

by the same author

Posse

Solea

Lost Mariners

Sun of The Dying

Life Tires

T O T A L C H A O S

Jean-Claude Izzo

T O T A L C H A O S

Translated from the French by Howard Curtis


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for Sébastien

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There is no truth, there are only stories.
JIM HARRISON

PROLOGUE

RUE DES PISTOLES, TWENTY YEARS AFTER

All he had was her address. Rue des Pistoles, in the old neighborhood. It was years since he'd last been in Marseilles. But he didn't have a choice. Not now.

It was June 2nd, and it was raining. Despite the rain, the taxi driver refused to turn into the back alleys. He dropped him in front of Montée-des-Accoules. More than a hundred steps to climb and a maze of streets between there and Rue des Pistoles. The ground was littered with garbage sacks spilling their contents. There was a pungent smell on the streets, a mixture of piss, dampness and mildew. The only big change was that even this neighborhood was being redeveloped. Some houses had been demolished, others had had their fronts repainted ocher and pink, with Italian-style green and blue shutters.

Even on Rue des Pistoles, maybe one of the narrowest streets of all, only one side, the side with even-numbered houses, was still standing. The other side had been razed to the ground, as had the houses on Rue Rodillat, and in their place was a parking lot. That was the first thing he saw when he turned the corner from Rue du Refuge. The developers seemed to have taken a breather here. The houses were blackened and dilapidated, eaten away by sewer vegetation.

He was too early, he knew. But he didn't want to go to a bistro and sit drinking one coffee after another, looking at his watch, waiting for a reasonable hour to wake Lole. What he wanted was to have his coffee sitting comfortably in a real apartment. He hadn't done that for months. As soon as she

opened the door, he headed straight for the only armchair in the room, as if it was something he'd often done. He stroked the armrest with his hand, sat down slowly, and closed his eyes. It was only afterwards that he finally looked at her. Twenty years after.

She was standing. Bolt upright, as always. Her hands deep in the pockets of a straw-colored bathrobe. The color made her skin look browner than usual and emphasized the blackness of her hair, which she was wearing short now. Her hips may have grown thicker, he wasn't sure. She'd become a woman, but she hadn't changed. Lole, the Gypsy. She'd always been beautiful.

"I could use a coffee."

She nodded. Without a word. Without a smile. He'd dragged her from her sleep. Maybe from a dream in which she and Manu were hotfooting it down to Seville, not a care in the world, their pockets bulging with cash. She probably had that dream every night. But Manu was dead. He'd been dead three months.

He sprawled in the armchair, stretching his legs. Then he lit a cigarette. The best in a long time, no question.

"I was expecting you." Lole handed him a cup. "But not this early."

"I took a night train. A train full of legionnaires. Fewer checks. Safer."

She was staring off into the air. Wherever Manu was.

"Aren't you going to sit down?"

"I drink my coffee standing up."

"You still don't have a phone."

"No."

She smiled. For a moment, the sleep seemed to vanish from her face. She'd dismissed the dream. She looked at him with melancholy eyes. He was tired, and anxious. His old fears. He

liked the fact that Lole didn't say much, didn't feel the need to explain. It was a way of getting their lives back in order. Once and for all.

There was a smell of mint in the room. He looked around. It was a big room, with unadorned white walls. No shelves, no knick-knacks or books. Furniture reduced to the bare essentials. A table, chairs, and a sideboard that didn't match, and a single bed over by the window. A door led to another room, the bedroom. From where he was, he could see part of the bed. Rumped blue sheets. He'd forgotten the night smells. The smell of bodies. Lole's smell. When they made love, her armpits smelled of basil. His eyes were starting to close. He looked again at the bed near the window.

"You could sleep there."

"I'd like to sleep now."

Later, he saw her walking across the room. He didn't know how long he'd slept. To see the time on his watch, he'd have had to move, and he didn't want to move. He preferred to watch Lole coming and going through half-closed eyes.

She'd come out of the bathroom wrapped in a terry towel. She wasn't very big. But she had everything she needed, and in the right places too. And she had gorgeous legs. Then he'd fallen asleep again. His fears had vanished.

It had gotten dark. Lole was wearing a sleeveless black dress. Simple, but it really suited her, hugged her body nicely. He looked at her legs again. This time she felt his eyes on her.

"I'm leaving you the keys. There's coffee heating. I made some more."

She was saying only the most obvious things, avoiding everything else. He sat up, and took out a cigarette, his eyes still on her.

"I'll be back late. Don't wait up for me."

"Are you still a bar girl?"

“Hostess. At the Vamping. I don’t want to see you hanging around there.”

He remembered the Vamping, overlooking the Catalan beach. Amazing decor, like something out of a Scorsese movie. The singer and the band behind stands full of spangles. Tangos, boleros, cha-chas, mambos, that kind of thing.

“I wasn’t planning to.”

She shrugged. “I’ve never been sure what you were planning.” Her smile made clear she wasn’t expecting a reply. “Are you going to see Fabio?”

He’d thought she’d ask him that. He’d asked himself the same thing. But he’d dismissed the idea. Fabio was a cop. That had drawn a bit of a line under their youth, their friendship. He’d have liked to see Fabio again, though.

“Later. Maybe. How is he?”

“The same. Like us. Like you, like Manu. Lost. None of us have known what to do with our lives. Cop or robber, it makes no difference...”

“You liked him a lot, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I liked him a lot.”

He felt a pang in his heart. “Have you seen him again?”

“Not in the last three months.” She picked up her bag and a white linen jacket. He still hadn’t taken his eyes off her.

“Under your pillow,” she said at last, and it was clear from her face that his surprise amused her. “The rest is in the side-board drawer.”

And with that, she left. He lifted the pillow. The 9mm was there. He’d sent it to Lole, in an express package, before he left Paris. The subways and railroad stations were swarming with cops. The French Republic had decided it wanted to be whiter than white. Zero immigration. The new French dream. There might be checks, and he didn’t want any hassle. Not that kind. Having false papers was bad enough.

The gun. A present from Manu, for his twentieth birthday. Even then, Manu had been a bit crazy. He’d never parted with it, but he’d never used it either. You didn’t kill someone like that. Even when you were threatened. That had happened to him a few times, in different places. There was always another solution. That was what he thought. And he was still alive. But today, he needed it. To kill a man.

It was just after eight. The rain had stopped, and the warm air hit him in the face as he left the building. He’d taken a long shower and put on a pair of black cotton pants, a black polo shirt, and a denim jacket. He’d put his mocassins back on, without socks. He turned into Rue du Panier.

This was his neighborhood. He was born here. Rue des Petits-Puits, two streets along from where Pierre Puget was born. His father had lived on Rue de la Charité when he first arrived in France, fleeing poverty and Mussolini. He was twenty, and had two of his brothers in tow. *Nabos*—Neapolitans. Three others had gone to Argentina. They did the jobs the French wouldn’t touch. His father was hired as a longshoreman, paid by the centime. “Harbor dogs,” they were called—it was meant as an insult. His mother worked packing dates, fourteen hours a day. In the evenings, the *nabos* and the people from the North, the *babis*, met up on the streets. They pulled chairs out in front of their doors, talked through the windows. Just like in Italy. Just like the good old days.

He hadn’t recognized his house. That had been redeveloped, too. He’d walked on past. Manu was from Rue Baussenque. A dark, damp building, where his mother, already pregnant with him, moved in with two of her brothers. His father, José Manuel, had been shot by Franco’s men. Immigrants, exiles, they all arrived full of hope. By the time Lole appeared on the scene, with her family, Manu and he were already grown up. Sixteen. At least, that’s what they told the girls.

Living in the Panier wasn't something you boasted about. Ever since the nineteenth century it had been a neighborhood of sailors and whores. A blight on the city. One big brothel. For the Nazis, who'd dreamed of destroying it, it was a *source of degeneration for the Western world*. His father and mother had lived through the humiliation. Ordered to leave in the middle of the night. January 24th 1943. Twenty thousand people. Finding a wheelbarrow quickly, loading a few possessions. Mistreated by the French gendarmes and mocked by the German soldiers. Pushing the wheelbarrow along the Canebière at daybreak, watched by people on their way to work. At school, the other kids pointed the finger at them. Even working class kids, from Belle de Mai. But not for long. They simply broke their fingers! He and Manu knew their bodies and clothes smelled of mildew. The smell of the neighborhood. The first girl he'd ever kissed had that smell at the back of her throat. But they didn't give a damn. They loved life. They were good looking. And they knew how to fight.

He turned onto Rue du Refuge, to walk back down. Some distance away, six Arab kids, aged between fourteen and seventeen, stood talking, next to a gleaming new moped. They watched him coming, warily. A new face in the neighborhood spelled danger. A cop. An informer. Or the new owner of a renovated building, who'd go to the town hall and complain about the lack of security. The cops would come and check them out. Take them down to the station. Maybe rough them up. Hassle them. When he drew level with the kids, he gave the one who seemed to be the leader a short, sharp look, then walked on. Nobody moved. They'd understood each other.

He crossed Place de Lenche, which was deserted, then walked down toward the harbor. He stopped at the first phone booth. Batisti answered.

"I'm Manu's friend."

"Hi, pal. Come by tomorrow, have a drink. About one, at the Péano. It'll be great to meet. See you, kid."

He hung up. A man of few words, Batisti. No time to tell him he'd rather have gone anywhere but there. Anywhere but the Péano. It was the bar where the painters went. Ambrogiani had showed his first canvases there. Then others had come along, influenced by him. Poor imitations, some of them. But journalists went there, too. From right across the political spectrum. *Le Provençal, La Marseillaise, Agence France Presse, Libération. Pastis* knocked down the barriers between them. At night, they waited till the papers were put to sleep, then went into the back room to listen to jazz. Both Petruccianis had played there, father and son. With Aldo Romano. There'd been so many nights. Nights of trying to figure out what his life was all about. That night, Harry was at the piano.

"All you need to figure out is what you want," Lole said.

"Yeah. And what I want right now is a change of scenery."

Manu had come back with the umpteenth round. After midnight, they stopped counting. Three scotches, doubles. He'd sat down and raised his glass, smiling beneath his moustache.

"Cheers, lovebirds."

"Shut up, you," Lole had said.

He stared at the two of you as if you were strange animals, then turned his back on you and concentrated on the music. Lole was looking at you. You'd emptied your glass. Slowly. Deliberately. Your mind was made up. You were leaving. You stood up and went out, unsteady on your feet. You were leaving. You left. Without saying a word to Manu, the only friend you still had. Without saying a word to Lole, who'd just turned twenty. Who you loved. Who you both loved. Cairo, Djibouti, Aden, Harar. The itinerary of an eternal adolescent. That was before you lost your innocence. From Argentina to Mexico. Ending up in Asia, to get rid of your remaining illusions. And

an international arrest warrant on your ass, for trafficking in works of art.

You were back in Marseilles because of Manu. To take out the son of a bitch who'd killed him. He'd been coming out of Chez Félix, a bistrot on Rue Caisserie where he liked to have lunch. Lole was waiting for him in Madrid, at her mother's place. He was about to come into a tidy bit of cash. For a break-in that had gone without a hitch, at a big Marseilles lawyer's, Eric Brunel, on Boulevard Longchamp. They'd decided to go to Seville. To forget Marseilles and the hard times.

You weren't after the guy who'd whacked Manu. A hitman, for sure. Cold and anonymous. Someone from Lyons, or Milan. Someone you wouldn't find. The guy you were after was the scumbag who'd ordered the hit. Who'd wanted Manu killed. You didn't want to know why. You didn't need any reasons. Not a single one. Anyone attacked Manu, it was like they'd attacked you.

The sun woke him. Nine o'clock. He lay there on his back, and smoked his first cigarette. He hadn't slept so deeply in months. He always dreamed that he was sleeping somewhere other than where he was. A brothel in Harar. A Tijuana jail. On the Rome-Paris express. Anywhere. But always somewhere else. During the night, he'd dreamed he was sleeping at Lole's place. And that's where he really was. It was as if he'd come home. He smiled. He'd barely heard her come back and close the door of her bedroom. She was sleeping in her blue sheets, rebuilding her broken dream. There was still a piece missing. Manu. Unless it was him. But he'd long ago rejected that idea. That would have been to put himself in too good a light. Twenty years was a hell of a long time to mourn.

He stood up, made coffee, and took a shower. The water was hot. He felt much better. He closed his eyes, and imagined

Lole coming to join him. Just like before. Clinging to his body. Her pussy against his dick. Her hands gliding over his back, his buttocks. He started to get a hard-on. He turned on the cold water, and screamed.

Lole put on a record. *Pura salsa*. One of Azuquita's first recordings. Her tastes hadn't changed. He attempted a few dance steps, which made her smile. She moved forward to kiss him. As she did so, he caught a glimpse of her breasts. Like pears waiting to be picked. He didn't look away quickly enough. Their eyes met. She froze, pulled the belt of her bathrobe tighter, and went into the kitchen. He felt wretched. An eternity passed. She came back with two cups of coffee.

"A guy asked after you last night. Wanted to know if you were around. A friend of yours. Malabe. Frankie Malabe."

He didn't know any Malabe. A cop? More likely an informer. He didn't like them approaching Lole. But at the same time it reassured him. The Customs cops knew he was back in France, but not where. Not yet. They were angling for leads. He still needed a bit of time. Two days maybe. Everything depended on what Batisti had to sell.

"Why are you here?"

He picked up his jacket. Don't answer, he told himself. Don't get involved in a question and answer session. He wouldn't be able to lie to her, and he wouldn't be able to tell her what he was going to do. Not now. But he had to do it. Just as, one day, he'd had to leave. He'd never been able to answer her questions. There were no answers, only questions. That was the only thing he'd learned in life. It wasn't much, but it was more certain than believing in God.

"Forget I asked." Behind him, she opened the door. "Not asking questions has never gotten me anywhere."

The two-storey parking garage on Cours d'Estienne d'Orves

had finally been demolished, and what had once been the prison canal was now a lovely square. The houses had been restored, the fronts repainted, the ground paved. An Italian style square. The bars and restaurants all had terraces, with white tables and parasols. People wanted to be seen, just like in Italy. The only thing missing was elegance. The Péano also had its terrace, which was already full. Young people mostly. Very clean-cut. The interior had been refurbished. The decor was hip but cold. The paintings had been replaced by crappy reproductions. But he almost preferred it this way. It helped him keep the memories at arm's length.

He sat down at the bar and ordered a *pastis*. In the room, there was a couple who looked to him like a hooker and her pimp. He might be wrong, of course. Although they were talking in low voices, their discussion seemed rather animated. He leaned an elbow on the brand new zinc counter and watched the front door.

The minutes passed. Nobody came in. He ordered another *pastis*. He heard the words "Son of a bitch!" followed by a sharp sound. Eyes turned to the couple. Silence. The woman ran out. The man stood up, left a fifty-franc bill, and went out after her.

On the terrace, a man folded the newspaper he'd been reading. He was in his sixties. A sailor's cap on his head. Blue cotton pants, a white short-sleeved shirt over the pants. Blue espadrilles. He stood up and came toward him. Batisti.

He spent the afternoon staking out the place. Monsieur Charles, as he was known in the underworld, lived in one of the opulent villas overlooking the Corniche. Amazing villas, some with pinnacles, others with columns. Gardens full of palms, oleanders and fig trees. After the Roucas Blanc, the road winds across the little hill, a crisscross of lanes, some of them barely tarred. He had taken the bus, a no. 55, as far as

Place des Pilotes, at the top of the last slope. Then he'd continued on foot.

He could see out over the harbor. The whole sweep of it from L'Estaque to Pointe-Rouge, with the Frioul islands and the Château d'If. Marseilles in Cinemascope. Beautiful. He started on the downward slope, facing the sea. He was only two villas away from Zucca's villa. He looked at his watch. Four fifty-eight. The gates of the villa opened. A black Mercedes appeared, and parked. He walked past the villa, and the Mercedes, and continued as far as Rue des Espérettes, which cuts across the Roucas Blanc. He crossed the street. Another ten paces, and he'd reach the bus stop. According to the schedules, the 55 passed at 5:05. He leaned against the stop, looked at his watch, and waited.

The Mercedes reversed along the curb, and stopped. Two men inside, including the driver. Zucca appeared. He must have been about seventy. Elegantly dressed, like all these old gangsters. He even had a straw hat, and a white poodle on a leash. Preceded by the dog, he walked down as far as the crossing on Rue des Espérettes. He stopped. The bus was coming. Zucca crossed to the shady side of the street, then came down the Roucas Blanc. He passed the bus stop. The Mercedes set off, at a snail's pace.

Batisti's information had been worth the fifty thousand francs he'd paid. It was all there in writing, without a single detail missing. Zucca took the same walk every day, except Sunday, when his family visited with him. At six o'clock, the Mercedes drove him back to the villa. But Batisti didn't know why Zucca had gone after Manu. He'd gotten no farther toward understanding that. There had to be a connection with the break-in at the lawyer's. That was what he was starting to think. But the truth was, he didn't give a damn. All he was interested in was Zucca. Monsieur Charles.

He hated these old gangsters. On intimate terms with the cops and the judges. Never done time. Thought they were better than anyone else. Zucca had a face like Brando in *The Godfather*. They all had faces like that. Here, in Palermo, in Chicago. Everywhere you went. And now he had one of them in his sights. He was going to take one of them out. For friendship's sake. And to give vent to his hatred.

He was looking through Lole's things. The chest, the closets. He'd come back slightly drunk. He wasn't searching for anything in particular, just looking, thinking maybe he'd uncover a secret. About Lole, about Manu. But there was nothing to uncover. Life had slipped through their fingers, faster than money.

In a drawer, he found a whole bunch of photos. That was all they had left. He was disappointed. He almost threw everything in the trashcan. But there were these three photos. The same photo taken three times. Same time, same place. Manu and him. Lole and Manu. Lole and him. It was at the end of the big pier, behind the commercial port. To get there, they'd had to slip past the guards. We were good at that, he thought. Behind them, the city. In the background, the islands. The three of you came out of the water, breathless and happy. You feasted your eyes on boats leaving in the setting sun. Lole read aloud from *Exile* by Saint-John Perse. *The wind's militias in the sands of exile*. On the way back, you took Lole's hand. You dared to do that. Manu never had.

That night, you left Manu at the Bar du Lenche. Everything had turned upside down. No more laughter. None of you had spoken. You'd all drunk *pastis* in embarrassed silence. Desire had distanced you from Manu. The next day, you had to go pick him up from the station house. He'd spent the night

there. For starting a fight with two legionnaires. His right eye wouldn't open. He had a cut lip. Bruises everywhere.

"I got two of them! I really did!"

Lole kissed him on the forehead. He hugged her and started sobbing.

"Fuck," he said. "This is hard."

And he fell asleep, just like that, on Lole's lap.

Lole woke him at ten o'clock. He'd slept soundly, but his tongue felt furred. The smell of coffee pervaded the room. Lole sat down on the edge of the bed. Her hand brushed his shoulder. Her lips rested on his forehead, then on his lips. A furtive, tender kiss. If happiness existed, he'd just come close to it.

"I'd forgotten."

"If that's true, get out of here right now!"

She handed him a cup of coffee, and stood up to get hers. She was smiling and happy. As if the sadness hadn't yet reawakened.

"You don't want to sit down. Just like before."

"I prefer—"

"To have your coffee standing up, I know."

She smiled again. He couldn't get enough of her smile, her mouth. He clung to her eyes. They shone the way they had that night. You'd taken off her T-shirt, then your shirt. You'd pressed your bellies together and stayed like that without talking. Just breathing. Her eyes on you all the time.

"Don't ever leave me."

You'd promised.

But you'd left. Manu had stayed. And Lole had waited. But maybe Manu had stayed because someone needed to take care of Lole. And Lole hadn't followed you, because she'd thought it was unfair to abandon Manu. He'd started to think these things, since Manu died. Knowing he had to come back. And

here he was. Marseilles had caught in his throat again. With Lole as an aftertaste.

Lole's eyes were shining more brightly. She was holding back the tears. She knew that something was going down. And that whatever it was would change her life. She'd had a premonition after Manu's funeral, during the hours she'd spent with Fabio. She could sense it now. She was good at sensing when something was going to happen. But she wouldn't say anything. It was up to him to speak.

He picked up the brown envelope he'd left beside the bed. "This is a ticket for Paris. The high speed train, 1:54 today. This is a checkroom ticket. The Gare de Lyon. Another one, for the Gare Montparnasse. Two suitcases to be collected. In each one, there's a hundred thousand francs, hidden under a pile of old clothes. This postcard is from a very good restaurant at Port-Mer, near Cancale in Brittany. On the back, Marine's number. Get in touch with her. She can get you anything you want. Whatever she does for you, don't haggle over the price. I've booked a room for you at the Hotel des Marronniers, on Rue Jacob. Five nights, in your name. There'll be a letter for you at the reception desk."

She hadn't moved. She was frozen. Her eyes had gradually emptied of all expression. "Don't I get a word in edgewise?"

"No."

"Is that all you have to say?"

What he had to say would have taken ages, but he could have summed it up in a couple of sentences. I'm sorry. I love you. But they didn't have time for that anymore. Or rather, time had overtaken them. The future was behind them. Ahead, nothing but memories and regrets. He looked up at her, with as much detachment as he could muster.

"Close your bank account. Destroy your credit card. And your checkbook. Change identity as soon as possible. Marine will arrange that for you."

"And you?" she said with difficulty.

"I'll call you tomorrow morning."

He looked at his watch, and stood up. He passed close to her, averting his gaze, and went into the bathroom and locked the door behind him. He didn't want Lole to join him in the shower. He looked at his face in the mirror. He didn't like what he saw. He felt old. He'd forgotten how to smile. Bitter creases had appeared at the corners of his mouth, and they wouldn't go away. He wasn't yet forty-five and today was going to be the worst day of his life.

He heard the first guitar chord of *Entre dos aguas*. Paco de Lucia. Lole had turned the volume up. She was standing in front of the stereo with her arms folded, smoking a cigarette.

"You're getting nostalgic."

"Screw you."

He took the gun, loaded it, put on the safety, and wedged it between his shirt and the back of his pants. She'd turned around and was watching his every movement.

"Hurry up. I wouldn't want you to miss that train."

"What are you going to do?"

"Set the cat among the pigeons. I think."

The moped's engine was idling. It hadn't misfired once. Four fifty-one. Rue des Espérettes, just down the hill from Zucca's villa. It was hot. Sweat ran down his back. He wanted it to be over with.

He'd spent all morning looking for the Arab kids. They constantly changed streets. That was their rule. It probably served no purpose, but he supposed they had their reasons. He'd found them on Rue Fontaine-de-Caylus, which had become a square, with trees and benches. They were the only people there. Nobody from the neighborhood ever sat in the square. They preferred to stay by their front doors. The older kids

were sitting on the steps of a house, while the younger ones were standing, the moped beside them. When the leader saw him coming, he'd stood up, and the others had moved aside.

"I need the bike. For the afternoon. Till six o'clock. Two thousand, cash."

He looked anxiously around. He'd counted on there being no one to catch the bus. If someone showed up, he'd let it go. If any passenger wanted to get off the bus, he wouldn't know until it was too late, but that was a risk he was prepared to take. Then he told himself that if he took that risk, he might as well take the other. He started calculating. The bus stops. The door opens. The passenger gets on. The bus starts off again. Four minutes. No, yesterday, it had taken only three minutes. But let's say four. Zucca would have crossed by then. No, he would have seen the moped and let it pass. He emptied his head of all thoughts, counting the minutes over and over. Yes, it was possible. But after that, the shooting would start. Four fifty-nine.

He lowered the visor on his helmet, and gripped the gun firmly. His hands were dry. He moved forward slowly, hugging the curb, his left hand tight on the handlebar. The poodle appeared, followed by Zucca. He felt suddenly cold inside. Zucca saw him coming. He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, holding back the dog. By the time he realized, it was too late. His mouth formed a circle, but no sound emerged. His eyes widened with fear. If he'd crapped in his pants, that would have been enough. He pressed the trigger. Disgusted with himself, with Zucca, with all men, all mankind. He emptied the clip into the guy's chest.

In front of the villa, the Mercedes shot forward. To his right, the bus was coming. It passed the stop, without slowing down. He accelerated, cut across the path of the bus, and went around it. He almost had to mount the sidewalk, but he got through.

The bus came to an abrupt halt, stopping the Mercedes from entering the street. He rode flat out, turning left, then left again, onto Chemin du Souvenir, then Rue des Roses. On Rue des Bois-Sacrés, he threw the gun into a manhole. A few minutes later, he was riding calmly along Rue d'Endoume.

It was only then that he started thinking about Lole. You stood facing each other. You'd both gone beyond words. You wanted her belly against yours. You wanted the taste of her body. The smell. Mint and basil. But there were too many years between you, and too much silence. And Manu. Dead, yet still so alive. You were standing two feet apart. You could have put out your hand and taken her by the waist and drawn her to you. She could have untied the belt of her bathrobe and dazzled you with the beauty of her body. You'd have made love, violently, with unassuaged desire. But what would have happened afterwards? You'd have had to find words. Words that didn't exist. You'd have lost her forever. So you left. Without saying goodbye. Without a kiss. For the second time.

He was shaking. He pulled up outside the first bistro he came to on Boulevard de La Corderie. Like an automaton, he locked the moped and took off his helmet. He had a cognac. He felt the burning sensation spread through him. The cold flowed out of his body. He began to sweat. He rushed to the toilets and threw up. Threw up all he'd done, all he'd thought. Threw up the man that he was. The man who'd abandoned Manu and hadn't had the courage to love Lole. He'd drifted for so long. Too long. He knew that the worst was yet to come. By the second cognac, he'd stopped shaking. He'd recovered.

He parked at Fontaine-de-Caylus. It was 6:20, but the Arab kids weren't there, which surprised him. He took off his helmet and hooked it on the handlebars, but didn't cut the engine. The youngest of the Arabs appeared, kicking a ball. He ran up to him.

“Get out of here, the pigs are coming. They’ve been watching your girlfriend’s house.”

He set off, back up the alley. They must be watching all the back streets. Montée des Accoules, Traverse des Repenties. Place de Lenche, of course. He’d forgotten to ask Lole if Frankie Malabe had come back. He might have a chance if he took Rue des Cartiers, right up at the top. He left the moped and ran down the steps. There were two of them, two young plainclothes cops, at the bottom of the steps.

“Police!”

He heard the siren, higher up the street. He was trapped. Car doors slammed. They were here. Behind his back.

“Don’t move!”

He did what he had to do. He plunged his hand inside his jacket. He had to get it over with. No more running. He was here. He was home. In his own neighborhood. It might as well be here. Might as well end in Marseilles. He turned toward the two young cops. The ones behind him couldn’t see that he was unarmed. The first bullet ripped open his back. His lung exploded. He didn’t feel the other two bullets.

1.

IN WHICH EVEN TO LOSE YOU HAVE
TO KNOW HOW TO FIGHT

I crouched by the body. Pierre Ugolini. Ugo. I’d only just arrived on the scene. Too late. My colleagues had been playing cowboys. Shoot to kill: that was their basic rule. They followed the General Custer principle that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. And in Marseilles, everyone—or almost everyone—was an Indian.

The Ugolini file had landed on the wrong desk. Captain Auch’s desk. In a few years, his team had gained an evil reputation, but it had proved itself. People turned a blind eye to its occasional mistakes. Cracking down on organized crime was a priority in Marseilles. The second priority was maintaining order in the north of the city, where the suburbs were full of immigrants and the housing projects had become no-go areas. That was my job. But I wasn’t allowed any mistakes.

Ugo was a childhood friend. Like Manu. He was a friend, even though he and I hadn’t talked in twenty years. Ugo dying so soon after Manu cast a shadow over my past. It was something I’d tried to avoid. But I’d gone about it the wrong way.

When I found out that Auch had been given the job of investigating why Ugo was in Marseilles, I’d put one of my informers on the case. Frankie Malabe. I trusted him. If Ugo came to Marseilles, it was obvious he’d go to Lole’s, in spite of all the time that had passed. And I’d been sure Ugo would come. Because of Manu, and because of Lole. Friendship has its rules,