

FRANCESC SERÉS

The Country

Translated from Catalan by Peter Bush

EVERY MORNING he dives back in.

The sun pokes its head up like a giant octopus, a mass of tentacles over the surface of the sea, reflected on road signs and other car windows. Along the road by the beach, residential and industrial estates, a fox that's been run over, two blond girls wilting under the weight of their backpacks and supermarket bags, camping sites and pine groves, and there are still whores around and lots of eastern Europeans sleeping inside their cars or caravans on a lot full of notices welcoming tourists, nobody knows where they're going, where they've come from, nobody knows how long they'll be on the road.

The secretary at the kiln rings to apologize, they sent flowerpots instead of amphora. She apologizes a second time and says a young man will come midmorning to change the order. He says he's more calls to make, so he can ring off and cut short their conversation, he's just left his father at the shop and he's still got to finish his errands and stop at the bank to get change. He doesn't like to leave Feliu too long by himself, lots of eastern Europeans ask him things he doesn't understand and he sometimes gives them the wrong change; he's willing but worries, and he is aware he gets more and more flustered, he's always afraid he'll break something or other. He couldn't care less whether pots are broken or chipped, they can be sold at a discount and it's no big deal, but Feliu gets upset when he notices he's not put things in the right place, when he sees they are rearranging everything, that's why he always keeps quiet and even waits till he's gone to the casino before putting the things back outside.

The sun's starting to heat up the other side of the windscreen. He parks in the storage annex next to the shop, leaves the bonnet slightly sticking out so nobody blocks their exit. His father has already started to take out the counters, the awning is up. He unties the parcels of newspapers and magazines and spreads them on the stands, brings out the boxes of plates, with the trays and pitchers, and, as soon as he's put them all in place and lined up the amphoras that lean against one another, he ties the earthenware together with old fisherman's ropes and nets.

There's a stink of diesel oil from the vehicle cleaning the promenade, between their shop window and the beach, under the palm and plane trees. The sun is still so low their branches don't give any shade, and its beams fill the whole shop and light up the figurines on the front shelves, the ones that sag, that sleep under the trees, and display osier baskets and panniers underneath. The light brings a shine to the ceramic statuettes, highlights designs on the T-shirts and the silhouettes of trinkets, patches of light and shadow on belts and hats, on wooden ladles and forks. It's a big shop, with boat lamps and maps of the coast and out-to-sea, everything seems set up to lure in the tourists who gawp and inquire and then won't know what to do with their purchases, everything exhibited to catch their attention. As soon as the customers decide on one item or another, Feliu fetches it from the store next door. The newspapers outside, like the goldfish tank by the window, are only bait, the tourists stop to buy a newspaper and look at the fish and almost always end up going into the shop.

He's just fixed the amphoras and attached the price and labels in a stack of languages, from Italian to Russian, from Japanese to Finnish. He's had to learn how to deal with all sorts. Italians, Ukrainians, Danes, and Americans, all sorts. Feliu has learned to give a welcoming laugh, he always laughs, "Yes, come in, take a look, Cristina, Jaume, Cristina, Jaume, come in, come in." Jaume can make himself understood in seven languages, he only knows the words and expressions necessary to keep the business afloat. He's been repeating the same phrases to tourists for years, he lets them correct him with a laugh, the tourists buy, the tourists pay, and Jaume laughs and mispronounces the expressions the tourists correct yet again, just like when he was a kid and tried to answer the first Germans and French who came there on holiday. He still uses the same lingo, and it beggars belief, really beggars belief that so many years have gone by, that everything has changed so much and the Germans and the French are still correcting him exactly the same.

Those first words still stand out, the tourists sat on the terraces by the beach and, when they saw them coming in with their catch, they'd walk over and peer at the boxes and baskets, leering at them as if the boat arriving was some kind of extra treat they were being offered for the money they'd paid out. He'd stop in front of a group of bystanders, rummage in the baskets, and the shells and prawns would put up their defenses, to the surprise and amazement of all around him, elderly folk, pensioners and the odd young couple. They looked at him with a slight mix of admiration and

pity . . . He's often thought back to that episode, they must have reckoned he was some kind of savage leaving a boat they felt was a very exotic vessel. They shouted and spoke to him, what a lively lad, all those old dears must have thought when they saw him with his top half naked and barefoot on the beach carrying baskets of fish, sunburned, look at the little savage. They sometimes asked him to stop so they could take a photo, of him, or of the fish they'd just caught, aboard the boat.

Jaume recognizes and can translate the most common phrases in seven different languages, some of the expressions sound just as they did then, are etched on his brain, even the tone of voice they used to address him. He walked up the beach behind Feliu, both carrying baskets on their backs and, when he was forced to stop because the tourists crowded around and even blocked his path, he put the basket on the sand and grabbed a fish that still gasped when you moved it and the tourists would whisper, whistle, and grimace in horror.

Until the day came when it all fell into place, one of the old dears offered him a hundred peseta note he didn't dare accept. A hundred pesetas? Why? He was astonished, a hundred pesetas, why a hundred pesetas? The old dear grinned at him, as if she wanted to say something, as if she were saying a hundred pesetas because you're getting off a down-at-heel boat when you should perhaps have been at school, because you're carrying baskets of fish across the beach, because I think you're funny, a hundred pesetas for the time we've been waiting here to see how you bring the boat ashore, how the fish flop and how you do all these things we find such fun, I'm not giving you them for the fish, I'm giving you them because it's fun to watch you carrying baskets on your back, barefoot and half naked, all sunburned. . . . When Jaume showed his father the note, Feliu told him to give it back, that they wanted nothing from those people, that they were fishermen and earned their money out to sea, they weren't monkeys at a fair. The old dear wouldn't accept it, or understand why he was returning money that Jaume finally put in one of her pockets. He ran off, he didn't understand why they'd given him a hundred pesetas or why his father made him give it back.

Cristina and Feliu arrive at the same time, that's when he can deliver the orders around to hotels and restaurants. When there's nothing to deliver he goes to the Chinese store to buy souvenirs of the town that are identical to souvenirs of so many other towns, figurines, baubles, paper fans and balloons, cardboard hats and caps for restaurant fiestas. Or else to the earthenware factory in Cassans, to order ashtrays and bowls and

all kinds of enameled animals and diverse junk the hotels and restaurants give away to tourists as gifts. Feliu goes to the casino and stays there till ten, the time when Cristina and Jaume are relieved, the same routine they repeat throughout the summer and on local holidays. They all get up at the same time and, after breakfast, Jaume and Feliu leave home to go down to the sea, it's now almost fifteen years since they lived by the sea. They bought a house in the inland part of town because they were fed up with summer, the noise from the nonstop partying, the same tourists and the same din every day, as if everything had become one gigantic carnival. It was also the way to put an end to working days without end, he'd never have shut up shop, he was there till eleven at night, but when the children were born Cristina said enough was enough. They always worried about paying their bills, always wondered whether they shouldn't have set up a bar or a restaurant. It didn't make any difference whether it was a shop or a bar because, in fact, they didn't sell ceramics or jackknives or compasses, not even the T-shirts with images of the beach, or stamped with sketches of the town, who knows what they sell, who knows what tourists want to buy . . . They left and would now never go back; the promenade is a shop window, it's no place to live.

Though they did live there once, father and son were born in the spot where the back of the shop now is and both grew up on the beach, by the boats. On the photographs Jaume has hung on the amphoras, you can still see what the strip along the beach used to be like, the houses jammed up against each other, as if driven together by a heavy storm. You can see their house, where their shop now is, and the houses of their friends and neighbors. And the boats are there too, his in one corner, where you can just see the prow and his mother's name, Lluïsa. Yes, they did live there once; he used to chase around in the places on the photos he pins up; there are photos of boats unloading in the port. Others are from the time he went deep-sea diving, when he went in search of amphoras and coral, they've turned a faded blue, the sun has absorbed the colors and left only blue silhouettes.

He now thinks, *It all changed when my voice broke*. There were fewer and fewer fishermen and even those who lived by the sea were giving up. The Germans bought their houses: if someone was hard to persuade, they doubled their offer, even upped it further, until the owner couldn't resist the temptation, sold his house, and went to live in Girona, to the inland part of town or one of those residential estates being built everywhere. They were years when catches were poor, and he almost made

more money acting the monkey for tourists than from selling fish. After unloading the fish he'd go down to the sea midmorning, where the tourists gathered, to show them sea urchins or sell fish that they took looking surprised and horrified. Perhaps they saw him in a similar way, like a fish out of water nobody wants to touch, perhaps he too gasped for breath. They laughed most when he managed to catch octopus, tied the boat to the stanchions of the footbridge and left the octopus on deck. It was so easy to fish octopus, you only had to bring up the earthenware pots they left on the seabed, then yank them out and put them in a tub, what they thought would protect them was finally the death of them. As soon as he took one out of the pot, the beast tried to find a way out, to escape from the deck, moving clumsily, wriggling, spreading its tentacles in search of water. . . . They were a pitiful sight stretching and shifting this way and that, their tentacles sticking, then moving, slipping and sliding in the water Jaume hosed over the deck so they didn't die. From the top of the footbridge the tourists threw coins, even the occasional note and foreign coins he changed in the bars. When he caught five or six large octopus, he kept them in a tub of sea water until he reached the footbridge, then upended the tub and out fell a shapeless mass that sprawled over the deck, octopus that writhed in every direction or slurped into each other while he poured water on them so they didn't die too soon, so they flopped around a bit more. He left them on deck and even put them on a hook and returned them to the water so he could haul them back on deck and the tourists howled in delight like they did when he was a youngster, when he carried baskets across the beach. The tourists laughed, whistled, and looked disgusted as they threw coins on the deck, some even tried to hit the octopus, the coins made a strange sound when they hit their target, the sound of metal on the flesh of those beasts. Once when he caught a really big one, it wrapped around his arm so tightly it went white, so much so he couldn't sever it with his knife, it didn't want to let go, he remembers so vividly the power of its suckers, the feel of its skin, the weight of it. Everybody applauded.

He did all kinds of things in those years, selling around restaurants or visiting the houses of the wealthiest tourists, who still recognized him as that little savage, that kid who didn't know how to handle a hundred peseta note. He took baskets and panniers up to their grand houses so he'd get a tip, charity for clambering up the hill, while Feliu repaired the nets on the beach surrounded by onlookers who asked him this and that and never let him finish the work in hand. When Jaume returned to where

Feliu was and saw him in a crowd of people that kept fingering the tackle . . . he was forced to try everything, he'd go after coral, but it gave him the shakes, pulling off those little red fingers, he didn't know why, but he got the shakes snapping off the little ends clinging to the rock under the sea. Feliu didn't like any of that, but didn't dare say anything, "we're only fishing shit, fucking shit," he complained whenever they paid them for their fish.

The moment Cristina arrives, he drives off to do the deliveries. She makes sure everything is in place, prices, labels, leaflets, photographs, nets and ropes, and, following her daily routine, she checks the change in the till, that the press is in the right place and the door to the store is securely locked.

She met Jaume in the bad years. They were the bad years when she worked as a waitress on a terrace on the promenade. Feliu remembers them as the bad years, his wife died on him, Lluïsa, and the fishing went to pot, both his Lluïsas failed him, his wife and his boat. At the time Cristina had no set plans, she'd just arrived in town from Gràcia in Barcelona, and her only aim was to save over the summer and then have a quiet winter. They were the bad years, the years they fished only shit.

Jaume has already called at two hotels, ceramics, ashtrays and owls over a mountain range that vaguely recall the outline of the one looming over the town, cut down the middle by a waterway. At the next, he has to deliver paper decorations for the next round of parties, after every binge the English smash everything and it all has to be replaced. Then he takes more ceramics to neighboring towns, the usual story.

He often thinks, he's not budged but it's all changed so much he finds it difficult to recognize, though the fact is nothing has changed as much as he has. He wonders whether he really was that little savage who dragged the boxes of fish over the beach or if everything has gone so haywire he's also turned into somebody else. Perhaps not, perhaps nothing has changed, in fact isn't he still hawking rubbish and junk up and down the seaside? They still give you a hundred pesetas, Jaume, and they don't give you them for the paper umbrellas or the pennants, they give you them so you won't turn into another Feliu living on his memories in the casino, he thinks . . . Come, O come, little seaside savages and sell whelks and urchins to the tourists . . . Come, O come and tell us how the boats and ships rust up and how the waves eat up the sand that must be replaced every year so when the tourists arrive, they find everything just so, come, O come, you shitty tourists, and watch how the octopus gasp

and fight for a breath of air, come and see the sterile water of this river that's lost all life, come, O come with your motorboats and those rangers that hack through the mountains, come and throw us your coins that we try to catch, come, O come!

Cristina rings to say that the boy has come from the kiln with the amphoras and has taken the flowerpots away. The bad years . . . there aren't many young lads who know the right spots and the paths to take over the sea, who can guide a boat, but even if they were very few, nobody wants them now, there are no large boats anymore, everybody has left, gone to Palamós or to industry. He keeps thinking, there are lots of boats and one big vessel on the bottom of the sea, opposite the beach, they bought them to sink by the islands, so fish would multiply there and the tourists could go deep-sea diving. Feliu can't believe it, they sank boats so fish would multiply there, fish growing in the boats at the bottom of the sea. . . The bad years . . . that was when he met Mr. Livesey, the Englishman who'd bought one of the grandest houses in town, in the inland part, a long way from the beach.

He remembers him well, in his whites, walking along the promenade in the early morning, not mixing with the other English who lived in town. He remembers the day when he came to chat for a while, and how he sought him out to talk of the silliest things, football, beer, English ships, and a load of stories that went nowhere, when he thinks about it now, Jaume splits his side laughing, even thinks he was interested in *him*. The day came when he asked to go out on a boat, to the rocks, only as far as the rocks, because he wanted to see the town and mountain range from the sea, he'd never sailed in a boat like his. As soon as they were out at sea he asked if he fished a lot, if he ever caught anything that wasn't fish . . . "Treasure?" asked Jaume, laughing, and the fellow said that's right, treasure, earthenware, whether he'd ever netted pots, whether he'd ever brought up shards of pottery . . . and of course he had, not very often, but he certainly had, and some fishermen had brought up shards of amphoras, though, obviously, they were broken and full of mud, not gold.

Mr. Livesey asked if he knew how to dive, if he'd ever gone deep-sea diving, if he wanted to try to go to the bottom and see whether there were any amphoras, he'd pay him well, very well, he'd pay for the gear and the time it took to see if there was anything there. He'd been down to look for coral, but he'd never thought of putting on a diving suit.

He only did it for six months. They pretended they were just going for a sail. Mr. Livesey climbed on board with an easel and a box of oils

to make it look as if he was going to paint while they headed toward the rocks where people said there were remains of boats from God knows when. Roman or Greek, said Mr. Livesey, Roman or Greek, said Mr. Livesey after examining the remains Jaume brought up. They went with Martí, one of the workers from the estate that Mr. Livesey had purchased. It wasn't very deep, thirty meters where Jaume went down with a spotlight and vacuum cleaners to suck away the accumulated slime and weed. Martí dealt with the panniers that Jaume filled. He still remembers himself, down at the bottom, on a leather belt so he could work more comfortably, and the amphoras he found, more than a hundred and twenty, some still sealed. Feliu wasn't at all happy about any of that, but by that time Jaume took the decisions. When he thinks back, he gets the shivers remembering how he went right to the bottom and stirred the sediments. Later, when he has watched television reports of such explorations, with all manner of attachments and cleaners, with support teams and all kinds of safeguards, he can't help thinking that anything could have happened to him, but that's all over, is past history, and it seems that Mr. Livesey and that whole business have completely submerged, they've never seen him again.

His cell phone. The representative of the kiln is phoning to say they'd finished the ceramic tableaus. They sell well in Girona, sell very well, he insists. . . . Ceramic tableaus, they'd have to make space for them, put them outside and see how they do, next to the newspapers, by the amphoras and the photographs. Yes, by the photos of him on his boat, dressed as a deep-sea diver still half in the water, with the deck covered in amphoras, as if they had taken over the space where the octopus slipped and slid into each other when he put the hose on them. He'll put the tableaus by the photos, the blowups of his hands, full of shards, and the small piece of sword that's impossible to identify it's so rusty and corroded.

Mr. Livesey sold the amphoras and *he* was able to buy the house in the center of town, completely do up the one they'd always had and buy the one next door to make an annex for the shop. They still look like fishermen's houses, with fishing tackle, containers, and two anchors hanging on the façades. Mr. Livesey sold everything, the amphoras, the bits of ironware, the completely rusted, twisted keys that were still attached to something that looked like wood. "You see how there is treasure down there . . .?" he told him when he came to the surface.

He left a dozen amphoras at the bottom, changed their position, and went down to look for them the following winter. They are in the back part

of his garden, under the palm trees, like hidden treasure, an insurance in case the bad times ever return and the business needs a boost. Mr. Livesey went to live in England and was never heard of again; he once met Martí, who told him some Germans had bought his house.

Everything they sell in the shop are imitations made in the kiln, amphoras and enameled beaches and figurines of fishermen, little boats he buys from the Chinese, cheap jewelry the tourists take with them as a souvenir of everything they've seen and will never see again. One day perhaps they will appear on the porcelain and earthenware tableaus, trashy treasure the tourists carry off, while Feliu still laughs and Cristina takes their money, every day they dive back in.