ZOE

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.

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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 ﬂ ight 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-ﬁ ve 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 street­lights 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.

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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 ﬁ nding 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

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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 ﬁ fteen 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.’

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‘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.