Tintjournal

Essay

The Americans

by Joelle Ballonzoli

One of a series of short stories, each standing on their own, which focus on the importance placed on the communal nature of life in France in the 1950's. They are based on the author's memories of a shipyard town of what was then the blue-collar region of the French Mediterranean coast.

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On September 5, 2002 at around 7:30 pm, Beatrice Blumenfeld and Marie Ballonzoli, my mother, fell into each other's arms in the middle of Dover Road in Oceanside, New York. Adrian Blumenfeld, who had been sick that past winter, was trailing behind his wife Bea, coming out of their one-family house on 325 Dover Road. Beatrice and Adrian Blumenfeld, 83 and 88 years old respectively, and Marie Ballonzoli, 80 years old at the time, had not seen each other since 1956. That had been in La Ciotat, a town located halfway between the cities of Marseille and Toulon on the French Mediterranean coast.

La Ciotat, where I was born and where I grew up, was a shipyard town that fell victim to globalization in the early 1980's, bringing decades of prosperity to an abrupt end. The town had welcomed immigrants throughout most of the twentieth century, starting with the great human migration in the aftermath of World War One. Its population had grown in waves, in direct proportion to the workforce needs of the shipyard. The largest immigrant groups had settled in La Ciotat in the early 1920's. Those newcomers were Italians impoverished by a disastrous economy in their country, and Armenian survivors of the genocide that had taken place in The Ottoman Empire and The Republic of Turkey between 1914 and 1923. In 1939, the population grew again with the arrival of Spanish families expelled from their country by General Franco's Fascist takeover, as well as through a sprinkling of refugees from eastern Europe.

In the mid-1950's when Adrian, Bea and Marie met, La Ciotat was at the beginning of an unprecedented era of growth, attracting a new wave of immigrants. Those were emigrants from various countries of the Mediterranean basin such as Yugoslavians who had escaped

the dictator Tito's Communist regime, along with emigrants from the French colonies and territories. The culmination of the different surges of immigration formed a large and mostly Mediterranean working class which had a dominating influence on the culture of the town. Conversely, La Ciotat's middle class was rather small. As its members it counted two doctors, one lawyer, the white-collar management of the shipyard and the public hospital, and local small business owners who catered food and goods to the overall population prior to the arrival of supermarkets.

The municipality encompassed the shipyard that supported the town economy; *La Cité Ouvrière,* the shipyard workers town; *La Rue des Poilus,* Main Street, and its labyrinth of crisscrossing backstreets; *Mugel* and *Figuerolles,* two small pebble beaches tucked between cliffs at the very west end of the town. In the east, there was a neighborhood called *La Ciotat Plage*, a sandy beach area, populated by summer houses owned by wealthy Marseillese families. Those summer visitors never mixed with the local population.

La Ciotat, vue d'avion © Photo Garabedian

Everybody knew everybody in La Ciotat. The only strangers who landed there were tourists of the working-class persuasion, who arrived when factories and businesses closed in August, and left the big northern cities deserted. The locals called these invaders Watermelon Eaters, because most of them were on a very tight budget and survived on watermelon, the cheapest piece of fruit you could find at the green market in the summer. They were also called Parisians because to us, Ciotadens, anyone who had an accent different from ours was from Paris regardless where they were from. The budget-minded watermelon eaters would go shopping for food in small quantities, two tomatoes and six olives, half a baguette… thereby providing ammunition for gossip. "They surely won't take a big shit!" This deprivation was a mystery to the locals who never went anywhere and didn't understand the point of going on a vacation when one could not really afford it.

Just like our fellow locals my family never went on vacation. My father had his own theory about this. He held that living in La Ciotat was like being on vacation year-round for free.

“People are paying good money to come here. There is no way we could afford this luxury! Besides, go where? Mountains are cold. Cities are noisy. The ocean has dangerous tides…”

I had luxurious dreams for the daughter of a construction worker. I used to dream of the high mountain peaks that appeared in color in the geography books, brown alpine cows grazing on their steep slopes in the summer, evergreens, trees as beautiful as described in the song “Oh! Christmas Tree,” tall and majestic, plenty of snow and high-speed running sleds with happy people on them just like on Christmas and Happy New Year’s cards. In other words, I wanted to see something different. Just as the watermelon eaters probably did.

My dream came true when I went to a month-long summer camp offered by the municipal government for a nominal fee that my parents could afford. Based on the belief that a change of climate was greatly beneficial for growing children the municipality made the effort to subsidize the trip during an election year. I will never forget the first time I saw the medieval city of Annecy in the Alps, with its lake on which swans gracefully glided around, barely causing a ripple on the surface of the water as they moved. That summer, at the foot of the Mont Blanc massif, the highest mountain in Europe west of Russia’s Caucasus high peaks, I even saw snow and ice, the so-called eternal snow that never melts. I was very impressed. I never dared to ask the people of Annecy whether they went on vacation somewhere, or whether — like my father — they felt that they were already on free vacation year-round.

We lived on the west side of the port, right across from the quays where the fishermen’s boats were moored, close to the shipyard’s main gate. Rows of bars stretched from the main gate, to the east side of the port where the Town Hall was then located. La Rue des Poilus, the main street named in honor of the French victors of World War One, divided the town into east and west, running from north to south, all the way to the port, halfway between the shipyard and the Town Hall. East of La Rue des Poilus, past another row of bars was the main church, *Notre Dame de l’Assomption*, Our Lady of the Assumption, dedicated to the Holy Virgin, the town’s protectoress.

The port area population lived according to the rhythm of the shipyard, 24 hours a day, eleven months a year; August excluded. There were three 8-hour shifts daily, whose beginning and end was each marked by a howling siren that governed the life of the population. Thousands of men, workers of the day’s main shift, dressed in their blue work clothes swept through the piers, from east to west like a wave, shortly before 8:00 am and

then again at 2:00 pm when they were going back to work after lunch. At noon, as well as at 6:00 pm sharp, the wave moved in the other direction, from west to east, only twice as fast as the men were rushing home or often breaking into groups and stopping at bars on their way. 12:00 to 12:30 and 6:00 to 7:30 pm was rush hour. The bars got crowded and loud with customers. People drank in my town; mainly Pernod. Drinkers went from one bar to another in succession, buying each other's rounds along the port on their way home. That custom was called *Faire les Chapelles,* Making the Chapels. In my mother's mind Making the Chapels was very negative. Not because it might have been insulting to the Church, about which she didn't care much, but because people who made the chapels were wasting their hard-earned money in bars. To me it sounded very bad. Worse than the chapel makers, another workers' type demonized by my mother were the 6-to-8pm poker players of *Le Café du XXème Siècle,* an old watering hole, whose backroom gambling had been an open secret for a couple of generations. My mother called the participants of those games degenerates. I didn't know the meaning of this word, but it sounded terrible because of the tone she used in pronouncing it, accentuating the second syllable of the word. By me, except for drinkers and gamblers, whom I would forever have to stay away from, everybody was just fine in my town.

Aside from the gambling, the most popular activity in the bars was playing cards. My father was one of those players who often forgot to come home for dinner. He never drank, didn't gamble, but lost himself in games. He came home from work at 6:00 pm, got rid of his dusty construction worker clothes, washed his face and hands at the kitchen sink of our cold water flat, put on clean clothes and headed out to the local bar, the Cristal Bar to play cards. At 7:45, on a typical night, my mother would send me to the Bar, two flights of stairs down and a small block away from our place: "Joelle, go tell your father dinner will be on the table in fifteen minutes". At the Bar, my father, focusing on his cards, would tell me distractedly: "I'll be right there." At 8:20 pm, my mother would become restless, although she looked as if she was trying to restrain herself. "Joelle, go tell your father dinner is getting cold!" My father had the same distracted reply: "I'll be right there." Now, at around 8:30, my father still not back, my mother was in "session," cursing God and dragging the Madonna through the mud in the process like the good Italian-French woman that she was. "Let's eat," she barked. One bite, one curse. She grumbled between her teeth. It would be 8:50 or 9:00 when my father would finally push open the apartment door, sit down slowly at the table, help himself to the food and wine while totally ignoring the flood of insults that was being showered over

him: “Would your ass ever stay glued to the chair…”

My mother’s bouts of anger didn’t change anything about the way that evening routine unfolded. She could nag and complain all she wanted; my father came home late every other day, at the very least. The only time there was a reprieve was in the summer months when school was off, and my brother and I could go to bed later than 9 pm. Then my mother tuned the diatribe down. In the summer, my father would take us out for a walk after dinner. That treat consisted of walking along the port from our place, all the way to a red beacon located at the eastern-most entrance to the port, past the Town Hall. During those walks, my mother proudly put her arm under my handsome father’s arm, and I climbed on top of his shoulders. I loved it up there and never wanted to come down.

The port was crowded during summer nights. Working class families who lived in small cold-water flats, were seeking relief from the heat late into the night. I remember the twilight return of the sardine fishing crews and the silver fish being shaken out of the nets, still alive frantically wriggling in the deep of the *Pointus*, fishing boats traditional to the Marseille region. It was a summer ritual that attracted the local population, as well as the watermelon eaters and that forever managed to fascinate me.

The Cristal Bar was the community headquarters where men played cards, women gossiped and neighborhood kids watched TV. It was commonly called *Chez Pierrot* because its owner was Pierrot Pravettoni, and his wife Raymonde, or Mrs. Pierrot. Mrs. Pierrot was my mother’s friend. The two of them sat on the terrace in front of the bar in the afternoon commenting on the events of the day. My mother would allow herself that respite after our small apartment had been meticulously dusted, swept and mopped. She had a sharp tongue during these afternoon sessions, unlike Mrs. Pierrot who didn’t have a single bad bone in her. Mrs. Pierrot was a very skinny, artificially blonde, petite woman. So skinny that she wouldn’t go out shopping on *Mistral* wind days for fear of being blown away into the sea along with tree branches and leaves, garbage, laundry and other things flying around. It had happened to her once while going up to the family’s cabin, on Trinity Hill. A powerful wind had swept her off her feet sending her tumbling into a vineyard and leaving her with a broken leg, a black and blue eye and a bump on her head. Since that incident, she limited her comings and goings from a kitchen located in the back of the bar to its entrance door, and vice versa on Mistral days.

Mrs. Pierrot was very sweet. In the winter, on my way to school passing by the bar, she called me over some mornings: “Joelle, would you like a croissant for your 10 o’clock break?” “Yes; thank you,” I would reply, delighted. She would put the pastry in a brown paper bag that had originally been used to wrap packs of cigarettes which were available to customers at the Bar. Consequently, the croissant smelled a bit of tobacco. That was OK. Tobacco paper or not, with the croissant in my satchel I felt rich. Just like those few kids who came to school with pastries every morning. I saw them buy candies every day after class at the store across the street from the school. By first grade I had figured that if their parents had money to give them to buy candies, they must be rich since mine and my neighbors could not afford the extra expense.

Mrs. Pierrot was not only rich in croissants, she also had a great supply of patience. I was a dreamer and had the habit of telling never ending stories. That drove my mother crazy after a while. When she couldn’t take it anymore, she suggested that I tell it all to Mrs. Pierrot. Mrs. Pierrot would sit me down with a *Sirop Rouge,* grenadine and water, and a straw, which was the pinnacle of elegance to me. “So, what happened to the princess?” she asked. I took it from there, wherever my imagination would take me. She seemed greatly appreciative of my creativity. I loved her.

My feelings about Mr. Pierrot were just the opposite. He was a little bit of an odd character; grey hair, sallow complexion; all skin and bones like his wife. It seemed as if he never worked. He never stopped drinking Pernod and smoking cigarettes. I didn’t know anything about alcoholism then, but I remember bits and pieces of conversations that I caught from adults here and there, accusatory words. Mr. Pierrot had had throat cancer and he had a big scar under his left jaw. I heard that that occurred because of his smoking. From my height I could see all the details of the scar. It was ugly. Although my father didn’t drink Pernod like Mr. Pierrot, he smoked cigarettes like him. That worried me and caused me to ask little Jesus to protect him from cancer when I went to church on Sunday morning.

August was quiet in my neighborhood because the shipyard was closed for the month. Except for the watermelon eaters, almost everybody napped after lunch when the thermometer reached the nineties in that southern portion of Provence located between Avignon and the sea. The watermelon eaters had never accepted the fact that the southern sun had to be taken very seriously. They just wanted to make sure that they were taking full advantage of their vacation, often turning lobster red with layers of skin peeling off their

bodies. More serious were the sunstrokes. We never heard as many ambulances blasting their sirens down the streets as during the month of August. Apart from that, the arrival of Mr. Silla, the ice cream man, across the street from my house was the only regular, noticeable activity in the early afternoon. Mr. Silla, all dressed in white, including shoes and hat, rode an old-fashioned motorcycle connected to a Pepto Bismol pink two-wheel pushcart, in which he kept his home-made ice cream on ice and salt. He jerked an old-fashioned horn at numerous stops on his route, alerting the population along the waterfront from Mugel to Figuerolles to La Ciotat Plage. At the sound of the horn, I always hoped that my mother would be in a good mood, open her purse and give me ten cents to buy ice cream. It didn't happen every day, unfortunately.

Nothing was unusual on that hot Sunday afternoon of August 1956. Not a single breeze of air to refresh the atmosphere. By 5 pm the neighborhood was slowly coming back to life. The shaded terrace of the Crystal Bar was filling with regulars. Mr. Marini, a diligent customer and Mr. Pierrot were busy arguing about the best place for a tourist to visit. A few minutes earlier, two watermelon eaters had asked them their way to Figuerolles. Mr. Marini had suggested that they visit the zoo in *Bandol*, a nearby town, instead. "You'll see the big monkeys there…" An indignant Mr. Pierrot was now protesting Mr. Marini's lack of loyalty to his native town: "How could you send them to Bandol. There are things to see here. La Ciotat has the highest cliff in France!" Mr. Dejana, who lived in an apartment two floors above the Bar grumbled: "Hey! You're too loud. It's too early. I just woke up. Mrs. Pierrot, can you get me an *expresso, please?"*

My father was inside the bar playing cards. My mother was sitting on the terrace gossiping with a heavy-set Corsican neighbor with a heavy drawl, whose husband was partnering with my father in a four-man game. I was sitting by the two women enjoying a Sirop Rouge with a straw, lost in a daydream.

A car came bumping along on the paving blocks that constituted the port pavement in those days. It made a slow left turn towards the water in order to park. Then the car came to a stop facing the water across the street from the Cristal Bar. A woman and a girl came out of the back doors. While another girl was pushing the front passenger door open to also get out, the car suddenly surged toward the water, pivoted on the stone edge of the quay and slid into the port. Astonished, I froze. The glass of Sirop Rouge slipped through my hand and smashed on the ground. The whole crowd on the Bar terrace jumped from their chairs clamoring in

unison. My mother shouted to my father: “Fredo! Fredo!” My father rushed out of the bar, hustling across the street with the group of male customers and suddenly leaped and disappeared over the quay into the water. The next thing I remember is him standing on the wharf with the driver and the girl who had been trapped between the front seat and the door, all three of them soaked. The woman and the girl who had come out the car’s back doors were also standing there. The crowd that had come to the rescue was now dissipating.

These unfortunate visitors were Adrian and Bea Blumenfeld and their two daughters Susan and Joan, eight and seven years old at the time. We took them to our apartment across the street where communication immediately became a serious issue. None of us spoke English and Bea and Adrian spoke an extremely poor French. Luckily, I had a very resourceful mother. My mother had succeeded communicating with Americans once before. That had taken place on the glorious day when the GI Liberators had driven their jeeps down Rue des Poilus, chasing the German occupiers away in August of 1944. At that time, she had gesticulated her way through a series of expressive hand movements and pantomime. She had successfully explained to the soldiers that her very pregnant girlfriend, starved after years of deprivation, would appreciate a piece of the very white bread they were carrying, at which all the locals surrounding the jeeps were also looking with envy. She used the same technique with our new guests. Her expressive skills worked wonders here too. She indicated to Adrian and Susan that they needed dry clothing while she took a pair of my father’s pants and a shirt and one of my dresses out of the armoire. Susan was about my size. The dress fit her well. But Adrian was tall. He had had to duck his head when entering our apartment or else he’d hit the wall above the door with his forehead. My father was eight inches shorter. Adrian really looked silly in my father’s clothes. To this day speaking about the spectacle makes my mother laugh.

At 8 years old I had never seen any Americans in the flesh. I had figured that they were all tall and good-looking like Gary Cooper and Rita Hayworth. As grandchildren of Italian immigrants, we all had second cousins growing up somewhere in the United States, whom we would probably never meet. America was the place where people went to become rich and we all believed that our so-called relatives must have been wealthy, living in beautiful houses surrounded by big lawns and driving big cars. Rich, the Blumenfelds were surely. Once they took us to a restaurant for dinner. I had never been to a restaurant before and I found the fish soup the best I had ever had. Despite the restaurant episode, a sure evidence of

wealth, I came to find out that the Blumenfelds might not have been as American as I was expecting them to be. Just wanting to make sure that they were the real thing, I asked Susan if she knew Frank Sinatra who was the supreme American star for us Italian-French. She said she did. My conversation with her became a little confusing not only because of the language, but also because I understood that she had never seen any real cowboys and Indians in the flesh. That made me feel a little suspicious of her true Americanness.

After the incident the Blumenfelds remained in town for two weeks. From there sprouted a friendship. They came back to France in 1957. They exchanged letters with my parents for a while. Then, eventually, with time they lost contact.

1956 was the year when I saw the sea smoking for the first time, when the water in the harbor became warmer than the earth during the February great freeze. In Provence, it is remembered as the year when the olive trees died due to the cold. In my family, it is remembered as the year the shipyard workers went on strike under Communist leadership and took the CEO hostage. The leaders were fired. Among them my uncle Joseph, a fervent member of the Communist Party, who would then disappear from our lives until 1966 when he showed up out of the blue at my grandfather’s funeral. Still, for me 1956 will always be the year of the Americans.

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