

The curate is short, fat, red, round - of a healthy, rude, simple peasant... well, beauty. To eat and do nothing in the city is never laziness, living in the city is in itself a kind of work.

"Where shall I dine? What should I eat? Where will I have supper? Should I go to the theater? Or to the cinema? Has the new hospital been finished? Will Dr. X speak at the public meeting?"... These questions do not exist in the village, so they are not raised and not solved. One course, one inn, one church, one event: the thought is monotonous and immovable, and as there is no choice of food, theaters, newspapers, cafés - there are no ideas; and as you do not agonize over the question "should I have hot chocolate and a biscuit or some stew and a beer for supper, drink a glass of rosé, get a bed at Pepina's, a seat in the café chantant" - thus you are not burdened by skepticism. For dinner - fish, for dessert - a glass of wine, for the solution to all problems and the cause of all consequences - one God and one Beelzebub. That's why I couldn't convince the curate that atheism is still not immorality, that faith in the Pope's infallibility is still not Christianity and that Catholicism is by far not the only religion.

That was on the first day after my arrival.

The girl, Marija, is young, slender, her face sweaty, her eyes black, her hair greasy - one might say, a simple beauty that for a man of the city

has the advantages of being typical, innate and inappropriate. In the city, to kiss a woman - your own or that of another - is not the same as loving: at ten in the morning you must go to the café to read the papers; in the afternoon, you have a date with the spinster from N Street; at night, the high-school girl Y is meeting you at B Square; you've promised to have a beer with your colleague Jota after the theater... So one kiss cannot remain on your face pure, lasting, untouched, implanted; if, in a city street, you drop a piece of trash or waste, a love letter, your wallet, there is the street sweeper, an unknown person, an unknown owner. In the village, you get drunk and everyone knows; you have diarrhea and somebody from ten houses down the street brings you a remedy; you miss one mass and everyone thinks you're a socialist; you relieve yourself in the main square and the stamp remains untouched, immobile, impressive, until it is eradicated by time. Hence I had no intention of approaching Marija, although I dreamt of her.

That was the second day after my arrival.

No matter. I had the sea, idleness, milk, the moonlight, the fish, the sun, wine, cigarettes and the rocks; days - clear, white, stiff; mornings - tremulous, pink, moist; evenings - dense, vivid, plump; nights - greenish, wistful, transparent, and - my appetite. I would stretch out naked on the rocks, in the sea, in the sand. My body soaked in all the heat of the full summer from the water, the rocks, the air. A million traces white-hot, sharp, pungent, thin, pushed into my pores, and there the sky was covered with gold dust and the sea, soft and azure, reflected the passion of the sun more forcefully, roughly and passionately than a poet celebrating the passion of being. And in the early evening the scent of the water spread through the grave and tired coast like a cocotte whose presence you sense with your nose sooner than with your eyes or your touch. It was on the fifth day that I sensed the scent and looked at Marija more carefully. She was my neighbor. She offered me figs every morning. She never said anything; offering them silently, uttering two or three words at most, with a bashful smile and always suddenly flushed as if she had immersed her face in boiling water. I paid her a compliment, for the first time, but I was more confused by it than she was, for if it was improper for her, I was the more improper for saying it. I noticed immediately that I would not be able to talk to Marija, and hard as I tried, I could not think of a subject to talk about. Art? Life? Clothes? Cooking? The spirit of con-

versation of all intelligent people and city dwellers is the same; the spirit of peasants is different because of the simple fact that they have no spirit. Spirit requires ingenuity, vividness, dishonesty, a language of dots and allusions, sentences cut short, the name of an author such as Boccaccio, the mention of a pose such as that of Venus of the Medici. The peasant prefers clarity, obviousness, and if he believes in God, he only believes because of the hand-graspingness of his mind and dialogue; it is simpler and easier to believe that there is a being that thunders and pulls the sun by the ears than it is to comprehend the laws of physics, electricity, etc. For that being is the interpreter and the reason, while on the other side there are so many laws, experiments and proofs. On the one side - beans, on the other rice, meat, dessert, fruit, potatoes, black coffee... Thus I fell silent in Marija's presence. I immediately chopped the airs and flirtations of city love-making: quips, verses, letters, longing gazes, melancholy strides, ridiculous forced endearings - all that makes the overture of love, for only intellectual women listen to the overture of operas, there being no action in them... I fell in love with her body, which I could understand, encompass, support and feel. Hand-graspingness.

As I said, I did nothing. Nature rendered me speechless. I didn't have to and I couldn't have consideration in front of her: you don't react to a storm by showing your diplomas, or your identity cards as against the acts of state institutions; you don't stop torrents and floods with witty speeches like those of demonstrators; you do not enrapture trees and the sea with poetic diction as you do youth. All considerations of people and culture - "terribly sorry, Miss, did I push you?" - vanish when a cow fondles you with her soiled tail. "After you, dear lady" makes no sense when cattle enter the stables. I gave myself up totally to instinct and nature: I brilliantly noticed that dogs do not speak and that pigs do not write love letters.

But in this and because of this, Marija too sank. I saw other girls; I liked them all. I fell in love with the whole village, inasmuch as it consisted of girls, youth and beauty. None of them could touch me with a special charm, individual trait, scent, expression or form: my sexual-psychological mood developed from the expressionlessness of their faces, monotony of their conversations, beliefs and demeanors, and the unity of their souls. Not in a single one of them did "longing drain her blood, pain swallow her gazes, sadness stroke her hair, despair blemish her skin

or daydreams crush her lips". I could not call one of them "my pale love", another "dim", a third "gay", a fourth "black"; or "a rosy cry of passion, a black question-mark of happiness, a yellow smile of pleasure or a magic hymn of death..." For if I called one of them Madonna, I could call another Aphrodite at most.

But Marija had one advantage: she had no - fiancée, she lived next to me, and her father was in America.

That was the first week after I arrived.

The curate went on trying to convince me, although I kept consistently silent, that atheism is immoral and that his good parishioners would pierce each other with prongs the moment they became non-believers. He showed me a paper that reported on a young man who had murdered a jeweler, another who had robbed his landlord, a maid who had strangled her child, another who had poisoned her husband... and all that was to prove that faith is the guardian of morals, the city a hotbed of crime and that my freethinking views are announcing the doomsday of honesty. That very evening, according to my friend Martin, the curate grabbed their (Martin's parents') maid on the stairs by the tits. I felt sorry for him. I sincerely wished him luck. I was always touched to the point of tears by those wretches who had to make do with a piece of bread for dinner, and this tit-grabbing meant that the curate was suffering from hunger and fasting. However, I envied Martin: he had visited that maid two nights in a row, and in our debates he supported the curate and, somewhat well-read, pointed out France, where the state was separated from the church and where people did not breed like bacillus and the Germans, and the Germans, you see, have a strong Catholic center, and German nationalism is successfully germanizing Polish children.

I paid little attention to such arguments. I didn't even want to debate. Such problems bored me; thinking bored me; reasoning became as unclear to me as summer flies and Confirmation sermons. I felt the burden of passion, the thirst of love, the hunger of sensuality. I was convinced that Martin's nightly excursions could be no secret to the curate; so if I were to follow Martin, I would follow him in this also. And the thought that even the smallest immoral act of mine would become known scared me terribly.

Among those people I was something special, exceptional: everyone knew I didn't go to church. An esteemed village figure, the richest farmer there, looked at me with distrust from the very first day: firstly because of my accent, secondly because of all my "isms", thirdly because to his question "Are the churches in Rome always full?" I replied "Yes - of foreigners, when there is no mass".

And in going there I had dreamt of rehabilitating my generation: convincing everyone that the young are - people, that holy pictures are - pictures, and that a scapular is - a scapular. The curate had said to me: "Do you see what your papers write about scandals in clerical circles? But they should realize that one priest does not represent all clergy and that, after all, a priest is still a man." Certainly, I thought, a priest too is a man and only a man. There, I thought, when I go back I shall rehabilitate the clergy in the eyes of the city intellectuals, to wit, I will convince them that a priest is also a man, and then I shall cry out from the bottom of my soul: Then be people like us, with no special privileges over human souls, and do not take conscience and charity from those who have them, but rather give them to those who do not.

But now I no longer daydreamed: I was in love head over heels, I pitied the curate and envied Martin, and when the curate took Martin's place, I pitied Martin and envied the curate. I suffered physically, but I damned physics to bloody hell. I felt matter, but I locked materialism up in the library. I sensed animalism, but I forgot phylogenesis and ontogenesis as if they were grammar-school Greek.

There you are! There you are! If I were now to follow the curate as he followed Martin, I would compromise all that I came to rehabilitate.

The blame would be laid not on my person, although I too am a man, but on my principles, my party and the new generation. I felt that immediately, I had just touched the maid's breasts "by mistake", as I protested to the curate, for he had strictly warned me: "You keep your modernness to your own kind!" And I could not tell him that tits are still not - the breviary...

I felt powerless and guilty. The curate, on the contrary, showed decisiveness and strength. And that confused me. I became speechless and went home.

There everything suddenly began clearing up as I recalled my moods of the past fortnight.

Had I said to the curate that he had done the same thing I had done, he would probably have replied: "Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi". For, what is he and what am I? He is a priest, he lives in the village, he eats and thinks; I am a student, I live in the city, I eat and study. He teaches religion, I demolish it; in this village I am the first public atheist. - Now, it was always true that the man of faith and the priest had also to be men and satisfy their human needs like animals. But to this day there had never been a man in the village who was a non-believer and a layman, and whose human needs would... etc. For - and that is the main point - all that has always been and shall always be, but never before had there been non-believers.

I realized that my position is quite critical, that because of my views I was torn out of the circle of humanity and that because of my atheism I lost the right to be an animal. My ideas were unusual for those around me, they were controversial, new - something exactly opposite of their own - unnatural. And there I was in the middle of nature. Had I gone a step further with the maid, I would have committed an even greater unnaturalness: an unnatural man doing something - natural!

Thus women and life were torn from my grasp. I could not go on; I thought of escaping to the city; it was not possible; there was no way. My thoughts, my problems, my impressions - they all agglomerated into a single solution; my pains, my torture, my suffering - they all fit into a single reason; and my dissatisfaction, my hypochondria and insomnia and anemia... I was entering the simplest of understandings, the hand-graspingest philosophy, the toughest arguments. And unable to endure the appetite and hunger any longer, I humbly said:

- Dear curate, here's a hand. I realize I was misled. There has to be someone who created it all. Only here, in the village, man discovers God and understands nature. There has to be one cause to all the consequences. I believe!

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Translated by Ljiljana Šćurić