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Natalia Goncharova

*Mediterranean
happiness.
A Philosophy
of slow coastal life*

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«Издательские решения»

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Mediterranean Happiness is a book about the way the sea, the sun and the gentle rhythms of life along the coast can change our sense of time — and, quietly, our sense of ourselves. Philosophical and meditative, it is a calm, lyrical and contemplative read. It does not set out to teach us how to be happy. Instead, it invites us to slow down, to listen more closely to ourselves, and to rediscover happiness in the simplest things.

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Mediterranean happiness. A Philosophy of slow coastal life

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CHAPTER 1. Morning

In the early morning, the sea always feels slightly unfamiliar.

Even when you have lived beside it for years.

It does not yet belong to the day. The beaches are almost empty. The water looks dense and motionless, like glass with salt dissolved into it. Along the horizon, the sky slowly begins to pale, and the whole town seems to take one deep breath before the heat arrives.

In Calpe, people move differently in the morning.

More quietly.

More slowly.

Even the dogs walk without pulling at their leads.

The first cafés along the seafront begin to open. Waiters carry chairs onto the terraces with the calm assurance of people who know the day ahead is long, and that there is absolutely no need to rush through it. White cups appear on the tables before the customers do.

The air smells of coffee, damp wood from the pier, and stone still cool from the night.

At moments like these, the town can seem almost unreal — like a backdrop to somebody else's more carefully lived life. Not luxurious. Not perfect. Simply a life in which people are no longer trapped in a constant inner hurry.

Perhaps that is what surprises you most in Calpe.

Not the palm trees.

Not the sea.

Not even the light.

But the absence of tension.

No one looks as though they are running late for life itself.

At first, you notice it in other people.

Then, gradually, in yourself.

After a few days, you stop checking your phone during breakfast. Then you begin sitting by the water a little longer. You notice the wind. The temperature of the shade. The taste of a cold peach. The sound of ice shifting in a glass.

It is as though the body remembers something ancient and natural.

Something that had been switched off for a very long time.

In the North, people often live mostly in their minds.
In the South, life slowly returns to the body.

People walk more. Eat dinner later. Sit at the table longer. Look at one another more often. They leave windows open at night, and the sound of the sea remains inside the room — sometimes so faint it resembles the breathing of a sleeping person.

By midday, Calpe grows brighter and louder. Tourists appear carrying towels, children drag inflatable rings towards the beach, and sun-browned retirees from Northern Europe settle into the light they have waited all winter to find.

But the true Mediterranean begins in the morning.

Before the heat.
Before the noise.
Before the town steps fully into its role as a seaside resort.

At that hour, it becomes easier to understand why people keep returning to the sea.

Not for entertainment.

But for a state of being.

For the feeling of a life lived without constant inner resistance.

And perhaps for the quiet reminder that human beings were never meant to exist in permanent anxiety.

CHAPTER 2. Long Breakfasts

In southern towns, people spend an astonishingly long time over breakfast.

Not because they have nowhere to be.

Simply because, here, the morning is not treated as a technical interval between sleep and work.

It exists in its own right.

In Calpe, this becomes especially noticeable near the sea. By eight o'clock, the terraces begin slowly filling with people. Some arrive after a walk along the promenade. Others appear still half-awake, with damp hair after an early shower. Elderly couples settle almost instinctively at the same tables each morning, as though they follow a private timetable made of sunlight, coffee and sea air.

The waiters never hurry anyone.

No one eats standing up.

At times, it feels as though the true talent of the Mediterranean lies in its refusal to turn life into a permanent reaction to urgency.

Small cups of coffee appear on the tables beside tomato toast, butter in transparent wrappers, warm croissants and freshly squeezed orange juice. Everything is simple. Yet it is precisely this simplicity that creates the feeling of a real life — the kind that is often missing in large northern cities.

There, people frequently eat breakfast alongside anxiety.

Here, they eat breakfast alongside the air itself.

The sea remains constantly present. You glimpse it between palm trees, between passing people, beneath the white awnings of cafés. Even during conversation, the eyes drift back towards the water again and again, as though the body is slowly adjusting itself to the slower rhythm of the coast.

It is especially interesting to watch people who have only just arrived.

During the first few days, they still move quickly. They check their phones constantly. They try to fit everything in. They walk for hours, as though afraid of missing their own holiday.

Then, little by little, something changes.

People begin sitting longer at the table. Drinking coffee more slowly. Looking at the time less often.

And one morning, without even noticing when it happened, they find themselves simply watching the light moving across the water for ten whole minutes.

Without guilt.

Without the feeling that time is being wasted.

Perhaps this is when people truly begin to rest.

Not while lying on the beach.

But when the constant machinery of inner urgency finally falls silent.

In Calpe, it is almost impossible to resist this transformation.

After a few weeks by the sea, even a person's walk begins to change. People move more gently. Speak more quietly. Stay longer over dinner. Go to bed later. Gradually, they stop living by the clock and begin living instead by the warmth of the air, the movement of the sun, and the quiet signals of the body.

Perhaps that is why leaving the South feels so strangely difficult.

People do not become attached only to the sea.

They become attached to a calmer version of themselves.

Chapter 3. People Who Are Never in a Hurry

In the South of Europe, you begin to notice how profoundly speed changes a person.

It is not something you understand immediately.

At first, it seems as though Calpe is simply full of retirees, tourists and people on holiday. But gradually you realise that it is not about age, nor even about having free time.

The rhythm of life itself is different here.

People do not look as though they wake each morning prepared to battle the day.

Hardly anyone walks quickly. No one glances anxiously at their watch every few minutes. Even at pedestrian crossings, people wait calmly, as though an extra thirty seconds could not possibly alter the course of a human life.

After large cities, this feels unfamiliar at first.

Almost strange.

During the first weeks, people continue living at their old speed: walking quickly, eating quickly, thinking quickly, even resting quickly. Sometimes they treat the sea itself as another task — something to enjoy efficiently, photograph efficiently, remember efficiently.

But the Mediterranean slowly resists this inner haste.

Very gently.

Almost imperceptibly.

After some time, you catch yourself no longer wanting to fill every hour of the day. There is a curious pleasure in unoccupied time.

In leaving space between things.

In the North, empty time often creates anxiety. People feel they are not productive enough, not organised enough, not living efficiently enough.

In the South, life follows different rules.

Here, people know how to sit.

To watch.

To remain silent.

To repeat the same small rituals every day without feeling that life is slipping away unused.

Elderly Spaniards sit by the sea for hours, speaking slowly about completely ordinary things. Waiters move calmly through the heat, the noise and the endless summer days without any sense of

personal catastrophe. Women spend a long time choosing fruit at the market, as though there will always be more time ahead.

And gradually, people become infected by this slowness.

First outwardly.

Then inwardly.

Even the way they walk begins to change.

At some point, you realise that for several days in a row you have not been hurrying mentally anywhere. That something inside has grown quieter. That life no longer feels like an endless list of tasks waiting to be completed.

Perhaps that is why so many people become attached to the South.

Not only because of the sun.

But because of the rare feeling that, at last, a person is allowed to live more slowly — and no one judges them for it.

Chapter 4. The First Sea of the Day

There is a particular feeling that is impossible to explain to someone who has never lived by the sea.

The sea in the early morning.

Not the daytime sea, filled with voices, music and brightly coloured towels. And not the evening sea, when the promenades begin to resemble scenes from an old holiday film.

But the first sea of the day.

When the Mediterranean still seems to belong partly to the night.

At that hour, the coastline looks different. The light is softer, the air cooler, and the water appears clearer than it does later in the day, as though the night has quietly removed everything unnecessary from it. Even the sound of the waves feels gentler — not like the background noise of leisure, but like the natural breathing of the landscape itself.

Early in the morning, people do not go to the sea for entertainment.

They go almost out of instinct, following a habit that gradually becomes part of their inner life.

Some are walking dogs. Others carry towels after an early swim. Elderly Spaniards move slowly towards the beach in trainers and light jackets, even though the heat will arrive within a few hours. Some simply sit on benches facing the water for a long time, as though quietly checking the condition of their own inner world.

On the Mediterranean coast, mornings change people in subtle ways.

Especially when they live there for longer than a brief holiday.

At first, the sea seems beautiful.

Then familiar.

And then, unexpectedly, necessary.

A strange need appears — the need to look at the water for at least a few minutes every day. Not to swim. Not even to walk. Simply to look. As though the eyes themselves occasionally need to rest against the horizon.

Perhaps that is why people live beside the sea for so many years without growing tired of it.

The sea never entirely repeats itself.

The light changes. The colour of the water changes. The air changes. Even a person's inner state beside it is never quite the same twice.

One day, someone comes to the shore exhausted. Another day calm. Another anxious. Yet the sea remains strangely indifferent to human urgency, and because of this, being near it becomes a relief.

The Mediterranean slowly teaches people to value simple things.

Open windows.

Breakfast in the fresh air.

Evening light on the walls of houses.

Wet hair after an early swim.

The slow walk home beside the water while the day is only just beginning and so much light still lies ahead.

In large cities, mornings often begin with the world invading the mind.

Phones.

News.

Urgent messages.

Noise.

On the Mediterranean coast, mornings begin differently.

With air.

With temperature.

With the movement of water.

With the feeling of one's own body existing quietly in space.

And perhaps that is why the inner hardness so many people carry for years slowly begins to disappear here, often without them even noticing.

The sea asks nothing from anyone.

It does not care how many emails remain unanswered, how successful a person is, or whether they are keeping pace with somebody else's idea of life.

Beside the water, these things lose their importance for a while.

Only the morning remains.

The light.

Salt on the skin.

And the rare feeling that life does not always have to be a form of endurance.

Chapter 5. An Abundance of Personal Time

In the Mediterranean, people unexpectedly discover something that has become increasingly rare elsewhere: personal time.

Not a free evening after work.

Not a scheduled holiday.

Not a brief pause between obligations.

But the inner feeling that life no longer belongs entirely to necessity.

At first, this can feel strangely unsettling.

People who are accustomed to living in a state of constant occupation often do not know what to do with silence inside the day. On the Mediterranean coast, this becomes especially visible during the first weeks. People continue trying to «do» their holiday properly.

They leave the house early, walk for hours, make plans, attempt to see everything. At times, it seems as though modern people are afraid of being left alone with the simple passage of time itself.

But Mediterranean life slowly changes even this.

Very slowly.

Almost imperceptibly.

One day, a person suddenly realises that for several hours they have not been «achieving» anything at all. They have simply been living: drinking coffee on a terrace, looking at the sea, buying fruit, walking home through warm streets scented with sun-heated walls and flowering trees.

And somehow, that has been enough for a good day.

Perhaps this is one of the deepest differences between northern life and Mediterranean life.

In northern cultures, time is often treated as a resource that must not be wasted. It has to be used correctly, efficiently, rationally.

The Mediterranean approaches time differently.

Here, time is not only spent.

It is inhabited.

That is why people sit so long in cafés. Why conversations continue so slowly in the streets. Why fish is chosen so carefully at the market, and fruit examined so attentively in small grocery shops.

From the outside, this can almost resemble idleness. Yet inside this slowness there is a remarkable respect for life itself.

Mediterranean days are organised more gently.

They do not demand constant tension from people. Even the towns themselves seem designed to leave room for air: long promenades, open terraces, wide beaches, evening walks beside the sea.

Gradually, people stop feeling like mechanisms whose sole purpose is to produce results.

And then simple things begin quietly returning to them — things that once disappeared beneath exhaustion and haste.

The taste of cold water in the heat.

The shadow of palm leaves against a white wall.

The sound of dishes in an open café.

Fresh linen dried in sea air.

A long summer evening that does not need to be filled with activity in order to feel complete.

In the Mediterranean, many of the deepest changes happen not around a person, but within them.

At first, it seems that only the daily routine has changed.

Then, slowly, it becomes clear that the entire relationship with life is changing too.

People begin hurrying less not because they have become lazy,

but because, perhaps for the first time in many years, they no longer feel as though they are constantly running late for their own lives.

And perhaps this is what people remember most vividly during winter.

Not the beaches.

Not the tan.

Not the photographs.

But the rare feeling that life can consist not only of obligations,

but also of time that truly belongs to oneself.

Chapter 6. The Hours Before Noon

There is an hour on the Mediterranean coast when morning has already lost its coolness, but the day has not yet become hot.

I have always liked it.

The cafés are full now. The chairs that stood empty at sunrise have disappeared beneath hats, handbags and newspapers. Cups are being cleared away and replaced by tall glasses of water. Somewhere a spoon falls onto a saucer. A waiter laughs at something said by a man who seems to have been sitting at the same table for half his life.

The town is no longer waking.

It is awake.

I leave the promenade and turn into one of the streets leading towards the market.

The sun has reached the balconies. Towels hang over railings. A striped swimsuit moves gently beside a white sheet. Someone above me is watering geraniums, and a few drops fall through the leaves and darken the pavement at my feet.

A woman calls down from a second-floor window.

I cannot see whom she is speaking to.

A man's voice answers from somewhere farther along the street.

Neither of them appears.

The conversation continues above my head while I walk between them, carrying part of it with me for several steps before the voices fade.

At the bakery, the door is open.

The morning bread is nearly gone, but trays of small savoury pastries have appeared behind the glass. A boy comes out holding a paper bag carefully against his chest. His grandmother follows with two baguettes beneath her arm and a bunch of parsley sticking out of her shopping basket.

They stop immediately outside.

The boy wants something from the bag.

She tells him no.

He asks again.

She looks at him for a moment, reaches inside, breaks off a corner of pastry and gives it to him.

They continue walking.

By the time they reach the crossing, he has finished it.

Nothing about the scene seems important enough to remember.

And yet I do.

Mediterranean mornings are full of these tiny negotiations with pleasure.

A little more coffee.

Five more minutes at the table.

One peach for the walk home.

A piece of pastry before lunch.

No one seems particularly interested in denying the day its small offerings.

Farther on, a delivery van has stopped in the narrow street.

There is barely enough room to pass.

The driver carries crates of tomatoes into a restaurant while three cars wait behind him.

In another place, perhaps someone would sound a horn.

Here, the first driver rests an elbow on the open window.

The second looks towards the sky.

A woman in the third car adjusts her sunglasses.

The tomatoes are carried inside.

The van moves on.

So does everyone else.

By now the sun has begun to gather weight.

People instinctively choose the shaded side of the street. They do not discuss it or seem to notice themselves doing it. They simply cross when the shadow crosses, following the buildings as naturally as flowers follow light.

I do the same.

Under an awning, an old man is repairing a sandal.

His little worktable stands almost in the street. There are several tools laid out beside him, a tin containing nails, and a pair of spectacles resting low on his nose.

He holds the sandal close to his face.

For a moment, the whole world appears to have narrowed to the small leather strap between his fingers.

People pass within a metre of him.

A scooter goes by.

Someone wheels a suitcase over the uneven pavement.

The church bell marks the hour.

He does not look up.

I find myself slowing as I pass.

There is something reassuring about watching a person give complete attention to one small thing.

A few streets farther down, the sea appears again.

It always does this here.

You can forget it for ten minutes among houses, shops, parked cars and balconies, and then suddenly a street opens and there it is at the far end — blue, immense, almost improbably close.

For a moment, everyone walking in that direction seems to be heading straight into it.

A man carries a folded parasol beneath his arm.

Two girls walk ahead of him in wet sandals, leaving dark footprints on the pavement.

A woman has tucked her dress slightly above her knees and is carrying her shoes in one hand.

They have already been to the beach.

Others are only just going.

The two streams pass one another without distinction: those returning with salt drying on their skin and those still clean and expectant, carrying towels that have not yet touched the sand.

The day changes hands between them.

Near the water, I stop for a cold drink.

The glass arrives clouded with condensation.

Almost immediately, a thin line of water begins to run down its side and gathers beneath it on the table.

I move the glass into the shade.

Across the promenade, a child is trying to persuade his father to buy an enormous inflatable dolphin.

The dolphin is almost as tall as he is.

The father shakes his head.

The child places both arms around it.

For several seconds, boy and dolphin remain locked together in silent alliance.

The father looks towards the mother.

She laughs.

I turn away before I discover who wins.

The sea is brighter now.

Not yet white.

Not yet motionless beneath the full weight of noon.

It still has colour in it — deep blue farther out, green where the water thins above the sand, flashes of silver whenever a wave turns towards the sun.

A little later, all of this will change.

The streets will empty.

Metal shutters will come down.

Curtains will be drawn against the heat.

The day will enter that strange Mediterranean stillness when even time seems to seek a patch of shade.

But not yet.

For now, the coast is still moving.

Bread is being carried home.

Tables are being laid for lunch.

Wet children are returning from the sea while dry ones hurry towards it.

Tomatoes arrive at restaurant doors.

Someone repairs a sandal.

Someone waters flowers above the street.

Someone breaks a pastry in two.

And the morning, without ceremony, gives itself away piece by piece until almost nothing of it remains.

I finish my drink.

When I lift the glass, a perfect circle of water is left upon the table.

The sun reaches it before I stand.

By the time I pick up my bag, half of it has already disappeared.

Chapter 7. The Stillness of Midday

By midday, the Mediterranean gradually ceases to be a landscape.

It becomes light.

The blue is still there, but it seems to recede before the almost white radiance pouring from the sky, settling upon the water, the stones, the shoulders of swimmers, the silvery leaves of the olive trees. Outlines soften. Shadows retreat to the foot of the houses. Even the colours seem to breathe more slowly, surrendering to the quiet authority of the sun.

I walk a little farther along the sand.

Morning invites you to move.

Midday asks you to stay.

The waves come ashore without hurry. They no longer need to wake the beach. Everything is awake now. The day has reached its full ripeness, like a fruit that has stopped gathering sweetness because there is no more sweetness left to gather.

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