

Death in the Soul, Albert Camus

Death in the Soul¹

I arrived in Prague at six in the evening. Right away, I took my bags to the checkroom. I still had two hours to look for a hotel. And I was full of a strange feeling of liberty because I no longer had two suitcases hanging on my arms. I came out of the station, walked by some gardens, and suddenly found myself in the middle of the Avenue Wenceslas, swarming with people at that time of evening. Around me were a million human beings who had been alive all this time whose existence had never concerned me. They were alive. I was thousands of kilometers from home. I could not understand their language. They walked quickly, all of them. And as they overtook and passed me, they cut themselves off from me. I felt lost.

I had little money. Enough to live on for six days. After that, friends would be joining me. Just the same, I began to feel anxious. So I started looking for a cheap hotel. I was in the new part of the town, and all the places I came upon were glittering with lights, laughter, and women. I walked faster. Something in my rapid pace already seemed like flight. Toward eight in the evening, exhausted, I reached the old town. Drawn by a modest-looking hotel with a small doorway, I enter. I fill in the form, take my key. I have room number 34, on the third floor. I open the door to find myself in a most luxurious room.

I look to see how much it costs: twice as expensive as I'd thought. The money question is suddenly acute. Now I can live only scrimpily in this great city. My distress, still rather vague a few moments ago, fixes itself on this one point. I feel uneasy, hollow and empty. Nevertheless, a moment of lucidity: I have always been credited, rightly or wrongly, with the greatest indifference to money. Why should I be worried? But already my mind is working. I must get something to eat, I start walking again and look for a cheap restaurant. I should spend no more than ten crowns on each meal. Of all the restaurants I see, the least expensive is also the least attractive.

I walk up and down in front of it. The people inside begin to notice my antics: I have to go in. It is a rather murky cellar, painted with pretentious frescoes. The clientele is fairly mixed. A few prostitutes, in one corner, are smoking and talking seriously to one another. A number of men, for the most part colorless and of indeterminate age, sit eating at the tables.

The waiter, a colossus in a greasy dinner jacket, leans his enormous, expressionless head in my direction. I quickly make a random choice of a dish from what, for me, is an incomprehensible menu. But it seems there is need for explanations. The waiter asks a question in Czech. I reply with what little German I know. He does not know German. I'm at a loss. He summons one of the girls, who comes forward in the classic pose, left hand on hip, cigarette in the right, smiling moistly.

She sits down at my table and asks questions in a German I judge as bad as my own. Everything becomes clear. The waiter was pushing the plat du jour. Game for anything, I order it. The girl talks to me but I can't understand her anymore. Naturally, I say yes in my most sincere tone of voice. But I am not with it. Everything annoys me, I hesitate, I don't feel hungry. I feel a twinge of pain and a tightness in my stomach. I buy the girl a glass of beer because I know my manners. The plat du jour having arrived, I start to eat: a mixture of porridge and meat, ruined by an unbelievable amount of cumin.

But I think about something else, or rather of nothing at all, staring at the fat, laughing mouth of the woman in front of me. Does she think I am inviting her favors? She is already close to me, starts to make advances. An automatic gesture from me holds her back. (She was ugly. I have often thought that if she had been pretty I would have avoided everything that happened later.) I was afraid of being sick, then and there, in the midst of all those people ready to

laugh; still more afraid of being alone in my hotel room, without money or enthusiasm, reduced to myself and my miserable thoughts. Even today, I still wonder with embarrassment how the weary, cowardly creature I then became could have emerged from me. I left. I walked about in the old town, but unable to stomach my own company any longer, I ran all the way to my hotel, went to bed, and waited for sleep, which came almost at once.

Any country where I am not bored is a country that teaches me nothing. That was the kind of remark I tried out to cheer myself up. Need I describe the days that followed? I went back to my restaurant. Morning and evening, I endured that atrocious, sickening cumin-flavored food. As a result, I walked around all day with a constant desire to vomit. I resisted the impulse, knowing one must be fed. Besides, what did this matter compared to what I would have had to endure if I had tried a new restaurant? Here, at least, I was "recognized." People gave me a smile even if they didn't speak to me. On the other hand, anguish was gaining ground. I paid too much attention to that sharp twinge of pain in my head. I decided to organize my days, to cover them with points of reference.

I stayed in bed as late as possible and the days were consequently shorter. I washed, shaved, and methodically explored the town. I lost myself in the sumptuous baroque churches, looking for a homeland in them, emerging emptier and more depressed after a disappointing confrontation with myself. I wandered along the Vltava and saw the water swirling and foaming at its dams. I spent endless hours in the immense, silent, and empty Hradchin district. At sunset, in the shadow of its cathedral and palaces, my lonely footsteps echoed in the streets. Hearing them, the panic seized me again. I had dinner early and went to bed at half past eight.

The sun pulled me out of myself. I visited churches, palaces and museums, tried to soften my distress in every work of art. A classic dodge: I wanted my rebellion to melt into melancholy. But in vain. As soon as I came out, I was a stranger again. Once, however, in a baroque cloister at the far end of the town, the softness of the hour, the bells tinkling slowly, the clusters of pigeons flying from the old tower, and something like a scent of herbs and nothingness gave rise within me to a tear-filled silence that almost delivered me. Back at the hotel that evening, I wrote the following passage in one sitting: I reproduce it here unchanged, since its very pomposity reminds me of how complex my feelings were: "What other profit can one seek to draw from travel?"

Here I am, stripped bare, in a town where the signs are strange, unfamiliar hieroglyphics, with no friends to talk to, in short, without any distraction. I know very well that nothing will deliver me from this room filled with the noises of a foreign town, to lead me to the more tender glow of a fireside or a place I'm fond of. Should I shout for help? Unfamiliar faces would appear. Churches, gold, incense, everything flings me back into this daily life where everything takes its color from my anguish. The curtain of habits, the comfortable loom of words and gestures in which the heart drowns, slowly rises, finally to reveal anxiety's pallid visage.

Man is face to face with himself: I defy him to be happy ... And yet this is how travel enlightens him. A great discord occurs between him and the things he sees. The music of the world finds its way more easily into this heart grown less secure. Finally stripped bare, the slightest solitary tree becomes the most tender and fragile of images. Works of art and women's smiles, races of men at home in their land and monuments that summarize the centuries, this is the moving and palpable landscape that travel consists of.

Then, at twilight, this hotel room where once again the hollow feeling eats at me, as if my soul were hungry." Need I confess that all this was just a means of getting to sleep? I can admit it now. What I remember of Prague is the smell of cucumbers soaked in vinegar that you buy at any street corner to eat between your fingers. Their bitter, piquant scent would awaken my anguish and quicken it as soon as I crossed the threshold of my hotel.

That, and perhaps a certain tune played on an accordion as well. Beneath my windows, a blind, one-armed man would sit on his instrument, holding it in place with one buttock while opening and shutting it with his good hand. It was always the same childish, tender tune that woke me every morning, abruptly returning me to the unadorned reality in which I was floundering. I remember too that on the banks of the Vltava I would suddenly stop, and seized by the scent or the melody, carried almost beyond myself, would murmur: "What does it mean? What does it mean?" But I had doubtless not yet gone over the edge. On the fourth day, at about ten in the morning, I was getting ready to go out.

I wanted to see a certain Jewish cemetery I'd not been able to find the day before. Someone knocked at the door of the next room. After a moment's silence, they knocked again. A long knock this time, but apparently there was no answer. A heavy step went down the stairs. Without paying attention to what I was doing, my mind empty, I wasted a few moments reading the instructions for a shaving cream that I had already been using for a month. The day was heavy. A coppery light fell from the grey sky on the spires and domes of old Prague.

As they did every morning, the newsboys were calling the name of a newspaper, Narodni Politika. I tore myself with difficulty from the torpor that was overcoming me. But just as I was going out, I passed the bellman who looked after my particular floor, armed with a bunch of keys. I stopped. He knocked again, for a long time. He tried to open the door. No success. It must have been bolted on the inside. More knocks. The room sounded so ominously empty that, depressed as I was, I left without asking any questions. But out in the Prague streets a painful foreboding pursued me. How shall I ever forget the bellman's silly face, the funny way his polished shoes curled upward, the button missing from his jacket? I had lunch finally, but with a growing feeling of disgust. At about two in the afternoon, I went back to my hotel.

The staff was whispering in the lobby. I climbed the stairs rapidly, the quicker to face what I was expecting. It was just as I'd thought. The door of the room was half open, so that all that could be seen was a high, blue-painted wall. But the dull light I mentioned earlier threw two shadows on this screen: that of the dead man lying on the bed and a policeman guarding the body. The two shadows were at right angles to each other. The light overwhelmed me. It was authentic, a real light, an afternoon light, signifying life, the sort of light that makes one aware of living.

He was dead. Alone in his room. I knew it was not suicide. I dashed back into my room and threw myself on the bed. A man like so many others, short and fat as far as I could tell from his shadow. He had probably been dead for quite a while. And life had gone on in the hotel, until the bellman had thought of calling him. He had come without suspecting anything and died, alone. Meanwhile, I had been reading the advertisement for my shaving cream. I spent the afternoon in a state that would be hard to describe. I lay on my bed, thinking of nothing, with a strange heaviness in my heart. I cut my nails. I counted the cracks in the floorboards. "If I can count up to a thousand ..." At fifty or sixty, I gave up. I couldn't go on. I could understand nothing of the noises outside.

Once, though, in the corridor, a stifled voice, a woman's voice, said in German: "He was so good." Then I thought desperately of home, of my own town on the shores of the Mediterranean, of its gentle summer evenings that I love so much, suffused in green light and filled with young and beautiful women. It was days since I had uttered a single word and my heart was bursting with the cries and protests I had stifled. If anyone had opened his arms to me, I would have wept like a child. Toward the end of the afternoon, broken with weariness, I stared madly at the door handle, endlessly repeating a popular accordion tune in my empty head.

At that moment I had gone as far as I could. I had no more country, city, hotel room, or name. Madness or victory, humiliation or inspiration—was I about to know, or to be destroyed? There was a knock at the door and my friends came in. I was saved, if disappointed. I believe I even said: "I'm glad to see you

again." But I'm sure I stopped there, and that in their eyes I still looked like the man they had left. I left Prague not long after. And I certainly took an interest in what I saw later. I could note down such and such an hour in the little Gothic cemetery of Bautzen, the brilliant red of its geraniums and the blue morning sky.

I could talk about the long, relentless, barren plains of Silesia. I crossed them at daybreak. A heavy flight of birds was passing in the thick, misty morning, above the sticky earth. I also liked Moravia, tender and grave, with its distant, pure horizons, its roads bordered with sour plum trees. But inside I still felt the dizziness of those who have gazed too long into a bottomless pit. I arrived in Vienna, left a week later. Still the numbness held me captive.

Yet in the train taking me from Vienna to Venice, I was waiting for something. I was like a convalescent fed on bouillon wondering how his first crust of bread will taste. Light was about to break through. I know now what it was: I was ready to be happy. I'll mention only the six days I lived on a hill near Vicenza. I am still there, or rather, I still find myself there again occasionally, when the scent of rosemary brings it flooding back.

I enter Italy. A land that fits my soul, whose signs I recognize one by one as I approach. The first houses with their scaly tiles, the first vines flat against a wall made blue by sulphur dressings, the first clothes hung out in the courtyards, the disorder of the men's untidy, casual dress. And the first cypress (so slight and yet so straight), the first olive tree, the dusty fig tree. The soul exhausts its revolts in the shady piazzas of small Italian towns, in noontimes when pigeons look for shelter, in slowness and sloth—passion melts by degrees into tears, and then, Vicenza.

Here the days revolve from the daybreak, swollen with roosters' crowing to the unequalled evenings, sweetish and tender, silky behind the cypress trees, their long hours measured by the crickets' chirping. The inner silence that accompanies me rises from the slow pace that leads from each of these days to the next. What more can I long for than this room opening on the plain below, with its antique furniture and its hand-made lace.

I have the whole sky on my face and I feel as if I could follow these slow, revolving days forever, spinning motionlessly with them. I breathe in the only happiness I can attain—an attentive and friendly awareness. I spend the whole day walking about: from the hill, I go down to Vicenza or else further into the country. Every person I meet, every scent on this street is a pretext for my measureless love. Young women looking after a children's summer camp, the ice-cream vendor's horn (his cart is a gondola on wheels, pushed by two handles), the displays of fruit, red melons with black pips, translucent, sticky grapes—all are props for the person who can no longer be alone.²

But the cicadas' tender and bitter chirping, the perfume of water and stars one meets on September nights, the scented paths among the lentisks and the rosebushes, all these are signs of love for the person forced to be alone.³ Thus pass the days. After the dazzling glare of hours filled with sun, the evenings come, in the splendid golden backdrop of the sun setting behind the darkness of the cypress trees.

I walk along the road toward the crickets one hears from far away. As I advance, one by one they begin to sing more cautiously, and then fall silent. I move forward slowly, oppressed by so much ardent beauty. Behind me, one by one, the crickets' voices swell once more: a mystery hangs in this sky from which beauty and indifference descend. In a last gleam of light, I read on the front of a villa: "In magnificentia naturae, resurgit spiritus." This is where I should stop.

Already the first star shines, three lights gleam on the hill opposite, night has fallen suddenly, unannounced. A breeze murmurs in the bushes behind me, the

day has fled, leaving its sweetness behind. I had not changed, of course. It was simply that I was no longer alone. In Prague, I was suffocating, surrounded by walls. Here, I was face to face with the world, and liberated from myself. I people the universe with forms in my own likeness. For I have not yet spoken of the sun. Just as it took me a long time to realize my attachment and love for the world of poverty in which I spent my childhood, only now can I see the lesson of the sun and the land I was born in.

A little before noon I went out and walked toward a spot I knew that looked out over the immense plain of Vicenza. The sun had almost reached its zenith, the sky was an intense, airy blue. The light it shed poured down the hillsides, clothing cypresses and olive trees, white houses and red roofs in the warmest of robes, then losing itself in the plain that was steaming in the sun. Each time I had the same feeling of being laid bare.

The horizontal shadow of that little fat man was still inside me. And what I could touch with my finger in these plains whirling with sunlight and dust, in these close-cropped hills all crusty with burnt grass, was one form, stripped to its essentials, of that taste for nothingness that I carried within me. This country restored my very heart, and put me face to face with my secret anguish.

It was and yet was not the anguish I had felt in Prague. How can I explain it? Certainly, looking at this Italian plain, peopled with trees, sunshine, I grasped better than I had before this smell of death and inhumanity that had now been pursuing me for a month. Yes, this fullness without tears, this peace without joy that filled me was simply a very clear awareness of what I did not like—renunciation and disinterest. In the same way, the man who is about to die, and knows it, takes no interest in what will happen to his wife, except in novels. He realizes man's vocation, which is to be selfish—that is to say, someone who despairs. For me, this country held no promise of immortality.

What would be the point of feeling alive once more in the soul, if I had no eyes to see Vicenza, no hands to touch the grapes of Vicenza, no skin to feel the night's caress on the road from Monte Berico to the Villa Valmarana?

Yes, all this was true. But the sun filled me also with something else that I cannot really express. At this extreme point of acute awareness everything came together, and my life seemed a solid block to be accepted or rejected. I needed a grandeur. I found it in the confrontation between my deep despair and the secret indifference of one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. I drew from it the strength to be at one and the same time both courageous and aware. So difficult and paradoxical a thing was enough for me. But perhaps I have exaggerated a bit what I felt then so sincerely.

I often think of Prague and the mortal days I spent there. I'm back in my own town again. Occasionally, though, the sour smell of cucumbers and vinegar reawakens my distress. Then I need to think of Vicenza. Both are dear to me, and I find it hard to separate my love of fight and life from my secret attachment to the experience of despair that I have tried to describe. It will be clear already that I don't want to bring myself to choose between them. In the suburbs of Algiers, there is a little cemetery with black iron gates. If you go the far end, you look out over the valley with the sea in the distance.

You can spend a long time dreaming before this offering that sighs with the sea. But when you retrace your steps, you find a slab that says "Eternal regrets" on an abandoned grave. Fortunately, there are idealists to tidy things up.

1 This essay was inspired by Camus's 1936 visit to Prague. According to his own working notebooks, the Carnets, he finished it in 1937 after the last essay in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, "Love of Life." His decision to place it before "Love of Life" in the finished volume suggests that an upsurge of happiness can follow closely after the experience of man's solitude. The "two sides of the cloth," evoked by the French title of the essays, *L'Envers et*

1'Endroit, are thus closely linked together. -P.T.
2 That is to say, everybody.
3 That is to say, everybody.

The End