



Fate took the form of a silver scallop shell in the window of an antique store in the medieval French town of Cluny. It was laying on its back as if waiting for Botticelli's Venus, luring her with a cluster of coloured stones at one end of a white enamel edge. For some reason, I was drawn to it.

Maybe the universe was sending me a message; it was hard to know with my head being in another time zone. I had been travelling for twenty-four hours since I walked out of my home in Los Angeles for the last time, feeling nothing. I guess I was still in shock.

LAX: 'Just the one bag?' Yes, and in it everything I owned, besides three boxes of papers and mementos I'd left for my daughters.

Charles de Gaulle Airport: obnoxious male official, trying to give me priority over a woman in a burqa. He didn't understand my protests, which was lucky, because he was directing her to the European Union passport line. It moved way faster than the foreigners line he sent me to.

Immigration officer: young man, perfect English. 'Holiday?' Then, when I gave him my passport: 'Vacation?'

'Oui.' As good an answer as any.

'Where are you staying?'

'*Avec une amie à Cluny.*' Camille, who I hadn't seen for a quarter of a century. The vacation she had been pushing me to take since we were at college in St Louis, and that Keith had cancelled three times.

The officer half-smiled at my schoolgirl French. ‘Your visa is for ninety days in Continental Europe. It expires May 13. It is an offence to remain after that.’ I wasn’t planning to. My return flight was in a month. I’d be lucky if my money held out until then.

Riding the train to downtown Paris: *Paris*. In spite of everything that had happened, I felt a thrill at the thought of studying a Monet at the Musée d’Orsay, immersing myself in an exhibition at the Pompidou Centre and sitting in a Montmartre café sketching an elegant Frenchwoman.

Cluny—La Sorbonne subway station, right in the Latin Quarter: ‘This is not the Cluny you are looking for. The address is in Burgundy. Not far. Less than two hours on the TGV—the fast train to Mâcon.’

Gare de Lyon: ‘One hundred and forty-seven euros.’ You’re kidding me. ‘It is more cheap on the slow train. But not from this station.’

Paris—Bercy station: ‘Four hours and nineteen minutes, then you will take the *autobus*. One hundred and thirty-five euros. For the train, only.’

By the time I reached Cluny—the one southeast of Paris, halfway to Italy—the winter sun was setting and the street-lights were creating halos in the light drizzle. I had only made it thanks to strangers who passed me from railroad platforms to ticket counters to bus stops like a baton in a relay race. They’d earned some good karma.

I followed the signs to Centre Ville, dragging my suitcase. One of the wheels had developed a death rattle and I hoped that Camille’s complicated instructions would translate into a short journey. I had cancelled my cell phone at the same time as the

electricity and water.

I found myself in the central square, bounded on one side by a majestic abbey and on the other by its ruined ramparts.

A bunch of young men—and one woman—burst out of a bar. They were wearing long grey coats decorated with hand-painted designs. The woman's got my attention: the artist had done a fine job of rendering the colours and swirls of Japanese anime.

I managed *excusez-moi* before my French deserted me. 'Art students?'

'Engineering,' she said, in English.

I showed them my directions to Camille's. She had written, in French, 'go directly out of the square', but hadn't said which way.

'We do not know Cluny well,' said the student. 'It is better to ask at a shop.'

So I found myself outside the antique store, which I had at first mistaken for a butcher because of the black metal goose that stretched out from the door. I have always felt a connection with geese. They co-operate, look out for one another and mate for life. The goose is also the symbol of a quest—like finding my flaky college friend.

The pull of the jewelled scallop shell in the window was strong, even a little unsettling. Recent life events had left me wondering if I was attuned to the universe at all, so when I got a clear signal it seemed wise to pay attention. I bumped my suitcase up the steps into the store.

A trim man of about fifty with a narrow moustache smiled tightly. '*Bonjour, madame.*'

'*Bonjour, monsieur.* Ah...this.' I pointed. '*S'il vous plaît.*'

'*Madame* is American?'

‘Yes.’ Was it that obvious? He handed me the charm, and as I held it I had the feeling again, the one I had relied on to make major decisions throughout my life: *this is meant to be.*

‘*Madame* is walking the Chemin?’

‘I’m sorry...’

‘The Camino de Santiago. The Way.’

I was vaguely aware of the Camino, the pilgrims’ path in Spain, from skimming Shirley MacLaine’s memoir. I could not see the connection with a scallop-shell charm in central France.

The antique dealer must have taken my nod of understanding as confirmation that I was planning to follow, literally, in Ms MacLaine’s footsteps.

‘This St Jacques will take *madame* to Santiago in safety.’

‘I wasn’t planning...Why a scallop shell?’

‘The scallop, the St Jacques, is the symbol of the pilgrimage.  
St James. Santiago.’

‘Okay...’

‘Scallops floated the boat that was bringing St Jacques to Spain.’

Not in any Bible I’d read. I turned the shell over in my hand, eyes closed as I let myself disappear for a moment into thoughts and feelings I had been too busy to deal with, until the antique dealer coughed.

‘How much?’ I asked.

‘Two hundred and fifteen euros.’

Dollars and euros: about the same. I’d never spent more than a hundred dollars on a piece of jewellery.

‘It is from the late nineteenth century,’ he said. ‘Gilded silver and enamel. Possibly it belonged to royalty of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.’

'I'm sure it's worth it.' Well, not that sure. 'But I can't afford it.' It would be like Jack spending all his money on the beans.

'The walk is not expensive. Much is given free to the pilgrim.'

'No...*merci*,' I said, putting down the shell.

*Madame* was not planning to walk any further than Camille's. The antique dealer looked disappointed but gave me directions in a mixture of English and French.

I pulled my case up the hill, hoping I hadn't mixed up *à droite* and *tout droit*—right and straight ahead. I couldn't get the scallop-shell charm out of my thoughts. *Destiny speaks to those who choose to hear.*

As I left the old part of town, I looked up. At the top of the hill there was a cemetery and, silhouetted against the darkening sky, a huge elm tree. Beneath it, a tall man was pulling what looked like a small horse buggy. It was a strange sight but his single wheel was doing better than mine, which chose that moment to break in two.



My final trial of the cart, up to the cemetery and back, marked the end of a project that had begun six months earlier, when Cluny was sunny and crowded with tourists and I was enjoying my morning coffee at the Café du Centre.

Some might have said I was fortunate to have been sitting at an outside table at the exact moment that the Dutchman staggered down the street. There's a certain kind of person who focuses on the random, rather than your preparation and what you do with it.

'Staggered' was an exaggeration. He was doing remarkably well, considering he was probably in his late fifties, a little overweight and carrying a golf trolley on his back. Two large wheels protruded and, as he passed, the reason for his not making use of them became obvious: one was buckled. I sprung up and caught him.

'Excusez-moi,' I said. '*Vous avez un problème de la roue?*'— You have a problem with the wheel?

He shook his head, unaccountably denying the obvious. My first impression of how he was doing had been the right one. He was out of breath and sweating, though the August day had yet to heat up.

'You are English?' he said—not the most tactful response, as I had been working on my accent.

I extended my hand. 'Martin.'

'Martin,' he repeated. It looked as though switching languages

was not going to improve communication.

'You?' I asked.

'I am from Holland. There is no problem with the street. It is my cart that is the problem.'

He must have heard *roue*, wheel, as *rue*, street. We continued in English and established that his name was Maarten. He was not a golfer but a hiker, and the cart held his clothes and equipment. He had spent the night in his tent on the outskirts of town, and was now hoping to find somewhere to have the wheel repaired.

I didn't fancy his chances. He would have no problems finding chocolates, overpriced Burgundy or souvenirs of the abbey, but I was unaware of anything resembling a repair shop. There might be something in the Zone Industrielle, but he could expect a frustrating time finding it, and some regulation or strike or employee absence that would leave him cooling his heels until the repairer was disposed to assist.

'I should be able to fix it for you,' I said.

It took all day, minus time out for a lecture. I had only been working at the ENSAM—the School of Arts and Engineering—for a few weeks, but knew my way about.

The wheel was damaged beyond repair and had been flimsy in the first place. Our problem attracted a few students, and soon we had an impromptu design workshop underway. In the interests of education and community engagement, we cannibalised a hand truck with inflatable tyres and welded the assembly to Maarten's trolley. The rubber handle grip had perished, and we fashioned a grooved metal replacement. The result was a definite improvement. He and the construction team, in their painted coats, were duly photographed for the school website.

In the course of our work, I asked Maarten the obvious question. ‘Where are you headed?’

‘Santiago de Compostela. I’m walking the Camino.’

‘From here?’

One of my English colleagues had ‘done’ the Camino and was more than a little proud of it. But my recollection was that the walk started at the French–Spanish border.

Maarten set me straight. ‘Obviously, all the pilgrims did not come from this one town. In the tenth century, they could not get on a plane or train and meet at some tourist hotel in St Jean Pied de Port. They walked out of the doors of their homes as I did.’ Cop that, Emma. Try walking from Sheffield next time.

There were feeder routes all over Europe, including the Chemin de Cluny, which Maarten had now joined. Most converged at St Jean Pied de Port on the Spanish border for the final eight-hundred-kilometre leg—the Camino Francés, or French Way, that Emma had walked. Maarten had already covered 790 kilometres, from Maastricht.

‘Why the cart?’ I asked.

He tapped his knees. ‘Most walkers are carrying a backpack, but it is hard for the knees and back. Many walkers are not young.’

I could relate to that. The aftermath of my middle-aged attempt at the London Marathon had been a knee reconstruction, and advice to avoid further wear, tear and trauma.

‘Where did you get it?’ I asked.

‘It was invented by an American.’

‘And you’re happy with it? Besides the wheels?’

‘It’s a piece of crap,’ he said.

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It was 8 p.m. by the time we finished, and I offered Maarten a spot on the floor of my flat.

'I'll buy you dinner,' I said, 'but I want to know all about your cart.'

'You have seen it. It is very simple.'

'No, the practicalities. What it's like to use, what the problems are, what changes you'd ask for.'

An idea had been growing. I was sure I could come up with a better design. There were a lot of questions to answer before I could put pencil to paper, but the important thing was to understand the requirements. And, as I tell my students, you don't get requirements by sitting on your bum writing a wish list. You get out in the environment, ideally with a prototype, and find out what's really needed. Maarten had done this for five hundred miles with the product I would be competing with.

We established that the cart was hard work on rough ground, and awkward to manoeuvre along narrow tracks, where the handle twisted constantly in the palm. Maarten had been forced to follow the bicycle routes, which included some unpleasant stretches on main roads.

Over cheese, I asked him about the pilgrimage. I am not a religious person, but I was curious about the logistics. Maarten was not religious either. He had been retrenched from a civil-service position and did not expect to work again. His reasons for undertaking such a long journey were vague, but his choice of route made sense.

'Good signposting, water, hostels for a shower and a meal. If you break a leg or have a heart attack, you will be found by another pilgrim.'

My flat was a short walk from the town centre. I had

organised it through Jim Hanna, an expat from New York who had come to Cluny to marry a Frenchwoman he'd met in the States. The marriage had failed, but not before producing a daughter, who tied him to France for the foreseeable future.

Jim had found me a pair of old armchairs, and Maarten and I sat in them, drinking *eau de vie de prune*. The liquor had been my first purchase in Cluny but I'd gone easy on it after one night of drowning sorrows.

'No family?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'My partner died. You?'

'A daughter in Sheffield. She's seventeen.'

Sarah and I texted each other sporadically. She would rather I had stayed, but she would inevitably have been drawn into Julia's and my recriminations, until she was spending half her life worrying about what she shared, who she stayed with and whose side she appeared to be taking. I knew all about the damage that estranged parents could inflict on a teenager.

'What are you going to do when you're finished?' I asked.

'That is why I am walking. To consider this matter.'

'And so far, no ideas?'

'There is plenty of time. If I do not have a solution by Santiago, I can consider it further on the walk home.'

In the morning, I watched as Maarten dragged his trolley from the ENSAM to rejoin the Chemin. It barely handled the cobblestones, and I was already envisaging the suspension for a version that would be pulled along the Pennine Way, the Appalachian Trail and by a thousand pilgrims on their way to Santiago.

Designing a better cart was easy. Just strengthening the wheels would make a difference, and upgrading the suspension would

improve the off-road capabilities. But I was looking for a more dramatic step forward.

The breakthrough came from applying the techniques that I was paid to teach.

'So,' I said to the four students who had stayed back after class, 'we're stuck. How can we encourage innovative thinking?'  
'Beer.'

'Sometimes. Don't tell your parents you heard it from me. What else?'

Pascale, in her anime-decorated coat, raised her hand.  
'Dr Eden, we can push the limits; extend parameters to their boundary values.'

'Go on. What parameters do we have to play with?'

'The wheelbase?'

'And the extreme values are?'

'Infinity and zero. Both wheels pushed together. To make a single wheel. But—'

'What did she say?'

'A single wheel.'

'No, after that.'

'But.' Laughter.

'Our job now is not to find reasons to reject Pascale's idea, but ways to make it work.'

'If stability is the problem, we add another handle. Simple.'

The final design owed more to rickshaws and sulkies than golf trolleys, but was far more manoeuvrable than Maarten's version. The single wheel allowed for a sophisticated suspension system, which was impressive to see in action as the wheel rose, fell and twisted to accommodate the terrain.

A hip belt with clips reinforced the impression of man-as-horse, but freed both hands, allowing the use of sticks—*bâtons*—which were favoured by many walkers. Maarten had noted the difficulty of negotiating rivers and fences, and I added straps to allow the cart to be lifted onto the back for short distances.

From the beginning, I had been looking for an investor. After many emails, I attracted some interest from a Chinese manufacturer and two outdoor-equipment distributors, one German and one French. They would all be at a trade fair in Paris in May, but they would not be satisfied with an inspection of my prototype. They wanted evidence that it could survive a long-distance walk. The French required proof that it could cope with their country's conditions, which were, of course, unique. I was in no position to pay for such an extended trial.

I turned the problem over in my mind for a week or so, but kept coming back to the same answer. My teaching contract ended in mid-February. It was time to move on, to do something more substantial towards rebuilding my finances. The cart represented my best chance of doing that. And the person best equipped to test it, make running repairs and improvements, and communicate the results to prospective investors was me.

I would walk the Camino from Cluny, pulling the cart nineteen hundred kilometres over French and Spanish terrain, taking photos and video, and blogging to build interest. I needed to reach Santiago by 11 May, allowing two days to get back to France for the trade fair. If I started as soon as my teaching duties were over and covered twenty-five kilometres per day, I would make it with a week to spare.

Winter was not the ideal time to start. The hostels on the

two-week section between Cluny and Le Puy would likely be closed and the trail across the top of the Central Massif snowbound, forcing me to take the road.

My savings allowed for around a hundred euros a day, enough for basic accommodation and food. I did not dwell on the fact that by the time I got to Paris I would be penniless again.

I was sorry to be leaving. The students and faculty had made me welcome, despite not having met me at the best time of my life.

I reached the cemetery at the top of the hill. I had read that, under French law, cemeteries were required to provide drinking water. Sure enough, just inside the gate was a tap labelled *eau potable* which splashed ice-cold water over my bare legs when I tried it.

The cemetery had the best view in town, and I spent a few minutes surveying the fields, trying to make out the walking track through the drizzle and fading light.