

The house across from the sea

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The windows face the beach. After the tragedy, we put up heavy curtains so they cannot be raised by the wind. The sea won't attend the spectacle of our sorrow or relief. For us, it is just another way of mitigating the shadows that stubbornly put sand between the sea and us. During the daytime everything is fine. The ups and downs of daily routine make time more bearable. However, when dusk arrives, we think of them. We also think of him, up there at Rochelle, wandering around that little palace he got built in the middle of the woods. Then I remember the same pitiful and piercing motto: Everything was over, or rather started in that Saint-Silvestre's eve, when he stopped in order to help a motorcyclist...

Behind the closed windows, I live with Adrienne, my mother. We are two shadows, two ghosts roaming over heaps of absence. We are the ashes of an existence remembered by no one. Most of the families who, as it was our case, lived the events of that Saint-Silvestre's eve are gone. They brought all their rags and scraps with them. Could they forget? At least could they find some peace of mind?

We didn't leave Sapatille. When I was a little girl, the whole world came down to this town, to these houses and their big rooms, and to their shaded backyards. Our backyard was my reign. There was a pomegranate tree, its flowers and fruits were red. That was my splendid palace; that was the harbor where leaf-made little boats floated around. And the breadfruit tree's log with its umbrella-like leaves was my king. All my motivations were there, my brother and, of course, Philippe, whom I used to recall while straddling a pomegranate tree bough. The tree is always there. I pull aside the curtain in order to peep a little.

When I was a child, the world came down to the Sapatille church and the toll of its bell, that could be heard all over the Mount Jacob and extended to the ocean. Sapatille, which houses have been corroded by sea salt and the rough water. Sapatille, that will always be the whole world for me; to which I have given every single drop of love, rage and passion that my heart can contain.

Mom and I don't care about the initials carved over the tombstones, or the rickety streets, or the endless humming of sand and memories; they are all that is left, and we cannot neglect them. Our memories are dreadful jails and infamous tyrants. They grip, chase, possess and regulate our existence from that day on. Because of them, mom and I have become mute, like stones, we don't know any other language but the one that they dictate us.

At times, mom used to write. She used to dream of being a writer. But in this country there was only place for power and madness. Adrienne had to abruptly bury her love for words. Wisely, she hid her notebooks and pencils. But when the pain is too hard, she takes them out. She removes the dust from them in order to alleviate that grief that, as a malignant fever, has taken her whole existence: Everything was over, or rather started in that Saint-Silvestre's eve when he stopped in order to help a motorcyclist...

Behind the closed curtains, Adrienne and I, two islands floating over the big island. Sapatille, this town is still alive, breathing, but we don't know how. For a long time, we have questioned everything. How have we been strong enough to continue? We wonder how humankind has been able to survive such a horror. We don't want to get to the bottom of things by now. It is futile. There nothing left to do. The long for an end is the only living thing here in this house that faces the sea. It's there, tucked in, throbbing among us as if it were an infant we don't end up fully being.

All the others, the ones who are not dead, have parted. They left Sapatille in this endless season of fear and nonsense. They have gone forever. The last to leave, Guy, our youngest brother, the one that remained unnoticed because that day he fell asleep on the beach, crossed swiftly the border, attired in woman's clothes. A large skirt hid his hairy calf. He wanted to stay with us. But he finally made that terrible decision: to leave. Because he couldn't cast away the past, because everyone else had died; he chose to remain up there, with his guards and dogs, with his pool and his horses. "Because I can't do anything else, there is no other option but to leave". Those were the last words Guy said before plunging into the night of oblivion, thirty years ago.

He, the one up there, is called Philippe. Philippe Breton. I'm telling you his name so you, like me, can remember him. He was my boyfriend. He grew up among us. With my brothers, Carl, Jacques, Guy and the others, and with me, with me that loved him... I don't know anything else. All I recall nowadays, thirty years after everything ended, is that stubborn, heavy sea that came to me when Philippe covered me with his breath on the beach. When I was a girl I used to recall him while straddling the pomegranate tree bough. I loved Philippe when I was 18, with that 18 year-old love that is so hard to describe.

The children are playing with marbles. Philippe scratched his knees with the same rocks my sons did. My mother writes. Marisa's brother's, they were six, were on their way to school. They were running together towards the beach, they ran over the white foam of the waves, sprinkling water and laughing. With Jacques, my first son, I had spent ages reading at the beach. How many times they fell asleep right there, without even noticing it!

How many times I had stared at the same scene before telling them, to Philippe's surprise, how silly and confused they looked among all those books they wanted to read every time! This library, at the barn, belonged to my father, and only Jacques and Philippe had the right to stay there. At that time, Philippe was a sweet, respectful and hard-working man; qualities that my father,

an attentive teacher, really appreciated.

“That boy will achieve great things”, my dad used to say, filled with admiration while giving a concealed stare at me. “It’s a pity that Antoine and Guy are not like him”, and he started ranting on the bohemian lifestyle of his two young sons. My father, Daniel Saint-Cyrien, was also a lawyer, but he had stopped practicing that profession because he understood, as he liked to say, that times weren’t the same in Sapotille, or any other area of the country. Those who decided to rule the country were determined to turn all its inhabitants into mere spectators of their own existences.

Everything was over, or rather started in that Saint-Silvestre’s eve. I had just turned 19 and Phillippe, 24. My father has returned from visiting someone and he is at the corner of Quatre-Chemins with a motorcyclist who has had an accident.

“Phillippe, what are you doing around here at this time?” “Don’t get any closer Mr Saint-Cyrien”, said Phillippe in a cold and challenging tone.

In spite of the darkness, my father realized not only that Phillippe’s eyes were injected with blood, but also that his hands and clothes were red-stained. Clumsily he tried to hide a gun that my father could clearly see in the middle of the gloom. He failed to find that hard-working and intelligent stare of Phillippe that he was so accustomed to. A few steps ahead of him, he could only see a face deformed by hatred and willing to shoot him.

“So you too, Phillippe?”

“Now that you know, Mr Saint-Cyrien, what are you planning to do?”

My father turned around and escaped with his heart full of sadness and disgust.

The next morning he woke up later than he was used to. He talked to my brothers and me for a long while. Mom already knew something. She had the face of death-sentenced prisoner; her eyes were red for the lack of sleep.

Frankly, dad told us about Phillippe and the people he had recruited, all of them willing to kill. He explained us his role in the state of terror that had seized Sapotille and the whole country. “The stench of corruption, crime and unlimited betrayal has taken our homes”. Just to finish, he said: “Someday, people will eat their mothers’ flesh without any disgust”.

Phillippe, using his tests as an excuse, had stopped visiting our house since a long time. “I knew- my father went on talking- that absence hid something unusual. But I hoped in the most idiotic manner that all those rumors were just calumnies”. He was looking straight into my eyes.

At that moment, a mixture of angst and rage started to replace the blood in my body. Every little while, my brothers tip toed towards my room and told me the latest news. We talked in a quiet voice. They had lost many of their friends. Nobody knew if the ones who disappeared were dead or imprisoned. They weren’t there anymore, just like that. Their relatives, if they weren’t already also sent to prison, gathered. They were struck by horror and without any clue of where to go or what to do. All of them, like us, trembled at the sound of any truck.

They came in the middle of the night, armed to the teeth, wearing black hoods. Was Phillippe among them? I didn’t want to know. I will never forget the despaired gaze of my mother, who was shutting her mouth with a handkerchief to avoid screaming. They would get Jacques, Daniel, Carl, Victor, Antonio, and, presumably, my father too. “We are simply taking them to our office; you have to answer some questions”. We knew none of them would come back, but we were shocked by that phrase.

How were the following days and nights? They never came back until that day... They appeared in the beach, gathered in the water where torn shirts floated. The sea vomited swollen and unrecognizable bodies. A crowd of people descended to the beach, trying to identify someone. Adrienne and I stayed by the window. The sun over the sea was red as blood that day.

How to describe the turmoil and the screams that rose over the beach? How can I describe the chaos that seized our lives since that moment?

Late that night, the last women returned home. Silently, they went up the Mount Jacob and left with the voice of the sea in their heads, a sinister whistle. Then, everything was left behind, the days, the hours... and now we are here forever, in the middle of these nights of absence, across the sea we always question.

During the daytime, when the noise of the market and the echoes of life seem to be playing the oblivion game over the nether area of the town, we play something similar. But then, when the dusk arrives, when December and Saint-Silvestre eve is about to come; we go back to every sound, every gesture, to every moon-beam, to that hellish carousel of living-dead and ghosts that will always obsess Sapotille and our house across from the sea.