

Before, Marseille for her was like watching a family

through a window, from the outside. After, she says, it was like being in her own house and made her warm at heart.

Before I came to live here I would arrive on the night sleeper around seven in the morning. I remember the street-cleaners' water gushing along gutters, and the sun. It didn't rain. Sometimes I called at the station washroom to shave – and cut myself more than usual. Those towels. Coming out, from the top of the station steps, the town seemed yellow ochre streaked with blue. Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde stood out. Then down the flight of steps to rush into the boulevard d'Athènes, that sombre street split in half like double brackets which changes its name several times before reaching La Canabière. Beyond there I had no real idea where the cours Lieutaud led, and didn't know its name anyway. Today I make sure not to go that way, I don't like it any more. Before, whole slabs of the town and their names were strange to me: La Plaine, the Cinq Avenues... I was unable to make a link between the poles sketched by these haphazard images – for instance a fragment of Mazargues or the Prado plane trees abutting place Castellane. But towards the town centre: nothing.

Cardo loves to relive first impressions of people and places. What he remembers of someone's face is the expression of their eyes, not the colour but the overall aspect. I've tried in my way

the same exercise: I conjure up the plane trees of Mazargues, of the boulevard d'Athènes or the Estaque and, in summer, the ones adjoining place Castellane with the sound of the fountain. Great tall trees forming a vault of shade, or by night enclosing the street light rays. Or I see C. smiling, and ten years later his same smile seen from afar, coming towards me. But I don't remember when I first went to Les Chartreux where, at the start, I lived for three months in the house belonging to Jo G's mother.

As a child Marola would be accompanied by his mother to visit his piano teacher at Endoume. They would take the tram along boulevard Longchamp. Then they'd walk up rue Sainte where he remembered the smell of the oil-mills. For him like, he believed, for most Marseillais, the sea was never there. I recall when I first sniffed it, an iodised clamminess with an aftertaste of sludge, coming out of the subterranean tunnels of the Vieux Port metro station. It is always a surprise. Discussing Marola's claim, Cardo said: "But here you see the sea in the sky". We understood the poetry of what he meant but he tried to explain himself: he was thinking of the strong reflected light demanding sunglasses all year round. From the end of spring you see suntan lotion in town. Castellane is where the buses leave for the southern beaches: David, Pointe Rouge and beyond. Coming back, flecks of salt, dustings of sand on sunburned skin, moist hair and shirts. Towels and swimming costumes.

St Charles is a cul-de-sac sort of station: you enter town by the back door. Kitchens seen through rear windows, washing strewn over balconies, the barracks where my father joined up.

On the inevitable theme of tarts, Cardo is not short of words. The all-night bars around the Opera, the hostess – so beautiful, very young – who spotted us together at Stop looking for a bite to eat at two in the morning, the prostitute who asked him to drive her there after doing a blow job in his car near the Corbusier building. I now realise that this type of story is banal. Except in the centre of town around the Opera night spots – or at the lower end of cours Joseph-Thierry – prostitution appears to be a moving phenomenon. Erratic, as A. would say. How long, for instance, will the blonde patrol the corner of cours Lieutaud and the rue de Village where she takes up position each evening under the spot lights of a shop selling biker gear, between two reflecting mirrors on each side of a glass door?

Marseille. I recently noticed that the rubbish collectors have a new look. They're no longer, as they were in the sixties, weary proles (African or Arab) but athletic types who run, jump, whistle,

picking up bags and bins with ease and style. They tote fluorescent yellow belts over their blue two-piece work-suits. I've also noticed the way in which some women remodel their mouths with red, pink and white lipstick: in my childhood this sort of practice was confined to elderly ladies.

A plumed drag queen sat on a wastepaper bin a long way up the rue de Rome near a traffic light. He approached cars with their windows down (they were down) shouting "travesty". Yesterday, passing by rue Thiers I noticed long white legs draped down the front door steps of an entrance way. Then there's the guy with the braided fringe who stands near the top of rue Senac at the corner of rue de la Bibliothèque, very close to where my grandfather who wore a tophat used to live. I can imagine the view my grandfather had over the town, the port and the sea. I have failed again to evoke the Courtille descent. Paris.

I came back by taxi to Les Chartreux for dinner with B and S, one of the first in a long series of meals. My taxi driver had gone to Marignane airport that day to meet his nephew who'd won a scholarship to study in the United States. "I too had plans. I was hoping to make it to America. I was a patissier, but the crisis intervened. I had an uncle in the secret services who advised me to join the police. I got ready to do just that... But then came military service and the Algiers coup. That's how I came to know my wife. I was stuck here in Marseille, otherwise I would have left, I would never have met her, I would not have married her, my life would probably have been different. I said as much the other day to my daughter. If I had never had a daughter, what would I have done?"

How many times, before getting to know Marseille, did I hear my grandfather tell the story of the assassination of the King of Yugoslavia by the *oustachis*? The dignified young queen and the burning chapel. Louis Barthou's bloodbath. And the setting alight of the steamer Georges Philipard.

Suddenly, drifting up from a radio, the sound of Cecca's laugh, reminiscent of Boubole the elephant, pride and joy of families in Longchamp park.

Here, we say "packet" where elsewhere they might say "pouch" or "bag". One Sunday afternoon, when there were fewer pedestrians and cars than on a weekday, I went to check the signs on the shop selling packaging in the rue d'Italie. I found signs for hoops, wedges, adhesives, bags... On either side of the two shops, placed in a horizontal oval, were the words "binding & packaging" (the ampersand forming the centre). There was just one word written in

English scroll: *bolduc* (red ribbon). I have learned its meaning only recently; it still seems too technical or archaic. A. uses it frequently where I would, doubtless wrongly, prefer the words tape or string. Late night on the Prado, after carefully wrapping the charcuterie I was taking to my friends, the shopkeeper added: "There, all you need is red ribbon".

Cardo decided to tell me another story. When he leaves his car in the town centre without putting cash in the parking meter, he tells himself before he picks the car up "if there's no ticket that means that she (the woman he's infatuated by) loves you". For several weeks, no ticket. What sunshine! He also tells me how, feeling abandoned, he decided to pass the night in town, on foot or in his car, but was unable to find a prostitute anywhere, or if he spotted one she'd vanished by the time he tracked her down. This he took to be a sign, like missed dates with women (other than the one he really fancied). A sign of what? I decided not to ask him. At moments like this, swapping confidences amongst themselves about love and sex, men are mostly insincere. He let the story drop.

