we walked down a rocky path into the Valley of Asquins. Edging a thick forest stood a tall wooden cross. We slid down to it, mindful that here, in the year 1146, the militant abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, not yet a mystic or saint, had harangued an assembly of thousands, from King Louis VII down, calling for a second Crusade to free Jerusalem from the Infidel—thereby restoring trade and Christian control of the Near East and Mediterranean. Petroleum and terrorism were not yet on the agenda. I squinted, imagining the sleepy valley alive with knights in shining armor, foot soldiers, mercenaries, farmers, and priests. The assembled dignitaries could not fit into the basilica of Mary Magdalene. Anticipating the overflow, the abbot had erected a country chapel. It still stands and is named La Cordelle.

I was glad that the rain and wind had swept away other visitors. After the crowds at the basilica, we were alone at last, inside the chapel's mossy walled compound. The beauty of La Cordelle is in its simplicity: un-faced gray stone walls and a floor of beaten earth. There was no noise from outside. Eyes shut, I felt the pleasant weariness that comes from rising before dawn, riding a train for several hours while seated backwards, walking for several more hours, talking to pious strangers, and wrestling with the ghosts of adolescent existentialism. I'd probably thought more and deeper about the human condition in the last six hours than I had in the last ten years. It had been quite a day. Perhaps "spirituality" was no more than an altered physical and mental state attainable by sleep deprivation or the fatigue of labor, prayer, or pilgrimage? Often, in my experience, it was the least likely candidate. Who had spoken the loudest about their spirituality and possession of religious feelings. Was I joining the choir?

What I really needed was another cup of coffee. Everyone knew that sleep deprivation was the favorite weapon of the medieval monastic orders, and plenty of contemporary sects, the kind that brainwashed adepts. I banished the thought and felt strangely elated. Birds chirped. Rain pattered. The silence was not silent—it hummed. We hadn't even begun to hike down to Spain. But I felt I'd crossed a threshold. Maybe the walking would not be necessary after all. Maybe we could call the whole thing

off and go back to Paris after Easter.

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## SACRED FIRES

The real challenge in getting to the 10 P.M. Easter Eve ceremony at the basilica was not the rain, wind, or cold. It was overcoming the desire for sleep that dogged us after dinner. We admired Vézelay lichen-frosted, floodlit old houses as we marched. Other diners teetered along full of good wine. Bel rang out. The night was full of other sounds, including the roar of a motorcycle engine. Around the parking lot facing the basilica rode an adolescent boy, his tricked-out, four-wheeled Quad motorbike scattering pilgrims and other worshippers.

Darkness has its advantages. The basilica's homely façade had undergone a transformation. Illuminated by spotlights, it hovered and glowed, an amber-colored hologram against the indigo sky. I thought for a minute about my confused state of mind and realized I was wrestling holograms of my mind's own making.

Inside the enclosed porch, the darkness teemed. I could barely see. A woman handed me two white tapers with white paper hoods. A choir of voices emanated from the basilica's nave. A figure in robes appeared, his face lit by a flickering taper. He positioned himself beneath the central tympanum, stooped, and lit a fire.

As if fed by gasoline, the fire exploded into a blaze. It cast the priest's shadow upward, across the tympanum where Christ reigned. A dog-headed man and the figure of Saint James glared down at us. With flames leaping and shadows prancing around him, the priest spoke. I could not make out what he was saying. I grappled with slippery emotions, my mind jumbled with thoughts of the primal fire, the eternal flame, and the campfires of my childhood. The priest tipped his taper and lit the candles of the men and women standing nearest. They lit others' candles. One by one, the twinkling points of light illuminated arms, necks, and faces, a throbbing canvas. And then a bell tinkled.

Unable to speak from the emotion, I pressed Alison's hand. As I lit her candle, her face leapt out of the darkness. I caught my breath as the basilica's giant doors yawned open. The faithful broke into song, their faces painted by childlike grins made strange in the dancing candlelight. I felt myself slipping into an intoxicating oneness with my fellow human beings, the torch bearers, the happy, the saved, the faithful.

But as the assembly filed from the porch into the nave, and the spotlights came up to enchanting harpsichord music, the stagecraft overwhelmed the authenticity. My cheeks burned with shame. I had been hoodwinked. I'd hoodwinked myself. Shuffling forward, my candle before me, I felt like a wallflower on in a cultish theater performance. The bone-china spell had broken. Toto had dragged open the curtains, revealing the Wizard of Vézelay. The words of an aged, atheist friend spoken years before welled up from memory. "If I had to do it again, I'd be a Catholic," she'd said with a wicked smile. "for the pageantry, the ritual, the marvelous hocus-pocus."

It was marvelous. With incense, bonfire, and candles burning, we took seats in the artfully lit nave —Plato's cave transmogrified by the Brothers and Sisters of Jerusalem, keepers of this extraordinary temple. I sneezed and felt at once foolish and guilty, a spy in the house of love all over again.

The Easter Eve sound-and-light extravaganza segued into the days of Creation. But my teeth chattered from the cold and my backside went numb at the thought of a French version of Intelligent Design. As the fourth day of Creation dawned, I rose silently from my seat and stole out of the basilica. The harpsichord's notes played up my spine, and the candles became voices roaring with skeptical fury.

Back outside in the parking lot, I watched the acne-scarred adolescent buck his Quad onto its back wheels, making it rear up like a horse as he rode around. I wondered how I could explain to Alison that I was not cut out to be a pilgrim after all. I'd been insane to think otherwise.

## EASTER WITH ASTÉRIX

Dawn's surly light discovered us already at the breakfast table, our packs ready by the door. The sun's first rays had barely begun to tickle the town as we settled up and strode out. I'd had a change of heart in the night. Today was another day. I would hike. I would do it my way.

The Way of Saint James curls down into the Cure River Valley from Vézelay to a hard-drive village below it called Saint-Père-sous-Vézelay, our first stop on the way to Spain. Flanking the grass-grown dirt road were pastures and fields and confusing, competitive signage designed to lure pilgrims down the true path. But which true path? Yellow scallop-shell panels showed the Via Lemovicensis, the official Catholic pilgrimage route from Vézelay to Santiago—direct. Blue signs with a yellow scallop shell indicated the secular E-4 trans-European route, also to Santiago, but not as direct. Nearby, red-and-white bands painted on fences or trees tempted innocent hikers along Grand Randonnée long-distance trail number GR-13, which also led south across Burgundy paralleling the E-4 and then branching to Cluny. From there, you could hike any way you wanted.

I remembered what a wild-eyed pilgrim we'd met earlier had said to us. "There is no one route," I had insisted. "Any road to Santiago will do." At least for this short stretch out of town it appeared that all roads from Vézelay to Compostela ran together in blissful, competitive harmony.

At the bottom of the valley and a mere eight hundred years old, Notre-Dame de Saint-Père seemed undistinguished compared to the basilica. Mary Magdalene and Saint James stared out at us from niches on the façade. Inside, a colorful baptismal font from the 8th century and a stone altar from the 10th hinted at earlier origins. Our guidebook made things clear. Underneath the Gothic church there lie a Merovingian chapel and cemetery, and a Carolingian monastery for women, all built atop the ancient Roman village of Vezeliacum.

The monastery had been founded on the banks of the Cure River around 855 by a local robber baron turned pious Christian, Count Girart de Roussillon and his wife Berthe. But Viking marauders in kayaks paddled up the river, repeatedly raping and burning, so Girart and Berthe sent away the beleaguered nuns and set up a community of Benedictine male monks atop a fortified hill, and Vezeliacum became Vézelay. Alison tucked the guidebook into her pack between her cameras and seemed content.

Trained in art history and a lover of all things mossy and decrepit, she was already in heaven. "Let me see what's in there," she said, drifting off before I could object.

I trailed after her into the Musée Archéologique Régional, a dusty repository of local history. My eyes widened when I saw the man at the ticket counter. He seemed to be the reincarnation of Astérix without a horned helmet. The long, disheveled hair and thick, drooping mustache were lifted from a comic book or movie about the Gallic warrior. Astérix, as celebrated at the Astérix amusement park north of Paris, is an ambiguous character. Because he's based on the fierce Vercingétorix, the real-life Gallic rebel who stood up to Julius Caesar, he has gradually acquired a right-wing political cast. He is often perceived as a *Résistant* or freedom fighter, and portrayed as an anarchist battling the corrupt mainstream of world politics. On the macro level, he's the French David versus the global Goliath, a Gauloise-smoking Native Frenchman making his last stand dressed, nowadays, in denim and leather.

With tobacco-stained fingers the Astérix lookalike gently detached a museum entrance ticket, also

valid for Fontaines Salées, an archeological site and natural salt springs, he said. With tobacco-stained teeth he smiled an unexpected smile. “Are you hikers?” he asked. He seemed suspiciously friendly. “Or pilgrims?”

Ignoring the distinction implied by the question—that hikers came a dime a dozen, and pilgrims were a more valuable commodity—we sketched out our plan to walk across Burgundy, and the rest of France, provided we survived, and said we were going to break in our boots on the Roman road running south. We’d heard about the Via Agrippa, which ran somewhere nearby.

“The Via Agrippa?” he interrupted, excited. He ran his thick fingers across a survey map, showing us where to find sections of the Roman road, plus ancient ruins and a sacred spring. He seemed to know the area astonishingly well. Did he perhaps boast ancient ancestry, I asked? Astérix doubled in stature—to a full five foot-six. He said his forebears had been in this part of Burgundy since “time immemorial.” He was, in a nutshell, a bona fide descendant of Vercingétorix—or another valiant chieftain with an unpronounceable name. Or so he thought.

We shed our packs and with Astérix at our elbows exuding nicotine, had a quick look at the display cases stuffed with broken statuary and rusted nails. Then we scuttled off to buy croissants and *pain au chocolat* before at long last hitting the road.

Following Astérix’s instructions, we found the ancient Roman Via Agrippa on the east side of the clear, rushing Cure River. It was an auspicious start—a friendly Gaul and a Roman road south.

## THE ROMAN WAY

Why was it people always thought in terms of *the* Roman road, I wondered, as if there had only been one in a given part of the Empire? The truth, of course, is more complicated. Wherever the Romans colonized, they built many roads, often atop older roads, the way we do. “Street” and the Latin word for roadway—*strada*—derive from *strata*. In Burgundy, the pre-existing road network was Gallic. The linked hilltop towns the Romans called *Oppida*—or so claimed the book we’d brought along. And we had no reason to doubt its accuracy.

We found a bench on the riverbank and as we enjoyed our flaky, buttery pastries, Alison read aloud from the book. It was the subversively light, read-anywhere paperback entertainment we’d decided to carry with us: Julius Caesar’s *The Conquest of Gaul*.

I’d read snippets of this masterpiece in Latin class back in high school, and had picked it up again while studying Political Science at UC Berkeley. But by now I remembered little, other than the fact that it is among the earliest reliable accounts of ancient warfare and of Gallic and Germanic history, religion, social structures, and lifestyle. Contrary to expectations, it also proved to be a page-turner. Already it was holding up our progress.

The introduction to Caesar’s opus explained that the fast-moving military genius was highly appreciative of Gaul’s fine roads and prosperous *Oppida*. In fact, without the pre-existing road network, how would Caesar have been able to march so quickly into Gaul? The Celtic tribes of Caesar’s day already had been transformed by contact with Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans, and had become an advanced if brutal civilization. They were less “barbarian,” for example, than the hard-core Germans or the savages holed up in what’s now Switzerland. The Gauls could no longer defend themselves against the Swiss-Germans and, taking Caesar at his word, it was these overly civilized Gauls who called upon Rome to save them from the future makers of the world’s best chocolate and keepers of secret, numbered bank accounts.

The Gallic request for Roman aid fitted nicely with Caesar’s long-term goal of “Romanizing”

northwestern Europe as a bulwark against Teutonic hordes. So up he swept from the Forum, to fight for Gaul and, it turned out, to stay. And stay. The tale sounded like a warmup to the last few centuries' conflicts pitting France against Germany, with England and America—the New Romans—stepping in to save the day.

The day was long, but not long enough to spend it entirely with Caesar. Full of bounce and unfamiliar optimism, we headed south on the Roman-pilgrim's trail, following a bright yellow scallop-shell signpost. Though it made me feel unkind, I could not help thinking the road looked like any other rutted, muddy farm road. But as we trekked forward full of glee, the realization that the centurions and perhaps Julius Caesar himself had ridden down it somehow gave the scenery a disconcerting, jackbooted gravitas.

## TIME TUNNELS AND WISHING WELLS

We hadn't hiked more than a mile when we spotted our first famous landmark—the Fontaines Salées archeological site and salt springs.

“Do we have time for a visit?” I asked, checking my pedometer and watch.

“About three months,” Alison reminded me. “Who's keeping track, other than you?”

Inside the ticket booth, a lean man sat reading a newspaper. “The Roman road ran by here,” he said unprompted, as we showed him the tickets Astérix had sold us. “Part of it is underneath the paved road you just walked on. But the Romans were newcomers,” he added with an air of mystery. “The Celts started using the salt springs around 200 BC.” He sounded like an oracle, or an actor used to reciting the same lines. “It's older than that, though, much older.” He raised a finger, wiggled it significantly, and returned to his newspaper.

A pattern of stone ruins hugged a lush, green hollow near the river. Walls a few feet high revealed what was, we learned, the Gauls' circular temple to the gods of this mineral springs. The Romans had remodeled and expanded it. Enough had withstood the centuries to evoke the salacious rituals of old.

Frogs croaked in marshy pools as Alison read aloud from the site brochure. I couldn't help concurring that the Romans and Celts were Johnny-come-latelies. Archeologists had discovered nineteen wooden wellheads at Fontaines Salées, all fashioned from felled trees hollowed out with fire. Dendrochronology and carbon-14 revealed one sample to have been cut in the spring of 2238 BC.

2238 BC?

I repeated the date silently, counting backwards. That was 4,246 years ago, the end of the Stone Age or Neolithic. Here?

We wandered through the ruins, seeing them with new eyes. I was filled again with disconcerting enthusiasm. Salty water welled through the rubble. I peered into one of the submerged wooden casings. The bark was still on the tree. How had Neolithic peoples learned to glean and use salt to preserve food? Perhaps they weren't so primitive after all. Tadpoles swam among lazy bubbles. I couldn't help feeling lost in the bottomlessness of 4,246 years. It made Saint James seem a beardless youth. Was this where the wishing-well myth had originated? Had the pre-Celtic salt-harvesters invoked the spring's gods and the gods of spring? Had the Druids made human sacrifices here? Had Narcissus been mesmerized and fallen into his own reflection here? Here, this very spot? What a luxury it was to speculate. If that's what pilgrimages were about, then I was all for them.

On the way out, we asked the custodian if he knew of a shortcut back to the pilgrims' trail that would keep us off the asphalt and away from today's Gallic road warriors. He pointed northwest toward a place called Valbeton, as if we were familiar with the place-name.

A path ran uphill to a dirt road—another ancient road, he said. It was, the custodian added, the way that Roland, Charlemagne, and Girart de Roussillon had traveled to Spain. Girart de Roussillon was the founder of Vézelay, he reminded us. “Of course you’ve read the *Song of Roland* and know that Roland was killed near Roncevaux abbey, where The Way of Saint James crosses the Pyrenees and turns into the Camino de Santiago?”

“Of course,” said Alison.

Well, I added, even though we were ignoramuses from the other side of the Atlantic, we were familiar with the personage of Roland and had even read the poem. I couldn’t quote it to the over-educated ticket-taker, but I had read parts of the *Song of Roland*, an epic in late 11th-century French that sings the adventures of Charlemagne and his “right-hand man” Roland, Duke of the Marches of Brittany. It was the French equivalent of the Arthurian cycle, but older, bloodier, and less romantic. When I read it those many years ago, I’d skipped to the massacre scene near Roncevaux, where Roland blows his horn in extremis, in a Pyrenees pass. That’s where we would be crossing the mountains in a few months, if all went to plan.

Yes, there was a plan. I checked my watch and compared it to the clock on my pedometer, realizing it was high time to hike south in haste. We had about ten miles to go before we’d reach our first overnight at a village called Domecy-sur-Cure, and it was already late morning. The lunch bell would soon be ringing in my belly, and if we didn’t pick up the pace, darkness would enfold us, possibly in the middle of a fearsome forest where lions, tigers, and bears awaited.

## GALLOPING SCALLOPS

As we bounded toward Spain like bee-stung hares full of hope and expectation, a mere month’s way from Cluny and our first major goal, I realized that for several years, Alison and I had been living in a kind of enclosed porch, like the one at the basilica of Mary Magdalene, a pre-pilgrimage Limbo built onto the façade of our lives. We were finally crossing into the nave, so to speak, and it felt good. It felt wonderful, liberating, exhilarating.

We were not alone in our excitement. Climbing the grade on GR-13, the secular hiking trail we’d selected, we spied a pair of telescopic walking sticks flailing ahead of us and heard their click on the rocky road. As we neared, I sensed the heavy breathing of an unhappy camper. Uphill crept what looked like a giant snail but was in reality a human of surprising proportions. She was large, as pneumatic as a truck tire, and wore a bulky backpack. As we came abreast, I also noticed her jack-of-lantern smile. Not much older than we, she’d somehow lost most of her teeth. Was she on pilgrimage to beseech Saint James for dental assistance? Or was her journey about weight loss? She caught her breath long enough to wheeze *bonjour*. We encouraged her with hand signals and smiles and climbed past, feeling like guilty hares leaving the tortoise behind.

The mixed metaphors struck me as uncharitable, especially given our Saint Jamesian surroundings. I didn’t mean to make fun of a fellow pilgrim, though I’d rarely seen a human so like a snail and a Halloween pumpkin combined. Now that I thought of it, she looked an awful lot like a tortoise, too. My knees ached at the memory of carrying an extra fifty pounds around my waistline, the pounds I’d managed to lose since catching hepatitis and starving myself toward health. My heart went out to her, furthering my misgivings about my mental metaphors. I couldn’t help wondering if there was some way to share the Good News with her—that if a seemingly hopeless case like me could slim down and perk up, and stride out, maybe she could too. All she had to do was eat less, eat right, detox from the prescription drugs, change her attitude, and get lots of exercise, without viewing any of the above as

“sacrifice.” Because if sacrifice was perceived, then failure was guaranteed. The real trick, as she clearly knew, seeing as she was out here, obviously suffering but with a smile on her face, was harnessing will power and self-awareness and....

“Who are you talking to?” Alison asked.

“Was I talking?”

“It was either you or a ghost,” she said.

“Caesar’s ghost, maybe,” I retorted. “Or Charlemagne’s.”

Charlemagne! The famous Valbeton lay ahead of us, pushing other thoughts out of my head. The dirt road turned into a trail that tipped up and ran over loose rocks. In my mind’s ear I heard the hooves of Charlemagne’s cavalry, but I failed to hear the blast of Roland’s horn. At the crest, among swaying pine trees, we turned to cast farewell glances at Vézelay and the determined tortoise fell below.

In the opposite direction, to the southeast stretched five ridges cloaked with fir forests and leafy deciduous trees surrounded by fields, pastures, and vineyards—and not a single paved road. Paradise.

The unassuming bowl beneath us turned out to be Valbeton. In theory it had been the scene of knights tilting on Charlemagne’s round trip from Aachen, Germany, to Spain. Vineyards flanked the trail. Grapevines mossy with age grew on grassy slopes. The vineyards looked to be organic, a hopeful sign. In the distance, grape-growers burned cuttings and passed around a bottle of clear liquid, the contents of which they tipped into their mouths. We were on the section of trail we’d spotted earlier from Fontaines Salées. Thinking again of Roland, I looked down at my boots and, thunderstruck, stooped to pick up an old cow’s horn.

“Roland’s horn?” I asked, turning it over. The pattern of Alison’s lips indicated to me that this wasn’t the famous Oliphant. A bone, then? And not from an animal. “A human tibia, perhaps?”

Alison recoiled. “Roland died on the Spanish border and was buried in Aix,” she said, shaking her head.

“Roland died on the Spanish border and was buried in what the French call Aix-la-Chapelle,” I retorted. “That’s Aachen, in Germany, Charlemagne’s capital. They brought his body back to Aachen on this trail. Don’t you see?”

If it wasn’t Roland’s horn, I reasoned, maybe it was one of his lost bones. Or maybe it had belonged to another knight who’d died at Roncevaux. Girart de Roussillon, for instance. Why not? His body had been brought up this trail to the abbey he founded at Vézelay, hadn’t it?

Before Alison could call me a fantasist, I knocked the mud off Roland’s bone and dropped it into a zip-lock bag. “Specimen one.”

“Are you planning to carry that horse bone across France to Spain?”

“I might,” I said, stowing it before she could reply. “At least as far as Cluny. This is how relics are born.”

## VILLAGE IDIOTS AND THE FRENCH DESERT

Steep, rock-strewn and slippery, secular hiking trail GR-13 snaked down from a plateau into Foissy-lès-Vézelay. The rock-built village of leprous old houses seemed hacked and lifted from the Appalachians, the red-necked heartland of Americana. Hunting dogs howled from fragrant farmhouses. Chickens clucked, reminding us of the etymology of “Gaul”—the name comes from “galli,” meaning roosters in Latin and Italian. A few fearful locals scrambled for cover at our approach, shotguns at the ready. To say Foissy hadn’t yet been gentrified is gross understatement. B

conversation was worth the risk: I was dying for a coffee. Our *Topo Guide*—a guidebook with topographical maps—sited a café in the village square.

The café was closed, naturally. Ditto the church and everything else. This certainly wasn't Paris. According to the literature, we'd officially entered the Morvan, an unsung enclave of rural France where amenities are few and people are on the far side. We looked for the exit and caffeine.

A pair of pale eyes behind lace curtains tracked us along the main road, past several ramshackle hovels. I noticed the houses were for sale. As we walked by, a tall, blond man stepped out, speaking something like English while a shortish real estate agent with a perceptible non-Gallic complexion waved his hands. Never fear. The gentrifiers were coming.

South of the village, a tractor blocked the unpaved forest road. Alison scrambled around it and came face to face with a beaming individual we immediately recognized as the proverbial village idiot. He seemed glad to see us, a carefree man of perhaps forty years with large, rough hands. A yellow corn paper Gauloise cigarette wiggled on his lower lip as he talked. And talked. And talked. He was herding cows, he said. His real job was gardening.

An ungenerous big-city friend once told me that throughout France, the postwar process of rural abandonment caused by the decline of the family farm had left few "normal" people in the countryside. They were flanked by fossils and the feebleminded—young, healthy, ambitious people fled to the cities. One famous sociologist had written a book in the late 1940s titled *Paris et le désert français*. It wasn't about cakes but about desertification and the effect it has had on the countryside. However, I'd read recently that the direction of the flow was finally turning. More people were leaving cities for rural France. Expense, pollution, and stress were making big cities, even Paris, less palatable. Apparently, the seniors and mentally retarded of France's backwater deserts would soon have more for company than wealthy Dutch and Englishmen with vacation properties. Whether the rural-dwellers were happy about the moneyed invasion was another question, one still to be asked in France. Judging by the results of gentrification in prettified Paris neighborhoods such as the Marais—not to mention in rural America—the natives of today's Gallic heartland were unlikely to be universally thrilled.

## CONFESSIONS AU LAIT

The roadside café in the village of Pierre-Perthuis was called Les Deux Ponts—the Two Bridges. It turned out to be a stylish country inn despite its hayseed surroundings. The owner busy behind the bar said his name was Philippe, and that he had chosen Pierre-Perthuis for its nearness to the tourists and spiritual charge of Vézelay, and for its pair of handsome, historic bridges. "I work fifteen hours a day," he added gruffly. "We love it, but..." He was too tired to speak, other than to inquire as had Astérix whether we were plain old hikers or bona fide pilgrims. I told him about our trek, two skeptical pilgrims following the Via Agrippa in Caesar's footsteps; Saint James was too recent for my taste, I added.

As if electrified with painful pleasure, Philippe raised his eyes to the ceiling. "In 1979 when I was eleven years old..." he began to recount.

With his school cycling club, Philippe had ridden a thousand miles from Le Puy-en-Velay in France's Midi to Santiago de Compostela—part of the same route we would follow once we had made it to the southwest of France. "I couldn't appreciate it back then, not in a spiritual way," he added with wistful urgency, drying and re-drying a cup and saucer. "Now I could, and would love to, but we're too busy. Too busy. Maybe when we retire we'll walk it, like you, from the basilica of Mary Magdalene



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