

and colder. In that night of wind and water, someone must have grabbed me from behind and held my head under the water before rushing up into the brambles and *bayabondes* at the top of the hill.

MARIE-CÉLIE AGNANT

THE HOUSE FACING THE SEA

(LA MAISON FACE À LA MER)

Translated from the French by Christina Vander Vorst

The windows open onto the beach. After the tragedy, we covered them with very thick drapes that will stay there forever. The sea herself will no longer witness the spectacle of our misfortune or of our deliverance. For us, it is doubtless another way of subduing the shadows that obstinately rise up on the shore between ourselves and the sea. By day, all is well. In the coming-and-going of daily life it is less necessary to pretend. However, as soon as night falls, in the darkness, we think of them. We also think of him, up there in Rochelle, in that little palace which he built for himself in the middle of the woods. And then the same sentence comes back to me, painful and haunting, the same words: *Everything ended, or rather everything began on that New Year's Eve when he stopped to help a motorcyclist...*¹

Behind the closed windows, I live with Adrienne, my mother. We are two shadows, two ghosts, drifting on the banks of absence. We are the ashes of an existence no one remembers anymore. Most of the families, which, like us, lived through what happened on that New Year's Eve, left, carrying away with them what bits and scraps they still possessed. Had they been able to forget? Or at least find peace?

We will not leave Sapotille. For me, as a child, the world was limited to this town and its houses with their vast balconies and shaded courtyards. Ours, the courtyard of our house, was my kingdom. There was the pomegranate tree, its red flowers and its fruit. It was my wonderland palace. There was the fountain pool where boats—nothing more than the leaves of

trees—navigated the waters. And the great foot of the breadfruit tree with its umbrella leaves. It was the king of my realm. All of my subjects were there: my brothers and, of course, Philippe; I thought of him as I straddled the branches of the pomegranate tree. The pomegranate tree is still there. I slit the drapes to cast a furtive glance its way.

When I was a child the world consisted of the Sapotille church and its steeple, which dominates Jacob's Butte and towers above the ocean. Sapotille, where the sea's salt gnaws away at the sides of houses during great tides, flaying them. Sapotille, which I never left, still remains for me the world I gave all the love, hate and passion my heart could hold.

We no longer have anything to cherish, mama and I, not even initials engraved on stone in a cemetery. For us, all that is left are the torn-up roads, the never-ending murmur of the shore, and memories; we cannot abandon these things. The memories are hideous wardens and vile tyrants. They have tortured us, followed us, possessed us, and ruled over our existence ever since that day. Because of them, mama and I have become mute as stones, with no language other than the one they dictate to us.

Sometimes mama writes. Long ago, she had dreamt of being a writer. But in this country where there is only room for the powerful and their lunacy, Adrienne was forced to bury her hunger for words early on. She had wisely set aside her notebooks and pencils. But when the pain becomes too raw she takes them out, brushes away the dust and writes, trying to subdue the grief which took possession of her whole existence like a malignant fever. *Everything ended, or rather everything began on that New Year's Eve when he stopped to help a motorcyclist...*

Behind the closed windows Adrienne and I are two small islands drifting off the coast of the big island, Sapotille, that town which continues to live, to breathe. How it does so, we cannot understand. For a long time we asked ourselves

how all this could have happened and above all how we found the strength to go on. How can a human being survive so many horrors, we wondered? We no longer want to get to the bottom of things. It is useless. The only thing left for us is to be. The hope for an end that would save us from everything is the only living thing in this house looking out on the sea. It is there, beating, nestled inside of us, like a child we never stop carrying.

All the others, those who did not die, have left, abandoning Sapotille to this interminable season of fear and madness. They left on tiptoe. The last to leave, Guy, the youngest, the one they spared through an oversight because that day he had fallen asleep in the attic, crossed the border in women's clothing he'd thrown on in haste—a long peasant's skirt to hide his hairy calves. He had tried to hold out with us. But in the end, he also made the terrible choice to leave. Since one cannot exorcise the past, since all the others were dead and *he* was there, up there, with his guards and his dogs, his swimming pool and his horses, since we couldn't do anything, there was nothing left to do but flee. Those were the last words Guy had said to us before sinking into oblivion thirty short years ago.

The one up there, his name is Philippe. Philippe Breton. I'm telling you his name so that, like me, you may remember. He was once my fiancé; he grew up with us, with my brothers, Carl, Jacques, Guy and the others, and with me, me who loved him since ... I don't know when. All I can remember today, now that it has all been over for thirty years, is that stubborn rolling of the sea which lifted me when, in the attic, Philippe would envelop me with his breath. It will always rise up from deep inside me until the last day of my life. Even as a child, I was already dreaming of him in the branches of my pomegranate tree. At eighteen, I loved Philippe, with that eighteen-year-old-love which cannot be named.

A child playing marbles, Philippe had scraped his knees on the same stones as my sons, my mother continues to write. Marisa's brothers, there were six of them, had sized him up on the road to school. They had all run on the beach, plunged into the white foam of the waves, splashing each other and laughing. Often, he had lunch at our table, at noon, next to my sons. With my oldest, Jacques, he had spent entire evenings reading up in the attic. How often sleep surprised them both, exhausted, eyelids heavy...

How often I had contemplated them before resolving to wake them, to surprise Philippe, who seemed stupefied and confused amid those books he wanted to read all at once. That library, in the attic, belonged to my father and only Jacques and Philippe were permitted to be there. Back then Philippe was a gentle boy, respectful, attentive, and hard-working, qualities which my father appreciated, attentive teacher that he was.

"That boy will go far," he would say, full of admiration and stealing a look at me. "What a shame that Guy and Antoine aren't like him," he would continue, as he constantly deplored the bohemian lifestyle of his two youngest sons. My father, Daniel Saint-Cyrien, was also a lawyer, but he had stopped practicing because he had understood, as he liked to say, that things would not be the same, not in Sapotille or in any other part of the country; those who had decided to control everything were resolved to transform the inhabitants of the country into spectators of their own existence.

Everything ended, or rather everything began on that New Year's Eve. I had just turned nineteen and Philippe, twenty-four. Returning from a visit, my father, who was coming out of the Quatre-Chemins intersection, came upon a broken-down motorcycle.

"Oh... Philippe, is that you, at this hour?"

"Don't come any closer, M. Saint-Cyrien!" said Philippe, in a cold, defiant voice.

Despite the darkness, my father realized that not only were Philippe's eyes bloodshot, but his hands and clothes were also covered in the brightest of reds. He was clumsily trying to hide a revolver but my father saw the gleam of its butt in the half-light. He no longer recognized the face of that intelligent and hard-working Philippe he had always known. A few steps from him stood someone disfigured by hate, ready to shoot him.

"You too, Philippe?"

"Now that you know, M. Saint-Cyrien, what do you plan to do?"

My father turned on his heel and left, his heart filled with sadness and disgust.

The next day, he woke up earlier than usual and spoke to my brothers and me for a long time. Mama already knew. She had the look of someone condemned to death, with rings under eyes that were red from a sleepless night.

Speaking plainly, papa talked to us about Philippe and about people like him who were recruited from all over and trained to kill. He explained their role in the climate of terror that had swept down on Sapotille and the entire country. "The fetid odor of corruption, of crime, and of innumerable betrayals has now invaded our homes," he told us in conclusion. "There will come a day when these people will eat the flesh of their own mothers without hesitation."

For some time now, under the pretext of preparing for exams, Philippe had been coming to the house less often. "I knew," my father continued, "that his desertion was hiding something strange, but I was praying to heaven with the insane hope that everything whispered about him was just slander." He looked me straight in the eyes. We had said all that needed to be said to each other.

From that moment on, distress and rage mingled together and replaced the blood in my body. I lived with the sensation of a thick shadow spreading over my heart. My

brothers, nervous, came creeping to my room to bring me news. We would talk under our breath. They had already lost several of their friends. No one knew whether those who were disappearing were in prison or whether they had been killed. They were simply no longer there. Their parents, if they had not also been taken, barricaded themselves, frightened, not knowing where to go nor to whom they should turn. Like us, they were waiting in their homes, trembling each time a truck went by in the night.

They came in the middle of the night, armed to the teeth. Some were wearing black hoods. Was Philippe among them? I did not want to know. I will never forget my mother's desperate look, the handkerchief she shoved in her mouth so as not to scream. They took away Jacques, Daniel, Carl, Victor, and Antoine, and of course papa. "We're only going to drive you down to the station, ask you a few questions." We knew that nobody who was taken away ever came back, but we held onto that statement from the *commandant*.

How many days and nights passed? Not one of them came back until that day... the mob on the shore, those floating scraps of shirts, those bloated, unrecognizable bodies that the sea was vomiting up. People from Sapotille, mothers in tears, ran down to the beach in an attempt to identify the bodies. Adrienne and I, we stayed at the window. The sun on the sea was the color of blood that day.

How can I describe the tumult and the screams that rose from the beach? How can I describe the chaos that has since taken over our lives?

Late at night, the last women returned home. Quietly, they climbed back up Jacob's Butte and went away with the voice of the sea in their heads, like a warning bell. Then everything stopped: the days, the hours... and we settled down forever into the vertigo of absence, mama and I, facing the sea. We have stopped questioning it.

During the day, when the sounds of the market and the echoes of a life playing at pretending to have forgotten arise from the bottom of the city, during the day, in the tumult of everyday life, we also play at pretending. But when night falls, especially as December approaches, when the New Year draws near again, we rediscover in every sound, in every gesture, in every glimmer of light, that infernal carrousel of the living-dead and of the ghosts who will forever haunt Sapotille and our house facing the sea.

Translator's Note

¹ Haiti's Independence Day is January 1.