



ELLE JOLIVET

Osman sat on the park bench.

Every day for the past month he'd come to sit on the same bench. Occasionally, when others occupied it, he would carry on walking round. He strolled until there was a spare place on that bench. Once, he did seven laps of the park, waiting. Two hours of walking, hands behind his back.

All the same, the bench was nothing special. There were a load of similar-looking benches in this park – and, no doubt, in every other Marseille park. But Osman had chosen this particular one as his. It was as simple as that.

During those early days' strolling around Borely Park he realised that everyone seemed to have their own particular spot. Old folks, single women, mothers with prams. Bench regulars chatted amongst themselves as if they were family. They shared jokes and often embraced before going their own separate ways.

"Is this place free?" he'd asked the first time.

The young woman was giving her baby a bottle.

She raised her eyes to meet his.

Osman liked her eyes and her gentle smile. On town streets he normally met other kinds of eyes – harder, more hostile. He knew they summed him up. Not just the way he dressed – like others of modest means he bought his wardrobe at the La Plaine market, canvas trousers for five francs, loud checked shirts at ten francs for three – but also what he was: an immigrant worker, more precisely an out-of-work immigrant.

"I think so, yes."

"Thanks," he said.

Shyly he sat down on the tip of the bench.

It was a lot later that he allowed himself to spread the full extent of his space on the bench. He inched across each time he folded and unfolded his legs. On one occasion the young woman

threw him another glance which made him scared she would be frightened of him.

"It's nice here," he said in an effort to be reassuring.

"Yes."

Then she shouted after Marius and Antonin, her two young children, who were amusing themselves throwing stones at the pigeons. They were fine-looking kids. Osman's own son, Gulnür, was just five. About the same age as little Antonin. Gulnür was good-looking, too. As Antonin ran clumsily towards his mother Osman thought of his own son and how he had been unable to witness him grow.

Aysel, his wife, had not said a word when Osman told her he was leaving. There was nothing to say. He had been the only 30-year-old still remaining at Bilcenik, his home village in Anatolia. Everyone else had left. Everyone sent back enough cash for their families to get by on each week. And everyone would return one fine day, pockets stuffed with banknotes.

The day Osman left, Gulnür was just one month old. He hadn't seen him since then. "You have a fine son," Aysel wrote to him. But Osman proved quite incapable of imagining his son.

Osman stretched his legs. He looked around him. By now, he knew almost all of the park regulars by their first names even though not one of them had spoken to him. He lived vicariously on the stories they told each other.

Jocelyne, the young mother, shared the bench with him – just the two of them. At least, that was when he went to sit there. Others would take his place at other times. A second mother with children – an older woman than Jocelyne – and another woman who might have been her mother.

Osman realised that one day. He'd returned to the bench a quarter of an hour after leaving having remembered at the bus stop that he'd left behind a paper bag with the remains of a snack in it. A tomato, some fruit, a bit of bread, maybe a slice of cheese. He'd no wish to be blamed for not putting his rubbish in one of the park's small green waste bins. Screwed up in a ball, the bag was on the ground beside the bench. Pushed there by the old lady, no doubt.

"Excuse me," he said stooping to pick it up.

The old lady didn't even look at him. Neither did the other woman. Jocelyne had smiled. She'd smiled at him, he thought. Even though he never dared strike up a conversation with her he felt very warmly for the young woman.

As the days passed, Osman plucked up courage to chat with Marius and Antonin, even to play with them. More often than not he

sacrificed buying fruit for himself so that he always had sweets in his pocket. Children everywhere love people to give them sweet things.

"Is it all right if they have these?" he asked Jocelyne, showing her two large toffee-apples.

That was yesterday.

"Fine, if you really want to."

Marius and Antonin were in heaven.

"So, what do you say?" Jocelyne prompted them.

Osman received two thank-yous and two kisses. It was the first time in five years that children had kissed him. It warmed the cockles of his heart. Everything's not lost after all, he thought.

That evening, in his tiny furnished room in rue Consolat, he was full of new hope. Perhaps now he would find work again. He dreamt that Aysel and Gulnür could finally join him in Marseille. He drifted off to sleep imagining himself with them in Borely Park, overjoyed at introducing Aysel to Jocelyne, Gulnür to Marius and Antonin.

The sun was strong the next day. A bright spring sunshine. Osman had eaten part of the pizza he'd bought at the mobile stall near the beach and was dozing, debating ways to bring his family to Marseille.

He knew what he wanted to do. He himself had entered France clandestinely from the Italian frontier. Over the mountains. He'd given a lot of money to an Italian guide who'd abandoned him during the crossing. He'd then paid a second guide at Vintimille. That time he'd managed to find an honest old local. But Osman couldn't imagine Aysel and Gulnür making the same journey. It involved a whole night's march over difficult mountain paths, then a mule track traversing lava rubble.

No, he dreamed of the train for those two, furnished with tourist visas. But how can you obtain a tourist visa to visit someone who doesn't even boast a *carte de séjour*? He must go to enquire at the organisation which helped the *sans-papiers* like himself. He would ask them what to do about Aysel and Gulnür.

He opened his eyes in time to see Jocelyne and the children approaching, accompanied by a man. She pointed at the bench and at Osman. They came in his direction. Jocelyne was not smiling when they stood in front of him.

"Hi," said Osman.

"Remove the children," the man told Jocelyne.

"He's done nothing wrong, Georges," Jocelyne replied timidly.

"Off you go, now."

Jocelyne went, head bowed over the pram which she pushed angrily in front of her. Marius and Antonin followed, turning back to look at Osman.

Osman stood up.

"I'm her husband."

"Hello" said Osman, holding out his hand.

Georges stared back with one of those looks Osman had learned to fear. There was no room for him in that look. Not in his life, or even on a park bench.

Osman's hand remained untaken.

"It seems you love children."

"Yes, sir, and yours are very fine."

"Bastard!" Georges snarled.

He planted his knee fiercely in Osman's crutch.

The pain bent him double. Then a punch hit him. He fell to the ground. He struggled for breath just as when he was following the guide on the mountain pass.

"You have an address here in Marseille?" the husband asked him between blows.

"I'll get by," replied Osman.

Somehow he always got by. In Toulon first, then here in Marseille. Alone. Just a little too proud, perhaps.

A kick in his side roused him. It was dark all around. People encircled him. He wanted to smile. To say hello. To say sorry. It must all be a mistake. He was ashamed to disturb the peace of the park.

"He messed with my kids," Georges yelled, lining Osman up for another kick.

"I saw that," said a female voice.

"They're all child-molesters, these fucking wogs."

Eyes closed, Osman tried desperately to conjure up Gulnür's face. The only image which came was that of Antonin. He smiled at him.

"Antonin," he murmured.

Suddenly he was beyond pain. Everyone was kicking him from all sides, all over. They were set on killing him. The final blow seemed like the end. But he couldn't know. His spleen had exploded.

Nor did he hear Antonin ask Jocelyne:

"Mum, why is this man so bad?"

JEAN-CLAUDE IZZO (1945-2000) was a poet and author of a much acclaimed trilogy of detective novels that take place in Marseille. This extract is from *Vivre fatigüe. Nouvelles*, Paris, éd. J'ai lu, coll. "Libro Noir", 2001.