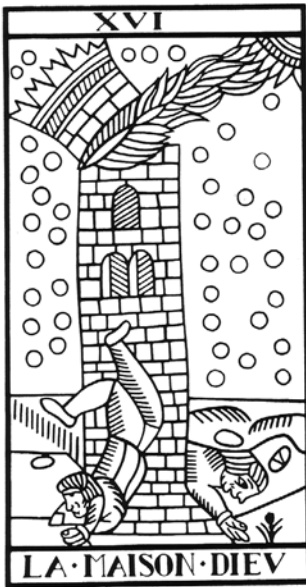


## THE TOWER



SANTIAGO, THE END OF THE PILGRIMAGE, is two nights, forty-five kilometres and, in terms of my gait, some ninety thousand steps away. In a solitary confinement of thought, I stride ahead, a dozen kilogrammes heavier, to Arca de Pino, that night's stop.

I have taken on some of Diana's load: three bricks taped up and covered in blue plastic. They are books – that much I can tell you and no more.

After five hours of walking in the heat, and trying to keep Richard out of my thoughts, the beacons counting down the distance to Santiago indicate that there are only seventeen kilometres to go. I have missed the turn-off to Arca, I realise, passing a compost heap where the air smells of decomposing brown-skinned onion bulbs and hot nettles. The wise thing to do would be to turn back, but I want to get away from the group.

The previous night's dinner at a café above Rimbandiso's meadows had been a trial.

Banishing envy, misplaced kisses, piles of stripped olives, and streams of Las Torras from my thoughts, I calculate that I should arrive at what is supposed to be tomorrow night's stop, the Monte do Gozo hostel, at one-thirty.

The forest opens into an area of smallholdings and I walk down a road with rows of snowball cauliflowers, Bulls Blood beets and Jerusalem artichokes on either side. The sunlight is thick and running down everywhere like molten gold; it covers my bones, making up for the fat I do not have.

I hardly notice the nun who greets me on my left or the man who smiles at me on my right. They do not seem to be there in the ordinary sense. Not like the cow I am passing or the farmer leading the cow.

The nun pats my hand. This disembodied touch is comforting but I question my sanity. Am I seeing what isn't there? These presences do not have the same substance as reality. I feel them with an inner sight, and an inner hearing: an uneasy reconciliation for someone who likes to pride herself on her rationality.

Madness is a possibility. Yet in certain cultures 'visions' are the norm.

'Have faith,' the Spirit of Love says to me. He looks like Jesus: in white, like the ordinary man with almost real flesh and a head of dark curls in Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. Like that painted Jesus, he is there in shadow, not entirely clear. 'Allow yourself to accept that we are with you,' he says.

What are my options? The first would be to fight off the insight, block the vision. The second is to take the risk of allowing insight to speak and suspend this disbelief.

They do not say much, the man and the Mother. I find the nun to be an open and friendly soul, and it seems she has already been where we are now, done the Camino before. The road dips and passes vegetable gardens fat with kale and other brassicas. Just as I am admiring these farmers' use of Sparky Marigolds, *Tagetes patula*, for nematode control, it occurs to me that I have a question for the universe:

Is it possible to make a person who does not love herself, learn to love herself?

'You have healing hands,' the Spirit of Love says. 'The way to make a person love herself is to touch her heart. It's that simple – for everyone.'

I am not convinced. 'How?'

'At twelve o'clock, you should stop for lunch,' he says. 'Sit down, hold your hand to your heart and the veil of illusion, of self-doubt, of fear, will be lifted from your eyes.'

'Do not doubt yourself. We will put our hands on your hand and we will give you the strength to heal your heart.'

The nun becomes a different Mother, and she says, 'We are one and the same.' Her robes are lapis blue and her skin is as iridescent as the illuminations in Boucicaut Master's *Book of Hours*.

The Spirit smiles at me. 'You, she and I and all of creation, we are one and the same. The separation is an illusion; we are the all.'

We, the all, pass a cow with its horns tied to its front foot so that it cannot lift its head. I assume the purpose of this is to prevent the cow from wandering too far.

'You must know that pain or wrong done to any one part of creation affects the whole of creation,' the Spirit of Love says. 'That pain reverberates throughout creation. A wrong to one is a wrong to all.'

I pause to look at the cow bound to itself with a dirty rope. 'Isn't that a bit like karma?'

But they have gone and I am left to contemplate the sun. My neck and the small of my back have begun to ache from the books weighing down my pack.

I kick a pebble out of the path, its easy movement down the incline is evidence of Newton's third law of motion. To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the truest sense, that is the way of the stars. Forces are by nature paired; contradiction must be the secret of everything.

The rising temperature confirms that midday is imminent. I walk on for another hour in the smell of sun-baking capsicums and melons, thinking about this revelation and the first law of thermodynamics – that energy can be converted but it cannot be created or destroyed.

I cross a road and enter a forest. It is twelve o'clock. I round a corner and after the bend there is a log.

Sitting on the log, I drink water and take out my provisions, an apple

and a banana. After checking to see that there is nobody around to witness my madness, I put my hand on my heart as I was instructed to do. I try to feel for a heartbeat. When I find the beat, I close my eyes and imagine that the nun and the Spirit of Love have put their hands on my heart.

A twig breaks behind me. I open my eyes. The first thing I see is a pair of white shoes. A man is approaching. I take my hand off my heart quickly, self-conscious, and busy myself with fruit. The man has a paunch, slicked hair and a moustache. His shoes squeak. He is not a pilgrim.

I concentrate on peeling the banana.

‘Fruta?’ he asks.

I nod and bite into the banana.

‘Mucho caldo, eh?’

‘Yes.’ One of the few Spanish phrases I have picked up is *mucho caldo*, ‘very hot’.

A long sentence in Spanish rolls from the mouth under the moustache, and the man pats the ground.

‘Non hablo Español,’ I say with a shrug. I continue eating.

The man with the black moustache utters another long sentence in Spanish ending in *mucho caldo*. After several such utterances, he begins to annoy me. I am relieved when he turns and walks away up the hill in the direction of Santiago.

With the forest to myself again, I remember my failed attempt to heal my heart. Disappointed, I bite into an apple thinking that perhaps I will try again later. For now, food and rest and shade are welcome.

The peace does not last.

I hear the squeaking white shoes return. The man with the black moustache stops in front of me and talks in Spanish. I shake my head and shrug.

‘Santiago?’

‘Yes,’ I say.

This leads to another Spanish soliloquy ending in *mucho caldo*.

When the man walks down the hill and disappears around the

corner, I finish my apple and take a last sip of water. I position my backpack on the log so that I can slip my arms into the straps while still sitting, thereby staving off the moment when the full weight must once again rest on my shoulders. As I stand the man returns. The squeaking shoes move fast up the hill towards me. I click the clasp of my pack into place, wave goodbye and start walking up the hill towards Santiago.

Monte do Gozo, where I plan to stay that night, should be seven kilometres away.

The man with the black moustache follows me up the hill. Have I not told him I don't speak Spanish? Why does he persist? Surely he realises conversation is hopeless? I shake my head and attempt to quicken my pace, hoping he will tire of keeping up with me. In the heat and after six hours of walking, I find it a great effort to will my legs to move faster. The increased pace has no effect on the man with the moustache.

I wish he would go away.

Jabber, jabber ... peso ... As the man with the moustache says this, he makes the curves of a woman's waist and hips in the air with his hands. He winks.

I push myself to walk faster. His white shoes shuffle through the pine needles on the forest floor. He is closer to me and his talking has become urgent. Amongst a string of sentences I pick up one word: *amor*.

I look around and realise we are totally alone in this forest of tall pine trees. There is no doubt in my mind that the man's thoughts have gone the wrong way. Still walking, I turn to him, noting the muscles on his arms.

'Now listen here,' I say, covering my fear with a stern tone, 'I've told you already I do not understand. Je ne comprend pas. Non capisco. Non hablo Español. Now leave me alone.'

He draws closer. Then I see it in his eyes, that familiar wild addiction. God help me!

'Je ne comprends pas, eh?' he says, and now he is right next to me, his shoulder jostling mine. Infuriated, I glare at him. He puts his hand

in his pocket and takes out a stash of silver foil squares. He ignores one that drops. It takes a moment for me to register that the foil squares are condoms.

'NO!' I say and hold up my hand. My heart lurches, I turn away and walk as fast as I can. As fast as the heat, the weight on my back and six hours of solid walking allow.

The white shoes keep shuffling. They are squeaking like bedsprings and vampire bats. His jabbering has become insistent. The faster I walk, the faster he walks and faster he talks.

I want to run, but I do not have the strength. There is no end to the forest in sight. This muttering man is more than white shoes and a condom. I will my legs to go faster and so prise a gap between myself and the man with the black moustache. I need to escape – this cannot happen to me again ...

What can I do? Can I touch his heart? If I turn and put my hand on his heart will he realise that what he is doing is wrong and leave me alone? I dare not try it. The path has turned steep and still there is no road, no village and no other person in sight.

For a reason I cannot pinpoint, I start singing the 'Ave Maria'. I do not know the words, only the tune, so I improvise some Latin-sounding words. Gasping, I walk, singing as loud as I can.

'Ave Maria,' the man jeers behind me.

I gulp for air between the fake words, but feel stronger. There is still no end to isolation. What other religious songs do I know? In a muddle of made-up *Maria*, *Gracia* ... I recall there was an aria I sang as a solo at my sister's wedding. 'Panis Angelicus', that was the one, and I know all the words.

'*Panis Angelicus, dat Panis.*' Gasp. '*Celicum. Man ducas dominus.*' Gasp. '*Figuris terminum.*' Gasp.

My lungs ache, as do my shins, but I sing as loud as I can and walk as fast as possible.

'*O Respirabiles, man ducas dominum.*'

I focus on the song and close my mind to the man with the black moustache behind me.

*'Pauper, pauper, servus et humilis.'*

Time evaporates. The words make a shield around me. The path flattens, the forest opens out and, although there are no people, I can see buildings in the distance. Without looking behind me I continue singing and walking.

*'Panis Angelicus, dat Panis Celicum, Man ducas dominus.'*

A pilgrim cycles past me.

The pilgrim smiles and calls out, 'Buen Camino.'

I realise I cannot hear the squeaking anymore, only a whirr of bicycle wheels as another cyclist passes. Tears run down my cheeks, and a highway rises between the pastures ahead.

Overwrought, I stop at a stone sign carved with a pilgrim's crook, a cockleshell and a ribbon etched with a single word: *Santiago*.