

SIMPLY  
*happy*  
ON MY WAY  
TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA



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In memory of my dear father

Bernardus Maria Joore (1932-1987)

Wherever you are,

I don't know.

It is not measurable in distance or time.

But I have you deep inside me,

That's why you're so close.

TOON HERMANS

## PREFACE

I have read that the road calls you. The road that called me leads along worn paths, past deserted villages, through valleys and over mountains, to Santiago de Compostela.

They say, "All roads lead to Rome", and the same could be said for Santiago de Compostela. 'El Camino de Frances', is one of the most popular pilgrimages in the world, beginning in St. Jean-Pied-de-Port in southern France and passing through Pamplona, Burgos and Leon on the way.

In 2016, this centuries old 800-kilometre-long pilgrimage through the French and Spanish countryside attracted over 250,000 people from all over the globe to walk to Santiago de Compostela. I was one of them.

This journey revealed to me its faces. First, the gruelling, initial section through the Pyrenees. Next, the spiritual part, through the vast and deserted Meseta: a setting whose expanses lent themselves to reflection and contemplation. And finally, the last section of the journey: living in the moment and mulling over with gratitude the experiences captured along the way.

My luggage was limited, but I kept my diary with me for the trip's entirety. At the front, I wrote the words that would become my motto: Keep calm and carry on, step by step.

In this book, I will take you on a journey.

I will share with you the stunning nature, deserted hamlets and gorgeous cities. I will introduce you to people from all over the world.

Over the hundreds of kilometres, I will share moments of happiness and euphoria, but also of sadness and loneliness.

You will follow step-by-step my physical and mental evolution. You will, as did I, discover the unexpected gifts that life gives to us. I hope that you will appreciate the power and the love that I experienced during the trip—a return to simplicity, a feeling of togetherness, and an enjoyment of the simple things in life. In short, how little we need in life other than to be simply happy.



## CHAPTER 1

# Planting the Seed

A pocket edition of Paulo Coelho's 'The Pilgrimage', also known as 'Diary of a Magus', catches my eye. In the middle of the sky-blue cover is a silver sword. I have vaguely heard about it and eagerly read the blurb on the back: Paulo is looking for his sword and may only take receipt of it after he has proved himself worthy. To achieve this, he goes on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. My curiosity gets the better of me, and I make a beeline for the checkout of the bookshop and purchase the book.

At this time, I am 41 years old and have no idea how the content of Coelho's book will affect my future life. I am married, and mother to three sons aged twelve, ten and six years old. My days are filled with all sorts of activities, from early morning to late at night: Doing the school run, buying groceries, cooking, cleaning, organising parties, receiving guests, having fun with friends, going to the gym... the list is endless.

Despite the hectic schedule, I have a constant feeling nagging at me that I want to develop myself further. So, I throw myself into a four-year training course to become a massage therapist. I study all the muscles of the human body, as well as personal development and therapeutic techniques. I am progressively becoming more interested in reading around these topics.

Paulo Coelho's book enchants me. As I devour it, I hear myself saying, "How amazing it would be if I could make a trip like that."

At the time of planting, a seed is very fragile. It needs care and attention. This nurturing came in beautiful ways.

For my 42nd birthday, friends gift me Shirley MacLaine's book 'The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit'.

In early 2004, I attend a lecture by André Brouwer, who completed the pilgrimage from Seville to Santiago de Compostela. I buy his book, 'On the Via de Plata, you are someone' and read his story with great interest.

The years go on, and so does my busy life. In 2007, I start up my own massage practice and am busy developing this. The thought of the Camino to Santiago is still dormant in the background, however, the seeds are fed, little by little.

In 2008, two of my mother's brothers decide to walk the 800-kilometre-long trip from St. Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago de Compostela. On their return, I receive their diary notes by e-mail, and the fire is once again lit within me. It's fabulous to read their experiences, and it reignites excitement at the thought of ever being able to walk there.

A new film, 'The Way' premieres in 2010. In it, a doctor travels from America to St. Jean-Pied-de-Port in France intending to bring home the remains of his son, who has died tragically in a storm on the first day of a hike in the Pyrenees. The father spontaneously decides to follow in his son's footsteps and complete the historical pilgrimage. It is, however, years later when I finally learn of this film. Whilst visiting our son Jeroen on an internship in Italy and having lunch with his boss, I mention my Camino dream. He reveals the existence of the film and sends me the title a week later by e-mail.

And so, my focus returns to the hike to Santiago. Dormant, but ever present. Flaring up, before sinking once again.

The years pass, and besides my work as a massage therapist, I am training to become an Emotional Freedom Technique therapist. I run workshops and continue to have a busy social life. My husband, Marcel, sells his company at the end of 2013, and at the same time, I decide to bring my massage practice to an end.

After a holiday in Southern Spain, I visit the doctor with persistent lethargy and tiredness. She immediately notices I am pale, despite my tanned skin. Blood samples reveal that my haemoglobin is extremely low; a severe anaemia, necessitating immediate hospital admission and a transfusion that very afternoon. Menstrual periods lasting weeks have exhausted me, and I haven't been looking after myself. Quitting my massage practice had come at just the right moment.

As a result, I have more space in my life and in my head.

Then, a serious fall from my bike obliges me to take even more rest.

An aunt gives me the book 'Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found' by the American writer, Cheryl Strayed. I read about how she, at the lowest point of her life, completed a life-changing 1,700-kilometre hike on the Pacific Crest Trail. Both the book and the film adaptation touch me and rekindle my desire.

The road continues to call me, and the little seeds slowly begin to germinate.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Decision

So, if I am far from home, what about Marcel... the boys... our dog? Who would cook for them and keep on top of the daily mountain of laundry? They couldn't handle that, could they? I believe I am indispensable.

It is 2015: our sons Marc, Jeroen and Tom are now adults, and all three still live at home. With their friends and girlfriends coming and going, it is a pleasant atmosphere. Marcel and I are regularly away for progressively longer periods of time, and they manage very well. Yet I still find it difficult to take the plunge.

One day in the supermarket, I am typing my code into the ATM when I overhear two women talking behind me. My ears prick up when I hear one of them say,

"Where were you?... In Santiago?... Who did you walk there with?"

"I was walking alone!" came the reply.

Coincidence or not, I am in the right place at the right time. I look over my shoulder and see a woman whom I recognise from the past. I choose not to join the conversation; instead, I walk out of the store. At home, I tell myself that the conversation in the supermarket must be a sign. I am suddenly so enthusiastic that I decide to track down the woman. My friend Nicole understands who I am trying to find. Her name is Anna. I search for her number in the telephone directory. I try different numbers

but unfortunately, without success. Then it dawns on me that her husband used to work for a local contractor, and the wife of this contractor has been working for years at the local butchers. The next day I ask her in the shop if she might know where Anna lives. She can't help me, unfortunately... but I'm determined not to be discouraged by it. I think again. For years, I walked the same route every day with our children to and from school. We walked through one residential area where Anna lived at the time. Her two sons had part-time jobs with the local milkman and delivered milk and yoghurt to us every week. I eventually speak to a woman who works at a local bakery on the route. BINGO! Although both have since moved house, she is still in touch with Anna. She gives me Anna's phone number without hesitation and confirms that she completed the walk to Santiago de Compostela last year. At last, I have found the correct person. I call Anna and explain that I used to live near her. I tell her I am interested in hearing about her hike to Santiago de Compostela. "Of course, I would enjoy that!" she responds enthusiastically. "When shall I visit you?"

One week later, Anna is at my door with bags full of information and photos. She shows me albums full of beautiful images captured from her walk. In addition, she provides me with useful tips, including advising me to become a member of the Dutch Society of Saint Jacob, which regularly sends magazines full of information and tips, as well as experiences from other pilgrims. I also learn that I can order a pilgrim's passport from there; it's essential in order to take advantage of the many inns dotted along the pilgrimage route. Each night the passport is stamped, and at the end of the trip on presenting it, the pilgrim is awarded the Santiago de Compostela Certificate - the stamps proving that a pilgrim has covered the 800 kilometres. I listen to her story, and my cheeks flush with excitement. I have so many questions for her.

How did she find walking alone? Was it dangerous? When did she leave? How was the route? Was it difficult? How did she sleep? What did she

carry with her along the way? How were her experiences with other pilgrims?

I am so excited and can't wait to leave, but something is holding me back. Certainly not Marcel; he has been saying for years that I should do the Camino walk. I decide that the main obstacle is letting go of the mother's role and my guilt about abandoning my family for so long.

My boys have regularly encouraged me to go, but it is Jeroen who gives me the very last push one night, when he says from behind his computer: "Ma, what's holding you back? Follow your dream while you're still well and able! Just go!"

I tell Marcel and he answers: "Go, do it! You've wanted it for so long."

I feel very excited as I tell myself "This is the moment!" It's mid-October 2015, and finally I say, "I'm going!"