



THE HOMELESS OF PROVENCE

THIS little sullen flower, folded in on herself, tight as a bud, sat on the ground, a step or two away from several stalls at the weekly *marché* in Salernes, known as the terra cotta tile capital of all of Provence. Generally, the town seems prosperous enough. Some tile factories have failed, but, as in any industry, businesses come and go. And the number of tile manufacturers and vendors seems to hover at around 35 – not bad for a town of about 3200 souls sitting on just upwards of 15 square miles of Provençal farm land, cornering a light industry in one of the most highly developed countries in the world. There are so many terra

cotta factories here, because, after all, the *terra* in these parts is mainly the red clay characteristic of the product.

This day, like any *marché* in summer, especially, the marketplace bustles. At 9am, every convenient parking lot is full, as are all the legal spaces in the streets, plus all the illegal ones that pass in common practice. There are three major produce stalls, and two organic farm stands, plus a small *producteur* stall, meaning the meager selection was grown by the seller. It's the latter that has the best looking items.

What I mainly buy from her this morning I turn into today's lunch, a ragout of eggplant, tomatoes, giant elon-

gated shallots of the sort we never see in the United States, very fresh garlic, with thick pliant purplish skin, rather than a dry whitish, papery, husk, *picholines denoyautés nature*, that is, green olives, pitted and cured (the "nature" means they have not been marinated or flavored with herbs or garlic), pine nuts, organic mushrooms (*champignons de crème*, we know them as "cremini"), a bright red bell pepper, a good cup of local olive oil (from the mill in Aups) and a dollop each of wine vinegar, white wine, and *armagnac*, which gets flamed off, while flavoring the sauce with capers, Tunisian spices, two healthy spoonfuls of home-made *harissa*, and a mess of

Provençal thyme. It smelled of the air in the marketplace, and tasted a lot better.

In short, abundance. The papers complain that the economy is bad. Unemployment is twice as bad as the United States, the electrical and gas workers have taken one action, and are threatening more, the government has taken a political drubbing in the recent bye elections for the EU Parliament, and, indeed, there is an item, in the local daily, about the problem of the homeless, but in the cities. Everywhere else, there is more food than one can eat. No one suffers. Moreover it's summer.

Even as the summer begins here, another story appears in the local paper anticipating difficulties for some during the fall “*pour la rentrée*” (the return, or perhaps that should be capitalized, The Return – that time of year the middle class knows like Christmas, but which the French have equally institutionalized). We merely call it “back-to-school,” a period with the cultural authenticity of Father's Day, an excuse for another run of promotions and sales.

In France, since 1938 and the Presidency of Léon Blum, mandatory vacations for all have become part of French law, and the great mid-summer exodus of all French citizens from the cities to the south and all the seacoasts became a tradition. The Return, after the long sultry indolent perpetual national traffic jam, causes one of the top ten industrial economies to convulse back into gear.

Apparently this summer, in the south, as many as half the university students looking for rooms to let for the academic year face a shortage. So much a seller's market, young scholars (with an average room budget of 320 euros [about \$420 at the current real market rate of exchange]) face room rates – for studio apartments – jacked up already to as much as 500 euros, or \$650. A spokesperson for the

Office of Information for the Youth of Toulon is quoted, “Prices haven't stopped climbing. It's already hard to find an apartment if you're working, so when you're a student... They make it tough for me. The ones that don't have parental back-up to help out are really worried.” Talk about homeless.

Yet walk the streets of Nice, a city of nearly half-a-million, and there are signs that high season is starting sluggishly. Restaurants are not full, not even at lunch, not even along the sunny *Cours Saleya*, where eatery after eatery, without interruption, and each offering menus that seem to have been cloned from an *urtext* of French clichés, always have tables available. Even the most popular, their terraces bursting with bonhomie and rosé-swalling tourists, have plenty of room à *l'intérieur*. Here and there, as you prowl the *cours* – the scene with its own dynamic of the flower market stalls now in the full splendor of the panoply of estival blooms – as in the streets of the city itself and of the back alleys of the Old Town, almost iconic figures sprawl on the sidewalks.

They seem to have gone to the same school of modeling, as if for an eternal *pietà*. Almost all of them women, they sit for hours, legs bent beneath them, knees facing to one side, feet under buttocks, and their bodies turned, at once languid and contorted, so their heads hang facing the other. With a head scarf covering every strand of hair and a doleful countenance hung so low it bespeaks sorrow, pity and defeat as they stare, unseeing, at the pavement. Without stirring, they sit. At their feet, tucked beneath them, a small hand-lettered sign that reads invariably the same way. “*J'ai faim. J'ai x enfants, et un bébé...*” [I am hungry. I have x [the number varies] children and a baby...]. The pitiful tale continues, replete with misspellings, accumulating despairing details until it simply ends. Each of these

signs is lettered painstakingly, usually in lowercase print, all of them suspiciously in what appears to be the same hand. But the urban cynic, especially from another calligraphic tradition, must remind himself that French handwriting is so roundly and universally similar as to be, indeed, indistinguishable from one example to the next.

The signs are torn crudely from a seemingly uniform bit of corrugated board, worn, if not the embodiment of careworn, as if each sign came from a carton used just one too many times to move the last pathetic bits of personal belongings from place to place, from the last permanent lodging of the creature folded passively onto herself on the public way. To complete the tableau, there are perhaps a few coins before the sign, in the smaller denominations – five- and ten- and twenty-centime pieces. I'm reminded finally of an old Robert Klein comedy routine, from the days of what were then called panhandlers, wherein he discovers that the local practitioner is, in fact, a franchisee of a syndicate up and down the east coast of the U.S., and every gesture and pose is rehearsed, choreographed and, in fact, trademarked.

Shame is the inevitable product of such thoughts, and higher cerebral functions lead me to speculate that the impulse here is likely iconic and mimetic, and the sinuous pose, repeated every city block, being the proven posture for the greatest monetary return, is merely repeated by each new supplicant for its efficiency and efficacy. Of course, the disadvantage is that it ultimately induces a blindness in the would-be donor. Seen one beggar, seen them all – so undifferentiated in the end are they, and so uniform, in every sense, that they become part of the cityscape.

The sporadic foreign visitor is struck anew each time – so used are we in the United States to the flamboyant, atten-

tion-seeking individualistic style of every seller of homeless newspapers – by these silent, recessive, pathetic figures, authentic in their need, or not. One may wonder if, when leaving a coin, this releases, even briefly, the beggar from her tortuous pose. If so, it would be much as the white-face or silver-face mime practitioners of a nation-wide series of *tableaux vivant* – “living statues” we would call them, especially for their often ingeniously draped figures imitating classic or baroque or imperial statuary – assume a new pose with each donation, and hold that pose in stillness with varying degrees of success. They have nothing on the immobility of these sorrowful ladies of the street with their pitiful signs and their scant rewards.

But this is the city. Here, unemployment, which rankles so much of the middle-class caught one way or another in its grip (forced not to work, or forced to pay egregious taxes in part to support those who do not), is twice as high or higher among the *beurs* [street slang for the Muslim and other Arab immigrant populations – based on *verlan*, a lingo that inverts the letters in a word – and meaning “Arab,” though it originally applied only to the children of Arab and French parents from North Africa]. One may expect to see homeless, and there is no relief in sight as the government struggles to find solutions better than the failed *banlieues*. This expression, in the singular, “*la banlieue*,” actually, and innocently, means simply, “suburb.” But it has taken on a sinister meaning in practice in reference to the huge block housing at the outskirts of a great number of French cities, sequestered ghettos to which, and in which, respectable French citizens (that is, whites) will not travel. In some, the more notorious, even the police will not venture, except in pairs or groups, and armed.

In part, it is the *banlieues*, and their reputation, which have helped spawn a

long term resurgence of right-wing extremist political parties, and especially in the sunny, bucolic, lazy south, a significant, if refractory, part of the terrain of Vichy France in World War II. The right is mainly a party of the cities – the stronghold of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front Party. And in the truly rural parts of Provence, in my neck of the woods, where, in my little village the recent vote went poorly for him, any Le Pen graffito is quickly defaced itself to read “*Le Pénis*,” no translation necessary.

Scratch not too deeply, and some innate fear or distrust of “*les beurs*” emerges only to disappear again, muddled (so as to encompass an even larger group or people who betray even the least color to their skin) and commingled with the group that, if anything, has instilled over centuries even greater levels of watchfulness. It is the “*Roma*,” as the Gypsies call themselves, who, fanning out of India in a great diaspora in the 10th century, ended up in Eastern Europe, among other places. With their own language, culture, and xenophobic lifeways, they are another people apart, and their legendary, albeit stereotyped, modes of interacting with white races, means suspicion precedes them.

In Provence, at least, they are referred to, with what is to my ear a comical euphemism, as “Rumanians,” perhaps originally a slight parapraxis on their self-reference, perhaps an intentional, if misplaced, case of political correctness. Their westward migration from the Punjab, through Persia, took the *Roma* eventually to Europe, first to its eastern enclaves, and ultimately to Germany. From there they wandered further, nomads, in caravans and convoys, not so much homeless, but rootless. No matter.

Unlike the native Provençals, who have deeply burnished complexions, but striking, always striking, no matter how often viewed, often piercing, blue eyes, the

Roma and the *beurs*, of as different ethnicity from one another as either are to the northern and western Europeans who suspect them, seem, often without question, as predators.

Let us return to the *marché* in Salernes and the little flower whose look askance, speaking of suspicion, illustrates this tale. At her feet, not a humble creased sign of overused pulp, not a pile of yellowish coins, anyone of which will barely purchase a gumball from a supermarket dispenser. At her feet is a single copy of *Sans-Logis*, the newspaper of record of the homeless in France – what, depending on the American city you reside in, is variously called *Spare Change*, *Street Sheet*, *Street News*, *Streetwise*, or, in a triumph of poeticism, *News from Our Shoes*. *Sans-Logis* means, of course, literally “without lodging.” Can't get more straightforward than that.

The news from the shoes of this dark-eyed *demoiselle* is thus. The details, though visible in the original photo, but possibly not readable here, show a banner emblazoned with the flags of the E.U., Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, and France, for this is the “International” edition. Indeed, it goes on, this is the “#1 Francophone newspaper with the humanitarian mission of struggling against precariousness and misery.” Sold in Switzerland, Belgium, and France. This week's cover story: “Save the old crafts: the artisan maker of wooden shoes.” Below the fold is the rest of a color photo of one of the last of these craftsmen, a certain *Monsieur Raimbault*, who painstakingly carves his authentic *sabots* from wood. What this has to do with the homeless is not clear – though there is an undefined line of reason from the precariousness of *Mr. Raimbault's* ancient craft to the precariousness of any in life who lose their means of making a living. And, indeed, below the photo of the noble Raimbault,

squinting at his chisel, is another exhortation to the reader: *Defendre notre outil de travail et vendre notre journal* [Champion our means of work and buy our newspaper]. Hence, by a precarious logic indeed the chisel and the mallet and the wooden block of the estimable Raimbault are made equivalent to the equally estimable tools of the trade of, not the homeless beggar, but the honest tradesman/salesman. And so we have the metaphoric *Sans-Logis*, a mere two euros.

And what does this buy the honest consumer? Let us examine the alluring *vendeuse* who, from a position of subservience – not precisely a humble urban *pietà*, but close enough for the countryside. Note the rings and earrings. Note the gauzy, diaphanous blouse. Note the manicure. And hardly concealed beneath her modest garment, note (you’ll have to look closely, as the reproduction here is not optimal) the modish demi-cup bra, in a lively, pastel floral fabric, revealing and decorative. Homeless fashion.

The previous day, for *marché* in Aups, the next town over, I was forced to park in a large meadow, officially designated a *parking de 500 places*. As I locked my door, I was immediately accosted by a young man, neatly dressed in a somewhat stylish red shirt and tight black trousers. Without his laminated badge and a clipboard, laden with a copy of *Sans-Logis* he might have been mistaken for any number of idlers in any number of similar small towns of rural backwater, yet high tourist season, genus. The French social safety net buys a great many out-of-work young men and women room and board, cigarettes, and beer, enough food to eat, and a lot of time on their hands. As he approached me and began to raise his clipboard to my face, I said, I lied, in English, “I don’t speak French. Sorry.” He smiled broadly. “English!,” he said. It was actually more like, “Eeeengleesh!!!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’m in a hurry.”

He looked at me quizzically, and then at my car. “Parking?” he asked me. Clearly, from his posture and the particular interrogative tone, and the way he held his hand, he meant for me to infer that I was to pay him for attending the lot. “It’s free,” I said, “sorry,” and walked toward the marketplace. He looked sad.

As I walked, with my basket of recyclable bottles and packaging, with my three-thousand dollar camera dangling from my shoulder, I considered several things. I considered that possibly, by some stretch, he was legitimate. I considered the consequences of having to return a rental car with long, keyed, scratches along the side (a self-important thought this one; there were at least a hundred-fifty cars in that lot; with a likely conversion rate for my young entrepreneurial newspaper salesman of, I would guess, one to two percent – vengeance would be a losing business; it was market day, and the *Police Municipale*, not to mention the local *gendarmes*, were patrolling).

My conscience nevertheless got the better of me. I turned around and returned to the lot, and sought out *Monsieur Blousson Rouge*. He smiled when he saw me. Held up his newspaper again, pointing at the price. He pointed at the price in Swiss Francs, which was 3,50. I moved his hand, where beneath the palm lurked the price in euros, of two of that denomination. I put my hand in my pocket and extracted a two-euro coin and handed it to him.

This bought me some conversation, free, I gathered. “Eeenglish,” he said, “beautiful country.” “America,” I said, “not England.” His smile nearly broke his face. “America! BEAUTIFUL country!!!”

We had now attracted his *confère*, who had an even bigger stack of newspapers in his arm. Clearly they believed they had a live one. His friend looked doleful. He

mumbled something, and held his pursed fingers to his pursed lips. He was hungry. “He is hungry,” his mentor announced to me. The hunger artist looked at me soulfully, gauntly. What sounded like, “Patron!” passed his lips, which he pursed again, and lifted his fingers. He pointed to the 3,50SF price on the paper.

I put my hand in my pocket again, and grabbed the first coin I felt that I knew not to be a 2-euro piece (they are the largest coin minted). It was a 50-centime piece, which I put in his palm, while he looked at it incredulous. His friend, my buddy, burst into a laugh. No self-control.

The defeated one lowered his papers scornfully, and he handed one to the other. Apparently to replace the one I had bought. Perhaps they were on commission. As I walked through the *marché*, in the direction of the stalls I was interested in browsing, a young girl (not the sullen beauty I was to encounter the next day in Salernes) came up to me with a stack of *Sans-Logis* and held them towards me. I lifted my personal copy and showed it to her, and she looked at me quizzically, as if to say, “you’re a vendor too?”

Later in town, as I rose from my table where I’d just finished an espresso, I saw my young red-shirt friend striding jauntily, now without his badge, his clipboard or his papers, into the convenience store next to the café. And I knew him, in his natural state, to be regular in the town, one of the anonymous faces that, in time, grow familiar with repeated encounters.

When I told my friend Y__ the story at his real estate office later that day, he said, “It’s said to be a *mafia*.” He meant, not the *cosa nostra*, but a racket, a scam (a word he didn’t recognize). “Some think it’s possibly the Rumanians – not that I have anything against Rumanians.” And I am sure he does not. Nor do I. •