

Dusk

‘My heart did not tell me! My heart did not tell me!’

Mademoiselle Léocadie Timothée, a retired elementary school teacher for over twenty years, stood with one hand on her breast, the other rolled into a cone level with her mouth, and went over her dreams in slow motion, taking herself back to that night the previous week when the pain of her worn-out body, together with the barking of Leo’s dogs next door and the lowing of his cows tied up in the savanna next to her house, had kept her awake until four in the morning, the hour when the pale and timid light of dawn had already stolen noiselessly between her louvered windows. No. Nothing had emerged from the opaque waters of sleep. As usual, ever since she had moved deeper into the depths of old age, she had dreamt of her sister who had died without experiencing the vicissitudes of marriage and the joys of motherhood like herself; she had dreamt of her mother who had experienced both, and there the two of them were, back in good health before their sickness and suffering, looking as young as ever, waiting for her at the open gates to Eternal Life.

No doubt about it: it was him.

Face down in the sticky mud with his clothes soiled, his heavy-built frame and curly mop of salt and pepper hair were easily recognizable.

The smell was appalling and Mademoiselle Léocadie Timothée, who had a sensitive heart and stomach, was disgusted at herself for feeling sick. She retched and then knelt down on both knees in the tall Guinea grass on the bank and vomited. Like all the villagers of Rivière au Sel she had hated the man who now lay at her feet. But death being what it is, when it passes by, respect it.

She crossed herself three times, lowered her head and recited the prayer for the dead. Then she looked around her, frightened out of her wits. What had gotten into her to cut off along this forest path she had never taken before? What had pushed her to stumble with both feet on this corpse? Every day, once dusk fell, she turned the key to the house where she lived alone, surrounded by memories, photographs, dozing cats, and birds who built their nests in the hollows of her lampshades, and went out to take the air, walking along a straight unswerving line from the Villa Perety, thirty years earlier as lovely as a picture, today dilapidated under trees eaten by creepers, abandoned by its owners who preferred to live in French France, to the Lameaulnes Nurseries whose entrance was barred by an iron gate and a sign saying 'Private Property.' Today she had taken a different path. What had been more powerful than years and years of habit?

Forcing her old body, spurring it with the terror that was now boiling inside her, she made her way back to the village. With her heart racing, thumping in her ears, she climbed back up the forest track and found the footpath between the ferns, now dark owing to the late hour, that came out on the road at the chapel to the Virgin Mary, Mother of All Sorrows.

The dead man's house stood just outside the village, hemmed in by the forest that had begrudgingly left an opening of several miles and was anxious in its greed to win back the lost ground. The house was made of corrugated iron and wooden planks, even though throughout the island even the poorest were striving to build with concrete under the new tax incentive laws. It was obvious that the man had not cared what other people might think. In his eyes a house was a place where you ate, where you sheltered from the rain and where you lay down to sleep. Two dogs, two Dobermans, their coats the color of Satan, who had been seen feasting on innocent chickens, rushed out, barking and baring their cruel ivory-colored fangs. Mademoiselle Léocadie stopped therefore at the gate, raising her broken voice with a cautious 'Anyone at home?'

A teenager emerged, his face drawn tight as a prison door. 'Down! Down!' he shouted at the animals. And the monsters withdrew, sensing a more violent presence than themselves.

‘Is she there, Alix?’ Mademoiselle Léocadie asked, still not moving.

The teenager nodded. Aroused by all this ruckus, Vilma herself came out onto the veranda. Mademoiselle Léocadie decided to go in. How was she to announce to this young thing, this child she had seen christened one fine Sunday in August – oh how she could remember it – that her man was lying in the mud, as dead as a door-nail! Mademoiselle Léocadie had never imagined that one day the Good Lord to whom she prayed so devoutly, missing neither Vespers nor Rosary nor the month of May, would send her such a cross to bear, such a tribulation at the end of her old age.

‘He didn’t come home to sleep, did he?’ she stammered.

Vilma did not even think of lying, and with her eyes damp from the warm salty tears of sorrow she uttered an explanation: ‘Nor the night before, nor the night before that. It’s been three nights. I’m scared. Maman has sent Alix to sleep with me in case my pains come.’

Mademoiselle Léocadie plucked up her courage. ‘Let me come in, I have something to tell you.’

Inside they sat down on either side of the whitewood table and Mademoiselle Léocadie began to talk. So it was that the warm salty tears overflowed from Vilma’s eyes and streamed down her cheeks, still chubby from childhood. Tears of pain, tears of mourning, but not of surprise. For she had known from the very start that this man would break into and out of her life in a brutal fashion.

When Mademoiselle Léocadie had finished speaking, Vilma did not move, slumped in her chair as if the grief was too much for her eighteen-year-old shoulders. Then she turned to Alix, who had come in during the conversation, no doubt attracted by that special smell of calamity.

‘Did you hear?’ she asked.

He again nodded. It was clear that the only pain he felt was the one hurting his sister.

‘Go and tell Father!’ Vilma ordered.

Alix obeyed.

Outside, the night had crept in on tiptoe. The mountain ridge could no longer be seen silhouetted against the sky beyond the black foliage of the mahogany trees. Electric light shone from every cabin

and radios bawled the news without managing to drown the cries of children. Amid a jabber of words and gibberish, the men were drinking their white rum at Chez Christian while the players slammed down their dice on the wooden tables. All this noise and commotion shocked Alix; after all, a man was lying dead on a muddy path, even if it was a man for whom not an eye, except perhaps Vilma's and Mira's, would shed a tear. He entered the noise and cigarette smoke and with authority clapped his hands. Usually nobody would have paid any attention to this young pup. But such was his expression as he stood at the corner of the counter that they guessed the nature of the words soon to be uttered before he had even opened his mouth. Black and oppressive like mourning. So it was amid complete silence that he announced:

'Francis Sancher is dead!'

'Dead?' the men repeated.

Those who were sitting got up in disorder, the others stood transfixed.

Without another word, Alix turned his back. He knew the question that was about to follow and for which he did not yet have an answer.

'Who killed him?'

While he strode in haste towards his parents' house, the men, forgetting their rum and dice, hurried off to spread the news to the four corners of the village, and soon people were crowding on their doorsteps to comment on the matter, not in the least surprised, however, for everybody knew full well that one day Francis Sancher would come to a bad end!

Alix's announcement staggered its way through the mind of Moïse the postman, nicknamed Mosquito, not because he was drunk, as was common one evening out of three, but because he had been the first in Rivière au Sel to make Francis Sancher's acquaintance at the very moment he had stepped off the bus and asked the way to the Alexis property, even though now every time Francis's name was mentioned it made him spit and side with Sancher's worst enemies. Once its meaning had become clear and reached the farthest corner of his brain he started to shake like a leaf on a

branch on days when the wind gets up. So Francis had been right to be frightened! His implacable enemy had smelled him out, tracked him down and struck in the very oasis of greenery where he had come to bury himself! It was not therefore the deep-rooted, crazy, superstitious terror that had seemed so surprising in a man of his stature. He stood up heavily, his heartbeats shaking his puny frame. Then he ran out after Alix.

The moon closed its two golden eyes when they rolled over the massive body of Francis Sancher, his swollen face turned upwards. The stars did likewise. No light filtered down from the silent sky.

Lowering their lighted torches Alix and Alain shed light over their older brothers, Carmélien and Jacques, kneeling in the awful smell. Their father, Sylvestre Ramsaran, was standing a little way back, Moïse blending in with his shadow. Carmélien looked up and whispered:

‘There’s no blood on him!’

‘No blood?’

The six men looked at each other in astonishment. Then without further ado Jacques slid the corpse onto the bamboo stretcher and motioned to his brothers to help him. The procession set off. The timid moon then opened its eyes again and lit up every corner of the landscape.

When the procession reached Vilma’s house a crowd had gathered in the lane, in the garden and on the veranda, half in mourning, half curious for news. There were those who were directly involved – Rosa, Vilma’s mother; Loulou Lameaulnes, the owner of the nurseries; Dinah, his second wife from Saint-Martin; Aristide, Loulou’s only son who had stayed behind to work in Rivière au Sel; and Joby, the first child from his second marriage, a pale little boy who had been confirmed the year before. Mira, of course, was not there, and it would have surprised, even shocked people if she had been. Yet, except for Emmanuel Pélagie, who as soon as he got back from Dillon would lock his Peugeot in his garage and not even come out on his veranda to take the air, the whole of Rivière au Sel was there. Even Sonny, the unfortunate Sonny, even Désinor the Haitian . . .

Seeing such a crowd you might have concluded they were being hypocritical. For all of them, at one time or another, had called Francis a vagabond and a cur, and isn't the fate of a cur to die amid general indifference?

Actually, people had come mainly out of respect for Vilma's parents, the Ramsarans, one of the most esteemed families in Rivière au Sel. After having laid up his father with a vicious kick for three long months in a hospital bed in La Pointe for refusing to give him sugarcane cuttings, Ti-Tor Ramsaran, Vilma's great-grandfather, had put as much distance as he could between himself and his bad deed and had settled in this region of the island – an unusual spot for an East Indian – the same year as Gabriel, the first of the Lameaulnes, a white Creole from Martinique, who had been hounded out by his family because he married a Negress. This must have been in 1904 or 1905. In any case before the 1914–1918 war and well before the hurricane of 1928.

When Ti-Tor turned up, quite a few people took offense and chanted spitefully: 'Kouli malaba isi dan pa peyiw!' (Coolie malabar, this country's not yours!) But Ti-Tor ignored them and kept his eyes glued on the four acres of land he had purchased. These four acres had led to more land for the next generation when the Farjol factory had closed down and the land had been sold off in parcels. Rodrigue, Ti-Tor's son, had bought forty acres and planted them with bananas, since the island no longer had any use for sugarcane. The old people, who had been through the First World War, shook their heads.

'What's got into the place? If cane goes, Guadeloupe goes!'

Many were angry with Rodrigue's purchase and complained:

'Since when do the Indians lay down the law around here?'

For the Ramsarans were getting richer and Rodrigue had replaced the wooden cabin where he had come into this world with a one-story, reinforced concrete villa girded by a balustraded balcony in wrought iron that he called L'Aurélie.*

L'Aurélie? Where did that name come from?

* The name of the first ship to bring indentured East Indians to Guadeloupe.

Nevertheless, the envious and the discontented soon went into real fits of rage when Carmélien, Rodrigue's grandson and the son of Sylvestre, went to study medicine in France. What! A Ramsaran, a doctor! People don't know their place! The Ramsarans' place was on the land, cane or no cane! Fortunately, God works in mysterious ways! Carmélien quickly returned home from Bordeaux when he came down with an illness. There is justice in this world. You shouldn't get too big for your breeches. In such cases life does its duty and brings the overly ambitious back to earth.

People hadn't finished deriding Carmélien, nicknaming him 'Doktè,' before he had two ponds dug on his father's land and had started breeding crayfish. People who as children had fished them by hand from the rivers' icy pools, began by asserting that these artificial crayfish were not worth the peppers and chives they were seasoned with, but they were silenced when all the hotels for tourists from as far away as Le Gosier and Saint-François put in their orders, which Carmélien delivered in a Toyota pickup, and one evening right on Télé-Guadeloupe itself, between the habitual epithets for products made in France, appeared a commercial that bellowed out: 'Dinners for special occasions. Business lunches. Weddings. Banquets. Buy local. Buy Ramsaran crayfish.'

The person this sickened and irritated the most in Rivière au Sel was Loulou Lemeaulnes who, like his parents and grandparents before him, played the aristocrat behind the nurseries' iron gate, which in season was covered with mauve and orange flowers from the Julie creeper and trumpet hibiscus. He too had thought of a TV commercial for his flowers and plants. Then he had told himself that was white folks' ways and better left to them. And now along comes this upstart Carmélien who had been born the same year as Kléber, his second boy, and goes one better than him.

Despite these petty tensions, bitterness and jealousies, the Ramsarans were a respected family, always attending ceremonies, never begrudging a sizable contribution for the annual feast day or the carnival procession. Although some of them had never intermarried and gone off to the Grands Fonds from where they originated to find a partner, many of them had married into black or mulatto

families in the region. And so were related by blood to much of Rivière au Sel.

It was around nine and the moon was resting behind an ink-colored cloud which was getting ready, so it seemed, to burst, and Monsieur Démocrite, the school's principal, had sent for the tarpaulin that was used to cover the football field, when Dr Martin arrived from Petit-Bourg at the wheel of his luxurious BMW and locked himself up for a long tête-à-tête with the corpse. When he emerged nothing was written on his face. He went and telephoned from Dodose Pélagie's, who stood in vain behind the door to catch the conversation. Despite appearances, even if there were no blood or wounds on the corpse, this apparently was no natural death. Around 10 p.m. therefore an ambulance rolled up scattering the idlers with its siren, and for three days and three nights the body of Francis Sancher hung around on the cold marble tops of autopsy tables until a doctor was called from La Pointe as a last resort and was categorical: We should not let the talk of rum-besotted villagers go to our heads. We should not look for difficulties where there are none. Aneurysmal rupture. This sort of accident is common with hot-blooded individuals who overstep their quota of alcohol.

So on the afternoon of the fourth day Francis Sancher came back home, no longer on his solid two feet and a head above the rest, even the tallest, but laid out in the light-varnished wooden prison of a coffin with a glass plate on top so you could see his square, handsome face for a few hours longer. The coffin was placed on the bed, covered with a profusion of fresh flowers from the nurseries, in the larger of the two bedrooms under the three beams symbolizing Bread, Wine and Poverty,* which during his lifetime had witnessed Francis Sancher's prolific lovemaking with his succession of women, and which had never been touched by a broom. While the men remained seated on benches, laughing and joking under Monsieur Démocrite's tarpaulin, sheltering from the rain that poured through

* A way of predicting the fate of a home by counting the beams that represent Bread = strict minimum, Wine = abundance, and Poverty = misfortune.