

Marvin VICTOR

Blues For Irène

My daughter had told the police she'd been a witness in the murder of Jimmy Labissière, and the murderer was her girlfriend, Irène Gouin, who lived with her mother, a woman who'd become blind one day when she had gone out to buy cigarettes, and Irène killed Jimmy because Jimmy had announced he wanted to break up with her, and he'd agreed to spend one last night with her to ease his conscience, taking her to the Café on Rue des Fronts-forts, and then to that little hotel where she stabbed him, in the Carrefour-Feuilles neighborhood, and on her way back home, with the money she had found in Jimmy's wallet she bought a rum-raisin ice-cream, a flavor she was crazy about. When she got home, she told her mother she had just killed a man, and when he died, she could see the whites of his rolled up eyes though she never expressed any desire to see as much white in anybody's eyes, and it was so easy, a flip of the hand would have been enough as Jimmy lay sprawled on the bed with a frothy mouth, and besides, he was already dead, pointing out that she wasn't saying this to justify herself, but she remembered very well that before leaving the hotel room she had stroked his forehead, taken his penis out of his pants to see one last time that stupid genital machinery with its sad, wrinkled skin between legs so skinny they reminded her of a bird's, the legs of a wader, yes, she had stabbed him seven times in the stomach and then she went to the bar of the hotel, sat down on a stool, ordered a drink she sipped for a long time before requesting *Please don't talk about me when I'm gone* from the maestro of the quartet playing at the other end of the deck...

A week later, the police found out my daughter's name was also Irène Gouin, and she was rather nuts but very beautiful anyway, a policeman had whispered to me regretfully. That's the day Inspector Joseph showed up with his questions. He knew I'd had an affair with Jimmy, but Jimmy wasn't just my own dead man; he was the dead man of all the people who lived in Bel-Air and who had loved and hated him. He was a public dead man, I told him right away, hissing between my teeth. A dead man people never stopped talking about, trying to find with an abundance of proverbs and metaphors which part of him belonged to the devil and which part to an angel, obliterating our story as well as the old, dusty story of all the other women, knowing that all I had left of him was only the vague memory of crumpled sheets, moist with sweat, and the breath of old, whispered words. That's how stories are made, I concluded, telling myself that Jimmy, clutching the murderer's bottom and bawling as he was about to come, may have had a beautiful death. But nobody had talked about that. I personally had no desire to talk about Jimmy but Inspector Joseph had forced me, as a way to cooperate. And in my refusal to speak about Jimmy, I was hearing my voice pronounce his name. There was no logic possible when you started talking about him, no reason either when you knew that in people's mouths, he wasn't dead, only an absentee. That's what they thought, since they didn't hear him on the radio or see him on TV or leading demos on the street anymore. I didn't want doom to come out of my mouth. I wanted the idea of it to be banished. In my opinion, his life was beyond the commonplace of thought, any thought, for it had always been a mistake, the mistake that had to do with childhood maybe, to the immense poem of childhood. I knew

it right from the first moment I'd seen him. Imagine a vast, dark room; blind, no glimmer of light ever slips into it and stays. He told me I was that glimmer, and I'd forgotten to hear, his words sliding over my skin, like his fingers when we made love. I let it happen. When the young president had started to build his underground army, Jimmy was at the heart of the movement, with the enthusiasm of mad children. He'd spent six months, a year, maybe more, in a training camp. He himself couldn't remember when he told me about that part of his previous life. A whole eternity spent waiting for a sign from the young president. Many were waiting like that. Meanwhile, the young president was making speeches, stirring up the rhetoric and the people alike. He was inside that crowd too.

One morning, he got the call. He was shaking on the other side of the line, as if he hadn't been floundering with that young man in the smelly mud around the Saline. A load of weapons to transport to Camp-Perrin, along with money, lots of money. No. He did not understand, could not understand. He'd hit the road in a van, in the company of a comrade he'd lost sight of. In the middle of nowhere, the van started to smoke and backfire before stopping smack in the middle of the highway. There was sand and cane syrup in the gas tank. At some point, a man with his face eaten up by a salt-and-pepper beard popped up; he offered to help, pointed his gun at Jimmy's temple, and took the money and the ammunition. A set-up?

When he called to report that the mission had failed, the phone rung in vain. There was no phone as there had never been any such number. That was the day he was murdered. Not on the day before my birthday, in that small hotel room where he went to look under the skirt of that snotty girl, his mother had said when I came to offer my condolences, ah, that snotty girl everybody in town described as a rich girl at odds with her family, twenty years old, not black-black but a burnt-earth color. Yes, he was dead before our encounter was my reply, arguing in my head that I imagined him faking sleep, forever cured of the betrayal. Yes, gone onto another road, far from his own murder, towards absolution, love probably, still as sick from the change in the status quo as from concealed hope, gone behind the crest of the hills or to the breast of a girl.

Yes, pain and sadness had arrived the day people started to turn around on the street to look at him, with the banality of his face gone, naked under his mask of a public character wanted by the police. I had met him, had reached out to him, not knowing that everything had become, literally and figuratively, cold around him, and that he was in a way pouring boiling water over his head. We made love inside that madness. Voices, carried by the winds, were speaking inside of him. I had met him during that period. In front of a movie theater, on Lamarre Street. He'd come to see "Bird", at the 7:00 PM show. He'd come out of the theater and was tying his shoes on the sidewalk when I spotted him. I'd been selling junk jewelry to make a living for me and my daughter; so I showed him a wristwatch for his wife or girlfriend. Not knowing that I would become his girlfriend a few moments later. That same evening, we slept together in a crummy hotel on Grand-rue. No fuss. We had a long talk about Charlie Parker, who, when he was a teenager in Kansas City, played the recorder as he rode his mule and had big dreams, listening to Count Basie's orchestra. He told me he was my Bird and me, his Chan, the dancer he admired. I told him no, let's switch roles and put them in the right order, I am the bird and he's Chan, but he wouldn't hear of it and sleep fell upon us, all of a sudden. After that, we'd meet at his place, not far from the cathedral, on rue Borgelat. A very dark two-room apartment that smelled of mold and cold tobacco, because since my husband had left, aside from

occasional one-night stands I had no man in my life, which was all right by me—the body has its needs—as long as my lovers didn’t promise me the sky and the earth or rain from countries where it no longer rains. I’ve got my home, you’ve got yours. As the police was after him—he rarely went out, and only at night, in disguise, taking dark streets with their streetlights out—we had agreed I would be the one to go see him. Aside from the films he’d go see secretly, I had become his only contact with the outside world. I’d show up at his place three times a week: on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Like a rebellious girl, I was attracted by the danger he represented, I didn’t know why; it gave me the exhilarating feeling of betraying somebody, something I wasn’t completely conscious about, but really turned me on. To the point where I wouldn’t remember if I truly loved him. We’d spend our evenings talking travel, although I had never left the island, and he even less: the only sea he knew was the one polluted by the barrels of toxic waste foreign cargo-ships dumped into the harbor of Port-au-Prince. Once, on a whim, I brought him back a shell from the sea-fest in Pestel where I’d taken my daughter. I made him listen to the sound of the waves inside it. Yes, everything was fine, until that night when he forced me to spend the night; he heard me moan in my sleep as I was caressing myself and asking a stranger to tell me his name. A first, he didn’t seem to mind; then, a week later, he started to think—wrongly—that I was seeing another man. From then on, he’d made surprise visits at my home. Most times, he’d run into my daughter, sitting on the stoop in front of the house, smoking a cigarette; she knew what he was coming for, so she’d look him up and down and stick her tongue out at him.

Jimmy was buried in the big cemetery of the city on a Saturday morning. Dirty, ragged children wept and put flowers on his grave. That day, there were also women, many women, most of them very beautiful, wearing long dark dresses under the shade of their black silk mantillas. I was there too, with my daughter, in the background, dry-eyed. I had the impression that we weren’t there for his funeral but for an ultimate erotic parade, a way for each of us to prove to him that we loved him more than anything, and me, more than that tall, big-boned woman who was looking disdainfully at me from behind the grey designs of her fan, sweating in the heat of the last days of summer.

One afternoon, in the middle of our endless interviews with Inspector Joseph, my daughter came out of her room almost naked. She leaned over his ear and told him that if he went looking into the crumpled sheets of the hotel room, or if another couple occupied it, he could find, in the play of the shadows created by the subdued light of the lamp on the bedside table, the meanderings of the murder, how the scene had unfolded. The inspector knew she was delirious and he laughed, but that same afternoon, he took us to the crime scene, to that hotel high up in the Carrefour-Feuilles neighborhood, to that room with a view on the harbor and on the rusty roofs that hemmed in the sea. He took pictures of the hotel which was deserted since the night of the crime, of its entrance lined with bougainvilleas and oleanders, of the walls of the room decorated with cheap paintings, of the bedspreads, of the private cop with his hunting rifle who had seen the young woman arriving on Jimmy’s arm, her steps heavy with alcohol, both laughing madly.

After the visit, we walked part of the way home, and my daughter kept repeating that in the room she had felt the presence of that other Irene who was her complete invention, yes, she herself, bent over the dry body of Jimmy lying in his blood, and she stressed that the gesture must have been very quick, sublime. She was talking non-stop. She was very voluble, deciding how the facts were to be arranged, and me, to cool off the

situation, I told the inspector she was not in her right mind; she pretended not to hear me, and kept on talking as if she wanted to take control of the situation, deconstruct the hypothesis of unpredictability and randomness of Jimmy's murder, arguing that she was trying to link the words and their impact, Irene's act and her state of mind at the time, the compactness of that night and the strong smell—salt and seaweed—of the sea rising from the harbor, filling the city streets with fragrance, denying both the pros and the cons, the skin and bones, the golden reflection of the Barbancourt rum on the rocks in Jimmy's drink and the bubbles in Irene's coke at the counter of the bar in the hotel, before they went up to the room. She encouraged the inspector to get rid of his pretentious desire to understand everything about a life that takes pleasure in secrecy, in hiding meaning and lack of meaning, the way a virgin might get pleasure from her little perfumed firebrand, she said, explaining to us that sometimes, when she had nothing else to do, she imagined she was Irène Gouin, that she was the murderer, yes, Irène Gouin, and vice-versa, that they resembled each other, like two drops of water at the bottom of the ocean with the same amount of salt, down to every detail of her face.

On the Chemin des Dalles, near the Saint-Géraud bridge, we stopped a cab. We settled into the back seat. A pile of scrap metal, a small apple-green Datsun you could immediately tell dated back to the seventies. A little old guy with a straw hat on his head was at the wheel, driving slowly. He threw himself into rue Pavée and taking advantage of the traffic jam, started to talk, mumbling through his teeth. Seeing we didn't pay any attention to him, he put on some Shleu-Shleu music. We got off at the entrance to my neighborhood, rue Tiremasse, at the top of Bel-Air hill. My daughter headed straight to Brigitte's stand, she was thirsty, she said, although our house was nearby. Scratching the back of her head, she ordered a rum taffy. Inspector Joseph and myself caught up with her right away. She was no longer herself. She was gesticulating more and more outrageously. I sometimes thought I had brought her into the world so she would become my master and I her slave, I told the inspector, as if she was the one who had tinkered with me, knowing she was the prolongation of my dreams, of my shipwrecks, projecting myself on her, wondering on which one of her shoulders she would have to bear my cross. But she was cleverer than I was and had escaped on time. Then the inspector left me, walked up to my daughter as if to give her a kiss, framing her in his camera before getting near her: a beautiful portrait of a woman, a synthesis of several profiles, with big black eyes slightly sunken, heavy eyelids, subtle smile, hollow cheeks, hair prematurely graying parted by a middle line. "Oh!" she exclaimed, as if she'd never noticed the inspector's presence before; she ingurgitated her rum in one gulp and a few drops escaped from the corners of her lips. She handed the empty cup to Brigitte, thanked her, coughing in the loose end of her blouse and slowly lit a cigarette, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Then she grabbed the inspector's arm to take him to our place, except that what the inspector really wanted was to talk about Jimmy some more.

Before our conversations, I usually offered him coffee and cookies but this time, I went to get some in the kitchen and there weren't any. Then I joined them in the living-room. It was very hot. The inspector was helping my daughter to open the two sides of the high window that looked out onto the façade of a big white house on the other side of the street. I walked up to them. My daughter said "come on, Mom!" The inspector didn't see my knife entering the back of his head, and blood, not thick, but clear and fragrant, spurted onto my face. That big white house there, is where Irène Gouin lives, my daughter had said

as he was dying, yes, her house, a mix of high tech and refinement, a hotel with a gym and a large room for funky brunches, a white marble porch at the entrance, a living-room with a glass ceiling, a white Chesterfield couch, a vodka bar, a sun deck; in the spacious, luminous bedrooms, an electrical system allows you to create a mood with all shades of blue, tile and chrome bathrooms, deep oval bathtubs, thick, white wall-to-wall carpeting, pop-art colored objects ... Yes, Irène Gouin's house, my daughter went on, has two duplex suites with their own swimming pools; the last floor is the space of **BH**, the famous singer; it includes an immaculate bedroom, and at the top of the stairs, a small living-room opens up onto a deck with a view of the city's rooftops and there is a tiled swimming pool all lit up at night; the bedroom opens up onto a second deck—summer breeze and diving under the sky. It's well known that Irène wanted nothing to do with the neighborhood people and even less with the good old city of Port-au-Prince which sometimes somewhere takes itself for London or Paris; that to her, everybody is only dirt on her shoes anyway; that when she arrived here, she didn't introduce herself to anybody, and they all understood her need for solitude, and she, Irène Gouin, had always been very composed, she never wanted to have company, couldn't stand heroes, Saturday night drunks and Sunday Christians, and at the beginning, everybody had doubts about her unusual hairdo, but after one month had gone by, they thought they were lucky because she could have behaved like that young Dominican couple with hennaed hair who partied all night long, unlike her, Irène Gouin; that from her window, she, my daughter, could sometimes see the smoke of a cigarette billowing out, or hear the notes of *Please don't talk about me when I'm gone* being looped, over and over again.

Translated from the French by Nicole Ball

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