

Irony, Albert Camus

Irony

Two years ago, I knew an old woman. She was suffering from an illness that had almost killed her. The whole of her right side had been paralyzed. Only half of her was in this world while the other was already foreign to her. This bustling, chattering old lady had been reduced to silence and immobility. Alone day after day, illiterate, not very sensitive, her whole life was reduced to God. She believed in him. The proof is that she had a rosary, a lead statue of Christ, and a stucco statue of Saint Joseph carrying the infant Jesus. She doubted her illness was incurable, but said it was so that people would pay attention to her. For everything else, she relied on the God she loved so poorly.

One day someone did pay attention to her. A young man. (He thought there was a truth and also knew that this woman was going to die, but did not worry about solving this contradiction.) He had become genuinely interested in the old woman's boredom. She felt it. And his interest was a godsend for the invalid. She was eager to talk about her troubles: she was at the end of her tether, and you have to make way for the rising generation. Did she get bored? Of course she did. No one spoke to her. She had been put in her corner, like a dog. Better to be done with it once and for all. She would sooner die than be a burden to anyone.

Her voice had taken on a quarrelsome note, like someone haggling over a bargain. Still, the young man understood. Nonetheless, he thought being a burden on others was better than dying. Which proved only one thing: that he had surely never been a burden to any one. And of course he told the old lady—since he had seen the rosary: "You still have God." It was true. But even here she had her troubles. If she happened to spend rather a long time in prayer, if her eyes strayed and followed a pattern in the wallpaper, her daughter would say:

"There she is, praying again!" "What business is that of yours?" the invalid would say. "It's none of my business, but eventually it gets on my nerves." And the old woman would fall silent, casting a long, reproachful look at her daughter. The young man listened to all this with an immense, unfamiliar pain that hurt his chest. And the old woman went on: "She'll see when she's old.

She'll need it too."

You felt that this old woman had been freed of everything except God, wholly abandoned to this final evil, virtuous through necessity, too easily convinced that what still remained for her was the only thing worth loving, finally and irrevocably plunged into the wretchedness of man in God. But if hope in life is reborn, God is powerless against human interests.

They had sat down at table. The young man had been invited to dinner. The old lady wasn't eating, because it is difficult to digest in the evening. She had stayed in her corner, sitting behind the young man who had been listening to her. And because he felt he was being watched he couldn't eat very much. Nevertheless, the dinner progressed. They decided to extend the party by going to the cinema. As it happened, there was a funny film on that week. The young man had blithely accepted, without thinking about the person who continued to exist behind his back.

The guests had risen from table to go and wash their hands before leaving. There was obviously no question of the old lady's going too. Even if she hadn't been half-paralyzed, she was too ignorant to be able to understand the film. She said she didn't like the movies. The truth was she couldn't understand them. In any case, she was in her corner, vacantly absorbed in the beads of her rosary. This was where she put all her trust. The three objects she kept near her represented the material point where God began. Beyond and behind the rosary, the statue of Christ, or of Saint Joseph, opened a vast, deep blackness in which she placed all her hope.

Everyone was ready. They went up to the old lady to kiss her and wish her a good night. She had already realized what was happening and was clutching her rosary tightly in her hand. But it was plain this showed as much despair as zeal. Everyone else had kissed her. Only the young man was left. He had given her an affectionate handshake and was already turning away. But she saw that the one person who had taken an interest in her was leaving. She didn't want to be alone.

She could already feel the horror of loneliness, the long, sleepless hours, the frustrating intimacy with God. She was afraid, could now rely only on man, and, clinging to the one person who had shown any interest in her, held on to his hand, squeezing it, clumsily thanking him in order to justify this insistence. The young man was embarrassed. The others were already turning round to tell him to hurry up. The movie began at nine and it was better to arrive early so as not to have to wait in line. He felt confronted by the most atrocious suffering he had ever known: that of a sick old woman left behind by people going to the movies. He wanted to leave and escape, didn't want to know, tried to draw back his hand. For a moment, he felt an intense hatred for the old woman, and almost slapped her hard across the face.

Finally he managed to get away, while the invalid, half rising from her armchair, watched with horror as the last certainty in which she could have found rest faded away. Now there was nothing to protect her. And, defenseless before the idea of death, she did not know exactly what terrified her, but felt that she did not want to be alone. God was of no use to her. All He did was cut her off from people and make her lonely.

She did not want to be without people. So she began to cry. The others were already outside in the street. The young man was gripped with remorse. He looked up at the lighted window, a great dead eye in the silent house. The eye closed. The old woman's daughter told the young man: "She always turns the light off when she's by herself. She likes to sit in the dark."¹

The old man brought his eyebrows triumphantly together, wagging a sententious forefinger. "When I was a young man," he said, "my father used to give me five francs a week out of my wages as pocket money to last me till the following Saturday. Well, I still managed to save. First of all, when I went to see my fiancée, I walked four miles through the open country to get there and four miles to get back. Just you listen to me now, young men just don't know how to amuse themselves nowadays." There were three young men sitting at a round table with this one old man. He was describing his petty adventures—childish actions overblown, incidents of laziness celebrated as victories.

He never paused in his story, and, in a hurry to tell everything before his audience left, mentioned only those portions of his past he thought likely to impress them. Making people listen was his only vice: he refused to notice the irony of the glances and the sudden mockery that greeted him. The young man saw in him the usual old bird for whom everything was marvelous in his day, while he thought himself the respected elder whose experience carries weight.

The young don't know that experience is a defeat and that we must lose everything in order to win a little knowledge. He had suffered. He never mentioned it. It's better to seem happy. And if he were wrong about this, he would have been even more mistaken to try to make people sympathize with him. What do an old man's sufferings matter when life absorbs you completely? He talked on and on, wandering blissfully through the grayness of his mutterings. But it couldn't last. He needed an ending, and the attention of his listeners was waning. He wasn't even funny any longer; he was old. And young men like billiards and cards, which take their minds off the imbecility of everyday work.

Soon he was alone, despite his efforts and the lies he told to enliven his story. With no attempt to spare his feelings, the young men had left. Once again he was alone. No longer to be listened to: that's the terrible thing about being

old. He was condemned to silence and loneliness. He was being told that he would soon be dead. And an old man who is going to die is useless, he is even an insidious embarrassment. Let him go. He ought to go. Or, if not, to shut up is the least he can do. He suffers, because as soon as he stops talking he realizes that he is old. Yet he did get up and go, smiling to everyone around him.

But the faces he saw were either indifferent, or convulsed by a gaiety that he had no right to share. A man was laughing: "She's old, I don't deny it, but sometimes the best stews are made in old pots." Another, already more seriously: "Well, we're not rich but we eat well. Look at my grandson now, he eats more than his father. His father needs a pound of bread, he needs two! And you can pile on the sausage and Camembert. And sometimes when he's finished he says: 'Han, han!' and keeps on eating." The old man moved away. And with his slow step, the short step of the donkey turning the wheel, he walked through the crowds of men on the long pavements.

He felt ill and did not want to go home. Usually he was quite happy to get home to his table and the oil lamp, the plates where his fingers mechanically found their places. He still liked to eat his supper in silence, the old woman on the other side of the table, chewing over each mouthful, with an empty head, eyes fixed and dead. This evening, he would arrive home later. Supper would have been served and gone cold, his wife would be in bed, not worrying about him since she knew that he often came home unexpectedly late. She would say: "He's in the moon again," and that would be that.

Now he was walking along with his gently insistent step. He was old and alone. When a life is reaching its end, old age wells up in waves of nausea. Everything comes down to not being listened to any more. He walks along, turns at the corner of the street, stumbles, and almost falls.

I've seen him. It's ridiculous, but what can you do about it? After all, he prefers being in the street, being there rather than at home, where for hours on end fever veils the old woman from him and isolates him in his room. Then, sometimes, the door slowly opens and gapes ajar for a moment. A man comes in. He is wearing a light-colored suit. He sits down facing the old man and the minutes pass while he says nothing.

He is motionless, just like the door that stood ajar a moment ago. From time to time he strokes his hair and sighs gently. When he has watched the old man for a long time with the same heavy sadness in his eyes, he leaves, silently. The latch clicks behind him and the old man remains, horrified, with an acid and painful fear in his stomach. Out in the street, however few people he may meet, he is never alone. His fever sings.

He walks a little faster: tomorrow everything will be different, tomorrow. Suddenly he realizes that tomorrow will be the same, and, after tomorrow, all the other days. And he is crushed by this irreparable discovery. It's ideas like this that kill one. Men kill themselves because they cannot stand them—or, if they are young, they turn them into epigrams.

Old, mad, drunk, nobody knows. His will be a worthy end, tear-stained and admirable. He will die looking his best, that is to say, he will suffer. That will be a consolation for him. And besides, where can he go? He will always be old now. Men build on their future old age. They try to give this old age, besieged by hopelessness, an idleness that leaves them with no defense.

They want to become foremen so they can retire to a little house in the country. But once they are well on in years, they know very well this is a mistake. They need other men for protection. And as far as he was concerned, he needed to be listened to in order to believe in his life. The streets were darker and emptier now. There were still voices going by. In the strange calm of evening they were becoming more solemn. Behind the hills encircling the town there were still glimmers of daylight. From somewhere out of sight, smoke rose, imposingly, behind the wooded hilltops. It rose slowly in the sky, in tiers, like the

branches of a pine tree. The old man closed his eyes. As life carried away the rumblings of the town, and the heavens smiled their foolish, indifferent smile, he was alone, forsaken, naked, already dead.

Need I describe the other side of this fine coin? Doubtless, in a dark and dirty room, the old woman was laying the table. When dinner was ready she sat down, looked at the clock, waited a little longer, and then began to eat a hearty meal. She thought to herself: "He is in the moon."

That would be that.

There were five of them living together: the grandmother, her younger son, her elder daughter, and the daughter's two children. The son was almost dumb; the daughter, an invalid, could think only with difficulty; and of the two children, one was already working for an insurance company while the other was continuing his studies. At seventy, the grandmother still dominated all these people. Above her bed you could see a portrait taken of her five years before, upright in a black dress that was held together at the neck by a medallion, not a wrinkle on her face. With enormous clear, cold eyes, she had a regal posture she relinquished only with increasing age, but which she still sometimes tried to recover when she went out.

It was these clear eyes that held a memory for her grandson which still made him blush. The old woman would wait until there were visitors and would ask then, looking at him severely, "Whom do you like best? Your mother or your grandmother?" The game was even better when the daughter was present. For the child would always reply: "My grandmother," with, in his heart, a great surge of love for his ever silent mother.

Then, when the visitors were surprised at this preference, the mother would say: "It's because she's the one who brought him up." It was also because the old woman thought that love is something you can demand. The knowledge that she herself had been a good mother gave her a kind of rigidity and intolerance. She had never deceived her husband, and had borne him nine children. After his death, she had brought up her family energetically. Leaving their little farm on the outskirts, they had ended up in the old, poor part of the town where they had been living for a long time.

And certainly this woman was not lacking in qualities. But to her grandsons, who were at the age of absolute judgments, she was nothing but a fraud. One of their uncles had told them a significant story: he had gone to pay a visit to his mother-in-law, and from the outside had seen her sitting idly at the window. But she had come to the door with a duster in her hand and had apologized for carrying on working by saying that she had so little free time left after doing her housework.

And it must be confessed that this was typical. She fainted very easily after family discussions. She also suffered from painful vomiting caused by a liver complaint. But she showed not the slightest discretion in the practice of her illness. Far from shutting herself away, she would vomit noisily into the kitchen garbage can. And when she came back into the room, pale, her eyes running with tears from the effort, she would remind anyone who begged her to go to bed that she had to get the next meal ready and carry on in running the house: "I do everything here." Or again: "I don't know what would become of you without me."

The children learned to ignore her vomitings, her "attacks" as she called them, as well as her complaints. One day she went to bed and demanded the doctor. They sent for him to humor her. On the first day he diagnosed a slight stomach upset, on the second a cancer of the liver, on the third a serious attack of jaundice. But the younger of the two children insisted on seeing all this as yet another performance, a more sophisticated act, and felt no concern. This woman had bullied him too much for his initial reaction to be pessimistic.

And there is a kind of desperate courage in being lucid and refusing to love. But people who play at being ill can succeed: the grandmother carried simulation to the point of death. On her last day, her children around her, she began freeing herself of the fermentations in her intestines. She turned and spoke with simplicity to her grandson: "You see," she said, "I'm farting like a little pig." She died an hour later.

As for her grandson, he now realized that he had not understood a thing that was happening. He could not free himself of the idea that he had just witnessed the last and most monstrous of this woman's performances. And if he asked himself whether he felt any sorrow, he could find none at all. Only on the day of the funeral, because of the general outburst of tears, did he weep, but he was afraid of being insincere and telling lies in the presence of death. It was on a fine winter's day, shot through with sunlight. In the pale blue sky, you could sense the cold all spangled with yellow. The cemetery overlooked the town, and you could see the fine transparent sun setting in the bay quivering with light, like a moist lip.

None of this fits together? How very true! A woman you leave behind to go to the movies, an old man to whom you have stopped listening, a death that redeems nothing, and then, on the other hand, the whole radiance of the world. What difference does it make if you accept everything? Here are three destinies, different and yet alike. Death for us all, but his own death to each. After all, the sun still warms our bones for us.

¹ Roger Quillot, in his notes to the second volume of Camus's works published in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1965, traces the ideas Camus expresses in these essays to the very first literary sketches written in 1932, when he was only nineteen. A manuscript belonging to Camus's first wife, Simone Hié, presents the themes of loneliness and old age, and specifically mentions the old woman left behind by the young people who go to the cinema. In 1935 Camus sketched a plan for these essays that indicates he intended to center them around the son's relationship with his mother. He first had the idea of writing a preface to a new edition of these essays in 1949, and read part of this one to Quillot in 1954. The essays were originally published in 1937, by the small firm of Charlot, in Algiers. The account of Camus's home life in the last section of *Irony* and in the essay *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* include the most openly autobiographical passages in all of his work. His father was killed at the first battle of the Marne in 1914 (cf. page 38), and he lived with his mother, his grandmother, and his elder brother Lucien in the working-class suburb of Belcourt in Algiers. -P.T.

The end