

He opened the book and wrote out the word: BUSINESS. Then he wrote: NOT NOW BUT LATER. He looked at the words and picked up the pen again. But as he considered what to write he realised that no one else in the cafe was writing, and that if he were to start writing he would seem even more suspicious, no longer a businessman, but more like a police spy or an informant, observing and reporting on these people. He wrote nothing. He drank the mint tea, from the little glass. He looked, furtively, at the cakes on a shelf, but they seem unfamiliar, sugar-coated, unsafe. He wondered if he should speak to the men. But they ignored him, they had gone back talking amongst themselves.

Finally he got up and asked the man behind the counter the way to the centre of town.

*Business?* asked the man.

*Later. I need to find the centre of town.*

The man shrugged and smiled. He was a genial man.

*Straight ahead, always go straight ahead.*

Sparrow went out into the street again. He thought he could hear the men muttering behind him, *business, business, business.*

clothes, grey trousers, plastic jackets, un-ironed shirts. Other wore sports clothing. The men fell silent and looked at him suspiciously. His presence seemed to have altered the atmosphere in the cafe. But he wished to feel at home and for these people to feel at home with him. He wondered just where these men are from, were they North African, or Middle Eastern, or Eastern European, or from some other backyard?

*A small beer please.*

He looked around. No one was drinking beer. *Ah, no beer. Of course. Then a tea.*

*Business?* said the man behind the counter, in a kind of English.

*Business?* asked Sparrow.

*You want to do business?*

*What kind of business?*

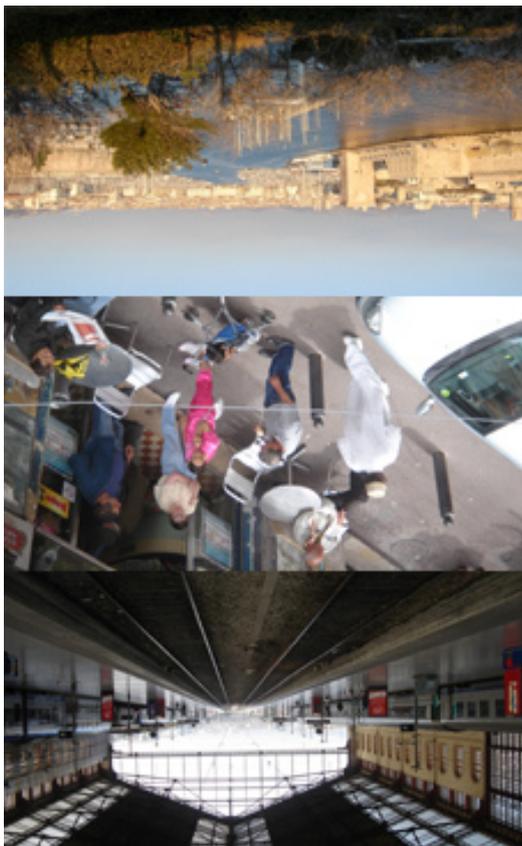
*Business.*

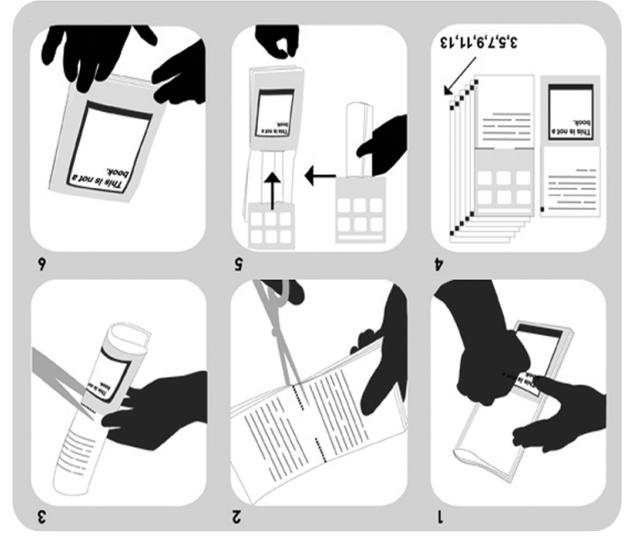
*No, replied Sparrow. No, not just now. But later. Just the tea please.*

He sat at a small table. He felt he needed something to do. He brought out a small notebook to write down his thoughts, because he knew that if he forgot to write things down they would vanish and be lost.

# Marseille Mix: never look at the map

William Firebrace





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### Marseille Mix: never look at the map William Firebrace

The bright light was suddenly shut out.  
Darkness outside.

A few maintenance lights.

The train passed through a long tunnel.

The railway carriage was cool quiet and comfortable. The seats, the tables, the light, the harmonious colours, all were elegantly designed. The passengers mostly ignored one another, each on his own journey.

Emil Sparrow, origin Swiss, professor of Psycho-cultural Studies in a small and hated south German university, currently engaged in a research operation into the city of Marseille, closed the detective story he had been reading. The gypsy drug dealer had just been shot. The Islamics were on the run. The cynical jazz-loving detective was back in his favourite bar, drinking too much, planning his next move. The corrupt police were, as always, dealing on both sides. The beautiful North African woman, after a night of passion, had met her sad end. The mistral was blowing through the streets of the city, cleaning out the dirt and gloom. The cover showed a half-naked girl blowing bubble-gum, and a church, in lurid colours.

*Ladies and gentlemen. We will shortly be arriving at the main railway station of the city of Marseille.*

*See, said the girl, I was right. We found out. And we found out nothing much. And you didnt guess, so I won. Whats my prize?*

*The train emerged from the tunnel. Sudden light. Tower blocks, low buildings, sheds, factories, roads. Another European city. Nowhere in particular. Except that not far away there was visible the grey-blue of the sea.*

*The father sighed and was about to reply. He looked irritated. He had lost this last game, as well as all the others on the long journey. He glanced sideways, disapprovingly and also with curiosity, at the cover of the detective story.*

*Why should I guess, said the girl, we will find out anyway when we arrive. Anyway I am tired of playing games. You guess.*

*Guess, said the father to the little girl sitting beside him, and opposite Sparrow. Guess what we shall see at the end of the tunnel. The girl continued to colour in the dinosaurs in her book. Most of the creatures seem to be pink or light blue, a prehistoric world with a curious feminine tone.*

*We wish you a pleasant stay. Please remember to take all your baggage with you.*

There are several exits from the Marseille railway station.

Perhaps whichever exit is taken determines the image of the city in the mind of the visitor, as though the very first experience of any city remains the strongest, burnt like light onto a slow photographic film. All later experiences simply modify this first moment, but can never erase it.

Or, perhaps the image of the city is already decided in the mind of the visitor, before he even arrives, through the rumours and stray information which tumble carelessly through the world. And these vague impressions determine subconsciously which exit the visitor will take, suggesting one route rather than another, pressing him gently to move to the left of the newsstand rather than the right, to follow without much thought this group of people rather than others.

The usual exit to the left of the newsstand in the Marseille station Saint-Charles takes the traveller out onto the grand steps leading down towards the centre of the city. Standing at the top of the steps, surprised to be out of the dim light of the

station, most visitors pause for a moment for a view of the city. The view stretches down to the statues of women representing the former colonies, Asia and Africa, then along the Boulevard d'Athènes, with its dilapidated nineteenth century houses, across the Canabiere, across the bourgeois houses of the 6th district to the hills and to the sky beyond. Up to the right, on the hill, is visible the church of Notre Dame de la Garde, also known as la Bonne Mere. Women all. Asia. Africa. Good Mother. There are usually some people standing here, at the steps, waiting for one moment, about to step down into the city, or perhaps about to turn away and leave it.

In the confusion of people within the station, Sparrow missed the main exit, passed by the newsstand to the right rather than the left, went down an escalator into a dark corridor, through building works and street reconstructions, barriers and stationary traffic, out to Boulevard Charles-Nedelec.

Sparrow found himself beside an open patch of land, with ditches and mounds of earth, marked by white labels on sticks. Various men and women were sifting the earth, apparently looking

The experience left him facing to the right.  
Always walk straight on.  
He felt sure that if he walked straight on, without pausing or hesitating, then he would be certain to arrive at something he knew.  
It was a very fine afternoon, the air fresh and with a slight scent of the sea.

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This is a fragment from *Marseille Mix*, a forthcoming book exploring the city's literary, criminal, urban, gastronomic and cinematic aspects.

for archaeological remains. All around there was the heat of the afternoon sun, the rush of traffic. Beside the open land were some tatty buildings of a certain age. A little further on was an another open space, with some trees. Under the trees sheltered a group of people with cloths, sleeping-bags and placards. Sparrow looked around. He seemed not to have arrived in a city at all, but some kind of half-inhabited landscape.

*The town centre?* He asked a man coming by.  
*Yes,* said the man, *this is the town centre.*  
He looked at Sparrow in an friendly way and began to speak very fast, explaining something complicated. Sparrow quickly lost the thread. The man hurried on.

Sparrow entered a zone of narrow streets, cluttered with merchandise, cloths, plastic objects, clothes, jewellery, long-distance call shops, small restaurants selling snacks and tea, the pavements occupied by sellers with a few shoes, some electronics, some broken toys. Groups of men sat around doing nothing in particular, as though waiting for something to occur. Sometimes the vendors seemed about to greet Sparrow, but he looked away. A sudden shift seemed to have happened, without warning,

He wondered which way straight ahead might be. The street was very narrow. Either he could go left or right, but not straight ahead. A motor-scooter came down the street very fast, from the left. Both the driver and the passenger wore crash-helmets and scarves around the lower half of their faces. The scooter stopped suddenly beside Sparrow, pushing him up against the wall. The passenger put her hand into the pocket of her jacket, as though about to pull out some object. The passenger stared at Sparrow. Sparrow looked with surprise into her blue eyes. Everything was happening at a speed beyond his ability to react. The visible part of her face was tanned, the eyebrows dark and thick. Her eyes seemed both anxious and threatening. Sparrow breathed in suddenly and deeply. He realised something unpleasant was about to happen. The rider shook his head. The girl looked away. The scooter drove off, accelerating fast. An experience, though Sparrow, or almost an experience. It is important to have experiences, even if they are not always easily explained.

he seemed to have moved into a non-European world, or into a zone which showed that the European world is not always what he had assumed it to be. The familiar seemed not to be so familiar any more. People pushed passed him, but paid him no attention. He was now the stranger. Some of the streets were empty, closed up. He would pause, uncertain as to whether to enter, not sure just whether the street would lead nowhere, or might lead to a dead-end. Never look at the map. To look at the map would certainly be a mistake. It would show that he was already lost, and to be visibly lost when everybody else seemed to know there way would be too distinctive, too much a sign of not belonging. It was only possible to keep on moving. Sparrow was uncertain as to just what kind of area he had now entered. It did not seem exactly dangerous, simply unfamiliar. He stopped for a moment at a small cafe. He hesitated, then entered. All the customers were men, talking amongst themselves or playing cards. Mostly they wore slightly old-fashioned