



A FEW CERTITUDES

IN THE SUMMER of 1985, nearly ten years after Franco's death, I was twenty-five years old and ever so slightly screwed up. But fortunately I had six certitudes I could cling to. For example, I knew that my dark moods could be valiantly fought with a plate of my mother's paella. She makes it the traditional way, with rabbit and chicken, rosemary, snails, flat green beans, two kinds of white beans called *bajocó* and *garrofó* that you can only buy in the markets of Valencia, and artichokes. It is the Valencian artichokes that make all the difference; they dissolve on your tongue and give the rice that wonderfully delicate, earthy taste, and the dark green colour that overtakes the too artificial shade of *faux* saffron yellow that you get in restaurants. My mother would rather be found dead than be seen adding garlic, *chorizo*, peas, and all foreign ingredients that infiltrate the paellas on the Costas. Since I was little I have known that there is no sadness that can linger in your spirit while watching the alchemy of the paella. When your mouth starts to salivate looking at the saffroned-rice stewing in the pan over the fire, settling down between the fried meat, the vegetables and the snails, and your nose inhales the scent of the burning pine needles and the freshly cut rosemary, your whole body fills up with anticipation and your dark mood slips away. Forget Prozac – and that you are counting calories – and take it from me: paella valenciana is the best antidepressant

on earth.

Another four certitudes were that growing up under a dictatorship castrates you for life; that losing your father at age eight leaves a pain difficult to heal no matter how many men you sleep with; that I didn't like the French; and that life is basically disappointing.

At twenty-five I had been in love and back so many times that I had decided I was through with love. The words of that corny English song felt exactly as if they had been written for me. The loss I felt after any inevitable break-up with a lover had the power to bring back the forsaken despair I had felt for the first time the day of my father's death. Besides, I knew, and this was my last certitude, that true love doesn't exist.

After having left home at eighteen and having lived five disastrous love stories, both in Spain and abroad, I was again at my mother's, getting fatter by the minute, preferring as I explained, her rice dishes to the drugs the doctor had prescribed for the depression which followed my last break up. The pressure to do something with my life and to spend the rest of it at least keeping inside size fourteen clothes, forced me to reconsider going back to university. I was good at languages, having studied English at school and having learnt to speak French by ear over several grape-picking jobs during the wine harvesting season in the Carcassonne and Narbonne areas. I decided to take the entrance exam for the School of Translators and Interpreters in Barcelona at the end of September. But my French, though decent, wasn't good enough and I knew that to perfect it I had to spend the summer in France.

Not knowing where to start asking about jobs, I bought the latest issue of *Integral*, a magazine that was the banner for self-development, ecology, vegetarianism, alternative living, spirituality, organic food and other ideas that were starting to come to Spain under our own, brand-new democracy. Amongst the adverts for couples offering to take care of masías in Catalan provinces, mail order organic jams from Murcia, announcements of demonstrations against conscription in Bilbao and appeals from

communes asking for inmates to fill up deserted villages in the Huesca and Navarra mountains, I found an advert for a cleaning job in the countryside near Toulouse, in a place called L'Ecurie aux Miracles.

L'Ecurie aux Miracles called itself a "Transformational Centre covering a wide variety of – mind, body and spirit – subjects to encourage personal growth." It was a summer venue for workshops, therapies and awareness courses, offering anything from tai chi, money awareness or past life regression to crystal healing, drums and feng shui. It also offered summer jobs in exchange for board and lodging – no money – and promised "awakening and discovering of the true self while enjoying warmth, peace and relaxation in a comfortable and homely atmosphere, savouring delicious vegetarian food."

I wrote to the centre and a woman called Charlène de Panafieux wrote back to me sending instructions as how to get there. It surprised me that she didn't ask me any questions. Mind you, it was me who should have asked them. After all it was me who was going to work for free.

I bought an open return ticket to Toulouse. The coach journey from Valencia was going to take all night so – should I need food and entertainment – my mother prepared and packed the equivalent of dinner for three people, and came to the coach station to say goodbye. When the coach entered the motorway in Sagunto I started feeling nervous. Even if I had been in a commune before – that was the reason why I had left university in the first place, to go and live in a blasted commune, and that's why I knew about *Integral* magazine – I wasn't familiar with the world of therapies or with the New Age tribes. I wasn't a vegetarian either, let alone a vegan. And I find night journeys in coaches tedious, specially when the driver keeps smoking one cigar after another and listening to Sevillanas on a loop from Oropesa to the border.

When we stopped at the last service station on the Spanish side of the motorway I got off the coach to enjoy what I knew to be the last decent *café con leche* of the summer. I had been in France enough times to know that – no matter how much they boast

about their cheese, their wine and their confit de canard – their coffee is disgusting.

At the Spanish border the Guardia Civil got in and woke up those who were asleep to demand their passports. They didn't bother to check our luggage because we were leaving the country. That was the French police's task. While the Gendarmes were rummaging in the suitcases of two Arab men I found myself wondering what I was doing there. Once again I was crossing the French border and leaving my country behind. But at least this time I was alone and not following a man like the last time. What a disaster it had been. And the time before. And the time before that.

I didn't manage to sleep all night and when the sun rose – somewhere before or after Perpignan – my eyelids were swollen and my breath felt as if I had been smoking the driver's cigars myself. I got off the coach in Toulouse feeling and smelling like an old rag that has been used to clean the men's toilets.

In Toulouse I had to wait several hours before taking the very slow train to Laurac, the nearest village to L'Ecurie aux Miracles, where Charlène de Panafieux said she had arranged for someone to meet me. But when I got off the train, at eight in the evening, on the 25th June, the station was deserted. I walked to the village and entered the only bar in the square with the intention of asking if there was any kind of transport to L'Ecurie aux Miracles, which, as the address indicated, was in the grounds of the Château de Montaieul.

The small bar smelled of stale tobacco and had only six tables. In the middle stood a gigantic fish tank. I say gigantic because it was the size of two of the tables put together, and taking into account the size of the bar, the thing was actually huge. The tank was filled with plastic plants and stones, arranged in ways that formed caves between them from where a few colourful, if tired, fish came and went. There was also a black-legged lobster sitting at the bottom and lifting an antenna from time to time, as if to assert that, unlike the plants, it wasn't made of plastic. The tank was illuminated by a fluorescent tube at the bottom that diffused

light through the water giving it a ghostly aura. I have nothing against fish tanks – I usually find them quite relaxing – but that one was actually creepy and seemed out of place, as if forgotten on purpose by a retired fishmonger who couldn't find anywhere else to abandon it.

The farthest table from this aquatic epicentre of the bar was occupied by four men playing dominoes. The other tables were empty. The men greeted me with a polite *Bonsoir Mademoiselle*, gave me a short, inquisitive look, and continued playing their noisy game. Behind the counter I was surprised to see the back of a child filling four sticky glasses with a yellow liquid. He topped them with water and the liquid acquired a milky consistency: the omnipresent *Ricard*. When he came out of the counter to take the tray of drinks to the men playing dominoes, I realised that he was no child but a middle aged woman, extremely short, thin and flat-chested. Her hair was short and cut in a masculine old fashioned way, parted at one side, glued in its place by some sort of grease or gel, and sprinkled with dandruff. It was the same kind of hairstyle little boys used to have for communion on a Sunday in Spain – when I was a child and also obliged to go to mass.

“*Oui?*” she asked me abruptly when I approached her.

“Could you tell me how could I get to *L'Ecurie aux Miracles*, please?” I emphasised the *please* because there was something in her mouth that made me feel intimidated.

“Gerard!” she shouted.

“*Oui!*” answered one of the domino players.

“This girl wants to go up to the château. Will you take her?”

“Of course,” he said, without even looking up. “But she will have to wait until we finish the game.”

“Thanks,” I replied, not very reassured by the idea of going anywhere with a man I didn't know. I stood in the middle of the bar looking at the lobster and not knowing what to do, whether to take a seat at one of the tables, or to walk up to the counter. I was tired and hungry and starting to regret being there.

“Can I get you anything?” asked the breastless lady. It looked as if she were fighting between a strong desire to ignore me and a

duty to get some money out of me.

“Do you have anything to eat?”

“No, the kitchen is closed.”

“Couldn’t you at least prepare me a sandwich?”

“I have no more bread.”

I’m not psychic but I could sense her inner struggle. I could have sworn that the woman was so bitter that she hated her job, the village and the whole world. At that very moment, she hated me too.

“Do you have anything to eat at all?”

“I told you the kitchen is closed.”

I have low sugar levels and have to eat quite often. If I don’t, I get dizzy, start having palpitations, my blood pressure plummets and my mood takes a walk underground, with the rats, the worms and the cockroaches. I had finished my mother’s last sandwich in Toulouse station. I hadn’t planned not being met at Laurac.

“Don’t you even have some crisps, or some crackers, or even a madeleine?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll have some tonic water then, thanks.”

Thanks? Thanks for nothing. I couldn’t believe it! If I were in Spain, in any remote village, and I was in a bar, and it was late, and I was a foreigner, and I was hungry, the person behind the bar would make me dinner. The kitchen wouldn’t be closed because it was never closed; we eat notoriously late in Spain, and even if she didn’t have anything to eat, she would give me some of her own supper. In Spain food is sacred and if some one is hungry you feed them, specially if you own a bar for God’s sake. During the Civil War my grandmother made pots of lentils to feed the Republican soldiers when their trains stopped in Valencia’s station on their way to the Aragón front. They were probably thin on lentils with just a bit of bay leaf, and positively deprived of *chorizo* or even lard, because times were very hard and there wasn’t much food around, but I bet they were hot and the soldiers could feel for a few minutes that they were not so far

from home after all. That's solidarity.

My mother never gave a penny to beggars and homeless people, but she made them sandwiches filled with chunks of *tortilla de patata* and *alioli*; or, if they were even luckier, with *escalivada* that she made with peeled roasted red peppers and aubergines, bits of dried cod and cut up boiled eggs, well dressed with olive oil.

Thinking about my mother's sandwiches the realisation came over me that I really was in a foreign land. France was only on the other side of the Pyrenees but it always felt like another planet. All those centuries of liberty and equality and they were incapable of feeding a hungry person. So much for their fraternity.

I'd been abroad before, but I'd never before been overwhelmed by such a sense of homesickness. It was probably only hunger and exhaustion but in that smelly bar of that Godforsaken village it felt as close to desolation as I could come.

The ectoplasm-looking light of the tank and those slimy, lazy fish had started giving me a headache. Fortunately tonic water has quinine. That picked me up a bit.

I was planning burning down the bar and the slow torture I was going to give the breastless woman before making her bite the dust, when the man called Gerard stood up and walked towards me. He offered me his hand and I shook it.

He was quite tall and much younger than he had looked sitting there amongst the older men in the dim light of the bar. In fact he was probably only in his early thirties, well built and handsome, and his short sleeves showed his well-tanned and pneumatic biceps.

He escorted me out of the bar and I didn't even bother to say goodbye to the lady. His van was parked on the square. As I entered the vehicle and sat next to him, we were so close that I could smell his after shave lotion. I felt a strange mixture of excitement and apprehension growing in my guts, but I was far too weak and depressed to try to identify my feelings or even to do anything about them.

"Are you hungry?" he asked me while turning the engine on.

He had obviously been listening to my exchange with the unfriendly waitress.

“Very.”

“Here, have some *merveilles*,” and he passed me an oil-stained paper bag from the back seat. *Merveilles* are sweet pastries, made with flour and water, and sometimes a drop of alcohol, and fried in very hot oil and sprinkled with icing sugar. They are very similar to *churros* – those waist destroyers that we often eat for breakfast in Spain dunked in hot thick chocolate – but lighter, and instead of being long and thin, they are square to begin with, and when fried they acquire different shapes. I don’t like *churros* very much, but must admit that those *merveilles* were truly marvellous. After three of them, the sugar running freely in my bloodstream again, I started to feel less lonely, less desolate and less foreign, and Gerard looked less menacing than before.

“Is that better?” he asked when I closed the paper bag and put it on the back seat.

“Yes, thank you. They are delicious.”

“Made them myself yesterday. The kids love them; you are lucky they left a few. So the season has started I take it?”

“What?” I was imagining this big man, with those grease stained hands, standing in the kitchen making *merveilles* for his children so I didn’t hear his question.

“Have the workshops started? I haven’t seen Charlène this year yet.”

“I don’t know. I am just coming to do the cleaning.”

“Ah, so you will be part of the staff this summer?”

“Suppose so.”

He wanted to talk. I didn’t feel like talking much but I owed him that. After all, he had given me the *merveilles*.

“Is this your first year?”

“Yes.”

“It might be your last as well. The way the things are going.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the girls are always arguing, aren’t they, so I imagine that one day the whole thing will explode.”

"What girls?"

"Charlène and Catherine. Can't stand each other. None of my business though."

"Who is Catherine?"

Curiosity started to run freely in my bloodstream too so I started asking questions and, in the rather short ride from Laurac to L'Ecurie aux Miracles, I managed to find out that Gerard was a farmer. His farm, La Ferme Saint Sylvain, belonged to the Château de Montaieul and his family had leased it for several generations. It was a small farm but it was big enough for himself, his wife Elsa and their two kids. They planted maize, had a vegetable garden, some twenty cows, a pig, rabbits, ducks, geese and chickens. He liked life in the country, although he would have preferred to be a chef. He had a diploma in cookery but his father had had a stroke and he had been obliged to take over the farm. He resented the fact that running a farm meant that it was difficult to take holidays. He was unhappy, not because he disliked hard work, but because the land wasn't his. His ancestors had worked the fields around Saint Sylvain. Down the generations they had made it grow and flourish. But they didn't own the land, and that seemed to be some kind of obsession.

"If you don't own the land, you don't own your life," he concluded.

I thought that was a rather dramatic statement, but I come from a city so what would I know?

"Who does the land belong to now then?" I asked again while Gerard drove the car into a big dark courtyard. The whole thing seemed too complicated.

"Catherine de Panafieux, la chatelaine."

"Is she Charlène's mother?" I guessed.

"Stepmother. She has land coming out of her ears, and the farm is small steak for her but she is proud and traditional and doesn't need the money. My grandfather asked her grandmother, and my father asked her mother, and I have asked her again and again but she won't sell. Sometimes I feel like packing up and going to live in the city. Open my own restaurant. Anyway, here

you are. *Bon courage.*"

I thanked him, shook his hand again, got out of the car and collected my rucksack. Gerard drove away and I stood there alone, with the feeling of foreignness still keeping me company. The ephemeral rush of the white sugar had evidently run off.

It was already half past ten and the courtyard was dark, lit only by the dim light which came out the first floor windows of the central building. At the other side of the courtyard there was an imposing oak tree, and behind it the ghostly silhouette of a chateau loomed in the darkness.

As soon as I put my rucksack on the cobbled floor to have a look around and get my bearings, I heard a big scream coming from the open windows upstairs.

"Mamman!"

It was a piercing sound, like the crying of a desperate baby calling his mother, with the difference that this baby must have been more than 50 years old. It was a man's voice, and there was so much distress in it that it hurt just listening to it. Then he started to sob. I jumped, and looked up. A cloud of tiny insects was swarming around the open windows.

Then there was another voice, coming from the same place. This time a woman screaming with terror.

"Don't touch me, don't! Please, daddy, stop it, Please, not down there! No, I don't want to do it, no, please daddy. Don't! Please, stop it. Stop it! I'll be good, I promise, please, daddy. Nooooooo!"

At first I thought that perhaps they were rehearsing a play but then I started to tremble. Somehow I knew that this wasn't a play, but for real. I grabbed my rucksack, pressed it against my chest and stood there, not knowing what to do.

Then it became apparent that the man calling his mother and the woman trying to defend herself from her father were not alone. As if driven by a silent conjuror, voices started to come out from the first floor windows.

"Get away from her! She is my mother, you hear? *My mother!*" shouted a man that sounded like the first one, but I couldn't be sure if he was the same one.

"Look at me, for God's sake! I am here, over here. Why can't you ever see me? Why can't you ever see meeeee?!" demanded another woman.

"I hate you, bastard! Do you hear me? I hate you!" shouted another man. He had very a high pitched voice, but was definitely a man.

"All I wanted is your love! Why couldn't you love me like you loved him? Why did you always have to lock yourself in the room with him for hours and hours? What about me? What about *me*?" This seemed to be the first man's plea again.

"I want to kill you, I want to kill you! I *am going* to kill you!" threatened the man with a high pitched voice.

Then the night exploded with a cacophony of lamentations, as if all human suffering filled the courtyard. A symphony of emotions, anger, need, desperation, unrequited love, calls for absent parents, fear, humiliation, jealousy and revenge started to spin around me.

I was petrified. Where was I? What was this place? A sect specialising in torturing people? Was this the New Age centre that promised awakening and discovering of the true self while enjoying warmth, peace and relaxation in a comfortable and homely atmosphere? What was I doing here when all I had wanted was a summer job in France to practise my French?

And then someone shouted "Papa, papa, why did you leave me? I can't do without you. Papa, papa, come back... Please come back!"

And I lost it.

I was still shaking, trying not to cry. My stomach ached and I started to retch. Their distress was taking hold on me, reminding me too vividly of my own pain. The pain I felt when my father left. Mother said he'd gone to Heaven, but I knew she was lying. I'd seen the box where they had put him and that very box had been buried underground in the cemetery. He wasn't in Heaven but underground, and underground, according to the priests, was Hell. All that screaming was bringing back memories and feelings I had spent seventeen years trying to avoid. I felt so sick that I

vomited the three *merveilles*.

As soon as I had finished throwing up the voices stopped, more or less at the same time. A few minutes later, I heard a door opening upstairs and a cavalcade of steps coming down a wooden staircase. Someone turned the lights on and the courtyard was flooded with light and people. They all looked flushed but were talking amongst themselves as if they were coming out of a session of art house cinema and not from some painful place in their past. Some were even laughing.

Standing out from the others, in height and allure – and because she was the only one who didn't have puffy red eyes – was a woman in her late thirties, informally but impeccably dressed, with light brown leather trousers and a pale yellow silk chemise, opened at the neck to show a nearly-too-perfect tan. When she saw me standing in the middle of the courtyard, clinging to my old rucksack like a child to his teddy bear, she came to greet me. She walked with the sure step of the well-to-do. I have always been sure that walking with confidence is innate when you are rich; something you don't need to practise by sliding up and down corridors with a pile of books on your head. It tells people that you are used to getting what you want, that you are powerful. I've always envied that walk, having inherited my father's dizzy-duck-in-a-slippery-pond swing.

My vomit lay on the cobbles, meagre but smelly, and as she was approaching, I moved away from it and took a few steps towards her, hoping she wouldn't notice it.

"Hello, you must be Carmela," she said, showing me her perfect white teeth and kissing me on both cheeks. She smelled too, but of some strong and no doubt expensive, perfume. I didn't smile and kept my rucksack against my chest, still needing to cling to some sort of safety. "I was expecting you yesterday to clean the centre."

Yesterday? What was she talking about? I had her letter in my pocket. She had said I was to arrive on the 25th.

"I had to arrange some cleaning because the season started today. Did Babette meet you at the station?"

"No, no one came to meet me. I got a lift with a farmer."

"Really? Oh. I wonder what happened. Never mind, you are here now. Where is Bruno?" She looked around but didn't find the person she was looking for.

I wanted to say: what if I hadn't found the farmer? What if I had to spend the night lying on a bench at the station? What if I had been robbed and raped during the night by some drunken beggar? But something told me that she wouldn't be in the least interested in my concerns.

"Where are they?" she repeated to herself looking around the courtyard. "Never mind, come, I'll take you to your room."

She took a couple of steps but I didn't follow. Still couldn't move. Stuck to the cobbles.

"What was that?" I asked. "What was happening up there? Why were those people shouting?"

"That?" She gave a little laugh. "That was my workshop. Primal scream. It started this afternoon. I really needed you here yesterday to prepare everything, but never mind, you can start work tomorrow. I am afraid you will hear a lot of shouting while working here."

I wasn't sure I wanted to stay there at all.

"Why were they screaming?"

"It's part of the work. They were regressing, remembering episodes of their lives where they had a lot of pain and reliving the whole thing."

"Why? Isn't that masochism?"

"Oh, no. On the contrary, it's the only way to get over it."

Was she crazy? Was she saying that I had to relive the pain of my father's death to overcome it? She was totally deranged.

The Primal Screamers were now gathering in what seemed a huge dining room that was obviously the old château's stable because it still had the mangers on the walls. It had a cobbled floor and a long wooden table surrounded by benches. In a corner there was a sink, some shelves with mugs and tins and a kettle. They were drinking herb tea and chatting away, sharing their experiences about what they had been going through in the upstairs

room. Their togetherness made me feel more lonely. How could they seem so joyful after reliving such horrible memories, while I was still horrified by their pain?

“Come on, I’ll show you to your room,” insisted Charlène who obviously wanted to go back to her group. “We will talk about it tomorrow.”

There was nothing to talk about. I was getting out of there first thing in the morning.

My room was at the back of a nearby building that happened to be La Ferme Saint Sylvain, Gerard’s farm. As we approached the farm the smell of cow dung became stronger. It seemed that the room – that faced north, hence the smell of mildew that made breathing rather hard – hadn’t been opened since last summer. There was so much damp that the rolls of flowery paper that must have been hung in the 1940s had become half unstuck, and were peeling freely from the walls. The room had two iron beds with dank mattresses, in spite of the summer heat, a chipped sink and a bidet. Not a proper bidet with taps and drains but a portable one with a cover, that you have to fill with a jug of water and that you have then to empty in the toilet – which was next to the cowshed. On a dusty table there was a kettle, two mugs and a box of chamomile tea that had been forgotten there from the previous year. Or the year before that.

“It stinks in here,” I said stepping towards the window with the intention of opening it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Charlène advised me, “unless you want to be eaten alive by mosquitoes.”

As I was pondering the difficult choice between being attacked by insects or suffering a severe asthmatic reaction to the mildew that was creeping up the walls, we heard another scream. But this time it wasn’t human. It was worse.

“It’s one the cows,” Charlène explained when she saw how white I had become. “She’s calving.”

Nobody offered me dinner, so with a dusty chamomile tea to console my empty stomach, and the certitude that I had made a huge mistake by travelling all the way to France only to land

in this loopy place, I went to bed in the mould-smelling room. I didn't unpack because I was going to leave. Thank God I had an open return ticket to Valencia. Despite the tiredness, I couldn't go to sleep. The cow's primal screaming made relaxing impossible and the foul air prevented me from nodding off, so I tried to wait patiently for the sun to rise so I could get up and leave. The night was long and restless. Then, in the very small hours of the morning, I heard a cock crowing. "It's time to get up," I thought. And fell asleep straight away.

