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Nostra solitudine
(lit. "Our Loneliness")

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Translated by Olivia Jung

(p. 11-17)

I decided to quit social media while I was peeling a pitaya, a fruit that looks like a polka-dotted beet, commonly known as dragon fruit.

I have always been eating the same things since I have been here: pitaya for breakfast, pho for lunch and dinner, and cappuccinos throughout the day.

Pho is pronounced "fuh," as a young waiter in Cần Thơ corrected me. It is a soup with soy noodles, served with a large bunch of aromatic herbs that you chop into the broth along with lime, bean sprouts, and chili oil.

After tasting it for the first time in a simple restaurant next to the Temple of Literature in Hanoi, I haven't eaten anything else.

Not only is it delicious, but the ritual of seasoning it, picking up the noodles and vegetables with chopsticks, and slurping the broth from the cup is more satisfying than eating with cutlery.

Maybe I got the idea of quitting social media while I was having breakfast because I am more clear-headed in the morning, but I don't know if I will manage to do it: ever since I thought of it, I have been feeling a pang of sadness.

I already miss it.

Could it be the looming return home that is making me sad?

Usually, when I travel, I can't wait to get home, even if I am having fun, because I am eager to get back to work. And this trip to Southeast Asia hasn't been the most interesting: too many tourists, too much pollution. But I am with Ludovico.

"The world is almost entirely like this now, Mom: polluted and globalized," he said.

My son Ludovico is the wisest and most knowledgeable person I know, but this time I didn't believe him.

The part of the Brazilian Amazon that I visited last summer was untouched and quiet, except for the birds singing and the pink dolphins spouting air from their blowholes.

During the hikes in the Amazon Forest of Xixuaú, Olimpio would walk ahead of me wielding his machete. If he saw a tiny plastic cap in a bush – it happened maybe twice – he would rush to pick it up and put it in his pocket; he would then dispose of them every six months when he went to stock up on supplies in Manaus, twenty hours away by boat.

The territories left to the natives, those areas that haven't been occupied yet, are immaculate. Even the Rio Negro.

For the Amazon's indigenous people, their real home is the forest and they keep it spotless, while the dwellings where they sleep are precarious and messy.

The Mekong, instead, is dirty, both in Vietnam and in Cambodia: there are plastic bottles and trash floating everywhere.

In Cần Thơ, I saw a woman leave her house and casually throw a trash bag into the river, with the nonchalance of someone who does it every morning.

"It's neoliberalism, mother."

"But aren't we in a communist country?"

"Do you have any idea how poor they were here? We have been polluting for centuries, so who are we to tell them not to? Let them pollute in peace."

Even though it is dirty, the Mekong relaxes me.

I always feel good near large rivers.

Even last summer in Manaus, overlooking the Rio Negro and the Amazon River, I felt at home. And along Senegal's rivers, too.

Maybe it's because I was born three miles from the Po River. Or because the house where I grew up overlooked Ferrara's dock.

During my first school years, I was a little disappointed to live on a street that was far from the center where my classmates lived. The windows of our apartment building overlooked the lawn of a riverside warehouse made of red bricks where the caretaker's rabbits, many cats, and a dog ran around. The dark ribbon of the dock stretched behind the building.

Recently, my ideal retreat corresponds to that ancient landscape: slow flowing water, trees, a meadow where dogs, cats, and rabbits run free.

I would add a chicken coop behind the hedge.

solitude [from the Latin *solitudo* -*dinis*, der. of *solus* "alone"]. 1. The condition, the state of being alone, as a temporary or lasting condition: *loving, craving, seeking, escaping, fearing s.; longing for s., a bit of s.; blessed s., finally some peace and quiet!*, as a familiar expression of relief; *looking for, finding some peace of mind in the s. of a convent* (see also the Latin expression *o beata solitudo*, etc.); also, the condition of someone living alone, from a material and emotional point of view: *living in s., in the bleakest s.; spending the golden years in s.; feeling the burden, or sadness, of one's s.* 2. Lonely place, uninhabited: *the s. of mountains and deserts*; also plural: *the vast s. of the ocean*.

(TRECCANI DICTIONARY)

I started suffering from loneliness late in life. I might have felt awkward when I was thirteen, but I didn't feel lonely.

My first memory of loneliness as a physical discomfort, almost a painful sense of shame, is from the first Christmas I spent without my family: I was twenty-one and I was living in London at the time.

I had been there for two months and I was thrilled to be there; I was in love with the city and the experiences I was having.

On Christmas Day, I somehow ended up having lunch with a Roman couple; I didn't really know them, they were friends of friends. They were the first Italians I had met since arriving there.

They were engaged, beautiful, seemingly happy, with a nice home and a well-set table. Comparing myself to them made me feel lonely, and I was ashamed of feeling that way. I suddenly realized I had a bad haircut, a few extra pounds, and ugly clothes. And that what had seemed like exhilarating freedom just a moment before was nothing more than an obvious loneliness.

Despite this, a few months later I moved in with them. They were looking for someone to share the cost of a new apartment because they had to leave the one where they had stayed for Christmas.

I have never felt as lonely and uncomfortable as I did during the few months I lived with that couple.

I would make up commitments and friends I didn't have so I wouldn't have to eat dinner with them at home. I led on a Turkish friend I didn't like – ruining the friendship – just so I could try to be in a couple as well.

Yet, before meeting them, I had been perfectly happy in my little room in West Kensington, with its coin-operated heating and the occasional company of the black friends of my English coworker, with whom I went out every Friday evening.

I felt very lonely again a few years later, in Milan, between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-one, after breaking up with my boyfriend; he was much older than me and had been like a father to me after my own father died.

And sometimes during my second marriage. I was working so much that I didn't have time to pee, I would break down in despair, and my husband didn't understand why I felt lonely despite everything I had.

Then I felt terribly alone after the divorce.

As Grazia Cherchi wrote, "It doesn't take much to feel lonely."

Well, not really.

For some time now, I often don't feel lonely, but free, as I did when I was eighteen, before my father got sick. When the few friends who were in couples didn't have homes where they could set beautiful dinner tables, at most they had a small bedroom where they could have sex when their parents were away; the rest of the time they were almost ashamed of being a couple and, when we all hung out together, they didn't even hold hands.

In those years, the priority was being free, not being in a relationship.

Blissful solitude and bleak loneliness are two sides of the same coin, as the Treccani Dictionary says. But you need to be rested and confident to enjoy the right side of that coin.

Even now, if I work too much for a period of time, do too many things, live too intensely, then I pay for it with a period of sadness.

That is when loneliness starts hurting again: I feel like I have lost something that used to protect me, whatever it was, and I feel lost.

Then anything, anything would be better than that black hand that twists my stomach and takes my breath away. Aristotle said that whoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god.

I often feel like a wild beast, never like a god.

Thirty years after that Christmas in London, I told a feminist friend about my two Roman roommates and she commented that couples do everything they can to stifle the sexual energy of single women. It's because they pose a threat to their system. And I had been very naive to hang out with them and even move in with them.

In fact, they had also cheated me out of some money, which I had lent them and never got back. And, in hindsight, my punk haircut wasn't bad, nor were my clothes, even though they had seemed shabby to me compared to her angora sweater and his flannel pants.

They had caught me at a vulnerable moment, on the feast day of the Holy Family, and I had taken the bait.