Honorable Bandit

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Author’s Note

There once was a lady of Corsica
Who purchased a little brown saucy cur
Which she fed upon ham
And hot raspberry jam
That expensive young lady of Corsica.
Edward Lear

Corsica is an island 5,233 square miles in size, floating like a stone ship in the Mediterranean (this area of that great European bathtub is specifically called the Tuscan Sea), closest to the Italian city of Genoa (some eighty miles east) but politically and problematically part of France. Sardegna is only ten miles from the southern tip of Corsica, and on a clear day it looks quite swimmable. Corsica is a short boat ride from anywhere, and over the centuries every culture within swimming distance has made a point of invading it: Etruscans, Vandals, Goths, Saracens, Genoese, Aragonese, and French. Corsica was attacked so many times that if any town were not reduced to rubble along the coast (and many of the towns in the interior, as well) it is because it made of itself not just a town but a walled citadel. How remarkable it is, then, that the country has its own specific, pungent culture, with its singular cuisine, musical tradition,
language, and stories, and also that mad, operatic history of the vendetta—bloody family feuds that last centuries.

This is a book whose two intentions push and pull at each other. I wanted to write about a month-long travel experience, mostly on foot, crossing the island of Corsica. I also wanted to consider, as if to imitate the meandering of a walker’s mind, why it is that I spend so much of my spare time with a backpack strapped over my shoulders in order to hike, nearly every year, hundreds of miles—and why others might do it, too.

And so the travelogue you read here, a straightforward hike from north to south across that island, imitates a novel’s through-line, a forward momentum, the fairytale’s “and then” and “and then” and “and then” that propels you through any number of (mis)adventures, while my meditations on walking are intended to slow that progression, suspend you from an actual or figurative cliff, and even, Lord help you, back up a bit, in order to ruminate on rambling.

But that’s what walking is like: a tramp through landscape carrying a change of clothes and a brainbox full of jostled gears and screws, and in the evening, if you’re lucky, time to wash socks and rewind the gears, to rest and think about what just happened over the past twenty miles.

There’s a danger here. My meditative chapters, considering over and over again “Why I Walk,” while perhaps casting little stuporous spells, might jar you out of that sweet dreamy sorcery of the journey. And while a dream within a dream might sound, well, dreamy, it might also need to be paid for by a never-ending rousing. That’s me, blowing a bugle reveille over your head every twenty pages or so. And that’s what walking is like, too.

The road, then, is not direct, and as I have unfailingly found in my real and reckless walks, the way is sometimes lost. Plato called it “aporia,” a purposeful loss of reason’s linear thread, a getting lost in order to be found, eventually.
I hang the structure of my own story—the “and then this town, and then that town”—on this astonishing island, from a trail that cuts across it. It is a camino officially created in 1972 by the French, which, in all of its land and possessions, manages some 72,000 miles of well-marked trails as part of the *sentier de grande randonnee*—the GRs, for short. They are numbered like highways for cars (I have enjoyed walking on several of these, most notably the portion of the pilgrim way to Santiago de Compostela that stretches over France and crosses the Pyrenees, known among hikers as the GR65), and the trail that follows a rough diagonal from the northwest to southeast corners of Corsica is called the GR20.

It usually takes a dozen days to stomp your way over the GR20, and walkers can stay in or near *gîtes d’étape*, small shelters maintained by a more or less friendly *gardien* who keeps things organized, offers a few supplies (a sausage or an egg, perhaps; baguettes, over-priced Mars bars, and wine, always wine), and sometimes does a little cooking. This is not a simple walk in the park: the GR20 follows Corsica’s spine of granite peaks. Every day requires the assay of a mountain or two, so that most of the trek is spent in a series of climbs and descents—exhausting but offering a wildly different view every few minutes at every switchback and precipice. That is, wonderful views for those possessing the wherewithal to press on. Whether I had the wherewithal to execute the GR20 is the subject of this book.

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