

Claire Barbetti

SUITE MARSEILLAISE

PUNCHES, PIROUETTES

Saute. I learned to jump quick in Marseilles. Never quick enough, though, going to a public school, Mazarques Beauchêne, two miles from the sea, where half the students were of gypsy origin and lived in trailers or make-shift squats in a lot by the soccer stadium. At age eleven, I learned French à la Marseillaise from scratch, peppered with expletives: *Va te faire...* American clothing, American rock-music was coveted and cool, but those French kids knew a dumb American when they saw one. Wearing my powder-blue leotard beneath my pink sweater and embroidered jeans, washing my hair everyday, the naïveté was as thick as the lenses of my owl-round glasses. A different girl—Céline, Sandrine, Sonya, Carine—made a pet of me every week, only to laugh at my accent and insufficient grasp of feminine/ masculine articles the next, whispering fast phrases at me over my shoulder that they knew my anglo-brain could not deftly translate. *Salut!* I'd say with enthusiasm, and Frederick slapped my face so hard that my glasses hit the concrete. *Ne dit pas "Salop!" Méchante fille!* Shook his finger at me.

No, not *Oui*. *Wwwhei(-eu)*.

The day after the gypsy boy Aemile knocked my tooth out because I kicked him for laughing at me, I began rehearsal at ballet for the year's final performance. My classmates were older than me, their long wavy hair tied back, their breasts rounding, swelling from the top of their leotards, the hair thick and dark under their arms. They talked about boys; I only dreamed. Over the barre I stretched my arms and legs. They stretched their *jambes et bras* with a sure grace, a womanly *savoir faire*, the loose strands of sweaty hair falling from their chignons and trailing down to touch their posed limbs. Shameless and sexy. We worked on a few separate pieces from the *Nutcracker Suite*, but the final dance, the show-stopper—the *Can-Can*—I was to sit out. That night I dreamed that Frederick unbuttoned my shirt and touched me there...and there... and kissed me, tongue and all.

DANCING DAY

All year my teacher, Monsieur B., who was Greek and hefty, offered to take me on various trips—to Switzerland, to Greece, Rome—with his family. We often walked together in the schoolyard at recess and talked: he told me about classical music and poetry, and I would tell him of the Greek myths that I knew, my bed-time stories for years. He organized school trips to films: *Don Giovanni* shocked and excited my eleven-year-old mind as the title character caressed and slapped the naked behind of a woman while he conversed lightly with his companion. I was like a daughter to him, he said more than once, and that was very precious because the Greeks so prize their daughters. His only child was a small son, age eight, sickly and scrawny, but scrappy as hell.

In the small courtyard garden of the house in which we lived for the year that we resided in Marseille, I ate Thé biscuits and Nutella on baguettes in the afternoons for *gouthé*. The snails in the garden were enormous; they foamed and frothed as they ambiguously mated, conjured an ooze that surrounded them in their own private cloud. Poking with sticks to separate them, I fantasized about the proposed journeys. Skiing in Switzerland! My friends at home would be *soooo* jealous. Athens! Pompeii! My father always forbade it, declined. I thought because of money.

During the last week of school, the oldest two grades took a trip to the confectionery and winery. We watched as sugary syrup bubbled and cooled and poured through the machines that made it the candy famous for its succinct shape. The even stripes on its surface made dozens of minute mobius strips that our tongues and fingers could only trace in cooperation. Marveling at their fit in our mouths, we bought tins and tins of them. The winery was boring. What had we to do with fermentation and bottling? We sampled astringent and bitter sips from little paper cups and bought bottles to bring home to our parents. We preferred of course the candies: the patterned lines dissolved and broke with the working of our tongues, teeth, and saliva.

Le Jour de Danse was the last day of school. A gypsy circle dance: young boys and girls, barefoot, twisting, clapping, twirling about. The parents were proud and avidly clapped as we bowed and curtsied. Amid the shouts and praise, I ran to fetch my Adidas tennis shoes I had left inside the classroom. And there was Monsieur B., sitting alone, alone on a chair by the window, not at

his desk, the blinds drawn, waiting to wish me farewell on my journey back to the States. Iphigenia's neck was bared to the blade to give wind back to the sails; in the thin lines of light, mine only received a lingering touch and wet kiss. But I shrunk inside as if severed, retracted into my shell, confused and squirming, infused.

DE L'EAU

Provence is wet. Never mind the arid vineyards, the dry soil where I found brown swirled shells of snails lustering every few feet. Or the chalky ruins of Les Baux built into a cliff holding court over plains drowsed in unhindered light. Or the dusty silence at St. Remy where shafts of light spread through the monastery that was an asylum once. The wheat fields are still that unravished gold advancing from an unbearable sky.

I walked in the city of fountains. In Aix, art infuses the air with mist. Jets of water cluster and spurt from vessels of undraped maidens, fingertips of chiseled youths, mouths and penises of cherubs, mouths of dolphins, fish, gargoyles, dogs. Water spills from basins onto the wide boulevard, runs in streams down tight alleyways, pooling in corners, curbs, gutters. Cold water for the taking, running over my hands, washing away the powdered sugar from callissons d'aix and tarts.

Rivers run past old paper mills. Dense networks of streams gurgle from the ground and feed the woods that conceal the crumbling ruins of the Abbé St. Bernard. They fill reservoirs. A central vein in the land, the Rhône is sanctified by a view from the elevated grounds of Chateau-des-Papes. There I saw that half-bridge, the Pont d'Avignon, stop abruptly a third of the way across the river. The drop into the river is sharp and sheer.

The sea is never far. The sea that spits up faceted, glistening globs, the spore and spawn of jellyfish on the shores. I thought they were diamonds and I picked one up, startled to feel the ooze quiver in my hand. Clams, fish, *le vrai bouillabaisse* steaming in cafés and poissoneries is the smell of Marseilles. Close to the Vieux Port, Notre Dame de la Gard towers above the Mediterranean, extending her beneficence and light to the journeys of sailors and the commerce of fishermen, to the depths of the blue itself. Inside the church, I gazed up: suspended from the ceiling, hundreds of intricate model ships spin slowly, gleaming in the ceremonial light that flicks like the waves outside.

MARBLES

—for Will

L'Ecole Mazarques Beauchêne, Marseilles

At recess, crouching in our jeans, we played marbles. Not in circles delineated by chalk, but on the molded, toothed covers to sewer-holes. Core of these iron disks: the object of the game. Intermittent projections, little obstructions increased the challenge, made the game unpredictable. It wasn't merely a test of aim; it became *un jeu de chance* of chaotic infinitudes, jagged radii, not knowing if the fingernail's flick would make the marble hit this lip or that, land in this hollow or that. In the end, I think the gaming was always determined by an omnipotent desire: as foreigners, we had much more to lose and much more to gain. To gain these colored atoms of glass that we'd never seen before in the States: *Araignées*, spidery, swirly arms of yellow or orange within the clear arc. *Porcelaines*, *Galaxies*, bright planets confettied across black, and the pure-breeds: *les Sangs*, ruby; the leaf-green *Emerauds*; the veritable *Ciels*, sea-blue. *Stroomphfs*. Size was worth more, too—better to dare and win a Jupiter than an Earth or Mars. When a marble reached the impression at the center (it always nestled there neatly, as if the grate had been made for it), surprise overwhelmed us, and victory, at the unprecedented certainty that our globes could trounce other globes and for a moment reign at the circle's navel. Our coup: my brother and I, starting with 10, ended the school year with over 300 apiece. But as we left for the States, they remained: in salvaged cookie tins, on a shelf in the toyroom, in the house on Rue Jules Siegfried, Marseilles, France.

YOU WILL BE

I wanted to see bodies in the catacombs. Tourist visitations to churches in Provence encountered volutes and spirals, gold-filigreed casings for relics, vaulted ceilings. Churches like castles, colorful, splashed with icons, reliefs, stained glass. St. Victor was the difference, boring block, a rough square stone overlooking the Vieux Port in Marseilles. 11th century, practically primitive. Down its dark passages, following my mother and father, my mind filled with pictures from books of thin skeletons, shrouded, stacked in small rectangles, rows of martyrs, skins dried in death papering their bones. Close walls opened into the votive candlelight and—nothing: only empty compartments carved into the stone, tombs taken of their proof. *Where are the bones and skulls, the bodies?* I asked; father replied, *Archaeologists took them away to study, the Church recovered them; they're in Her vaults now.*

Tentative love the color of the delicate pale-green on stalks of leeks, uncooked. Laurent and I convened in the cove of green, vegetable, vine, smell of damp dirt after playing chase. *I like you* and *me you*—but only brushings, careful dustings. First kiss, last chance. His lips were the color of my nipples, but late day shadow preempted showing, the garden's dark scared us from the kiss. Ran away, laughing, threw our bodies back into declining light: orange, gold, red. Older when I arrived that year in Marseilles, age 10; younger upon leaving.

Bones beginning inside me since the wine-soaked evening before, I saw my skeletons in Rome with you, 15 years later. At the chapel of the Capuchins even the chandeliers were made of bones. Ascetic corpses in monastic dress standing guard over clavicles, shins, tiny bones of the wrist shaped into flowers, leaves, stars, clocks. Calcified rosettes wreathed around death's conception. And from crypt to crypt on successive slabs set into the floors of earth brought from the Holy Land, these words: *That Which You Are, We Once Were; That Which We Are, You Will Be.*

HOUSE THAT WASN'T HERS

On Wednesdays, when we were home from school, my father would work in his third-floor study that had no staircase to it. It was accessible only by a ladder precariously balanced on the top step of the stairs to the second floor. He'd pull the ladder up with him for safety's sake. Often I'd draw on those afternoons, sketches of my dream houses on thick pads of manila paper, instinctually knowing to render windows as flat rectangular boxes and doors as brief vectored lines, arcs indicating the direction they closed. The house I most remember was a monstrosity, patterned after a tortoise shell: an immense oval at the center, squares of rooms a peripheral mosaic. My mother sat hugely pregnant with twin girls in her wooden rocking chair against a red tie-cushion, stitching costumes for my recital, sipping her daily glass of red wine. Day after day, listening to Mozart's *Requiem* on record, sure she'd die that year in labor unsettled in this foreign house that wasn't hers.

Unwieldy, the oval was a ballroom larger than any of the flanking rooms put together. Dancing and parties, dreams of silk gowns, powders and perfumes, crowds of women with elongated jeweled necks, slippered feet as embroidered as Pushkin's dainty sea-sprayed arches and insteps, gentlemen outstretching suited arms, all posed, turning over and over, slipping, stepping glossily from pages of the *Vogue* I'd pore over. The other rooms boasted a library, a theatre, dining rooms, sauna and pool, greenhouse, and plush guestrooms, all interconnected, and my guests running from room to room weaving their scandals as they pleased around the disproportionate navel of a stylized dance.