

An Autobiographical Narrative By

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THE MESSAGE FROM THE HORSE

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one

IT IS EARLY EVENING and thoughts are forming in my mind without leading in any particular direction. It is not so that in this world all our thoughts are somehow part of a planned design and lead to an expected conclusion. No, they often come on silent footsteps, leading us in directions we had not planned or foreseen. They come as quietly as my horse's gentle breathing and sometimes last no longer than a single breath.

My horse is white, with a black mane. He is still a young stallion, but I see time creeping up on him as his mane pales a little more each year. As I feel him beneath me and think about him, life and death no longer hold any terrors. I am part of this horse and we experience life together: not life as perhaps I *should* see it but, dare I say it, life as it really is.

I live in this magic environment: the fire-red stones, the precipitous cliffs, the desiccated vegetation, the tortuous channels gouged out by winter streams that for a short time spring into life; the golden sands that light up and glitter with the low autumnal sun lying on the horizon; the iron-rich rocks that seem to have split or exploded and demonstrate a degree of hidden strength that one cannot ignore—indeed, a force that I take in with every breath.

This is where I live, in the valley of the ravens. On the horizon, gigantic rock formations reach into the sky as if being drawn upward to share in the might of the heavens. The landscape is peppered with ancient ruins, half-collapsed walls of old forts and dwellings, all woven together by the magicians of past centuries—fragmentary quotations that describe the passing of time but still radiate strength, life, and beauty.

I feel blessed to live here in this land called Catalonia, which reaches from the Spanish foothills of the Pyrenees, up over the precipitous mountains and down into the French plains.

On evenings like this I while away the hours in my horse's company on the little terrace in front of the old house, breathing in the unparalleled beauty of this corner of the world. I know my horse also feels the energy these moments give us, and the resulting calm that settles on us. I allow my gaze to wander, taking in every new detail of a landscape that is picking itself up after the energy-crushing dryness and heat of the endless summer months. Here and there, flashes of green announce the imminent arrival of the wet period, the fleeting springtime before the crushing heat of the sun returns for another year.

And this is how it is in winter: the sun is mild and gentle and a friend to man and beast. The nights are chilly and draw us all to the fires that burn continuously. When the ice-cold air that gathers in the valley beneath climbs toward us, the animals gather by the walls of the house and press themselves close against the warm stones.

“Come quickly! You must come now! The little stallion—they’ve driven him into the steel cage—he’s bleeding all over and now he can’t get out. You must come quickly!”

Fernando, our neighbor's chubby son, has climbed the steep hill below us as fast as he can manage and only just has enough wind to shout out his message toward the rear wall of the house. He can't see me but must have guessed that at this time of day I would be working with one of my stallions behind the half tumbled-down wall.

Finally his little round, red face appears in a large hole in the wall, and he repeats his message before I can say anything to calm him.

I have never seen this boy so animated before and decide to forego any questions: it is clearly an emergency. I lead my horse into his stall while I shout to Fernando to go straight to the jeep.

A minute later we are bouncing down the precipitous stony track; the sun is already low on the horizon and even though here in the mountains we are over 100 kilometers from the sea I have, as I often do on evenings like this, the sensation of being able to smell fish in the air. As soon as the sun sets, the smell disappears and is replaced by the strong odor of the pine trees that clothe the slopes.

In front of us, the old house looks across a wide dusty plateau; to the left of us the road, shored up by the ubiquitous, half-crumbled walls that cover the landscape, plunges down to the valley.

Fernando points in an agitated manner with his little arms toward a group of men in front of us. "There they are, the idiots, and now they don't know what to do!"

"Calm down, Fernando! Let's first see what's happened."

We pull up in front of the group, which stands aside. The boy leaps out and starts to run toward the cage before Antonio stops him.

"You stay put, Fernando, do you hear?"

Only now can I see the tragedy: they've driven Pinto, a fiery young stallion, into the narrow steel cage, which is big enough to

contain a bullock or a small horse but without leaving the creature the smallest room for movement. Whole herds are trapped by using this dreadful contraption. When the front and back gates of the cage are closed, no resistance is possible. In this case the stallion is thrashing about in such a panic that in addition they have used a *serreta*, a veritable instrument of torture. Sharp spikes are digging into the tenderest part of the horse's nostrils and the rope attached to the *serreta* is now tangled around one of his forelegs. Any attempt to move him or indeed free him from the cage only increases his panic and tears his nostrils even more severely.

Antonio, the manager, comes toward me, saying, "*Este caballo es malo, malo, malo!*" "He's a bad, bad, bad horse!"

Through gritted teeth, I take a deep breath before greeting him as civilly as I can.

"You've a problem here," I say. "What happened?"

He replies but I am not really listening. I slowly approach the cage. I see the *serreta*, which by now has reduced the nostrils to a bleeding lump of flesh, and my blood boils. I pause a moment as Antonio looks questioningly at me. I go toward Jose.

"Give me your knife," I say, "and now beat on the back of the cage with your stick!" He looks over momentarily at his father, but Antonio is impassive and nods without saying a word. The youth does what I ask, and the little stallion jerks his head upward in fright and to one side. Now I can get hold of the rope to sever it. At this point his front foreleg is so bent that he is almost lying on his side; the right hind leg has slipped through the bars of the cage and every convulsion only aggravates his situation. I ask the group of men to back away from the cage and give me space.