

# Every morning, as the market traders

set out their vegetables on stalls in the freshly-washed square. I pick my place on the cafe terrace. In summer I choose a spot under the green shade of the plane trees; in winter I sit where the first ray of sunshine falls, right against the wall. Moments later the owner, a friend of mine, brings me my coffee and the local paper.

I never liked school. Today, at more than forty years old, things are no different. I love life. I love the street with its particular smells, the clear morning voices of the traders round me as they prepare their stalls, the groomed, perfumed women who come to buy their packets of cigarettes looking even more beautiful than the day before and who sometimes smile at me. I feel so free that each day I believe I'm about to fall in love. In fact, I have been in love with the street and with all its women since the day I was born.

I always open my paper at the same page, to be precise at the football section. Politics bores me to death. Perhaps I glance at the column of gruesome murders. But here football means Olympique de Marseille and you won't find a single man who doesn't turn first to the OM news. Meantime women, armed with colour magazines, sit down nearby and cross their marvellous golden legs.

Even totally engrossed in the day's OM reports, which heaven knows are vital, one eye always wanders over those legs. This first great pleasure of the morning is a complete sensual experience: without a pair of legs close by, the sports page wouldn't be the same. I sip my coffee. The act allows me to tilt my head and better study today's beauty in her peerless splendour. If you've never known such moments you haven't lived. Of course, at the same time I store away all the club developments I find on the page: the captain's knee injury, the latest transfers, suspensions, a supporter's revolt against the way Marseille has once more been victimised. Perhaps it's that spirit of revolt I like most about my team. If I had to define Marseille

in one phrase it would be an air of revolt. As I get deeper into the newspaper, in this little Provençal square redolent of tomatoes, peaches and Opium, I rework all the revolt of my childhood, my horror of school – and my passion for hills, the sea, light and wind.

Every Thursday I went on foot to training sessions, my yellow jersey and my blue shorts folded in my bag around the yellow and blue socks and studded boots. To reach Stade Mallet you had to skirt a field of cabbages and cross vast meadows with slumbering ruset cows. I recall those winter afternoons spent chasing around happily in the warm sunshine to our childish shouts. I first played at centre half and then on the right wing. Sundays, bursting with pride, we set out in our little team bus as the Chicks, then the Infants, to take on all of the neighbourhood teams in the city: Merlan, Valentine, Estaque, Pointe Rouge. I remember the stadium with its drainage channels at Treize Coins where we kids screamed with happiness while thumping a muddy ball around. All the glory of Marseille was there, a leaden sun framing our frantic play.

That's how I got to know my town so well, aged ten to thirteen, criss-crossing it in all directions, Sunday by Sunday, with a queasy stomach and a wild heart. On the field, under Marseille's sparkling light, my eyes already weakened by too much reading still saw every football, and my legs flew.

Until I reached the junior team my legs matched my eyes, but then the ball started to move too quickly for me. The coach took pity on me, selecting me to play against weak teams or in friendlies.

One day I didn't go to Stade Mallet. That Sunday I went to the cinema.

Years pass. The sun has blanched the bones of this town, each summer's mistral has dried out the hills and, for forty years now, I've walked the streets. I cross neighbourhoods where washing jangles in the sky, I follow boulevards, I find myself in squares, all under that brilliant sky and beside a sea where children shout, run and lunge at footballs. You see them in anonymous northern landscapes between the white stripes of housing schemes whose grass never has the chance to grow except in yellow corners; in the little squares of cosy suburbs between a green fountain and a church porch; behind huge cast-iron port gates, in the shadow of boats bound for Tunis or Corsica; in an abandoned stadium beside the motorway. Children everywhere, kicking and shouting just as I did up to age thirteen, with new or punctured balls, with cartons, hard knots of cloth, dried poppy heads, plane-tree leaves brought by the wind. From each school yard, from each field behind school walls, the same

cries. The city of Marseille resounds from its furthest hypermarket car park to the last fishing boats of Callelonque with one huge buzz fed by ten thousand different sources; grown men and children between them relive the world's craziest matches until all hours of the night. Marseille is an incandescent slice of Brazil. Its men are children.

For six years now I have been visiting Baumettes prison, outside the city between Mazargues and La Grèce. Together with ten or so inmates we sit in a small, barred room and write about our dreams, our fears and the loves we should have had. I say we because, as the seasons go by, I am becoming one of them. The prison is slowly getting to me, living in me. I feel I will never escape this forbidden city perched on the white rocks of the hills under a surreal light. Often, while the ten men write, bent in pain over their memories, or pour a little water over a teaspoonful of chickory in plastic cups, I go to the window and press my forehead against the bars. The exercise yard is just below, inset beside crude buildings and watch towers.

Summer and winter, under this cruel light, the same men kick a ball around to forget their fate. Their bare chests are exposed to sun, wind and rain. Their shaven heads, blackened by the mistral, carry long white scars – frightening lines of paria destiny. Childish words come from brutish voices. The naive and lovely words one hears in school.

Prison shelters a race of dangerous, wounded children. Each goal scored sings out like an escape. From their watchtowers, guards listen stone-faced to the war-cries bouncing off walls. These ageless beings are transfixed by their fatherland. I imagine that at that very moment thousands of lost souls make identical shouts as they kick footballs in the prisons of Tetouan, Cadiz, Valladolid and the Île de Ré. Prisoners and professional footballers share the ritual of transfer travel. The latter go from one club to another for millions, the former from one detention centre to another their feet in chains and their hands cuffed. In luxury planes or prison vans both dream of green turf and white leather. A mysterious complicity binds them in vocal friendship. Footballers love hoodlums.

I've been to many big matches at many different grounds. I've never felt such magnetic tension as builds up in this Marseille prison the day of a cup final. Armoured doors and reinforced steel barriers are like paper; the smallest reffing error could ignite this gas-works where uniformed men pray for victory. From kick-off, 2,500 inmates and several hundred guards hold their breath.

Catastrophe is imminent in each corridor and passage. Seagulls flap swiftly away from this witches' cauldron, heading plaintively for the Iles de Frioul and the Planier lighthouse. Not far away at the Stade Vélodrome a demented ballet is played out before 60,000 hallucinated fans, eyes popping from their heads. Marseille, land of revolt. "Tonight we're burning you alive."

I don't really know whether I would have liked football if I'd grown up in another town. I love it here because it is the opposite of reason, the obverse of logic. It's like being love-struck, grabbed and swung into blissful oblivion. Running for your first date, you can't recognise your own face in the mirror, your own body, nor even the colour of your hair. Your mind is elsewhere, words don't make any sense. Here, each home match is a first date drawing sleep-walkers from the four corners of Marseille.

Men stand upright on a little ball, one falling amongst millions of others. Nobody knows when they started to fall or when they will stop. They have no idea of that ball's particular destiny. Sitting, standing, heads ascant, crossing fields of maize or lost in city depths, they look up to the sky, look at their hands growing old before them while the waters of melancholy rise around them. When a ball passes close by an incomprehensible fever grips their hearts. They start running and screaming behind it. They forget all their loneliness. This ball, bouncing along tarmac boulevards, over straggling wasteland or in narrow prison courtyards, is theirs. Its trajectories, its whims, its floppiness, its laser-like form all belong to them. And when it's all over, the extraordinary voyage of this little leather ball into the skies and stars will always be worth more than all the gold in the world for those who have long forgotten that they were once children.

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