

Patricia Thornley

A CAFÉ NAMED NO NAME

It was several months before they saw it, in the Place of Friendship among the Peoples, a café like any other, but why No Name? they asked themselves. Every other café was called something quite specific: Brussel's, or The Sports, or The Theatre. Why did it seem a good idea to call this one No Name? There were other questions too: why was the Place of Friendship among the Peoples not full of friendly people, but of parked and empty cars? And what was a building on the Place actually called: Athanor, as it said on the outside? Or National Scene, as it also said on the outside? Or was it both? And in any case, what was a "national" scene doing in a small town in the depths of the country? And what were the answers to these questions? But perhaps answers were not important anyway, and the questions themselves were just part of the whole new experience of coming to live in a town which did have a name and which they had known about before, but just then, like the café, could equally well have had none — it was hard enough for them to pin down their own identity by a name, let alone that of the town. And that was after several months.

Perhaps the winter in a northern continent, after the warmth and sunshine of a southern one, was not the best time for them to know exactly who they were, where they were, and what they were doing there. After all, there had been a flight of a day and a night that made no concessions to the feelings of loss for what had been left behind, or anxieties about what was to come. And the two-hour wait at six o'clock in the morning to pass through immigration, the non-appearance of the minibus that was to move them on to their next destination, its crash into another minibus once it was on its way, the pouring rain, and the ill-health of the friend who was to receive them — none of these circumstances did a lot to make them feel like real people with a real identity and a real life. Perhaps they were simply nomads, two of the nameless millions always in the air, suspended between two worlds, all flying constantly around the globe to destinations that to all the other millions were also nameless.

Later, they found themselves among other nameless people, not millions this time, but a hundred or so — in another Place, smaller, far more atmospheric, and with not a car in sight — who were there for a neighbourhood concert, curiously enough a concert with nameless home-made instruments such as the metal cone with what appeared to be a TV aerial on top. The miserable winter was over, and a pair of peregrine falcons, those other wanderers of the air, cried above the music, flying to and from a nest in the cathedral tower, where the evening sun deepened the red of its medieval bricks — a perfect summer

evening. They had bought a house by then, too, just behind the cathedral, with a front door in the centre just where it ought to be, and a garden at the back just where it ought to be. They were beginning to feel like real people with real names who “belonged” somewhere.

They were even eager to introduce themselves by their names to their neighbours, but they quite forgot that in the new country the way is to respond to an introduction by simply saying goodday, and so the neighbours, standing chatting to them on the ancient cobbles in the little Place, lit now by street lanterns and candles as well as the glow from the red bricks, remained, like the café, neighbours named No Name. Can there be friendship among the peoples if there are no names? Perhaps, they wondered on another occasion, as they joined a crowd back in the Place of Friendship among the Peoples, one answer is to be a group (which *did* have a name, the distinctly arresting one of The Commandos Percu) of nameless drummers, and make a very loud noise to the delight of a very large and nameless crowd, and if the noise is associated with a non-stop battery of brilliant fireworks, so much the better. Might shared noise and flashing crashing lights be a possible substitute for friendship? It was certainly a welcome alternative to parked cars that night, with instead a Place full of a crowd laughing and waving, and united with itself and the drummers in yelling its approval.

There was no need for them to yell their own approval at a little vegetarian restaurant that, like The Commandos Percu, also had a name: The Sunflower, redolent of summer fields filled with brilliant yellow blooms all turned towards the sun, and of autumn fields with the now black and wilted blooms about to be harvested for their seeds. At The Sunflower they discovered sesame seeds too, crushed with sea salt to sprinkle on a succulent vegetarian lasagna, perhaps, or a roasted-vegetable and cheese quiche. They also discovered the smile on the faces of The Sunflower’s owners, who at that time were nameless to them, but who wanted to know where they had come from and where they were going to live, and what their new house was like. They had a feeling very quickly at The Sunflower that this was not a substitute for friendship, but would be the real thing, and golden, like the summer fields, and the fact that no individual names were known was of no importance.

But, “I am ostracised,” said a friend with an unpronounceable name who is married to a foreigner and living abroad, “not because of who I am but because of my name.” They were sitting in the garden that was even more than just where it ought to be — once again, as at the neighbourhood concert, the evening sun made a glow, across the river below this time, and on the hills beyond, and the talk after dinner was of living in foreign lands. By this time their own name felt as if it was real again, even if ordinary and of

fundamentally little importance, and yet here was the exact opposite, a friend whose name is so extraordinary to the citizens of his adopted country that who he actually *is* is of very little consequence — with such a name he must automatically be a suspicious character, a wily Levantine merchant perhaps, dealing in drugs. His comment, though, was a reminder to them that "living abroad" can be a lonely business, that having and being conscious of one's own name can be an assurance of one's own being in alienating circumstances; or on the other hand having the "wrong" name can be an alienation in itself. As they talked, though, they began to be aware that who one actually *is* is the most important thing under any circumstances, living abroad or not. And as they talked more, with the local wine flowing, they became a touch philosophical, wondering whether, if all the peoples of the world became fully aware of their own unique being, then names really would not be important, and friendship among those peoples would also just *be*. But, of course, it was night by then, and there was a warm glow inside them even though it had disappeared from the horizon with the setting sun.

And that café? They discovered later still that the only reason it has no name is that many of the cafes in town reflect the idea that the smart thing these days is to have a theme — TexMex is very popular, for example, or "London club"; or, as at Brussel's, "Belgian," which equals the serving of mussels and chips — whereas the new owner of the previously dilapidated café in the Place of Friendship among the Peoples explained to them that he wanted to be totally independent of fashion and have no theme at all. What he did consider to be very much *à la mode* however, was to use English for the name of his café, and to explain it further by a smartly painted sign on the wall saying "Café No Name: no style — all style." They sat over their pastis and pineapple juice pondering this sign, and thought they could just about understand the thinking behind it. But it really was of no matter that they had to work it out if everyone else around them knew exactly what it was all about, that at the café named No Name there was freedom — freedom from themed decoration, freedom in the choice of food (providing of course that it appears on the menu of the day), and perhaps most importantly, freedom in the choice of drinks.

For them there was an even greater freedom, across from the cafe in their little town in the heart of the country, to be able to watch a foreign-language film with other-language subtitles, at the tiny "arthouse" cinema in that alchemist's furnace of culture, the Athanor. The National Scene, they had also discovered later, was nothing less than just that, and occasionally even an "international scene," in the choice it had given them of plays, poetry, dance, art exhibitions — and film. And then, after the film, in the Place of Friendship among the Peoples, before their walk back to the house behind the cathedral, there was the freedom simply to be themselves — and to talk of this and that, and never mind about names or no names, with the friendly owner of a café named No Name.