

HEARTS DON'T BEAT ON LETTERS

Translated by Brian Doyle

Photos? You've come to take photos of my room, of me?

For a book, you say? Well I'll be. Back then, back in Algeria, that would have brought a smile to my face.

In Algeria, absolutely, you heard me. Take a look in that drawer over there, bottom right. Do you see that medal? You wouldn't have thought it, eh, an old *sasa* like me, in his seventies, dozing off in the cosy comfort of Home Saint-Lambert in Sint-Pieters-Woluwe. No joke: I was once a *boudin* in the dirty war, end of the fifties, long ago, so long ago.

My voice is like a circle saw these days, too many cigs you understand, but back then – as *stupide Belge!* – they let me lead the singing when the Legion went to battle. A handsome baritone! Those were the days, those were the days.

Nous sommes des degourdis,

Nous sommes des lascars,

Des types pas ordinaires,

Nous avons souvent notre cafard,

Nous sommes des Legionnaires.

What's that book of yours about? The pensioners in this fancy edifice, gathered here to rot in peace? Say it like it is eh? Eh? There's plenty to like about the place, that's true. When I'm in my wheelchair in the garden, I'm often taken by the interplay between glass and stone and the ever changing light it creates. I never used to think about buildings as *beautiful* before, do you understand? Building were places where the enemy could hide, places to *distrust*. But now, young man, I can see my past in the light reflected in all this glass. What else does an old man have but a past? Would you mind opening the door? Yes, as wide as you can. Do you see the mural on the corridor wall? The tropical scene with the palm trees and the uniform, shiny colours? That's exactly what I thought Algeria was going to be like when I landed as a young

soldier. But what I got was a far cry from the sun, sea and sand on the wall out there. Kids these days and their Holy Trinity – sun, sand and sex – we didn't even get a sniff of it. The *plages* were magnificent, but we were herded like cattle into the interior, and there was a different Holy Trinity waiting for us, the Holy Trinity of war: blood, shit and fear. Take my word for it, young man, filth, you can't imagine the like of it. *Our* brutality and *their* brutality, I swear to God my throat turns to sandpaper when I think about it. Take a look in that cupboard, would you; grab a couple of glasses, the bottle's on the bottom shelf. Let's share a drop of the hard stuff. It's decent hooch, let me assure you, a *légionnaire* can tell the difference. We made sure we were well watered, even in Algeria, and when we'd had a skinfull my mate Bisserund and me would sing

*Pigalle, Pigalle,
das ist die grosse Mausefalle,
mitten in Paris.*

You got it, Sergeant Bisserund was a Jerry, a top notch Jerry I might add; saved my skin more than once that Bisserund with his angular face and sturdy little frame. There were other Kraut in our company, patent sons-of-bitches, let me tell you. Our chief instructor, a bastard to the core, was ex-SS. The top guns at the Legion liked that sort; they made the best instructors. Bisserund was an odd bugger, I swear to God. He spent every free moment with his nose in a book. He promised time after time to teach me to read and write. The older you get the harder it becomes. I was already twenty-two and I couldn't read a word. What do you expect? I was raised on a farm in Henegouwen, and by the time my old man let me go to school – reluctantly, believe me – the Germans were at the door. And when the war was over, we had to work hard on the farm to put food on the table. School was a waste of time. Bisserund planned to compensate, teach me to read and write, open up the world of letters. But we were in the thick of the war and General Massu would send us out on one *ratissage* after the other. So nothing came of it. Jean-Claude, Bisserund used to say, Jean-Claude, you don't have the hands for it, you've got the paws and arse of a bear; those are paws not hands, you'll never hold a pen. You look a bit like Bisserund, if you don't mind me saying, those curls and that, er, snub nose. Bisserund, my best mate... There's a real

resemblance, you know, but you're a lot younger of course. You're a photographer, you have a trained eye. Bisserund was the same, believe it or not. And that eye of his came in handy at the most impossible moments. Take that night in the middle of the desert not far from Colomb Bechar, surrounded by Bedouins shooting at us like madmen with their old-fashioned front loaders. And at night their women nearly drove us all crazy with their endless whining. After a couple of hours my nerves were in tatters. I yearned to let those towelheads have it, shoot them to pieces, rip them open with my bayonet, and suddenly there was Bisserund, with that crumpled grin of his: look up bear paw, he said, do you see the stars, will-o'-the-wisps on velvet? I came *this* close to shooting *him* to pieces, but he had such a mischievous look in his face that I patted him on the back, almost choking from laughter, drivelling that he was my mate, my godamned best mate.

Beauty, young man, as you say: you need an eye for it and that he had, the *Sauerkraut*. All my life I've had more of an eye for crap, if you'll excuse the word. God only knows why Bisserund joined the Legion, we never talked about it, but he had studied medicine in the past and he wanted to write a book about our experiences when we both got home. We called him Sergeant Baraka, that's Arabic for immortal. Mortar attacks in the desert, bombings in Algiers, gun battles with tetchy FLN militants? Sergeant Baraka would be covered in blood, cuts and gashes, but he would still be on his feet, steady as a rock, there wasn't a bullet with his name on it. Look, I've got a picture of him here somewhere; let me see... there, what do you think? Do you see the likeness between you? Surely a little? That angular face, that nose... Maybe it's just me, I'm a bit short sighted these days. But even your voice... And of course, he loved to take photos. You photograph buildings, he was into women... You also like to photograph women? Oh, I see. Men are all the same, even at my age. There's a nurse here, *crème-chocolat*, a pretty young thing... We don't make it easy for them, what with our bad breath and the other er... shall we say odours. The gas on the corridors in this place is worse than a desert latrine at times... Growing old is nothing but misery; you're still young, enjoy life, it passes faster than a bullet... That nurse, an agreeable young filly, reminds me of a girl in Algiers who broke my heart... Oolala, she's a pretty one, but at my age beauty is a rattrap: the bar breaks your rat-like neck leaving the cheese a centimetre out

of reach, and as the smell of it intoxicates you, your life trickles away, and that final tasty morsel... forget it.

Beauty, young man, beauty's a killer... I should know.

All we wanted, back then in Algiers, was to have a bit of fun. It's for you to judge, of course, but hindsight is always twenty-twenty, isn't it? In action we were happy with one of those Chaouia chicks. To be honest they weren't the cleanest and it was usually done in a jiffy, but we were easily pleased and they weren't ugly, don't think that, they had glorious eyes and lips. But watch out, it was dangerous; most of them just did it to feed their kids, and they hated our guts. And don't forget: if the fanatical Muslims found out what those floozies did for a living, they cut their throats... Bisserund was sick of all that fucking around. His words, not mine. He wanted *quality* in bed. When we had time off in Algiers, he worked himself into such a state he ended up on fatigue duty in the barracks laundry. The *Front de Libération Nationale* was in full swing at the time with assaults in the city, but we paid no attention. If an FLN bomb tore you to shreds, that was fate: kaboom and the tomb. That's what we used to say: kaboom and the tomb. Bisserund was extremely pissed at being stuck with laundry duty. He was set on revenge... He stopped me one morning, told me he'd pinched a couple of officers' uniforms, a first lieutenant and a captain. Our size, give or take, we would look like a couple of toffs. I'd seldom seen my Jerry friend so cheerful, so high-spirited. Our plan was simple: we would don our "borrowed" uniforms and visit the cafés where the daughters of the *Colons*, the French Algerians, got together. There were a couple of tasty morsels among them, let me tell you; we'd already noticed on earlier excursions, but they always turned up their noses at the sight of an ordinary Legionnaire's uniform. No fun and games there... What if the military police caught us by the short and curlies? That was my question. Bisserund's answer was typical: you make your bed, you lie in it.

I looked impressive as captain, if I was to believe Bisserund that is; he didn't look too shabby in his first lieutenant's uniform either. We headed off to the *Printemps à Paris* where the girls

sipped Pernod and shooed away hordes of postcard selling Algerian scamps. If you ask me, some of those little *bougnoules* were scouting for the *Fellagha* and their bombs, but security was particularly tight that night and we weren't expecting any explosions. You had to be ready to go the distance to get your nose under one of those skirts... Before we knew it our luck was in. Jeanine had a tempting smile, slender red lips, and open, honest eyes. She was already calling me "teddy bear" after a couple of Pernods. Bisserund was much handier at that sort of thing than me. He cut right to the chase – can't remember her name – and the two of them left together. She knew of a room in a discrete boarding-house. Those women were on the ball, let me tell you. Powdered noses, maybe, but when it came to the crunch they were randy little buggers. Jeanine and I decided to stay. And believe it or not, young man, for me it was love at first sight. I was sitting in front of an angel, and there was no convincing me otherwise. I wanted to get her into bed, absolutely, but just for once I also wanted to be a *gentleman*, do you get my drift? She wanted to talk about all sort of things I knew nothing about and I pretended I was recovering from a head wound to hide my ignorance. Jeanine rattled on for hours on end, turned all giggly, and tapped me on the knee. Then she whispered with a naughty look in her eye that *fruits de mer* made her feel "romantic" and why didn't I order. She pushed the menu in my direction. But I couldn't read it, not a word. Bisserund had done the honours up till then and we'd already squandered half a month's wages.

I was on my own. Jeanine insisted I order *coquilles*, a portion of *homard* perhaps, and why not some *calmards* and *pétoncles*? It put my head in a spin. I hadn't realised I was running my finger along the letters on the menu. The waiter was waiting. I blushed from ear to ear. The look of surprise on Jeanine's face! Come on my big handsome officer, she said, is it so hard to choose? I should just have guessed, pointed nonchalantly at something on the menu and if it was wrong blamed it on memory loss from my head wound. But I'm hopeless at pretending and I'm also a bit slow on the uptake. What's gotten into you, Jeanine asked, what's all the squinting about, why didn't I order... My heart was in my throat. Her eyes glazed over with a suspicious silvery sheen. She didn't know what it was, but she knew something was amiss. And do you know what I blurted?

“Hearts don’t beat on letters.”

Where did they come from, those words, how did they combine inside of me? Now, today, fifty years later, I still don’t know. The sound of them just flowed from my mouth, which had a sour taste to it, as if my stomach wasn’t right. I got to my feet and walked away, what else could I do? If Jeanine had grilled me I would have told her who I really was, an illiterate private. Then the MPs would have turned up, and what then? Disciplinary action, weeks if not months on the front lines of the desert campaign, surrounded by dead comrades, their throats cut, blood and innards everywhere. And we’d just finished a stint at the front, Bisserund and me. I staggered back to the barracks as if I’d guzzled litres of Pernod, Jeanine’s parting glance still stinging like acid on my skin... On the way I heard someone call my name. Bisserund caught up with me, a huge grin on his face: a wild bit of skirt under those Parisian airs, bear paw, wow, a hungry bitch. He saw my face, put his hand on my shoulder, listened to my story... When I finished he shook his head. We made our way back to the barracks in silence. He took me by the shoulders, told me he had exaggerated, that his chick hadn’t been up to much, that he wouldn’t mind scoring again with something wilder; come, bear paw, my treat, no arguing, a captain has a right to a bit of distraction and a first lieutenant isn’t a true war hero until he’s fired his cannon twice in the same night. I knew he was lying, that this was for me, and I wanted to tell him so. But the way he looked at me, the loyalty in his eyes, he was my *mate*, you see, he *loved* me. A little further ahead there was a colonial style house with two men standing in front. “Wait here,” said Bisserund. “Your buddy knows the ropes. I’ll make sure you come like a Minotaur.” I only looked it up years later, that word, Minotaur, when I took evening classes to learn to read and write... he had a thing with words, that Bisserund, he always hit the nail on the head: I was a half-crazy bull in a maze of ignorance... I tried to hold him back... my confidence was fading by the minute. “Not in Algiers,” I said. “Too dangerous.” A visit to the ladies of the night in Algiers was a risky business, no denying it. “Don’t concern yourself,” said Bisserund. “As soon as they see our epaulets they’ll jump to attention automatically!” He pulled that crooked grin of his! “Just make sure that general of yours is also standing to attention; this is going to be a parade to remember!” He saw me hesitate, grabbed my sleeve. “You need this, Jean-Claude,” he said, and this time he

was serious. I've thought a lot about those words down through the years, young man: he didn't say: *we need this*.

A comrade and a half, that Bisserund.

We ended up walking into the whore's room together, shoulder to shoulder. I've no idea why. Strange what the memory can do. Maybe Bisserund just wanted to demonstrate his solidarity to the last, maybe it was my idea because I couldn't have cared a rat's arse by then. I do remember Bisserund joking about a double barrelled gun, and me answering that the heart didn't beat on letters but the *queue* still liked to gobble the girlies. I don't think we were planning to hump her together, but to be honest I'm not really sure. She was still a young little thing and she started to screech when she saw the two of us blundering into her boudoir. We didn't understand any of it and panicked; the place was crawling with Algerian pimps, you understand, with long knives. We grabbed and gagged her. Bisserund told her in Arabic that she should shut her mouth, or else... And the poor bitch just stared at us with those doe eyes, the biggest eyes I've ever seen. Bisserund brandished some money and placed his finger on her lips. She nodded, we let her go and started to take off our uniforms. She rummaged around in her harem wardrobe and suddenly, believe it or not, she was standing there with a curved blade in her hand. Where it came from no one knows. It all happened so fast. She screamed and thrust it into Bisserund's crotch. I gave her a wallop and she fell on the bed. Bisserund coughed and panted, bent double, bleeding. The panic that came over me at that moment! I was so scared I completely lost it. I had my duty weapon in my hand and started to shoot at random. A shriek of pain, and thump, people running. I grabbed Bisserund, threw him over my shoulder, and legged it down the corridor towards the exit. People shouted after me, I aimed my pistol at the voices, still running like a madman, and pulled the trigger. I fired blind, two shots thundered along the corridor and I was outside, outside! Bisserund groaned, bled, and cursed, hanging over my shoulder like a bag of laundry. And all I could say was: "Hans, you can't snuff it, you can't! If you dare kick the bucket on me I'll dump you in a godamned fountain! Hans, please!"

I used what cash we had over for a taxi. Before we left the fort we had slipped the sentries some money. Almost all the soldiers and even some of the officers did that when they we're heading into the city and knew that they would be late getting back. I told them we'd been in a fight, that knifes had been drawn. The sentries insisted I disappear with Bisserund before the duty officer appeared and I didn't argue. Before bringing him to the infirmary, I first had to get him out of his uniform in the laundry. I had to do it in the dark. I didn't dare switch on a light. I stuffed the bloody bundle deep into a pile of laundry, took off my captain's uniform and tossed it on another pile. Trying to get Bisserund back on my shoulder in his soldier's gear was a job and a half, but I managed... He survived, but he had taken a nasty stab to the balls and they had to amputate one of his testicles. We joked about it later, but inside I knew that it was my fault Bisserund's buddies called him *Einselhoden* and I've never gotten over it. I was almost relieved, if you get my meaning, when he walked into a *Fellagha* trap a year later in 1961 and opened the door to soldier heaven. It was as if an enormous weight had been lifted from my shoulders... Friendship is like love, young man: one little wound and it runs through your fingers like sand...

Do you mind if I trouble you for just one more minute? What do you think of this birthday card? It's her birthday tomorrow, that cute little nurse who stirs so many memories in me because she looks like Jeanine. And look, what do you think of my handwriting? Elegant, eh? Bisserund would have been proud of me.

No, that's what it says: *The heart doesn't devour letters, it's devoured by time.*