

Between Yes and No, Albert Camus

Between Yes and No

If it is true that the only paradises are those we have lost. I know what name to give the tender and inhuman something that dwells in me today. An emigrant returns to his country. And I remember. The irony and tension fade away, and I am home once more. I don't want to ruminate on happiness. It is much simpler and much easier than that. For what has remained untouched in these hours I retrieve from the depths of forgetfulness is the memory of a pure emotion, a moment suspended in eternity. Only this memory is true in me, and I always discover it too late. We love the gentleness of certain gestures, the way a tree fits into a landscape. And we have only one detail with which to recreate all this love, but it will do: the smell of a room too long shut up, the special sound of a footstep on the road. This is the way it is for me.

And if I loved then in giving myself, I finally became myself, since only love restores us.

Slow, peaceful, and grave, these hours return, just as strong, just as moving—there is a kind of vague desire in the dull sky. Each rediscovered gesture reveals me to myself. Someone once said to me: "It's so difficult to live."

And I remember the tone of voice. On another occasion, someone murmured: "The worst blunder is still to make people suffer," When everything is over, the thirst for life is gone. Is this what's called happiness? As we skirt along these memories, we clothe everything in the same quiet garb, and death looks like a backdrop whose colors have faded. We turn back into ourselves. We feel our distress and like ourselves the better for it. Yes, perhaps that's what happiness is, the self-pitying awareness of our unhappiness.

It is certainly like that this evening. In this Moorish café, at the far end of the Arab town, I recall not a moment of past happiness but a feeling of strangeness. It is already night. On the walls, canary-yellow lions pursue green-clad sheiks among five-branched palm trees. In a corner of the café, an acetylene lamp gives a flickering light. The real light comes from the fire, at the bottom of a small stove adorned with yellow and green enamel. The flames fight up the middle of the room, and I can feel them reflected on my face.

I sit facing the doorway and the bay. Crouched in a corner, the café owner seems to be looking at my glass, which stands there empty with a mint leaf at the bottom. There is no one in the main room, noises rise from the town opposite, while further off in the bay lights shine. I hear the Arab breathe heavily, and his eyes glow in the dusk. Is that the sound of the sea far off? The world sighs toward me in a long rhythm, and brings me the peace and indifference of immortal things.

Tall red shadows make the lions on the walls sway with a wavelike motion. The air grows cool. A foghorn sounds at sea. The beams from the lighthouse begin to turn: one green, one red, and one white. And still the world sighs its long sigh. A kind of secret song is born of this indifference.

And I am home again. I think of a child living in a poor district. That neighborhood, that house! There were only two floors, and the stairs were unlit. Even now, long years later, he could go back there on the darkest night. He knows that he could climb the stairs without stumbling once. His very body is impregnated with this house. His legs retain the exact height of the steps; his hand, the instinctive, never-conquered horror of the bannister. Because of the cockroaches.

On summer evenings, the workingmen sit on their balconies. In his apartment, there was only one tiny window. So they would bring the chairs down, put them in front of the house, and enjoy the evening air. There was the street, the ice-

cream vendor next door, the cafés across the way, and the noise of children running from door to door. But above all, through the wide fig trees there was the sky. There is a solitude in poverty, but a solitude that gives everything back its value.

At a certain level of wealth, the heavens themselves and the star-filled night are nature's riches. But seen from the very bottom of the ladder, the sky recovers its full meaning: a priceless grace. Summer nights mysterious with crackling stars! Behind the child was a stinking corridor, and his little chair, splitting across the bottom, sank a little beneath his weight.

But, eyes raised, he drank in the pure night. Sometimes a large tram would rattle swiftly past. A drunk would stand singing at a street corner, without disturbing the silence.

The child's mother sat as silently. Sometimes, people would ask her: "What are you thinking about?" And she would answer: "Nothing." And it was quite true. Everything was there, so she thought about nothing. Her life, her interests, her children were simply there, with a presence too natural to be felt. She was frail, had difficulty in thinking.

She had a harsh and domineering mother who sacrificed everything to a touchy animal pride and had long held sway over her weak-minded daughter. Emancipated by her marriage, the daughter came home obediently when her husband died. He died a soldier's death, as they say. One could see his gold-framed military medal and croix de guerre in a place of honor. The hospital sent the widow the small shell splinter found in his body. She kept it.

Her grief has long since disappeared. She has forgotten her husband, but still speaks of her children's father. To support these children, she goes out to work and gives her wages to her mother, who brings them up with a whip. When she hits them too hard, the daughter tells her: "Don't hit them on the head." Because they are her children she is very fond of them. She loves them with a hidden and impartial love. Sometimes, on those evenings he's remembering, she would come back from her exhausting work (as a cleaning woman) to find the house empty, the old woman out shopping, the children still at school. She would huddle in a chair, gazing in front of her, wandering off in the dizzy pursuit of a crack along the floor.

As the night thickened around her, her muteness would seem irredeemably desolate. If the child came in, he would see her thin shape and bony shoulders, and stop, afraid. He is beginning to feel a lot of things. He is scarcely aware of his own existence, but this animal silence makes him want to cry with pain. He feels sorry for his mother; is this the same as loving her? She has never hugged or kissed him, for she wouldn't know how.

He stands a long time watching her. Feeling separate from her, he becomes conscious of her suffering. She does not hear him, for she is deaf. In a few moments, the old woman will come back, life will start up again: the round light cast by the kerosene lamp, the oilcloth on the table, the shouting, the swearing. Meanwhile, the silence marks a pause, an immensely long moment. Vaguely aware of this, the child thinks the surge of feeling in him is love for his mother. And it must be, because after all she is his mother.

She is thinking of nothing. Outside, the light, the noises; here, silence in the night. The child will grow, will learn. They are bringing him up and will ask him to be grateful, as if they were sparing him pain. His mother will always have these silences. He will suffer as he grows. To be a man is what counts. His grandmother will die, then his mother, then he.

His mother has given a sudden start. Something has frightened her. He looks stupid standing there gazing at her. He ought to go and do his homework. The child has done his homework. Today he is in a sordid café. Now he is a man. Isn't that what counts?

Surely not, since doing homework and accepting manhood leads to nothing but old

age. Still crouching in his corner, the Arab sits with his hands clasped round his feet. The scent of roasting coffee rises from the terraces and mingles with the excited chatter of young voices. The hooting of a tugboat adds its grave and tender note. The world is ending here as it does each day, and all its measureless torments now give rise to nothing but this promise of peace.

The indifference of this strange mother! Only the immense solitude of the world can be the measure of it. One evening, they had called her son—he was already quite grown up—to his mother's side. A fright had brought on a serious mental shock. She was in the habit of going out on the balcony at the end of the day. She would take a chair and lean her mouth against the cold and salty iron of the railing. Then she would watch the people going past. Behind her, the night would gradually thicken. In front of her, the shops would suddenly light up.

The street would fill with people and fights. She would gaze emptily out until she forgot where she was. On this particular evening, a man had loomed up behind her, dragged her backward, knocked her about, and run away when he heard a noise. She had seen nothing, and fainted. She was in bed when her son arrived. He decided, on the doctor's advice, to spend the night with her. He stretched out on the bed, by her side, lying on the top of the blankets. It was summer.

The fear left by the recent drama hung in the air of the overheated room. Footsteps were rustling and doors creaked. The smell of the vinegar used to cool his mother's brow floated in the heavy air. She moved restlessly about, whimpering, sometimes giving a sudden start, which would shake him from his brief snatches of sleep. He would wake drenched in sweat, ready to act—only to fall back heavily after glancing at his watch on which the night light threw dancing shadows.

It was only later that he realized how much they had been alone that night. Alone against the others. The "others" were asleep, while they both breathed the same fever. Everything in the old house seemed empty. With the last midnight trams all human hope seemed drained away, all the certainties of city noises gone. The house was still humming with their passage; then little by little everything died away. All that remained was a great garden of silence interrupted now and then by the sick woman's frightened moans.

He had never felt so lost. The world had melted away, taking with it the illusion that life begins again each morning. Nothing was left, his studies, ambitions, things he might choose in a restaurant, favorite colors. Nothing but the sickness and death he felt surrounded by ... And yet, at the very moment that the world was crumbling, he was alive. Finally he fell asleep, but not without taking with him the tender and despairing image of two people's loneliness together. Later, much later, he would remember this mingled scent of sweat and vinegar, this moment when he had felt the ties attaching him to his mother. As if she were the immense pity he felt spread out around him, made flesh, diligently, without pretense, playing the part of a poor old woman whose fate moves men to tears.

Now the ashes in the grate are beginning to choke the fire. And still the same sigh from the earth. The perfect song of a derbouka is heard in the air, a woman's laughter above it. In the bay, the fights come closer—fishing vessels no doubt, returning to harbor. The triangle of sky I see from where I am sitting is stripped of its daylight clouds. Choked with stars, it quivers on a pure breeze and the padded wings of night beat slowly around me.

How far will it go, this night in which I cease to belong to myself? There is a dangerous virtue in the word simplicity. And tonight I can understand a man wanting to die because nothing matters anymore when one sees through life completely. A man suffers and endures misfortune after misfortune. He bears them, settles into his destiny. People think well of him. And then, one evening, he meets a friend he has been very fond of, who speaks to him absent-mindedly.

Returning home, the man kills himself. Afterwards, there is talk of private

sorrows and secret dramas. No, if a reason really must be found, he killed himself because a friend spoke to him carelessly. In the same way, every time it seems to me that I've grasped the deep meaning of the world, it is its simplicity that always overwhelms me. My mother, that evening, and its strange indifference. On another occasion, I was living in a villa in the suburbs, alone with a dog, a couple of cats and their kittens, all black.

The mother cat could not feed them. One by one, all the kittens died. They filled the room with their filth. Every evening, when I arrived home, I would find one lying stiff, its gums laid bare. One evening, I found the last one, half eaten by the mother. It stank already.

The stench of death mingled with the stench of urine. Then, with my hands in the filth and the stench of rotting flesh reeking in my nostrils, I sat down in the midst of all this misery and gazed for hour after hour at the demented glow in the cat's green eyes as it crouched motionless in the corner. Yes.

And it is just like that this evening. When we are stripped down to a certain point, nothing leads anywhere any more, hope and despair are equally groundless, and the whole of life can be summed up in an image. But why stop there? Simple, everything is simple, the fights alternating in the lighthouse, one green, one red, one white; the cool of the night; and the smell of the town and the poverty that reach me from below.

If, this evening, the image of a certain childhood comes back to me, how can I keep from welcoming the lesson of love and poverty it offers? Since this hour is like a pause between yes and no, I leave hope or disgust with life for another time. Yes, only to capture the transparency and simplicity of paradises lost—in an image. And so it was not long ago, in a house in an old part of town, when a son went to see his mother. They sat down facing each other, in silence. But their eyes met: "Well, mother."

"Well, here we are."

"Are you bored? I don't talk much."

"Oh, you've never talked much."

And though her lips do not move her face lights up in a beautiful smile. It's true, he never talked much to her. But did he ever need to? When one keeps quiet, the situation becomes clear. He is her son, she is his mother. She can say to him: "You know."

She is sitting at the foot of the divan, her feet together, her hands together in her lap. He, on his chair, scarcely looks at her and smokes ceaselessly. A silence. "You shouldn't smoke so much."

"I know."

The whole feeling of the neighborhood rises through the window: the accordion from the café next door, the traffic hurrying in the evening, the smell of the skewers of grilled meat eaten between small, springy rolls of bread, a child crying in the road. The mother rises and picks up her knitting. Her fingers are clumsy, twisted with arthritis. She works slowly, taking up the same stitch three or four times or undoing a whole row with a dull ripping sound.

"It's a little cardigan. I'll wear it with a white collar. With this and my black coat, I'll be dressed for the season."

She has risen to turn on the light.

"It gets dark early these days."

It was true. Summer was over and autumn had not yet begun. Swifts were still calling in the gentle sky.

"Will you come back soon?"

"But I haven't left yet. Why do you mention that?" "Oh, it was just to say something."

A trolley goes by. A car.

"Is it true I look like my father?"

"The spitting image. Of course, you didn't know him. You were six months old

when he died. But if you had a little moustache!" He mentioned his father without conviction. No memory, no emotion. Probably he was very ordinary. Besides, he had been very keen to go to war. His head was split open in the battle of the Marne. Blinded, it took him a week to die; his name is listed on the local war memorial. "When you think about it," she says, "it was better that way. He would have come back blind or crazy. So, the poor man ..." "That's right."

What is it then that keeps him in this room, except the certainty that it's still the best thing to do, the feeling that the whole absurd simplicity of the world has sought refuge here.

"Will you be back again?" she says. "I know you have work to do. Just from time to time ..."

But where am I now? And how can I separate this deserted café from that room in my past? I don't know any longer whether I'm living or remembering. The beams from the lighthouse are here. And the Arab stands in front of me telling me that he is going to close. I have to leave.

I no longer want to make such dangerous descents. It is true, as I take a last look at the bay and its light, that what wells up in me is not the hope of better days but a serene and primitive indifference to everything and to myself. But I must break this too limp and easy curve. I need my lucidity. Yes, everything is simple. It's men who complicate things. Don't let them tell us any stories. Don't let them say about the man condemned to death: "He is going to pay his debt to society," but: "They're going to chop his head off." It may seem like nothing. But it does make a little difference. There are some people who prefer to look their destiny straight in the eye.

The end