ANNE MARSELLA
Brigitte and
her mother's broom

I met Brigitte Arrighi in 1987 in Aix-en-Provence

where I was then living. Brigitte was getting her masters in American literature at the university in Aix and I had just been hired by the French Ministry of Education to be an assistant high school teacher in a rough neighbourhood of Marseille, Brigitte's city. Our friendship was made like a rash purchase, but neither of us had a regret, even if the fit was not quite right.

I was shy, introverted, spoke halting French while Brigitte loved nothing more than to light up a room, or, more precisely, the men in a room, with her golden sheen and shapely body. She had a springy laugh she bounced around her own jokes and a mane of blond hair that stood out in stiff waves extending the electric current of her temperament. She was also pungent. Like Louis XIV, she did not so much bathe as change her clothes and perfume. She doused herself with Christian Dior's Poison and her mother took care of her laundry.

I think what Brigitte liked most about me was my willingness to submit to her benevolent rule while I, in turn, benefited from the comforts of her kingdom. She made three things clear from the get go: first, that the French government had sent me, an American lamb, on a mission into one of Marseille's most dangerous hoods – the *quartier nord* – but that I must not be afraid; secondly, that I would spend every Monday night at her family's flat in Marseille to avoid an extra commute; and thirdly that she would call me only by my last name, Marsella.

Brigitte was Corsican and proudly distinguished herself as such, particularly when it she felt it necessary to deride the French for

bad behaviour. She loved the accoutrements of the femme fatale – the make-up, the tight-fitting clothes, and the pill which she treated as a cause and distributed to her girlfriends for free, getting her stash from a pharmacist cousin – but displayed a masculine modesty around feelings and emotions. You could talk to Brigitte about love only in terms of conquest; yet any mention of the attendant emotions made her mute, as if sworn by *omerta* never to speak of the heart's messy underworld. She would wave her hand and say "It's only a game, Marsella, and you have no idea how to play it. Listen to me: men are easy prey. They are fools. A short skirt and boots is all it takes."

I listened carefully, but more for new bits of vocabulary to add to my emergent French lexicon. From Brigitte I learned *toxicomane* (she had had a boyfriend in Rome who was one), *magouille* (she was having an affair with the mayor of her village in Corsica, *un vrai magouilleur*) and *sexy folie*, an adjective she used to refer to the bling-bling bait a woman might use to get a fool into bed.

Every Monday I would meet her at Castellane metro station around five pm and from there we would walk to her family's flat, stopping to buy bread along the way. Brigitte took small steps and advanced slowly; she would grip my arm and pull me toward her so that I joined her little scent cloud of overly ripe fruit and sweat. She would talk the whole way, pecking her free hand at her mouth for emphasis, in the Italian manner. Whenever I ventured to ask her what she was reading, hoping we could talk about books rather than Etam's *sexy-folie* knickers, she took my question as an invitation to ponder not on books but on her propensity to accumulate degrees:

"What I can't understand about myself, Marsella, is why I'm so smart. I'm brilliant at studies, and with such little effort. But it has no meaning for me, it's just an exercise, a game I have mastered. I have a stack of diplomas and none of them means anything."

"Well, what do you want to do in life?"

"I'm not worried, I have my connections. The thing is, Marsella, I have to make sure the mayor gets re-elected."

"Do you think he will ever leave his wife?"

"Don't be an idiot! He must not leave his wife, even if she is as ugly as a shit and only sleeps with him every time a pope dies. I don't want him mooning over me and falling more in love than necessary. Already he is a pain in the ass enough. But he must be re-elected so he can get me the job he has promised me. It's all about who you sleep with, Marsella."

Brigitte's unhealthy habits – her morbid fascination with corruption, her dubious sexual politics, her obsession with shopping, and her fits of bulimia (the bread she bought never made it to the house) – made me ill at ease, yet I needed a friend and one so generous and warm was hard to come by. I got used to her smell, I applauded her bravado, I told myself that she was great fun, even if her circle of interests never quite intersected my own.

The Arrighi flat was an international-style affair designed for efficiency; it was kept impeccably neat and nothing round or soft disrupted its purpose. There was a living room no-one ever seemed to set foot in, a kitchen that opened onto an informal dining room where the family congregated, and three bedrooms, including the one I shared with Brigitte on Monday nights. When we reached the flat Madame Arrighi would emerge from the kitchen in a housedress and apron, holding her broom. "*Bonjour, Marsella, comment ça va?*" Brigitte had instructed her mother to call me by my surname.

Madame was blond like her daughter, but there the family resemblance stopped. Whereas Brigitte had a square forehead and a wide, east-to-west face, her mother's visage pointed north-to-south and called its features into a sterner line of action. Madame's face might have been solemn, but her eyes twinkled with a muffled mischief and her mouth clamped shut as if to choke back a laugh that burdened her. She was otherwise contained and calm, a housewife ruling her roost. She seldom spoke but when she did it was with a thick Corsican accent.

Weekday dinners chez Arrighi were without fuss, the food was simple to the point of being forgettable and the cheese platter passed after the main course offered an assortment of pasteurised rounds from the grocery store. A bowl of fruit stood in for desert. But if the food was bland, my friend was not. The plain fare offered the sober backdrop for something more momentous, and it was Brigitte's role to provide the sparks and spectacle. Tantrums were her specialty. They could be triggered by her mother taking away the salad bowl too soon, or passing the cheese platter to the right rather than the left. The reasons never made sense; the emotion contained the meaning.

I was a vegetarian back then and Brigitte had given her mother strict orders not to serve meat on Monday nights; I had told her this was entirely unnecessary, but she insisted. Then one night Madame brought a beef and carrot stew to the table. The aroma of the dish had filled the place for some time; even in Brigitte's room at

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the far end of the apartment, where we had convened before dinner to sift through *Marie-Claire*, I could smell the rich, meaty stew on the stove. It's hard to imagine Brigitte did not catch a whiff; I tend to think she knew what her mother had simmering, but was saving her blast for the table.

"What? What the fuck is this? Why did you cook meat on a Marsella night? There's Marsella, right? You see her? She's a vegetarian, imbecile! That means she can't eat this disgusting tub of lard you made. Didn't I fucking tell you not to serve meat when she eats here? Look at this shit you made! Is it to make us vomit? Is it to make us spend the next 24 hours in the shit hole, retching? Go to hell!"

Her right arm shot up with each abuse, releasing an extra charge of her odorous steam. Perspiration pearled at her temples. There was a moment when I was afraid she would slap her mother. But Madame Arrighi sat impassibly still throughout her daughter's tyranny, occasionally mumbling something in her defence, but with neither conviction nor remorse. Then she delicately spooned up a serving and set it on her plate.

"And you're eating it? You're eating that shit? Well, it's exactly what you deserve, you idiot woman. The cholera! Die! Die!"

Then Brigitte pushed back her chair. It fell over backward and as she made for the kitchen she tripped on its legs. A roar and a whore came out of her mouth: "*Putain! Ces putains de chaises de merde!*" It took a jig to free her feet, and now, balance regained, she directed her fury at the cupboards, slamming them shut after sneering into their depths, cursing her mother for the food that was and was not there; nothing was right in that blasted kitchen, again, as always and blasted mother was to blame.

Back at the table, Brigitte's brother shovelled down his food, muttered *eh ho!* into his plate, and excused himself to study. I don't remember her father being there that night; he was often out. Madame Arrighi had finished her serving of stew and now, as a peace offering, gently pushed the cheese platter toward me from which I sliced a wedge of rubbery camembert. The cheese, still chilled from the refrigerator, tasted as bland as a communion wafer, but I was grateful for the ritual. Somehow it eased my mortification.

When Brigitte finally returned to the table, she held a six-pack of *fromage blanc* and proceeded to empty the little cups at record speed. She grew increasingly preoccupied with her spoon, scraping it against the cup to get every last bit of the creamy cheese and she paid us no attention as we cleared the table. Her storm had passed and now her belly was content; I imagined her all blanched inside, for it struck me that she only ate things that were white: bread and *fromage blanc*. She never touched her mother's food.

I offered to do the washing up but as always Madame Arrighi shooed me away from the sink with her broom. She began sweeping around and under the table; she kept a spotless house. She

nudged her broom against Brigitte's feet. "*Putain!*" Madame Arrighi swept around Brigitte's chair, then nudged again. "*Qu'est-ce qu'elle est bête!*" It took one more push with the broom to get Brigitte out of her chair. Madame Arrighi then made a series of quick strikes at her daughter's heels, working her broom like a hockey stick. Brigitte shrieked and tried to grab the broom away. Her mother turned, clutching her sweeping stick, while Brigitte tickled her ribs, laughing hysterically. "*T'es folle! Toi et ton putain de balai!*" The battle for the broom continued amid peels of laughter and a gentle scuffle that displaced the playing field to the kitchen, where the energy now felt rippled as if there were streamers hanging from the ceiling. More shrieks. More banter. But the laughing was all Brigitte's; Madame Arrighi held hers in though she brayed like a lamb when tickled at the ribs. She never let go of the broom.

I was witness to such scenes repeatedly throughout that year and assume they didn't just occur on Monday nights; they must have been necessary to be so frequent and violent. They must have served some purpose. Still, I could not understand why Madame Arrighi tolerated her daughter swearing at her as if she were gutter trash. I could not understand how they kissed and tickled so quickly after the revolt. I was puzzled then and still am now. Brigitte and her mother could not have been more different on the face of it and yet they formed a tight conspiracy. At the time it seemed Brigitte was the unlawful one, but I've come to wonder about Madame, the laugh she never let out and the umbilical hold she had on her daughter. I have my suspicions. Brigitte's virulence was shocking to witness, but her mother's cool troubled me more. I sensed that no matter the outflow of invective, Brigitte did not stand a chance of loosening her mother's grip. Her atrocious behaviour would always be surpassed by her mother's quiet, terrible love and surely, deep down, Brigitte could not have accepted anything less.

I returned to the US for a year when the assistantship ended but eventually came back to Paris to pursue graduate studies. I lost touch with Brigitte due to a falling out we had (it seemed she had lots of these), but as one of my best friends had married her brother I continued to get bits and pieces of her news. I heard she lived in Brussels for a time, and that she had an international set of friends, before moving to Ajaccio for a job in publishing or something of that sort. Then, unexpectedly, came the bad news. Brigitte had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She was in her early thirties and I didn't doubt she would pull through. She would because she had the temper, the fire, the wild hair, the exuberance and the gall to tell the

disease to fuck off. Brigitte moved back in with her mother to their mountain village home but drove into Ajaccio for her treatment. It did not go well. The cancer spread like wildfire. In the last months she put her mother through hell, fought her till the end, just as she struggled against the malady. I can almost imagine the scenes Brigitte must have made, having been privy to so many, triggered by trifles like meat on a Marsella night or chick peas in corn salad; probably these final tantrums were spurred by equally benign occurrences, though the stakes had risen considerably along with the anger that had to be expelled for my old friend to find any relief at all. Yet in my mental picture I can't, though I wish I could, imagine a broom anywhere. A broom to tidy the mess, to pick up the pieces. Nor do I hear the laughter.

The poet Emily Dickinson might have measured every grief she met but she had never known the suffering of a mother losing a child. Many say there is none worse and I doubt anyone has the means to measure it or if they did, that it could possibly help the bereaved. I often think of Madame Arrighi, though I have not seen or heard from her since that year she set up a cot for me every Monday night. I remember sitting down to the task of writing a letter of condolence. It felt awkward, but I tried to write from the heart by recalling the year Brigitte was good to me and called me by my last name, and how her spirit had shored me up. I hope I wrote a letter that Madame Arrighi might have appreciated in her sorrow. However, I did something that could have left her puzzled. I signed the letter with my first name: I should have signed it Marsella.

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