

Love of Life, Albert Camus

Love of Life

At night in Palma, life recedes slowly toward the tune-filled café district behind the market: the streets are dark and silent until one comes upon latticed doorways where light and music filter through. I spent almost a whole night in one of these cafés. It was a small, very low room, rectangular, painted green and hung with pink garlands. The wooden ceiling was covered with tiny red light bulbs. Miraculously fitted into this minute space were an orchestra, a bar with multicolored bottles, and customers squeezed shoulder to shoulder so tight they could hardly breathe. Just men. In the middle, two square yards of free space.

Glasses and bottles streamed by as the waiter carried them to all four corners of the room. No one was completely sober. Everyone was shouting. Some sort of naval officer was belching alcohol-laden compliments into my face. An ageless dwarf at my table was telling me his life story. But I was too tense to listen. The orchestra was playing tunes one could only catch the rhythm of, since it was beaten out by every foot in the place. Sometimes the door would open. In the midst of shouts, a new arrival would be fitted in between two chairs.¹

Suddenly, the cymbals clashed, and a woman leaped swiftly into the tiny circle in the middle of the cabaret. "Twenty-one," the officer told me. I was stupefied. The face of a young girl, but carved in a mountain of flesh. She might have been six feet tall. With all her fat she must have weighed three hundred pounds. Hands on her hips, wearing a yellow net through which a checkerboard of white flesh swelled, she was smiling; and each corner of her mouth sent a series of small ripples of flesh moving toward her ears. The excitement in the room knew no bounds. One felt this girl was known, loved, expected. She was still smiling.

She looked around at the customers, still silent and smiling, and wiggled her belly forward. The crowd roared, then demanded a song that everyone seemed to know. It was a nasal Andalusian tune accompanied by a strong three-beat rhythm from the drums. She sang, and at each beat mimed the act of love with her whole body. In this monotonous and passionate movement, real waves of flesh rose from her hips and moved upward until they died away on her shoulders. The room seemed stunned. But pivoting around with the refrain, seizing her breasts with both hands and opening her red, moist mouth, the girl took up the tune in chorus with the audience, until everyone stood upright in the tumult.

As she stood in the center, feet apart, sticky with sweat, hair hanging loose, she lifted her immense torso, which burst forth from its yellow netting. Like an unclean goddess rising from the waves, her eyes hollow, her forehead low and stupid, only a slight quivering at her knees, like a horse's after a race, showed she was still living. In the midst of the footstamping joy around her, she was like an ignoble and exalting image of life, with despair in her empty eyes and thick sweat on her belly ... Without cafés and newspapers, it would be difficult to travel.

A paper printed in our own language, a place to rub shoulders with others in the evenings enable us to imitate the familiar gestures of the man we were at home, who, seen from a distance, seems so much a stranger. For what gives value to travel is fear. It breaks down a kind of inner structure we have. One can no longer cheat—hide behind the hours spent at the office or at the plant (those hours we protest so loudly, which protect us so well from the pain of being alone).

I have always wanted to write novels in which my heroes would say: "What would I do without the office?" or again: "My wife has died, but fortunately I have all these orders to fill for tomorrow." Travel robs us of such refuge. Far from our own people, our own language, stripped of all our props, deprived of our masks (one doesn't know the fare on the streetcars, or anything else), we are

completely on the surface of ourselves.

But also, soul-sick, we restore to every being and every object its miraculous value. A woman dancing without a thought in her head, a bottle on a table, glimpsed behind a curtain: each image becomes a symbol. The whole of life seems reflected in it, insofar as it summarizes our own life at the moment. When we are aware of every gift, the contradictory intoxications we can enjoy (including that of lucidity) are indescribable. Never perhaps has any land but the Mediterranean carried me so far from myself and yet so near.

The emotion I felt at the café in Palma probably came from this. On the other hand, what struck me in the empty district near the cathedral, at noon, among the old palaces with their cool courtyards, in the streets with their scented shadows, was the idea of a certain "slowness." No one in the streets. Motionless old women in the miradors. And, walking along past the houses, stopping in courtyards full of green plants and round, gray pillars, I melted into this smell of silence, losing my limits, becoming nothing more than the sound of my footsteps or the flight of birds whose shadows I could see on the still sunlit portion of the walls. I would also spend long hours in the little Gothic cloister of San Francisco.

Its delicate, precious colonnade shone with the fine, golden yellow of old Spanish monuments. In the courtyard there were rose laurels, fake pepper plants, a wrought-iron well from which hung a long, rusty metal spoon. Passers-by drank from it. I still remember sometimes the clear sound it made as it dropped back on the stone of the well. Yet it was not the sweetness of life that this cloister taught me. In the sharp sound of wingbeats as the pigeons flew away, the sudden, snug silence in the middle of the garden, in the lonely squeaking of the chain on its well, I found a new and yet familiar flavor. I was lucid and smiling before this unique play of appearances.

A single gesture, I felt, would be enough to shatter this crystal in which the world's face was smiling. Something would come undone—the flight of pigeons would die and each would slowly tumble on its outstretched wings. Only my silence and immobility lent plausibility to what looked so like an illusion. I joined in the game. I accepted the appearances without being taken in. A fine, golden sun gently warmed the yellow stones of the cloister. A woman was drawing water from the well. In an hour, a minute, a second, now perhaps, everything might collapse. And yet this miracle continued. The world lived on, modest, ironic, and discreet (like certain gentle and reserved forms of women's friendship). A balance continued, colored, however, by all the apprehension of its own end.

There lay all my love of life: a silent passion for what would perhaps escape me, a bitterness beneath a flame. Each day I would leave this cloister like a man lifted from himself, inscribed for a brief moment in the continuance of the world. And I know why I thought then of the expressionless eyes of Doric Apollos or the stiff, motionless characters in Giotto's paintings.²

It was at these moments that I truly understood what countries like this could offer me. I am surprised men can find certainties and rules for life on the shores of the Mediterranean, that they can satisfy their reason there and justify optimism and social responsibility. For what struck me then was not a world made to man's measure, but one that closed in upon him. If the language of these countries harmonized with what echoed deeply within me, it was not because it answered my questions but because it made them superfluous.

Instead of prayers of thanksgiving rising to my lips, it was this Nada whose birth is possible only at the sight of landscapes crushed by the sun. There is no love of life without despair of life. In Ibiza, I sat every day in the cafés that dot the harbor. Toward five in the evening, the young people would stroll back and forth along the full length of the jetty; this is where marriages and the whole of life are arranged. One cannot help thinking there is a certain grandeur in beginning one's life this way, with the whole world looking on.

I would sit down, still dizzy from the day's sun, my head full of white churches and chalky walls, dry fields and shaggy olive trees. I would drink a sweetish syrup, gazing at the curve of the hills in front of me. They sloped gently down to the sea. The evening would grow green. On the largest of the hills, the last breeze turned the sails of a windmill. And, by a natural miracle, everyone lowered his voice. Soon there was nothing but the sky and musical words rising toward it, as if heard from a great distance. There was something fleeting and melancholy in the brief moment of dusk, perceptible not only to one man but also to a whole people.

As for me, I longed to love as people long to cry. I felt that every hour I slept now would be an hour stolen from life ... that is to say from those hours of undefined desire. I was tense and motionless, as I had been during those vibrant hours at the cabaret in Palma and at the cloister in San Francisco, powerless against this immense desire to hold the world between my hands.

I know that I am wrong, that we cannot give ourselves completely. Otherwise, we could not create. But there are no limits to loving, and what does it matter to me if I hold things badly if I can embrace everything? There are women in Genoa whose smile I loved for a whole morning. I shall never see them again and certainly nothing is simpler. But words will never smother the flame of my regret. I watched the pigeons flying past the little well at the cloister in San Francisco, and forgot my thirst. But a moment always came when I was thirsty again.

1 There is a certain freedom of enjoyment that defines true civilization. And the Spanish are among the few peoples in Europe who are civilized.

2 The decadence of Greek sculpture and the dispersion of Italian art begin with the appearance of smiles and expression in the eyes, as if beauty ended where the mind begins.

The end