

Chapter IV
THE BRIDGE OF ESTELLA THE PASSION

Crystal water, a musical roar
A few steps
Two archways
For a moment pilgrims and crusaders
Wild monks and saints
Elegant gentlemen
Princes and beggars quench their thirst
Joined in an endless procession

I feel empty, nothing interests me; my feelings, my emotions, do not correspond to the reality that surrounds me. Yet I continue walking.

The road is slippery. Paradoxically it feels like enormous suction cups are grabbing my feet keeping them stuck to the slimy ground. The walking weighs me down triggering new fatigue with every step, soiling my footwear and clothes.

I have been walking all day, under a fine, impenetrable and constant rain. The rain. That rain, it was my only companion today. Traversing new landscapes I sensed a hostility. From a hilltop I see Estella, but before entering the city, I slip on a muddy path with water everywhere. My clothes, as well as being soaked through, get covered in the red clay of these parts. There is no other choice but to take shelter in the hostel in this city.

Tapping into childhood memories and the name Estella, my mind conjures up images of summer nights, under deep blue and starry skies, when my mother, sliding the beads of her rosary through her fingers, repeated her slow and almost silent prayers.

"It would be wonderful to make love under the stars", Barbara had said, urging me to take her on a summer night which found us lying like two castaways on the sand of a small beach on the Ionian coast. I simply cannot stop these leaps of thoughts, spurred on by instinct which manages to defeat the rational reasoning I have tried to impose on myself lately. Here in Estella I am alone, tormented by Barbara's absence, my bones soaked through and through by all the rain that has fallen on

me during this day of walking.
Hiking all day wearing only sandals has put my cold wet feet to the test, marking them with cuts.

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LOS AMIGOS DEL CAMINO D SANTIAGO' is written in the shape of an arc on top of the stamp that is placed in the *credencial* (Pilgrim Passport). At the bottom, ESTELLA, written in old characters, and in the middle, a sword with a curved grip (like the one stamped on the habits of the monks of Roncesvalles at heart level: two shells and a crusader's sword) complete the decoration of the stamp.

The identification number on my document is a sequence of the number six repeated four times. With a scornful look the *hospitalero** tells me that is the number of the devil. I don't know whether to be frightened or amused by this statement, but I take heart when I notice his ill-concealed smile.

In the afternoon, I stretch out for a short rest: the air is heavy with humidity and with the strong odor emanating from the wet clothes of the other pilgrims. I am overtired and my legs hurt.

"Living is searching, living is growing", I tell myself. Laying down I fall into a dead sleep.

"It is Good Friday, take part with faith in the procession of the Passion that will be held here in Estella". This phrase is persistently repeated in my head.

It is the blond haired witch who tells me this.

My thoughts are hazy. Perhaps my mind, still partly immersed in the world of dreams, still partly exhausted, cannot fuse with my imagination. All the perspectival lines delineated by my brain converge into two points of fire, as she, the witch,

continues: "When two moors, heavy chains on their feet, pass among the hooded marchers, in the crowd you will notice a girl, a ring in her lower lip and tears of emotion flowing from her eyes; stay still and I will be back to visit you.

*Hospitalero : A volunteer who provides hospitality for the pilgrims.

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The participation and religious fervour of the crowd in the procession of the Passion of Christ is pulsating.

At the tail end of the procession is the grieving Madonna all dressed in black with the hooded marchers, hitting the drums with three consecutive blows, producing a rhythm all the people accompanying the procession move in step with.

Two participants representing moors, their ankles clamped in large chains making a crazed deafening noise as they drag on the pavement, close out the procession.

The eyes of a young girl with a pierced lower lip, standing beside me, can barely hold back their tears. "Let's go ", she says, "walk beside me", as she brushes lightly against me, emerging as 'the white lady'.

Her hand, by its mere nearness, sends a special thrill to the nape of my neck, where the head connects to the neck and the neck joins the shoulders.

I walk beside her in the deep darkness of the night and it is as though she were guiding me, making me climb the steps of the 'Pont de l'Azzucarero" of Estella, to its highest point. The water rushes fiercely beneath, filling almost the whole span, leaving only a few feet of void below the bridge. The lines of the parapet as it follows the ascending staircase create, as they

meet at its apex, a perfect angle whose shadow is projects back onto the stairs.

Only few glints reflect the sliver of the moon in the water of the Ega river.

Normally this is a stream but today it is a true river, flowing up to the limit of its banks and outlining, with the reflected light of the moon - looking like the cutting edge of a blade - the profile of the lady.

Pointing her finger west, beyond the bridge, the woman says: "Passion is a precursor to death and resurrection. You will leave early tomorrow, while it is still dark so that you may observe the passage from darkness to light; I will be your companion for part of your walk."

Having said this, as suddenly as she had appeared by my side, she vanishes; a cold breath of air seeming to rise from the river envelopes me.

"I'll wake up early, I'll wake up early; passion precedes death and resurrection" my mind keeps on repeating in the depths of sleep, swaying my thoughts from darkness to light.