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A Difficult Spring

Far more effectively than the bands playing in the square, these ecstatic couples, locked together, hardly speaking, proclaimed in the midst of the tumult of rejoicing, with the proud egotism and injustice of happy people, that the plague was over, the reign of terror ended.

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

I

The train rushed smoothly over the Holland plains and softly, unbelievably softly, rocked on its springs. Almost too softly for those unaccustomed to such comfort, for those generally not in a situation to enjoy it. Their blue and white striped garments did not match the creamy velvet of the carriage. The jute fabric of their prison stripes rolled and twisted, and their nearly naked skulls were a sad complement to their bony cheeks and staring eye sockets. The high seat backs and creamy upholstery in the carriage was shot with gold and recalled vacant theatre loges. Luxurious and silent loges, which someone had given these impossible travellers. Actually not given, but only ceded to the gaunt creatures temporarily. The stripes on their uniforms looked like broken sticks tossed on and between the velvet seats; the people in the sticks like the remains of some unknown tribe. They'd probably been found in a mine shaft more than a hundred metres deep or in the throat of some extinguished volcano; or perhaps nobody knew exactly where they'd been found. And it somehow seemed that the train rocked so softly out of a kind of sensitivity, and at the same time out of an almost unperceivable caution, that its carriages might be polluted by too much contact with this impure cargo.

He sat beside the window. He had been stretched out before, his legs extended onto the opposite seat, his body supine and given over to the intoxicating cotton rocking. But then another windmill appeared and he sat up; it was an automatic movement in response to his amazement at the sight of the rare farmhouse beside the tracks. As if he needed to impress in his consciousness the image of the little homestead, but above all because some women and children had emerged from the doorway of the little house amidst the greenery and were waving little handkerchiefs at the train. One of the women was wiping her eyes with one hand and shaking the handkerchief with the other. And also because the little house was located on uncontaminated soil and the returning deportee observed the land with a calm and deliberate curiosity. He was

searching for any sign of *human history*, an image of the life that had continued among real people during his absence; he searched with eyes that were both weary and unbelieving.

Most of the other travellers did not rise from their seats and go to the window; they were too weak. The news of Dutch women standing in front of their houses only brought a tired smile, like that on a sleeping man's face, to the corners of their mouths.

The golden velvet of the seats paled as the train's springs gently rocked the travellers into the ever thickening grey of evening. And it seemed to him that they were travelling to the far end of a dark land, to an empty coast where each of them would face his own unknown and savage fate.

"We organized our departure masterfully," René said enthusiastically into the darkness.

"It's lucky that Jean and Marcel are so handy," responded François with a voice that, though tranquil, revealed a flash of self-confidence.

They had agreed to disembark at Harzungen, and there he found himself amidst a throng of skeletal bodies and again heard the wheezing lament of rib cages and saw even more clearly the unbelievably long line of train cars that had been traversing between the two front lines for five days now, meandering without destination it seemed, heavy from the weight of destroyed human cargo. The travelling necropolis of upright, tightly packed, zebra-striped bodies, in which even those that had stopped living did not fall to the ground. This caravan of death could not be compared with other transports and thus an endless series of coffins waited at the Celle station before the open doors of the long convoy.

The train stopped and Pierre stood up and swayed a bit before unbolting and opening the door of the compartment.

"This is Brussels," he said.

"Brussels?" François asked with a yawn.

But Pierre was already in the corridor, using all his force to push down the window pane.

"It is Brussels, isn't it?" he asked, answering his question the same moment he asked it.

They went out to the corridor to wave to the city from the window and girls wearing the white dresses of the Red Cross came toward them with warm drinks in cups and sweet intrusion in their voices. They were timid and gentle in their anxiety not to miss any aspect of caring for these bodies.

A faint steam rose from the tin pots and spread a sweetsmelling aroma of tea into the night air; it was as if the men were enfolded in the memory of blossoming linden surrounded by a swarm of droning bees.

## II

After their reception in Paris, they lined up under the showers and thoughts returned to him of thin bodies and bare skulls under the boiling water *there*. But he was able to push away these images because of the loud and clownish play of the former prisoners of war in the neighbouring stalls; they at least were not suffering in the shower from visions of death as were the returning deportees. The former prisoners of war joked in their military fashion, calling through the walls, climbing over them, noisily washing, cursing the water, laughing in a chorus, vigorously splashing as if they wanted to wash all people once and for all.

Although he could not join in their playfulness, he had to smile. It was pleasant to hear the full, manly voices with their healthy animal tone and the innuendos about their comrades' organs that were supposed to guarantee the continuation of the human race. But the returning deportee could not take part. Although it was a pleasure to feel the warm streams of water flow like balsam on his body, he was still somehow wounded. And yet he felt he could think more concretely under the shower, think somehow from a distance.

They went through a room where each had his chest xrayed one after another and then filed into a large space as wide as a dance hall. There were doctors everywhere, standing here and

there next to little tables where orderlies wrote out the information dictated to them by the doctors. There were six or seven such groups. The men stood naked, in lines, moving slowly forward.

He noticed that there were only four bodies in front of him. With a sudden embarrassment he realized he would have to present himself to the female doctor because by the time he got to the head of the line there would be nobody else in front of him. She was a middle-aged woman and did her job thoughtfully if a bit absently. It wasn't a problem to stand naked before her and yet he felt an unexpected humiliation when he realized that the entire history of the camp crouched in his poor body, and this in front of a woman. But he walked up to her simply and naturally when his turn came; it's always like that, he thought; no matter how much you think about something, when it is time for action everything suddenly becomes simple. The doctor sat on her little stool waiting; she looked a bit odd in her white apron. She seemed concentrated, although not by the herd of naked male bodies in the hall, but by something else she had been thinking about before. As she gently prodded his testicles, she spoke to the orderly who sat at the table to her left; she did this in the same unconscious manner that a woman in the market might test some silken fabric between her fingers as she talks with a friend. Her casualness, though appropriate to the particular situation, was almost insulting. It is interesting that a man who has just been liberated has to have his organs felt in order for a doctor to ascertain that he is still whole. And in this instant, he conjured up his cellmates in that other chamber; all the skeletal remains that had released their last breath with hands over their mummified members. Now the doctor withdrew her hand and placed a stethoscope on his chest and, as the little tambourine in her ear conveyed the sound of his lungs, her eyes slid from attentiveness and became almost maternal. She dictated automatically to the orderly.

He paused indecisively as he left through the large doorway; he was struck by the sudden fear that he would too quickly become a man like any other man walking the streets of Paris. He hesitated on the sidewalk, realizing that if he was different

it was only because of his clothes, which caught the eyes of passers-by. That had been the bright idea of the Red Cross.

He asked the guard for directions and started to look for the address he had been given in the labyrinth that was Paris. The crowds in the underground corridors and the masses in the metro rushed through the endless shafts; this is perhaps the most suitable place to welcome a returning deportee, he thought. Not the big city pulse up above on the avenues and boulevards but the darkness of the tunnels underneath the city pavement. There a deportee could continue in his anonymity and homelessness while, above, the living people confirmed his hidden difference. His clothes, of course, troubled him the most, but nobody noticed them in the packed crowd. He would take them off as soon as he could. There were not as many people in the train itself, and he asked a girl, who was standing next to a young man and looking at him, if this was the right place to get off. She said it was. She looked at his clothing and asked him what was meant by the letter in the red triangle on his chest; when he answered that it was the first letter of his nationality, she smiled and said she was Russian. The young man with her was French, she said, and then she asked about the camps. He smiled, saying it was impossible to tell her about them in such a short time. He then murmured something in Russian, more to himself than her. She blushed and he realized that he shouldn't use the same Russian phrases with a girl in the Paris metro that Vaska had used when they carried corpses on waterlogged mattresses. He was happy when it was time to get off and redeem his world from the shame of the blushing girl.

There weren't many automobiles in the Place de Trocadero and the wide avenues flowing into it looked like the abandoned arteries of an extinct Europe. It was as if the few automobiles that remained were departing on asphalt rivers that flowed, empty and silent, to the end of the world, and as if, on those lonely roads across the world, they were looking for a living creature who might explain to them the purpose of human settlements, of cities and existence.

The Palais de Chaillot resembled the wings of a monumental tomb. He remembered the embarrassment of the girl in the

metro and realized that he was looking through the prism of his own world. Her blushing cheeks, he thought, almost aroused some faint rosy glow around the human image, a glow that could become the birth of the universe; but such a birth now seemed so remote from him that it could hardly be real. Paris unfolded before him and a stiff muscle stirred in his chest, probably in the same way that the heart of a drowned man convulses when it is revived by artificial respiration. The heart hadn't stopped but had only been dormant. Perhaps we have only been dormant, he said to himself as he walked across the wide marble stage that divided the wings of the palace. He strode along the smooth surface and observed himself from afar as if through the lens of a moving camera; it caught the image of prison stripes in the middle of a terrace bathed in May sunlight. He could find no connection between the image of himself and the light on the pale yellowish marble, still less the amplitude of the city beyond the Eiffel Tower. And so he stood by the stone balustrade and thought that one day in the future this view might stir enthusiasm in him; at the moment, however, he could not grasp the meaning of such infinite size and magnificence. It looked as if it had all been made for a noble, sunny people who had come from somewhere else to live in this wonderful infinity of parks and avenues, boulevards and palaces. But he couldn't imagine where new residents would come from and, although he knew that centuries of history had constructed this eternal vision, he could not help but regard it with the hard and mutinous chill of the returning deportee. No specific image from *there* intervened, yet he felt as if he were looking at one huge camp. Because of this feeling, he searched deliberately for an image from *there* that he might compare with this view. He could find none, except perhaps one. In Dora he had looked down a hill at a wide road that ran between the barracks toward the gates. The gates were broad, and the flat, wide road gave an impression of distance, for one could see that it continued on the other side, beyond the gates. Trucks came in and out through these gates; the guards stood there as if beneath the arches of a drawbridge. Morning and evening, rows of labourers marched to and from work through

these gates. Seen from a distance, from a height, they looked like the long lines of some apocalyptic infantry. Because of the stripes on their uniforms, the columns seemed like a horizontal river of greyish, bluish mud.

No, he thought as he descended the stairs, the view from the hill *there* had nothing in common with the view *here*, although there must be a connection.