



Source: Nidal Al-mughrabi, Reuters, 'Hamas ends Israel truce after 10 killed', *The Age online*, 11/06/06.

Tags: [evidence](#), [streets](#), [intimacy](#)

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I'm searching for a man on the metro, searching the faces of the people who get on or off at every stop. A quick glance, no eye contact, and surreptitiously, in case it's him. I don't know exactly what he looks like, but I have an idea. I've seen a photograph, badly taken, in which he's sitting awkwardly on a bed, as if snapped just in the act of sitting, or perhaps just getting up. His edges are blurry, but he's smiling, you can see that much, and his hair is short and dark, and his skin somewhat greenish in the poor light of the photograph.

Marni showed it to me, simultaneously smug and embarrassed as she pulled it, crumpled from too much showing, or looking perhaps, from a plastic zip-lock bag. She showed me the slim booklet he'd made for her, from expensive art paper, each page inscribed by hand and ornamented with little line drawings. A book of love poems, we deduced, though there also seemed to be one about an old woman, and pigeons. Neither of us could really read French at the time. In any case Marni didn't let me rifle through it for long. She was always protective of her treasures.

In return she'd given him, Hamzah, a lock of hair, a thick wad of letters written in a fever of outpouring, and a photograph of herself, taken when she was young. She was a little anxious, she confessed. That lock of hair, like every hair on her head since she was twenty-two, had been dyed its jet and deadpan black and might just weep its colour, permanent though the packaging assured one, onto his lips as he lifted it to them, or onto his cheek that caressed its softness, or onto the palm of his hand. For Hamzah had held these gifts to his body, from her hands they had passed to his, to be held against the skin of his body. For Paris had become a place of wild winds and sudden rainstorms. For such fervent gestures were not uncommon where Marni was concerned.

Sometimes, as I search the faces on the metro or around the streets and boulevards where I'm staying, I look for a man in the distance, walking towards me, whose hair is short and features indistinct, but whose lips are somewhat streaky, whose cheek displays a telltale imprint.

You come to Paris for heartache, Marni said. Heartache is easy here, even in summer, when romance is everywhere, the body's heat out hunting, but especially in winter. Then the greyness of the city dominates, days of rain wash down like tears in cheap novels, the streets glisten, carrying the echoes of your footsteps even further. Then the air scrapes at your skin, cheeks and fingers, it pares you back in spite of all your layers. So you come to Paris in winter, she said, you drag your backpack up the narrow stairs to a room on the topmost floor. You hang cloths around the room, gauzy Indian prints or batik for the memory of warmer climates, and you pin some postcards

above the dresser. You soften the room's anonymity. Wander a whole afternoon away, gazing in through shop windows, hesitating on a doorstep where the shop assistants look like they might be friendly. You hunch over in a bus shelter, peering at your guidebook, phrasebook, map, somehow embarrassed, whisking them from sight when anyone passes. You fold your map into the smallest possible sections, nestle the guidebook in the folds of a newspaper. For some reason you'd rather be lost than seem lost in this city.

From the window Marni leaned out looking at the street. On fine days washing fluttered out the windows opposite, she wrote, and the smells of frying drifted over towards her. Voices echoed through glass as cold as icecubes, as thin as paper, which she pressed her forehead against in order to glimpse an elbow in the slit between the lace curtains opposite, or a slice of colourful head-dress. Sometimes a child's legs, swinging in a high-chair. One day the stairs were filled with the smell of fried bananas, making her mouth water. She wrote how she'd chosen this street for this purpose, a street in a bustling quartier populaire with no obvious monuments, where the unfamiliar produce of African shops spilled from their jumble of trays and boxes, and smoky *salons de thé* harboured men bunched over card-tables or gazing up at a television screen. These men from the Maghreb raised their hands, suddenly, in unison, a wave of hands rippling across the room. Their taut craggy faces, more suited to mountainous horizons, Marni said, in unison, splitting into hoarse shouts, and laughing lips.

The light changes as I pass from one correspondence to another, following the yellowing tiles of the curving passageways, weaving through people streaming the other way. My heels click as I hurry up the stairs. Boulevard Ménilmontant glistens after rain. Like Hamzah, I too hold Marni's gift of letters against my skin, tucked into one glove and under one sleeve. At the entrance to the metro, I watch the buskers and, like him, throw them a coin, not because they're good but because it's cold. On these streets there are no monuments and no place for silence. Music blares from the shops, bars and passing cars, people screech at each other in doorways, youths cluster on doorsteps calling out *Tu-veux quelque chose?* As I pass I can see the men planting their gazes on Marni with unconcealed intention, I can feel the warmth of those gazes through the crisp air, and Marni looking boldly back at them, as she wrote, in spite of heartache, looking back at their heads turned towards her, their hands held out, palms upraised. *Tu-veux quelque chose?* I look once, pass quickly, pull my wrists from their grasp. The streets are narrow, seldom empty of men. Cars joust each other for every available space.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Beth Yahp.*