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...and a pilgrim from Tanzania

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Under the dappling light of the beeswax candle, from the stub that was left after the evening meal, she pulled a scrap of paper from a woven basket and produced a colored pencil from the deep pocket of her calico skirts.

She chewed lightly on the pencil's end while staring down at the blank page, the top corner of which had been raggedly torn into another useful piece of parchment earlier in the day. Her right hand gently rubbed the nape of the lapped cat on her thighs, and her left held the pencil to her mouth.

We sat there, us four, sipping tea and staying silent for her sake as she seemed studiously on task.

“It’s difficult to know where to begin,” she said, her English perfect under the lilt of Dutch.

“Perhaps you start with the title,” said Pepe, playing with a small knife in his hand by snapping it open and shut.

“Yes,” she said, “good thought.” And she took pencil to paper and wrote in a steady hand, “Naiseh’s Wish List,” and flourished it with a sun and stars all around.

“There, now we can begin,” and she smiled a broad smile that made us settle into our seats even more after our warm meal with cake at the end.

Outside the rain was very soft, and barely raised any ruckus at all among the pilgrim campers. One man made a show earlier of running outside to collect all the laundry off the line, but mostly we watched the innocent drops play on the birch leaves and speckle the brick patio without alarm. The sky told us that this rain was not serious about dampening us too severely.

And so we sat comfortably around the wooden table, five of us in all, including Naiseh, the *hospitalero*. Our meal that night was simple rice with a stew of vegetables and tomatoes on top. Two Basque women who had a dog and their own tent shared a small half wheel of cheese and a stick of chorizo from the village five kilometers back. Pepe had brought wine and I had two bars of chocolate left from Burgos. Naiseh, as well as making the stew, also baked us a fine cake, sweetened with honey. And so we were a well equipped and satiated bunch.

“I will start with a horse, and then a windmill,” she said, placing both words on the page in a column.

“Will this horse work or ride you to town?” asked Pepe, a carpenter from Valencia, full-bearded and heady from wine.

“I suppose she will need to do a little of both, but I would also like her to enjoy the pastures and not be frightened by people coming and going.”

“You will find such a horse easily in this province. But be careful who you buy from. Buy from a villager you will see every day,” Pepe directed, pointing his finger, “in this way he will be less likely to cheat you.”

“I do not believe in people cheating. And so, it does not happen to me. And this horse will need to be a gift, we have no money here.”

Pepe opened and shut his knife, and took another sip of wine. He looked at her looking at her list with the two items on it and I could tell, in that moment and in that candlelight, that he would like to buy that horse for her and ride it proudly to this place, to her.

“You will also need *la selle* for the horse,” said one of the Basque women, who had one socked foot on her chair and was massaging it, “*et renes et la bride.*”

Naiseh pursed her lips just slightly, “I don’t like the idea of so much restraint on my horse,

but, I suppose its best in the beginning. Later, she will be free. Once we get to know one another.”

The Basque woman nodded in agreement while Naiseh placed the word, “*selle*,” next to “Horse,” and then added, “*bride*.”

“Do you know these words, their English translation?” Naiseh asked me. “I would like to know.”

“I am assuming you mean what we would call ‘tack,’ saddle, bit and reins, or bridle.”

“Bridle, is very similar isn’t it? And saddle...*selle* in the French. I like how words can be so similar. What do you call it again?”

“Tack,” I said, and she wrote that word down as well.

“Now, we have our horse and her things and a windmill,” she said, tapping the pencil against her chin. The cat in her lap stretched out one long paw, and slid purposefully to the floor.

“Oh, spoons we need. The little ones, for tea and coffee.”

“Those should be easy to get,” I said.

“You would think, but I have had a hard time finding the right spoons. For free. No one wants to give them up. People must have exactly the spoons they need and have none to spare.” She drew a picture of a spoon, and then another to indicate pluralness, on her list.

One of the Basque women stood and finished the tea in her cup, announcing her departure from the table. “It’s time to feed Balere,” she said, “and to go to sleep. We have a day ahead of us.”

The other woman smiled and thanked us for dinner and the company while rising from her seat. I was sorry to see them go; they rounded out the table and were soft and feminine. The trail has been dominated by men; this evening’s imbalance was welcome.

“Buenos suenos,” “Buenos noches,” we said as they departed.

The room settled and Naiseh went back to her list.

“A mango tree is absolute.”

I chuckled. “What a great list,” I said, “will mangos grow here?”

“I think they would. It’s worth a try. Wouldn’t they be lovely for the pilgrims coming off the hot trail?”

“*Si*, mangos are always good at the end of a long day,” said Pepe, smiling at her and trying on a wink.

“And I have never had a pilgrim here from Africa,” she said, continuing.

“Do many Africans make the *Camino*?” I asked.

Pepe said that he has met very few Africans along the way. “Africans do not travel, Africans move to work, not to play or make pilgrimage.”

“I have met Africans along the *Camino*,” said Naiseh, “but, yes, there are very few. I should like more here. That goes on the list.”

The candle was burning low, and the night had grown very quiet with all the other pilgrims sleeping in their tents. One woman was asleep in the bunk room next to the kitchen, which Naiseh reminded us about when we laughed a bit too loud at an earlier joke.

“Feed the hungry ghost,” went next on the paper. “You told me this is important to do.”

“Yes, we call it a spirit plate.”

“Shall I change the words?”

“No,” I said, smiling.

Pepe noticed, as I had, that his advances towards her had gone unheeded and so he too, began to make the motions of leaving. He folded up his knife and put it in the breast pocket of his shirt. It lay there along with a book of matches which made an outline on the linen. He stood and took his cup to the drainboard, placing it in a small plastic tub along with the evening dishes.

“Shall I do these?”

“No, but you can take them down to the creek and soak them. I will wash them in the morning. “

“I would be happy to...”

”It is a morning ritual; it helps me think. But thank you for asking.”

He smiled at her, even though her head was turned back to the list.

“Muy bien, Buenos noches. Thank you for dinner.”

“De nada, Buenos noches.”

I asked if he was leaving early in the morning.

“I don’t know,” he said, “perhaps I stay here and rest a day.” And we both knew that he would.

Naiseh got up after Pepe closed the door and began clearing the remainder of the table, straightening the salt and pepper shakers, removing the empty bottle of wine and placing honey on the table along with powdered milk for tomorrow’s coffee and tea. The candle gave very little light now and the small room was dark with shadows. I could barely make out the altar on the other side of the room.

When the table was cleared, and the room made orderly for the morning, she took her list and began folding it, but stopped short.

“I should very much like less wind here,” she said, and unfolded the paper to write on it again.

“But you’ll have the windmill,” I said, “you need wind.”

She looked at me with hazel eyes. “I will never run out of things to wish for,” she said, and reached out to brush a strand of hair from my eyes.

And the candle, knowing when a thing is done, fell to darkness.

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