

Kate North, 'The Largest Bull in Europe'

Abstract:

'The Largest Bull in Europe' explores the character of the tourist as both the observer and the observed. The first person narrative positions the visitor as a prurient viewer concerned with the sensual details of the other. Traditional associations of the traveller as a free agent, as flâneur, engender an environment of moral transgression in which the reconsideration of established social codes and mores are recast in alternative settings. The visitor is also noticed, observed and judged by those around her. The sense of alienation established provides a basis for reassessing what has already been accepted as true, particularly regarding the nature of romantic relationships and personal identity in relation to setting.

Keywords: fiction, first person, tourist, other, Spain, setting

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I was watching the children in the square behind you when I noticed that the waiter was on his way over. You sat straight, a dart up to heaven, and placed your hands on your thighs like when you're expecting news. The last time you sat like that we were in the hospital waiting to find out whether I'd fractured or sprained something.

The waiter placed our second dish on the table. We had decided to order a number of starters rather than a main meal each. You don't eat meat and there's no way of knowing what's really a vegetable and what's masquerading as one on menus this far inland, this far away from what we are used to. You had ordered in French because we don't speak Spanish and I liked the way you said 'pour le plat principal'. I was proud of your accent even though it was in the wrong place.

We looked down at the fresh plate together. There were six or seven items that had been deep fried in breadcrumbs. They were each the size of a baby's fist and they nestled next to a handful of fried potatoes with a large dollop of garlic mayonnaise.

'This could be a main course' you said, then smiled. Taking a knife and fork you split open one of the fists, sniffed at it then pushed the plate towards me. They had sounded vegetarian on the menu, stuffed peppers, but they were filled with a meaty mince.

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'You'll have to eat all of the aubergine yourself,' I pointed as it arrived. You pouted at me, aubergine is your favourite. When you first told me about your love of them I remember being fascinated. You consider it the most versatile vegetable as it can be fried, stuffed, baked, pureed, mashed, roasted, grilled and stewed. However, it is one of those vegetables that is actually a fruit, like the tomato. You told me you liked the way the texture varied so much according to how it was prepared.

You gave me a lengthy description of the aubergine when raw, dense and light like some industrial foam clothed in a wax jacket. Then, commentary style, you talked me through the breakdown of this ingredient when used to make a dip. From the charring of it over a flame when the skin peels and splits to the glossy ribbon of goo it becomes when mashed and blended with garlic and rock salt. You let me know that the largest producers of aubergines in the world are the Chinese followed by the Indians and that you have been to China and your sister has been to India.

This particular plate of aubergines looked like a nest of fat snails. The chunks had been coated in a cumin batter and deep fried, then glazed with a thick honey that was starting to set as we stared down at it.

'Go on then, eat one.' You stabbed a chunk with your fork and it made a moist crackle, opened your mouth wide like a chorister and placed it far inside before closing your lips around the fork then pulling it away. 'Mmmm', you said, 'mmmm.'

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'Nice?'

'Mmmm, nice.'

Good, I thought. They didn't look to my taste. I bit into a meat fist and dipped a potato slice into the mayonnaise.

'Really, really, really excellent.'

'You'll have to look up the recipe when we get home.'

'Mmmm.'

When the time came to pay I reached into my new leather handbag and pulled out my new leather purse.

'I'll get this,' I said and I unfolded the note section of the wallet. I took out all of the notes like I never would at home, and flicked through them until I had selected the right amount. I fanned them out on the saucer that came with the bill and weighed them down with a sachet of sugar.

'We still have some wine to finish,' you said as you wiggled the half full bottle in front of my face. I slid my glass to you and you refilled it. We both sat there

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taking in the couples and families on the tables around us. After a while, when nearly all of the wine was gone you said, 'I wouldn't mind going to see that bull.'

A circus had appeared on the edge of the village where we were staying. We drove past it the previous afternoon when they were hoisting the tent poles. In the evening when we came out to the square for dinner, we noticed lots of posters had been put up. They were on telephone poles, bins, swinging from streetlights, there was even one across the doors of the town hall. It read in Spanish,

For one night only El Circo Ronda brings you the largest bull in Europe - 750kg!

'They're showing it tonight.'

'It would be a shame to miss it.'

'I didn't think you'd be that interested, I must admit.'

'I am an animal lover.'

Throughout the afternoon and into the early evening one of the circus workers had driven through the streets in an elderly truck with a loudhailer attached. It blared out tinny classical music that was interrupted frequently with a recorded announcement detailing the time of the show. You looked at your watch, then at me.

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'We can still make it if we get a move on.'

'Are you sure you're up for it? I mean, it could be cruel.'

'We're in Spain,' you said and stood up as if about to burst into song.

On the way there we discussed what they would actually do with the bull. Would they make it do tricks or simply parade it about? Would it be trained and part of an act? We carried on down the hill to the edge of the village. There was a queue of locals at a ticket kiosk that had been set up on the scrubland by the tent. We joined the queue.

'Dos,' I said to the ticket clerk when we reached the booth. He was smoking a cigarette and he allowed the ash to fall on two tickets before handing them to me. He pointed towards the tent and told us the time of the show in very slow and enunciated Spanish. It didn't start for another twenty minutes so we headed to the other stalls that circled the main tent. There was an old lady selling children's toys: balls and sweets with trinkets inside them. She looked ancient and the lines on her face were like troughs in the land in which you could deposit seeds. There was another stall selling toasted almonds and polythene bags of peeled and sliced fruit. You bought some almonds in a rolled paper cone that looked like a miniature Ku Klux Klan hat.

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Inside families were taking their seats. Some were firmly installed and passing foil parcels of pastries about. One family entered through the curtain flap, looked around and waved at another family who beckoned them over to join them.

'Front, middle or back?' I said and you pointed to the front row where there was room at the edge of the bench. We took our places and you munched on the almonds.

'Mmmm, mmmm,' you said.

'Nice?'

'Mmmm, excellent.'

That's when the band started to play. I hadn't noticed it on the way in. A blast of trumpets made the audience look up and focus on the small but significantly loud five or six middle-aged men who made up the band. They were all round and sported extravagant moustaches like old cinema villains. As their first number built to a swell, so did the audience, who started to clap in time to the music. You patted your knee with your free hand and continued to clutch your almond cone with the other. By the end of the piece the audience had filled and the entry flap was pulled shut. A drum roll began, the lights were lowered and with a cymbal clash a spotlight appeared in the centre of the ring. A voice flared through the speakers and a traditional ringmaster with red coat-tails and a top hat ran out into the spotlight as we made our applause.

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After a brief introduction the performers paraded into sight one after another until they lined the entire arena. Marching and dancing, jumping and rolling in time to the music there were a number of clowns, a dog wearing a necktie and carrying a bone, an acrobat on a large ball, stilt walkers, a couple of people on unicycles and even a juggling dwarf in a unitard.

The first act was the acrobat walking on the ball. I didn't think much of him but I suppose he was just warming things up. He manoeuvred his way through an obstacle course of large foam objects that had been laid down by the other performers before they left the ring. I could see that it took a lot of balance and a huge amount of leg strength, so I did clap.

The next act was a clown. He appeared from somewhere in the audience and there was a yelp from a grandma. She was sat next to him when he stood up and started to shout at the man on the ball. Everyone around him burst out laughing and then eventually, once she had realised what was going on, so did the grandma. He seemed to be telling the performer with the ball that he could do just as well. The man left the ring in a faux state of despair and before going to claim the ball as his own the clown bent down to the grandma, pulled a bouquet of weeds from his jacket pocket and presented them to her with serious decorum. She took them and also accepted a peck on her cheek.

After trying to roll about on the ball and falling over a number of times, he made his way to the centre of the ring and motioned for silence. Then he pulled a

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violin from his extremely large trousers. The lights dimmed and he was lit by the spot. Taking us all by surprise, he suddenly charged into a very skilled performance of Vivaldi's Summer, presto. He played with raised eyebrows and concentrated eyes focussing on an unknown point at the back of the tent. I looked around and saw that most of the audience had a similar expression on their own faces. We were all in his moment as I felt your hand squeeze my knee and, even though I couldn't bring myself to turn and look, I knew you were smiling. As the rendition built I could feel all the breath in that tent, the whole audience inhaling and exhaling slowly, the way you do when you're concentrating so hard that you don't want the sound of your gulp to interrupt what's in front of you.

As the performance was reaching its climax we began to lean forward. I was clenching my fists as if I were a mother urging my child on to make the high note. The clown was starting to perspire, I could see the beads forming over the white of his make up. That was when the violin burst into flames as if through the audacity of his playing. It was perfectly timed and the audience gasped before realising it was part of the act. The clown ran about the ring waving his musical flame until diving for a large trough of water in which he threw both the violin and himself. The applause was solid and didn't stop for a good two or three minutes. The clown was fished out of the trough by some performers and dragged to the back of the ring. He was propped up and he rolled his shoulders as if he was going to be sick. Then he coughed a lot of water onto the floor followed by a few fish. He straightened himself up, gave a long, low bow then disappeared behind the curtain.

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The clown stood out as the best performance of the night. When he left you noted that the bull still hadn't made an appearance. I suggested that it would be saved for the finale, given it was the focus of the advertising. The following acts were fair, the dwarf juggled a number of things: clubs, saucers, torches, vases and so on. But she was at her best when balancing a sword on a dagger on her chin while climbing a ladder. A trampoline was brought out at one point and most of the performers did something on it. More clowns showed up and bashed into each other mid-air, some acrobats combined trampoline leaps with trapeze work and the dog with the bone did a few back flips. The final act involved performers dressed as bandits on galloping horses. The horses were as large as minibuses, but they were no bulls.

The end was much like the beginning with a parade of performers, only now there was more applause as the audience had become familiar with the cast. They gave farewell waves in time to the music and proceeded back out behind the curtain. When the house lights came up you turned to me and asked, 'So, what about the bull?' I shrugged then you grabbed my hand and said 'Look.' You pointed to another curtain flap that was open on the opposite side of the tent. People were leaving their seats and heading for it. We stood up and you handed me your empty almond cone. I made space for it in my handbag and we moved towards the new exit. A queue was forming and we joined it dribbling forward.

'Do you think this is where we'll see it?'

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'I suppose.'

As part of the queue we made our way out of the tent to a space where I could see a number of animal pens in a row. The audience was snaking past them in line. Fathers picked up toddlers and leaned them over the rails, behind which various animals were housed. In one pen there was a selection of unusually large rabbits that looked like they were on steroids. They had bulging eyes and long wavy hair in a variety of browns and greys. Next to the rabbits were some goats. Nobody seemed that fussed about them and the queue moved along swiftly. Then came a solitary llama who was marching back and forth along the length of the barrier. It stopped intermittently and shoved its head forward at the crowd who were laughing and squeaking at it. One small girl burst into tears, which provoked further gentle laughter, and her mother scooped her up onto her hip for protection. The crowd stopped moving at this point and we halted right by the llama.

'Give it a pat,' I said.

'No way. That's cruel.'

The llama looked down at us and batted its eyelashes. It had goofy teeth that pushed through what I made out to be a smile.

'Awh, it's smiling at us, go on, give it a pat.'

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'It *is* smiling isn't it?'

You reached toward it, your hand flat and calm. Then, just as you were about to make contact with the top of the animal's head it pulled back its lips, nodded towards you and hissed a large gob of spit in your direction. You shrieked and people turned to look at your stunned, wet face. There was quite a bit of laughter and you did your best to smile, when I knew what you really wanted was to scream and to run, run, run, keep running. I fished out a tissue from my bag that you snatched from me.

'Thanks.'

I slipped my arm around your waist and squeezed on that bit of muscle, your oblique I think, that you always insist is fat.

'Stop squeezing my fat,' you said but I didn't. I just hung in there until you let it pass.

'This bull had better be worth it.'

Then we pushed forward. I could hear the gasps from those people in front of us who could now surely see the bull. There was a reverential beat of quiet and a few more gasps until we found ourselves at the barrier in front of the beast.

'Shit!' I said.

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'What?'

'It's big.'

'Massive.'

'Shit!'

There, in a pen almost as big as itself, rather like one of those bed bound obese people they make documentaries about, knelt a bull that was so huge the spectacle felt like witnessing the sheer face of mountain for the very first time, or like the view from a ship when there is no land to spot, only ocean and ocean and ocean. Everywhere was bull. I squeezed at you harder.

'750kg, what's that in stones?'

'It must be over 100.'

The bull was totally black and snorted loudly. It had a ring in its nose and a large rosette pinned to its back. Its horns were two perfectly symmetrical protrusions either side its head, which looked a bit like a giant shoebox. Its plum eyes were shifting nervously, though it had a chest that looked proud and brave like the bonnet of a sports car. The crowd moved on. I looked to the bull and felt the

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need to stay with it. I remember thinking that I wish I could talk to it, just say hello or ask what it is like being *it*, a bull, that particular bull.

'No wonder it wasn't part of an act,' I said as we walked back up the hill toward the village square.

'Too big for that. It could kill.'

'Do you think they are that big in bull fights?'

'No chance.'

We reached the square and took a seat outside a bar under an orange tree. A waitress came and took our drinks order.

'I'm still in shock to be honest.'

'It *was* massive.'

'The largest bull in Europe.'

'And it was *so* still. Big and still.'

'Unnerving.'

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'But fascinating at the same time.'

Our drinks came along with a bowl of olives. The olives had been marinated in garlic, oil and an herb I couldn't make out. You popped one in your mouth.

'Mmmm, mmmm,' you said.

'Good?'

'Mmmm, excellent.'

'There's something I'd like us to do before we leave.'

'Mmmm. Mmmm?'

'You might not like the sound of it.'

'Go on' you said, then you spat an olive stone into the palm of your hand then placed it in the terracotta serving dish on our table.

'I'd like us to go and watch a bull fight.'

You took another olive from the dish and put it to your mouth. Sucking on it you looked up to the tree above us, then back down at me. You nibbled at the flesh of

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the fruit like a squirrel on a nut, then you held the stone in your hand between your thumb and forefinger and said, 'Okay.'

It was mid August and we had unknowingly purchased the best seats for the first show of the season. Tourist's good fortune.

'What will you wear?' you asked. I hadn't a clue. 'Do we need to dress up?' I said.

'Well, I intend to.'

We got there early and sat outside a café where everyone else was sat. We ordered two sherries and some water like everyone else and sat back with our matching shades balancing on our noses. It was about an hour before the start of the show and perhaps thirty minutes before the gates opened. I took out the tickets and double-checked which entrance we needed. Two elderly ladies strolled past arm in arm and you grabbed my hand, widened your eyes and said 'I'm so excited.' They were wearing patterned dresses and large flowers in their hair. One held a scarlet fan in her hand and you said that I should have one to go with my lipstick.

'This is just like a night at the theatre. Everyone's dolled up.'

'I'm glad we made the effort.'

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There were clusters of people on the tables around ours. It was a predominantly older crowd but the youth were not entirely absent. The thing that unified everyone was the style of dress – certainly the very, very best. High polished shoes cut past proud pressed chinos, tight black skirts accompanied expensive jeans and deceptively relaxed linen shirts.

The twenty-somethings butched-out their chests and primed-in their buttocks. The thirty-somethings slanted in their seats while sucking slender cigarettes and taking sultry nods. The forty-somethings relaxed against the street, the rare flicker of a significant signet ring or the practised savvy of an arriving heel occasionally causing the crowd to turn. The fifty-somethings communicated with their hands, fondling cigars, pinching cheeks, stroking palms, grasping shoulders. The couples in their sixties fussed with handkerchiefs while those in groups laughed in low rolls and pointed or waved at each other. The oldest people came as part of family arrangements where each generation had at least one representative present. These families took up two or three tables each, the waiters pushing them together and separating them as the afternoon required. Plates of food were passed about, uncles casually served grandmas, teenagers fed babies and parents loomed between mouthfuls in order to quietly air their presence.

One such family arrived shortly after us. They sat opposite our table on the other side of the thoroughfare that was encouraged by the break in seating in front of us. They were in the kind shade of a kiosk that formed an arc over the pavement with the help of an old oak tree. Dishes came and went, napkins were flapped

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and flourished while toddlers crawled on laps and escapees rolled toward strangers.

'Should we eat something?' you said.

'Yes, but maybe something small. We don't know how you'll feel later.'

'Yes, something small.'

We both liked the look of the thick purple salsa that came in a small oval tureen. It sat in the middle of the family's table and each person punctuated their meal with regular dips of bread into it. It was the last thing to remain on the table and arms reached for it solidly with javelined breadsticks and swinging forks until it was emptied.

'It looks delicious,' you said, 'I wonder what's in it?'

'Maybe tomatoes blended with black beans and oil.'

'Mmmm, yummy,' you said.

When the waiter came we pointed at the empty tureen and ordered our own along with some bread and another two sherries. It was served quickly and you submerged a torn chunk of bread in the slush immediately.

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'Mmmm, mmmm,' you said.

'Good?'

'Mmmm, excellent.'

I took a piece of bread and did the same. It wasn't what we were expecting, but it was perfect. A messy, oily, spicy, chilled concoction of the freshest unidentifiable ingredients I have ever tasted. It sang in my mouth the way a strong cheddar vibrates against one's gums. It clung to the insides of my cheeks like an obedient ice-cream and dissolved the bread slowly on my tongue like a saucy communion wafer.

'There are definitely tomatoes in it,' you said before pausing to dislodge a thin fibre that had got caught between your teeth. Pulling it out then dangling it in the air in front of my nose, you giggled.

'What makes it so dark and gloopy then?' I asked.

'Must be beans, like I said. All whizzed up then mixed in.'

You clearly didn't care what the tureen contained and I didn't blame you. We were in the place for such a dish, we were eating it like all of the other people around us were. It suited the temperature, it tasted divine and it felt like the

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only thing to be doing. We didn't talk again until the tureen was empty and then only to agree on a 'yum' or unite in a 'gorgeous'.

After a while the family opposite us prepared to depart. Men nearby stood up from tables and took their places under trees while they waited for wives to use the toilets inside the café. I asked for the bill and the waiter was so impressed with my accent he performed a kind of mini-flamenco clap on the heel of his palm and I blushed.

Outside the gate there were stalls with refreshments. I wanted some water and you insisted on cigars because everyone else was queuing up for them. We made our way to gate number three, a bulky cavern set into the round of the building. I felt like a peasant walking into a cathedral in the Middle Ages. We both looked up instinctively, awestruck with the height of the corridors containing the babbling brook of people in which we swam without control. I grabbed your hand and reached us toward a man who was tearing tickets. He glanced at us, then the tickets in my hand, took them, gave them a rip and motioned for us to follow him.