

Translated with the help and corrections of

Janet Daldy

Chapter 2 - Le Café de Plaisance¹

(The Navy and Fun Bar)

That evening, Paco entered this rather quiet bistro² on the Port-Neuf Quay: *Le Café de Plaisance*. This building faces the *Canal du Midi*, at the corner of Barge Street, just before the last lock that leads to the canal bridge. He loved this old building that seemed to disavow the devastating modernisation. The old wineries that lined the canal were now replaced by prestigious buildings. Only this bar with the appearance of a guinguette³ resisted the real-estate speculation by keeping its authentic retro look.

This afternoon had been difficult. Paco had just left his new psychologist with threatening words. In one year, he had exhausted three experts; this would be the last one. In the grip of a deep depression, Paco, a solitary man with a tough character, had declared at the first session that he considered Dr. Georges Antoine Viillard as his last resort and that he would give him a few weeks to help him get out of it. If the

¹ In French, *Plaisance* means navigation and fun

² Wine bar

³ Popular outside dancing bar

therapy failed, then Paco would kill himself. "Victory or death," he thought loudly.

Yet Dr. Viallard's consultation went as well as it could. Instead of trying to do what other colleagues had tried to do before him, i.e., give him a speech that aimed to explain the ins and outs of depression in order to get him out of his suicidal thoughts, Viallard listened patiently and wrote down all the words that Paco used. As an expert in linguistics and communication, he turned the sentences over in writing, reversing subject, verb and complement. In doing so, he reappropriated all of Paco's speech and very quickly managed to restructure an almost monotonous text without adding another word. Then, after a few minutes of cogitation and writing, the doctor launched into a long, interminable monologue that repeated, strictly and without irony, all the words and expressions spoken by Paco. In conclusion, Dr. Viallard recommended that he dedicate these last weeks to do everything he had wanted to do for a long time. To dare to realise his desires and indulge in whims and fancies, as long as his finances allowed.

Paco felt that he was heard and understood at best. But this speech intrigued him. The conclusion had left him breathless. So, he looked for a mirror among the decorative paintings. He found one between a copy of Escher and a caricature of Freud. And there, he contemplated an abundance of filthy hair, a tired and wrinkled face hidden under a salt and pepper beard, neglected clothes and worn shoes. Even he smelled a rancid odour. "Now!" said the doctor,

“start in the right order: shower, hairdresser, beauty salon, clothes shop and perfume shop! Give me just one reason not to spend all the money you have?”

Paco exited the doctor office, sceptical and pitiful. His morbidness had run away, for now, leaving a new thought. How can changing one's physical appearance change one's life? Is it enough to make a few futile changes to one's look to feel better? Aren't relationships between people systematically mediated by common goods? At a time when relationships are superficial, disposable and virtual, can we still believe in friendship or real and lasting love? All these issues questioned his deep beliefs. For a long time, he had resisted this consumer society that imposes false needs and superficial relationships. But now, he thought it was time to try this ultimate experience. So, the rest of the afternoon was devoted to his metamorphosis.

So, it was a new Paco, more dashing and in line with the new requirements, who went that evening to the stronghold of the resistance of the authentic bar: *Le Café de Plaisance*. On his way, at the entrance of the *Plateau des Poètes*, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Delighted to break his solitude so quickly, Paco turned around and saw a poor woman stammering: "Claude! Claude! Oh, excuse me, I thought you were Claude! Then, without waiting, she left in the direction of the garden. Disappointed, Paco resumed his walk towards the Port Neuf Quay.

Despite the late hour, some English people were still playing *petanque*⁴. The weather was nice and warm. The owner, a pretty redhead girl, who sat tenderly at the bar under an old Ricard sign, had put on some music. Waltzes, javas and tangos as her regulars liked. Piaf was still singing, and Astor Piazzolla was still playing his bandoneon. The customers had left the counter for the terrace, which had been cleared of its plastic chairs. People were dancing under the garlands of lights. Paco passed the group of dancers with indifference and sat down on a stool near the counter. As usual, he tried to get a feel for the atmosphere by scrutinising his surroundings thoughtfully. A pair of crutches remained curiously leaning against a table without a guest. Paco noticed it, glanced around and ordered a beer, a tastier and more expensive one this time. He was following the psychologist's instructions. The changes he had made to his appearance did not seem to have any immediate consequences. His loneliness continued to pursue him. However, his attention was drawn to a young man who was making two girls dance simultaneously, very freely, very equally. Amazing! Strange! He looked like him! A genuine clone: identical denim jacket, white shirt and short hair with a prominent lock. But this look-alike was dancing like a god. To make two beautiful girls whirl like that, he had to have some sacred talent. The young man linked passes with grace and flair in a surprising balance. His partners

⁴ Southern and local bowls game

responded with broad smiles with each step. A flash of shared happiness. And then the music stopped.

Then Paco saw one of the girls fetch the set of crutches and hand them to the young dancer. He weakened on contorted legs then abruptly straightened up to walk very stiffly. And yet, a moment earlier when he was dancing, his handicap was quite invisible.

This scene plunged Paco into a deep perplexity. So, it was only the inner strength of the movement that gave balance!

He had understood. As he left the *Café de Plaisance*, he remained for a moment contemplative, on the quay, before the spectacle of the lock emptying to allow the passage of the last barge.

With the way clear, Paco, the taciturn man, went off with a great burst of laughter.

Copyright Béziers, A walk aside by Jean-Paul Faure