

Room for a view

Under Cézanne's shadow

When I jogged the hills outside Aix-en-Provence I was chased by dogs. They were fierce and determined, and even when the side roads appeared empty I was on the lookout for them. In Provence, dogs were skilled at hiding in grass, behind thick stone walls and in dips at the roadside.

They waited for me to come over the hills.

I saw their bared teeth and their flattened ears and felt the sharp chill of fear. Many seemed truly vicious and snapped at me as I passed. They lunged at my heels, jumped at my hands and seized my jogging pants in their teeth. Untethered, they ran at full speed for some distance.

That year in Provence, I became a fast runner.



I graduated from medical school in 1970 and left a few months later for Provence. There was something mystical about the hills, the scent of the land, the still clarity of light and colour that entered the senses.

The dogs smelled a stranger and did not welcome me. Provençal dogs were trained to hunt, to warn, to attack.

Country homes had barred windows and locked gates, and broken glass was set into the tops of their garden walls. The old villas were picturesque, situated

on hilltops, overlooking valleys and vineyards. Curious, I jogged the dirt roads to see everything close up.

I began to wear thick gloves and run with a big stick.

I filled my backpack with a drawing pad,

pencils, pocket knife, oil pastels, an art eraser and charcoal, and sprinted by walking trails, valleys, over small bridges and across meadows. I found old stone fences and abandoned farm-

houses. Later, as my sweat cooled, I drew hills, ruins, aqueducts, fig trees. Each quiet reverie of drawing was pierced by a

snarl. Posted on villa walls was the warning:

Attention: chien méchant.



The most beautiful views were at sunset or dawn. Life was not a straight line, as the Provençal novelist Jean Giono wrote, but a gyre. Beginnings. Endings. Fields glowed ruby, amethyst; the rolling hills, vineyards, dark cypress and pine became paintings. At the crest of a hill eastward rose Mont Ste. Victoire, majestic with its massive ivory shoulders. To the west, workers in blue overalls bent over the fields, reaping hay, as if van Gogh's time was now. Everywhere was rust earth, silver-green olive trees, the scent of rosemary, and azure skies.

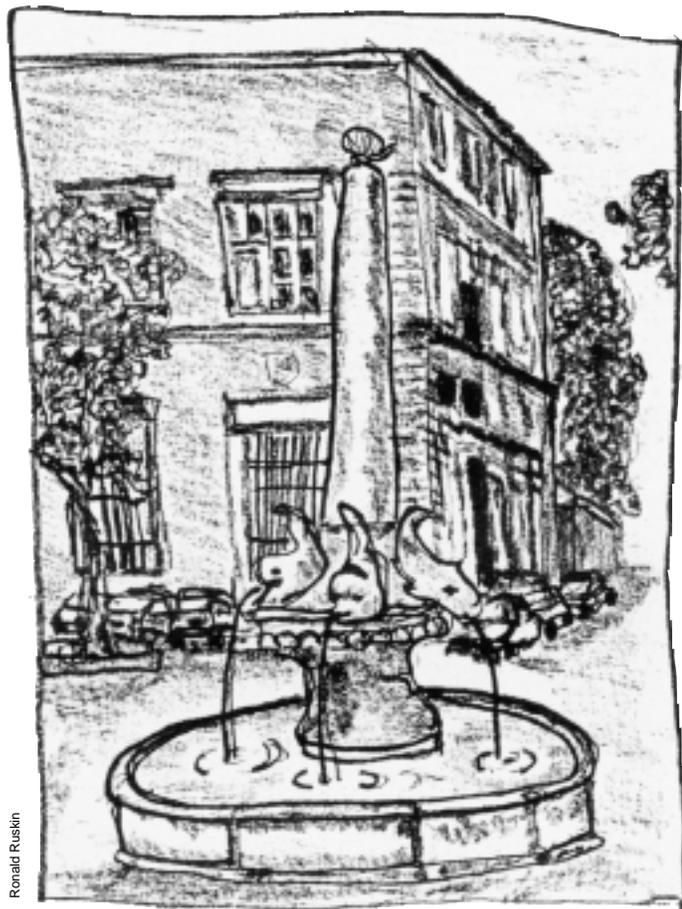
I wrote home about my tiny flat in Luynes, not far from the old Marseilles road. I wrote of the vineyards outside my window and *les rossignols* singing at night and enclosed sketches of the country. Three times a week I jogged the hills. Slowly, I sensed a change. Imperceptibly at first, an unknown side of myself stirred, for which I had no words.

My landlord found out I was a doctor. His wife asked about migraines during the mistral. Students came to me with their aches. I listened; I tried to help. Once I sent a young woman back home to Canada for treatment.

But I did not want to be a doctor in Provence.



I studied philosophy at Aix University and art at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After class I had a demi in the cafés along the Cours Mirabeau, an elegant tree-lined boulevard with central fountains. Cafés were arranged politically, left to right, along the Cours: Maoist-Leninist cafés were on the left, fascist cafés were on the right. The fed-



Fountain of Quatre Dauphins
Aix-en-Provence

Ronald Rustin

eral police, the dreaded CRS, parked their blue vans between the two, waiting for riots. In that year after de Gaulle's death all was in flux.

In those days the Canadian dollar was worth something and cash-poor youths like myself, who otherwise could not live abroad, studied in Aix. Canadians — French and English — sat in cafés and argued about separation.

Separation kept us together. We debated passionately in French into the night — strangers, then opponents, and later friends.

The next month, in October, the FLQ murdered Pierre Laporte.



That fall at the university I noticed a sign: *Equipe canadienne de hockey cherche joueurs*.

A group of hockey-sick Canucks went to Marseilles, where there was an ice rink and equipment on loan from a local team. The coach, Réjean, from the Marseilles consular office, spoke no English. There were three criteria for making the team. You had to be Canadian. You had to play hockey well. You had to hit the body.

We practised three hours every Sunday. Skating. Rushing. Shooting. Checking. Scrimmaging. I worked hard to understand French; I wanted to make the team.

To keep in shape, I jogged.

Hockey made my French fluent. I no longer had to work hard to understand others. I noticed that the dogs, too, had turned a touch less vicious. They still intrepidly chased me, forcing me to sprint past their masters' villas, but under their distrustful gaze I entered another universe.

I grew to fathom the soul of Provençal dogs. We were not exactly enemies. We simply had different roles.

Theirs was to protect their territory. Mine was to run.



I wrote home to say that I might stay another year.

I jogged the Aix roads and locals stopped to frown. I was a crazy Canuck. I sprinted across country roads and city streets. The French preferred cycling. Undaunted, I ran by *rue Gaston de Saporta*, where university classes were held, along *avenue Paul Cézanne* and *route de Tholonet*, where Cézanne had a



my flat at Luynes

Ronald Ruskin

studio; I ran to the *Musée Granet* and saw Cézanne's sketches and oils.

On New Year's morning a feathery snow fell over Aix. Cars spun out of control and people hesitated to walk. By noon the hills were white; at dusk the countryside was mauve and pink. The French feared snow and warned of danger.

That day I went for a long jog, feeling the icy touch of a lost friend. I sat and sketched the hills.

By noon the next day the snow had vanished.



After two months of practice, our *Equipe Canada* was ready for some of the best squads. The French were quick, agile, and had trained longer than us.

"Ah, so you worry?" Réjean said. "They look good, but you skate hard; a few stiff checks, yes? We shall see."

We had names like Nadeau, Pitre,

Chouinard, Gray, Marchard, Ruskin. After practices we ate couscous and bickered over politics, but on ice we were like Dumas' musketeers. All for one and one for all.

That year we won our series. After the last match in Marseilles, Réjean held a victory dinner near the old port. As the night air cooled, misty-eyed, already nostalgic, we vowed to keep close. We

talked boldly of next year. Many of us were leaving. I did not want to go home.

"And where will you be?" Réjean asked.

"Perhaps here," I said. "But I have residency back home."

"Alors," Rejean said. "You go home. We all go home."

By April Aix had grown tropical.

The countryside filled with mimosa, sprouting vines, almond blossoms. Our hockey season was gone but, like the flowers, I was grow-

ing. I visited museums and saw Cézanne's country sketches. How had he seized such colour? I jogged into the burning Provence hills, looking at flowers, not only with a passion for discovery but with farewell eyes.

In May a letter came from my residency program. The director had not heard from me. Was I coming?

That afternoon I set out for my longest run. Past Luynes into vineyards, through valleys, up hills, along meadows, to a cliff overlooking Aix. I waited. I sipped the still air.

A last sketch.

This time the dogs did not chase me. Was it the noon heat, or did we understand each other?

I no longer carried a big stick.

Soon I would be home.

Ronald Ruskin

Senior Staff Psychiatrist
Mount Sinai Hospital
Toronto, Ont.