

For over a month of the holidays,

Azdi came round just once to do his homework. On that day, you couldn't have found a more serious student. That was when I began to call him "Little Brother" (The title of a song sung by the rap group IAM). By way of explanation I told Azdi: "You make me think of myself when I was your age. I was just the same: always lying, always messing about, always leaving things until the last minute because I knew that I could work quickly. But you know the old refrain: "There's no use in running, Little Brother."

There was a core of truth in what I said: as I told Mariama, Azdi is smart. He has all-round intelligence, an extraordinary sense of humour (he even managed to get me to laugh that day) as well as a wild animal's ability to extricate itself from the traps set both by the French language and by life. His speed of analysis is breathtaking. All right, he lives off his natural gifts; I did as much at his age. But he is brilliant and carefree, qualities which I lacked. I suffered a terrible guilt complex when I put off doing my homework. And I would put it off at the drop of a hat, often because this complex also prevented me from doing the other things I was supposed to.

It's also a fact that I fell for the song "Little Brother" because of the moral in La Fontaine's story which applies to both Azdi and myself: since I didn't get out of here "at the right moment", I now find myself the prisoner of a life I feel I didn't choose.

But all these truths are outweighed by the lies: at Azdi's age I didn't know how to lie, I couldn't bullshit. I had the body of a sparkling clean squid, drained of its ink and stripped of its spine, a pale white body shining on sunny beaches where I was dragged against my will... I was, and remain, so different from Azdi. That's why I gave him this nickname: to ward off the difference, the good

and evil that it provokes in me, that it wants, from Azdi and the others.

My Little Brother was thus, for the space of an hour, a model student. Impeccable syntax. Satisfactory spelling. Only two mistakes in the dictation that I couldn't resist giving him: the opening paragraphs of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. As he mulled over the questions I had rustled up on Proust's text, he covered my cigarette pack with mini-tags.

"Questions on grammar! That's a bit of a dampener, eh? Don't you find that first sentence funny? Where he writes: 'For a long time...', and then: '...I went to bed early'. He could have said: 'For a long time I believed...', or: 'For a long time I thought...', because it takes a certain while to believe and to think... It's not like going to bed..."

"You know, he stayed in bed a long time... He wrote in bed, Proust..."

"You don't say..."

Azdi found my answer unsatisfactory, and he was right. It was a vague answer intended to avoid the question, full of panic, like the answers I give students when we happen to have "serious" conversations on my territory. Having waited and hoped so long for these conversations, I freak out when they happen, I lose my ability to reason. So I end up sidestepping them.

That day, Azdi was in overwhelmingly good physical and mental shape, calm, concentrated, full of disinterested kindness. I laughed, not always understanding him, with his clever play on words. As I dictated, I compared my own hysterical scribbblings in the corner of a white sheet of paper to his round, wholesome writing, settled as comfortably on the lines as his long hands on the table when he stretched them out, giving himself more time to answer a question. I would not let his kindly look seek out my bloodshot, sleepless eyes. For I was – as I am today – extremely, deliberately tired: it was a little 'trick' I had discovered.

The 'trick' works like this: first, I do what I can to exhaust myself. Then I look for the kids. Often I unearth them – but rarely all of them at once: and, when it does happen, I feel gripped in their presence with an inner silence like the one that invades you before a concert. I rarely see them for more than an hour, an hour and a half at the most. I watch them and, more than anything, I listen to them. I then drag myself home, I lie down; and just as I am about to fall asleep, I hear their voices, voices that I can manipulate like a film director using the voices of his actors: I make them talk, my little

performers, have them repeat sentences they said, or pronounce things they imagine. And sometimes, it's hallucinating, in this half-sleep, they almost speak about themselves, they tell me things in their own way – with words that I don't think I know – divine things ("Why didn't you come to Adrien's last night?... We longed for you so much...")

I've tamed them a little. They've ended up getting used to my "squid face" after bumping into me (through chance meetings that take entire nights to concoct) wherever they get together. They've scrounged cash, CDs, cassettes, cigarettes, chewing gum, from me. They usually make fun of whoever is emptying my pockets at the time, branding him a sponge, and throwing me a look or a word, sometimes even a kind gesture for "poor old Barbera". But it's all just an act to cover up for the gang. As if I could forget that whoever is scrounging cash from me today was displaying his honesty, his respect, his sympathy, the day before. The music that I'm accumulating nowadays is only a pretext to talk to them, or to see them later on: "Oh, by the way, I just bought the soundtrack of *Taxi II*... Didn't you tell me you wanted it?... I'll sell it to you for 50 francs. That's a fair price, isn't it? Because, you see, it really disappointed me, compared to the film..."

I don't mind them taking advantage of me (I must admit that I always have the vague feeling that, in the end, I would be taking advantage of them, if I'm not doing so already). But what I have a lot harder time with is their conscious, gratuitous cruelty towards someone that they can clearly see has some affection for them. Take for example the time when Ismael and Nourdine told me in the most tragic tones that Azdi and Fabien had been stopped by the police the day before, on Refuge Square. They gave me a detailed description of the chase along cinder trails, the things said by the two cops or by Azdi when he tried to tear his blue shirt away from the metal fence that surrounds the site. I swallowed it hook, line and sinker, and still believed it until Ismael and Nourdine – pulling me back by my sleeve as I set out to see Mariama – told me, bursting with laughter, that they really got me on that one.

Laura just called. We were able – now isn't this something? – to speak only about "business" over the phone, about the pizzeria, workplaces, the philosophy degree. What hurts me is not so much the business tone she adopts, but how awkward she is in maintaining it, the poignant questionmarks that distort her voice. It feels like a dagger blow when she refrains from replying "me too" to my statement that I miss her. As if she were simulating detachment to break me up, to force me to shatter this ignominious status quo.

I do miss her. The fact that she is only 20 could be a buffer between my peers and myself. Laura would still, for example, feel at home in a nightclub full of children and adolescents (who have indulgent fathers and powerless alcoholic mothers like Mariama). I, especially because I'm unattached, would stick out like a sore thumb. But, of course, she hates nightclubs.

Prado beach, my friends' favourite, is too crowded for her. Not to mention that she is allergic to the sun (a fact I previously ignored). And she is resolutely impervious to the 'collective charm' of the young Marseillais' chat. Laura believes she "speaks a correct French 99% of the time" (the 1% is terribly moving, this skinny "1", rebelling against the pot-bellied advances of the "99"). She corrects my use of the intransitive verb. She thinks she handles the language well because she knows a great number of words which she combines in the same way you would bring together a large group of people.

Totally 'screwy', these educated people. Let them go fuck the dead. Buuuggggger them all! Neither Proust nor the Marseillais adolescents claim that they express themselves 'correctly': to write or speak well doesn't mean a thing to them. They are freed from their duty to the French language, these 'French duties' that most of us still feel bound by, well after we leave school. Proust and my young counterparts are bad students: the former imposes his own system of values on everyday language, excluding certain so-called elegant turns of phrase while promoting others that would raise Laura's eyebrows if she read them anywhere but in a book – say, for example, in a newspaper. She would be right to want to correct the journalist, bring back into the fold someone who strayed despite himself. As long as one hasn't a style, one has obligations to others' usage of language.

Yet you can only be rid of a style after a pitched battle. You can struggle alone, like Proust did. Or, like my younger counterparts, you can blow up the 'correct way to talk' with little terrorist actions, taking a fistful of words hostage and deforming their definitions, raping dictionaries and grammar books, and forcing upon us new terms, gleaming and stinking within the sanctuary of the French language.

Sometimes, in quieter moments, I tell myself that I consider my little Marseillais to be virtuoso singers. When Azdi arrived, the golden sound of a harpsichord score floated up to us on a hot cloud. It intertwined with the registers of Little Brother's voice which, in itself, has certain harpsichord accents: in his speech there is not a moment of silence, no pauses. Nothing but life, a life inflated

with formidable skill by words that are not well chosen but well thrown out – hitting the very heart of where it hurts or where it delights. You might choose them well, but you'd better have something to say.

But for *them* it's not what you say that counts. It's the cumulative effect. They must prove that they can say something, anything. My little Scheherazades must prove themselves with their vulgar and scintillating chat. In contrast to their magnificent exercises in style, I'm bored to tears by the most apposite and flowery diction, the richest vocabularies. What's the point in churning out a shiny, meticulous choice without rhythm, extracted from the thickness of a dictionary? What's the point in having all the words in the world at your disposal, if you have no idea about syntax? It's syntax that I like most in speech, syntax that's aware of its own existence, that doesn't shirk at any form of gymnastics or violence to elude the rules of expression that have been forced upon us. Combination. Connivance. A syntax with a strong identity doesn't just link words together: it gives an identity to all who use them, it links you properly to a group. And, if you are the sole user, it cuts you off from the rest of the world – in which case, you are in full connivance with yourself.

So I don't want to hear that not everyone has the good fortune to be born in Marseille, to grow up here, or to have the courage to lock himself away to write books. It's just too bad for those who cannot grab their good fortune, or take their courage into their own two hands. It's too bad for those who don't want to learn.

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