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BY THE  
RIVER PIEDRA  
I SAT DOWN  
AND WEPT

A NOVEL OF FORGIVENESS

PAULO COELHO

Author of *The Alchemist* and *The Zahir*

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By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept Coelho, Paulo

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Luke 7:35

By the river Piedra I sat down and wept. There is a legend that everything that falls into the waters of this river—leaves, insects, the feathers of birds—is transformed into the rocks that make the riverbed. If only I could tear out my heart and hurl it into the current, then my pain and longing would be over, and I could finally forget.

By the river Piedra I sat down and wept. The winter air chills the tears on my cheeks, and my tears fall into the cold waters that course past me. Somewhere, this river joins another, then another, until far from my heart and sight all of them merge with the sea.

May my tears run just as far, that my love might never know that one day I cried for him. May my tears run just as far, that I might forget the River Piedra, the monastery, the church in the Pyrenees, the mists, and the paths we walked together.

I shall forget the roads, the mountains, and the fields of my dreamsthe dreams that will never come true.

I remember my “magic moment”that instant when a “yes” or a “no” can change one's life forever. It seems so long ago now. It is hard to believe that it was only last week that I had found my love once again, and then lost him.

I am writing this story on the bank of the River Piedra. My hands are freezing, my legs are numb, and every minute I want to stop.

“Seek to live. Remembrance is for the old,” he said.

Perhaps love makes us old before our time or young, if youth has passed. But how can I not recall those moments? That is why I write to try to turn sadness into longing, solitude into remembrance. So that when I finish telling myself the story, I can toss it into the Piedra. That's what the woman who has given me shelter told me to do. Only then in the words of one of the saints will the water extinguish what the flames have written.

All love stories are the same.

We had been children together. Then he left, like so many young people who leave small towns. He said he was going to learn about the world, that his dreams lay beyond the fields of Soria.

Years passed with almost no news of him. Every now and then he would send me a letter, but he never returned to the paths and forests of our childhood.

When I finished school, I moved to Zaragoza, and there I found that he had been right. Soria was a small town, and as its only famous poet had said, roads are made to be traveled. I enrolled in the university and found a boyfriend. I began to study for a scholarship (I was working as a salesgirl to pay for my courses). But I lost the competition for the scholarship, and after that I left my boyfriend.

Then the letters from my childhood friend began to arrive more frequently and I was envious of the stamps from so many different places. He seemed to know everything; he had sprouted wings, and now he roamed the world. Meanwhile, I was simply trying to put down roots.

Some of his letters, all mailed from the same place in France, spoke of God. In one, he wrote about wanting to enter a seminary and dedicate his life to prayer. I wrote him back, asking him to wait a bit, urging him to experience more of his freedom before committing himself to something so serious.

But after I reread my letter, I tore it up. Who was I to speak about freedom or commitment? Compared to him, I knew nothing about such things.

One day I learned that he had begun to give lectures. This surprised me; I thought he was too young to be able to teach anything to anyone. And then he wrote to me that he was going to speak to a small group in Madrid and he asked me to come.

So I made the four-hour trip from Zaragoza to Madrid. I wanted to see him again; I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to sit with him in a cafe and remember the old days, when we had thought the world was far too large for anyone ever to know it truly.

# By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept

Saturday, December 4, 1993

The place where the conference was held was more formal than I had imagined it, and there were more people there than I had expected. How had all this come about?

He must be famous. I thought. He'd said nothing about this in his letters. I wanted to go up to the people in the audience and ask them why they were there, but I didn't have the nerve.

I was even more surprised when I saw him enter the room. He was quite different from the boy I had known—but of course, it had been twelve years; people change. Tonight his eyes were shining—he looked wonderful.

“He's giving us back what was ours,” said a woman seated next to me.

A strange thing to say.

“What is he giving back?” I asked.

“What was stolen from us. Religion.”

“No, no, he's not giving us anything back,” said a younger woman seated on my right. “They can't return something that has always belonged to us.”

“Well, then, what are you doing here?” the first woman asked, irritated.

“I want to listen to him. I want to see how they think; they've already burned us at the stake once, and they may want to do it again.”

“He's just one voice,” said the woman. “He's doing what he can.”

The young woman smiled sarcastically and turned away, putting an end to the conversation.

“He's taking a courageous position for a seminarian,” the other woman went on, looking to me for support.

I didn't understand any of this, and I said nothing. The woman finally gave up. The girl at my side winked at me, as if I were her ally.

But I was silent for a different reason. I was thinking, Seminarian? It can't lie! He would have told me.

When he started to speak, I couldn't concentrate. I was sure he had

spotted me in the audience, and I was trying to guess what he was thinking. How did I look to him? How different was the woman of twenty-nine from the girl of seventeen?

I noticed that his voice hadn't changed. But his words certainly had.

You have to take risks, he said. We will only understand the miracle of life fully when we allow the unexpected to happen.

Every day, God gives us the sun—and also one moment in which we have the ability to change everything that makes us unhappy. Every day, we try to pretend that we haven't perceived that moment, that it doesn't exist—that today is the same as yesterday and will be the same as tomorrow. But if people really pay attention to their everyday lives, they will discover that magic moment. It may arrive in the instant when we are doing something mundane, like putting our front-door key in the lock; it may lie hidden in the quiet that follows the lunch hour or in the thousand and one things that all seem the same to us. But that moment exists—a moment when all the power of the stars becomes a part of us and enables us to perform miracles.

Joy is sometimes a blessing, but it is often a conquest. Our magic moment helps us to change and sends us off in search of our dreams. Yes, we are going to suffer, we will have difficult times, and we will experience many disappointments—but all of this is transitory; it leaves no permanent mark. And one day we will look back with pride and faith at the journey we have taken.

Pitiful is the person who is afraid of taking risks. Perhaps this person will never be disappointed or disillusioned; perhaps she won't suffer the way people do when they have a dream to follow. But when that person looks back—and at some point everyone looks back—she will hear her heart saying, “What have you done with the miracles that God planted in your days? What have you done with the talents God bestowed on you? You buried yourself in a cave because you were fearful of losing those talents. So this is your heritage: the certainty that you wasted your life”

Pitiful are the people who must realize this. Because when they are finally able to believe in miracles, their life's magic moments will have already passed them by.

After the lecture, members of the audience rushed up to him. I waited, worried about what his first impression of me would be after so many years. I felt like a child—insecure, tense because I knew none of his new friends, and jealous that he was paying more attention to the others than to me.

When he finally came up to me, he blushed. Suddenly he was no longer a man with important things to say but was once again the boy who had hidden with me at the hermitage of San Satúrio, telling me of his dream to travel the world (while our parents were calling the police, sure that we had drowned in the river).

“Pilar,” he said.

I kissed him. I could have complimented him on his presentation. I could have said I was tired of being around so many people. I could have made some humorous remark about our childhood or commented on how proud I was to see him there, so admired by others.

I could have explained that I had to run and catch the last bus back to Zaragoza.

I could have. What does this phrase mean? At any given moment in our lives, there are certain things that could have happened but didn't. The magic moments go unrecognized, and then suddenly, the hand of destiny changes everything.

That's what happened to me just then. In spite of all the things I could have done or said, I asked a question that has brought me, a week later, to this river and has caused me to write these very lines.

“Can we have coffee together?” I said.

And he, turning to me, accepted the hand offered by fate.

“I really need to talk to you. Tomorrow I have a lecture in Bilbao. I have a car. Come with me.”

“I have to get back to Zaragoza,” I answered, not realizing that this was my last chance.

Then I surprised myself—perhaps because in seeing him, I had become a child again... or perhaps because we are not the ones who write the best moments of our lives. I said, “But they're about to celebrate the holiday of the Immaculate Conception in Bilbao. I can go there with you and then continue on to Zaragoza.”

Just then, it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him about his being a “seminarian.” He must have read my expression, because he said quickly, “Do you want to ask me something?”

“Yes. Before your lecture, a woman said that you were giving her back what had been hers. What did she mean?”

“Oh, that's nothing.”

“But it's important to me. I don't know anything about your life; I'm even

surprised to see so many people here.”

He just laughed, and then he started to turn away to answer other people's questions.

“Wait,” I said, grabbing his arm. “You didn't answer me.”

“I don't think it would interest you, Pilar.”

“I want to know anyway.”

Taking a deep breath, he led me to a corner of the room. “All of the great religions—including Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam—are masculine. Men are in charge of the dogmas, men make the laws, and usually all the priests are men.”

“Is that what the woman meant?”

He hesitated before he answered. “Yes. I have a different view of things: I believe in the feminine side of God.”

I sighed with relief. The woman was mistaken; he couldn't be a seminarian because seminarians don't have such different views of things.

“You've explained it very well,” I said.

The girl who had winked at me was waiting at the door.

“I know that we belong to the same tradition,” she said. “My name is Brida.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Of course you do,” she laughed.

She took my arm and led me out of the building before I could say anything more. It was a cold night, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do until we left for Bilbao the next morning.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To the statue of the Goddess.”

“But... I need to find an inexpensive hotel where I can stay for the night.”

“I'll show you one later.”

I wanted to go to some warm cafe where I could talk to her for a bit and learn as much as I could about him. But I didn't want to argue. While she guided me across the Paseo de Castellana, I looked around at Madrid; I hadn't been there in years.

In the middle of the avenue, she stopped and pointed to the sky. “There She is.”

The moon shone brilliantly through the bare branches of the trees on either side of the road.

“Isn't that beautiful!” I exclaimed.

But she wasn't listening. She spread her arms in the form of a cross, turning her palms upward, and just stood there contemplating the moon.

What have I gotten myself into? I thought. I came here to attend a conference, and now I wind up in the Paseo de Castellana with this crazy girl. And tomorrow I'm going to Bilbao!

“O mirror of the Earth Goddess,” Brida was saying, her eyes closed. “Teach us about our power and make men understand us. Rising, gleaming, waning, and reviving in the heavens, you show us the cycle of the seed and the fruit.”

She stretched her arms toward the night sky and held this position for some time. Several passersby looked at her and laughed, but she paid no attention; I was the one who was dying of embarrassment, standing there beside her.

“I needed to do that,” she said, after her long adoration of the moon, “so that the Goddess would protect us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The same thing that your friend was talking about, only with words that are true.”

I was sorry now that I hadn't paid closer attention to the lecture.

“We know the feminine side of God,” Brida continued as we started to walk on. “We, the women, understand and love the Great Mother. We have paid for our wisdom with persecution and burnings at the stake, but we have survived. And now we understand Her mysteries.”

Burnings at the stake? She was talking about witches!

I looked more closely at the woman by my side. She was pretty, with hair that hung to the middle of her back.

“While men were going off to hunt, we remained in the caves, in the womb of the Mother, caring for our children. And it was there that the Great Mother taught us everything.

“Men lived through movement, while we remained close to the womb of the Mother. This allowed us to see that seeds are turned into plants, and we told this to the men. We made the first bread, and we fed our people. We shaped the first cup so that we could drink. And we came to understand the cycle of creation, because our bodies repeat the rhythm of the moon.”

She stopped suddenly. “There She is!”

I looked. There in the middle of the plaza, surrounded on all sides by traffic, was a fountain portraying a woman in a carriage drawn by lions.