

THE ARK

1

Aux Armées, 1914

Since it is necessary for us, my love, to submit along with the entire world to the cruel moment of the world's destiny, in the universal enslavement of people and things to martial force, would you like us to attempt the madness of declaring ourselves to be free—and saying it so forcefully that we succeed in believing it?

For myself, I will dispense in that victory of pride all my resources on conviction; and I sense in myself such vigor in that endeavor, my love, and such faith, that I am almost ready, in spite if my pain, to consider it with joy. I shall enumerate our still-vivacious capabilities and accumulate the reasons that we have, thanks to them, to declare ourselves happy in spite of the harshness of circumstances. I shall retrace with the eloquence that will give me the most tender and most moving of memories, the pleasures and beauties of the amorous hours that we lived before the war. I shall evoke the sumptuous garden of dreams that we formulated and the hopes that it was permissible to raise.

Doubtless you have experienced and know as well as I do everything that I shall have to say about that, but when we savored those pleasures and those hopes, their warmth was so soft and so evident that we had no need to give them a name. They were the elements of our happiness, and we respired them naturally with the air and the daylight. We did not stand them up before us to estimate their size. No more would it have come to our minds to scrutinize and measure the quantity that each of us was taking from our enjoyment, nor whether the quality was exactly the same in the balances of our sensations. That is why there might be a new value, a more resplendent appearance for each of us, if I express them as generally as they merit.

And I intend that, far from aggravating your sadness with the spectacle of forbidden felicities, the sparkle and the music of those felicities will excite in you the sentiment of the happiness that we possessed. And before you weep for that happiness, the least that can happen is that you will first savor them again, that you will live them for a second time. That feast of the imagination, shall I suppose, shall I say that it will last long enough for the war to be over before you find yourself confronted by the bare table? If it is not, I believe that it will leave you so much light that a consciousness of it will burst forth within you, a consciousness that you doubtless possess, but which is wandering vagabond along interior paths, and that you have not yet grasped—grasped as it seems to us that a cloudless sky grasps the midday sun in summer.

Yes, I think that you will then discover such a richness that sadness will appear to you to be a weakness that ought to be left to those who have nothing.

And this will be the Ark that I shall construct, and which will protect us through the second deluge, unleashed by the entire earth. Already, many houses, and the bodies of their residents, entire cities and the pride of their scattered stones, have gone, submerged by the great red tide. Thus, we have both thought until now that our dreams and our desires, the fiefs, cities and souls of our happiness, would be smashed and crushed by the tempest...no, no. Standing, my love! I shall reassemble our goods, adapt the timbers of our Ark. And if powder and iron do not interrupt my labor, oh, I affirm that after the work is done, Noah running aground on the dry summit of Ararat did not extend his hands toward Adonai with a greater gratitude and a more ardent intoxication, and the branch did not gleam with a fresher green in the beak of the dove, than the joy, youth and voluptuousness we shall have, my beloved, in obtaining consciousness of our liberty.

But your confidence which always accompanies me, is holding back, anxiously. Ah, I understand! Whether delightful illusion, or even conviction, what charm could ever replace the inexhaustible delights of veritable presence? Do I not grasp sufficiently that the sadness I need to vanquish is that of our separation? When we are together, what adversity do we fear? Whatever they were, the proofs that once afflicted us were still joys. Each of them brought to one of us a pretext to seek in the other's eyes for courage, security or the certainty of victory...

Well, let your confidence be serene. Follow me. Whatever might be the apparent disorder and discontinuity of this endeavor, it is the certitude of our liberty, I tell you; it is our inviolate happiness that ought to be resuscitated therein. Follow me my beloved. Wherever I go, whatever detours the vicissitudes of the war, the gusts of my memory and the train of my thoughts might impose upon us, it is toward you, with no relapse, that all my effusions will go. In spite of time, distance and circumstances, how can the fervor and force with which I sense you close to me not communicate the vivid impression of my thought to you too? For me, whose distress will have no other refuge, whose pride will have no other throne, than this message, I say, I know, that my will and my passion will attract, bring and fix here, real, your distant substance, your eyes, your soul and your passion.

What dear images shall I commence by evoking. First of all, I want to cause to reflourish on these leaves that you are holding a few of the ornaments of our hours, the pleasures of our household, pleasures such that a perpetual spring blossoms around us.

As soon as our threshold was crossed, everything foggy or irritating that either one of us dragged outside was suddenly chased away, dissipated like the dust that, as soon as our door was open, would have been caught and, in a sense, set away by a current of joyful air. At home! Here I am. Here is the cheerful garden, the banal staircase, our door...

Our door, which I am about to open....

Oh, let us hold back the advent of that moment slightly. My heart has suddenly swollen and its beating is becoming more precipitate. I would like to impose on myself here the bitter and delicious voluptuousness of expectation, and savor my emotion first. I sense myself joyous, impatient and solemn. O slowness of my pen...I cannot retain myself...

I go in...

You have heard me. Here you are, and you are holding out your arms, and have thrown them around my neck.

Bonjour my love, my darling, bonjour my little queen, my beautiful bird, my golden lamp...

This evening you're wearing the blue muslin dress with the light green and red Greek embroidery around the sleeves, the belt and the collar. A little of your bare shoulders and your neck rise from the fluid fabric with the supple majesty that the movements of lionesses have, and the glitter of those movements...loosen your arms, let's interrupt our kiss so that I can look at you...but you, impatient, are waiting for the moment...come...

I walk in front of you, and yet I sense the murmur of your eyes. Every evening it is the same, and that moment for which you wait, my little one, is the one where I hold you against me and tell you the slightest minutes of my day.

Here is the room where I work. The divan appeals to us with all the yellow arabesques of its Persian fabric, and I would not change anything in the disorders of the multicolored cushions that are slightly reminiscent of a band of intoxicated goblins. I can see from their hollows that you were lying here a little while ago...and the one that conserves the imprint of your arm seems to be gazing with a superiority full of indolence, at the one at the very end, kneaded by your fidgeting heels. I let myself fall into the middle of that soft little people, and all the fumes of the day are exhaled in my sigh of quietude and pleasure.

It's necessary that I clear a space within myself before holding you, abandoned against my breast. In an instant, I disencumber myself. Until tomorrow, people external affairs, sentiments, words for your usage...outside words and sentiments, my weavers, my forgers, creatures of the outskirts of my hearth, go away and rest until tomorrow.

You are huddled against me, and it's a calm evening of customary life. In the other rooms we can hear the great confused and heavy rumor of our populous street. Its noises arrive here, filtered by the garden, like the purr of a distant machine, like the grave rhythmic chant of the chambers of seashells.

Let's not light the lamp yet. Above our heads, on the wall, the old frame garlanded with gilded wood of the Arab mirror is still vaguely radiant, and the prestigious blue background of the *image d'Épinal*, the glory of the wall, is not entirely extinct—the image of I'm as proud, almost, and as content as if it were a Ghirlandaio!¹ It has the naïve splendor of a work by that primitive.

It's a crucified Christ, at whose feet the Saintly Women are weeping. I brought it to you marvelously one day, with a hundred other *images* that I had just bought from the factory itself, during the voyage we made to Épinal. They weren't the illustrations, so widespread, recalling in miniature the misadventures of lazy Gilbert or the prowesses of Prince Cornalin, but those posters by Georin² that the colporteurs once sold in the villages and were fixed on brown walls not far from the holy water stoup or the hunting rifles. Beautiful religious fables, Napoléonic adventures...

Do you remember the joyful cry of enthusiasm with which I threw the roll of those images on to the bed in our hotel room? You abandoned whatever you were doing and we pored over the dazzling sheets, laughing and emotional, soon spread out on the eiderdown and the pillows, on the tables, the chairs and the floor. They soon filled the sullen room with an extraordinary host of the Grande Armée's battles and biblical scenes in costumes from the Thousand-and-One Nights! Oh, my darling, before those images, costing a few sous, we were delighted, and clapped our hands like children taken for the first time to see a fairy play...

Who, having read in the first lines of this message the sentences in which I spoke to pompously of our pleasures, would not smile on hearing me declare our puerile admiration for those humble images, and think that it is very easy to say that one is happy when one is so easily enchanted! But that is what it will be necessary for me to do when I enumerate my joys, is it not, my beloved? It will be necessary for me to count the smallest grain of the sand of the beaches, the ripple of light over a leaf, as well as the rude scaling of summits, as well as the nuptial contemplations of the great works of art, the earth and time. It will be necessary for me to describe the perpetual fête that the unfolding of the world was for us, in particles and in number...

To describe, in sum, that which was the truth, the meaning, the very substance of our being, that which we had no need to name, and which I shall be able, in this era of horror, to signify: the instinct, the will and the force of joy...

3

But it's necessary that I interrupt myself and tell you about a certain prodigy...

I suddenly experience the sentiment, since I began to write *The Ark*, of having vanquished, with my little pencil and notebook—with regard to what concerns me, of course—the war, the Great War. But dare I pursue my confession?

To escape, or merely to seek to disintegrate, by intellect and the sentiments, and for whatever reason, such a formidable event, is it not an abominable egotism, at the same time as a stupid blindness? Does not this immense affair in which we are the actors and the witnesses require all our activities and all our intelligence to be employed in considering it in its most ardent appearances, passionate in studying its causes, conjecturing as to its consequences?

¹ The Italian Renaissance painter Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494), the guiding light of a large workshop in which many of his relatives collaborated and in which Michelangelo was once apprenticed.

² The popular engraver François Georin (1801-1863) was largely responsible for the distinctive style acquired in the early 19th century by *images d'Épinal*—brightly-colored pictures, often with rhymed captions, hawked by colporteurs [itinerant peddlars] in the days when they were the only decorations that poor people could afford. Most were postcard sized, but they could be poster-sized, especially when bought direct from the factory in Épinal.

On the other hand, is it possible that a human sensibility can refuse to be moved, can succeed in remaining estranged from the terrible and lamentable spectacles that are continually inflicted upon it? What response can I give myself? When I write that I experience the impression of having, for my part, vanquished the War with my pencil and my notebook, it's doubtless necessary to understand by it that I believe I have a resource, a passion that is stronger, more pressing and more absorbing for me than the War and all its episodes...

That active resource and that passion are, I imagine, the voluptuousness that I savor in evoking our days of love, and also the light that flows within me, since I have been writing *The Ark*, in sensing your body in all my gestures, your heart in all my emotions...but are those the same elements of what I call my Victory? No. They are only the effects of a certain state of mind.

If I can write this, evoke you so substantially, superimposing, full of life, the images of cherished memories upon rude realities...it is, as I said, because some strangely efficacious and powerful force gives me the means, and it is also because there must be in me and irresistible, an inviolable non-acceptance of the martial adventure...

These sentiments, issuing from the depths, become precise as my pencil obliges them to deliver themselves. Where can I find the reason, the source, the mechanism for that strange force, that non-acceptance of the most positive and most imperious of evidence? A word that I wrote a little while ago brings my soul before my consciousness.

4

In a beautiful oriental fable, a poor man goes to sleep and has an absurd and magnificent dream. In the bosom of a palace, of which he is the prince, all delights surround him, and as soon as he experiences a desire, perfumes, sensualities, ineffable dishes, gold, adornments and music fly to him. The sleeper, who senses himself dissolving in blissful satisfaction, utters in his sleep an exclamation of joy, and the sound of his exclamation wakes him up.

Now, he is certainly awake; he has propped himself up on his bed, his eyelids flutter, his fingers clench on the sheet, but his dream follows him. The craziest hallucination has him in its grip. It is not the familiar rickety table that is in the middle of his room, but the one resplendent with crystal, scarlet and gilded victuals and the fruits of Canaan; his scarred plaster walls have retreated strangely; he perceives in their stead the tapestries, the hangings and the trophies of the magnificent hall of his dream; his window with dirty panes has become the vast bay behind which his gardens and his forests extend...

He is fearful and wonderstruck at the same time. He knows full well that he is a poor man in his attic and yet he reaches out his hand toward the table, and the fruit and honey that he takes and chews convinces him that he is no longer dreaming...

Such is my hallucination.

When I wrote above "instinct, will and the force of joy," it was at that moment only a detail of my evocation. Now, that phrase, and most particularly the word "Joy" was, for me, the exclamation that woke the sleeper. As soon as I had written that line the word Joy came to collide with my soul as the sun suddenly strikes the rose-window of a cathedral and causes it to blossom in a thousand petals of flame. Since I have fixed that word, a vertiginous emotion has possessed me. I no longer know whether it is the reality I see that is real, or whether the prodigy that vivifies and multiplies every pulsation of my vertigo is real.

I am no longer in the sweet and languid half-light of memory. I sense myself positively in my limbs, my heart and my mind as entirely as I did before the war. I gaze, I breathe and I move in a spacious lightness. As the globe rings, and from its crypts rise the world's strength at the summons of Antaeus' heel, at the word Joy the foundations of my consciousness trembled, and my certainly rose up. It has risen in confrontation with the verity of the moment, in confrontation with the reality of mourning and massacre.

What is this certainty? What is it that snatches me thus from the tumultuous and bloody event? What is it that now gives the rhythm of a hosanna to the palpitations of my heart and regenerates my blood within the song of death?

My voice became the one that attained one day the clear certainty that Joy was the human verity...the clear certainty that in spite of the immense and millenary edifice of contrary evidence, Joy was, physically, mystically and spiritually, the sum of human verity...

I had slowly and arduously conquered that certainty once. For days and years I had marched, sensing it in advance, toward the verity of Joy. And I had found it, a Princess in the dormant wood, in the depths of the dense forest of ancient terrestrial, obsolete anankés;³ a black forest of dead trees, rigid phantoms, still terrible but empty of heartwood...

As soon as I had stolen my certainty, it was incorporated into my being; my blood carried it in my veins; it was alloyed with fluid saps flowing through the network of my nerves. And now it is awakening, unpolluted and unobscured.

I dare to admit it now. My eyes can see but I shall be like a blind man. My heart senses the hour but my mind has placed itself beyond emotion. My will is no longer participating in the War. My will is entirely contained in my certainty, which is a prisoner of facts but is not their slave.

But you...you, my love, my wife, are listening to me, following me, and are astonished. A confused jealousy is born in you. What? It is not, it is not, therefore, uniquely in your body, in our kisses, in our thoughts, in our memories, not absolutely within us and in our love that all grandeur and all liberty rises for me...?

My beloved, my beloved, listen again, because it must be apparent to you that our love is the miracle of my faith, the crown of my certainty.

³ Ananké is the Greek mythological personification of ultimate destiny, to which even the gods are subject. Employed as a trivial noun, when it can be pluralized, the word usually refers to the literary contrivance that simulates the workings of fate in a story, especially a tragedy; it recurs within the present text with that special significance.