

THE FUNERAL
LES FUNÉRAILLES

by ÉVELYNE TROUILLOT
translated from the French by EMELYN LIH

Every movement he made showed that the suit wasn't his. He ran his hands absently down the sides of the jacket. It fell to his knees, hanging without elegance on his hard, thin body. The dark tie was a red stain on the clean white shirt with a frayed collar. Oddly, there were so many others like him in the tent, all feeling the same awkwardness, that he felt even more uncomfortable.

A young woman whose sorrowful expression could not mask the sexuality emanating from her body was handing out leaflets. Probably the biography of the couple. He recognized dates of birth, gazed at the faces immobilized on the low-quality paper. The letters themselves meant nothing to him, he had never learned to read.

The priests had not yet arrived. The employees of the funeral parlor appeared with the first casket to a concert of discreet sobs which then rose in volume, sometimes drowning out the noise of cars outside and leaves brushing the tent's tarp. The church building had been destroyed in the earthquake, so services went on in this giant tent, with pews lined up to face the makeshift altar surrounded by palm trees. He had never been

here before. When he was younger, he used to go to the Baptist church in his neighborhood to eye the girls as they moved their bodies in time to the hymns they sang, their eyes closed.

The crowd was growing noticeably. There were all kinds of people: a delegation from a business school, many of them wiping reddened eyes, high society types whose every step and every look proclaimed their privileged status, unemployed people like him, or not quite...even foreigners, whose faces were appropriately sad but who sent furtive looks toward their watches. Militants with shirts reading "Nou mande jistis..." [We demand justice] walked up and down the aisles between the pews. He had crept into the enclosure of the temporary church, anonymous among others who looked like him: awkward and badly dressed, wearing second-hand shoes that could never be quite comfortable because they'd been trained to other toes, faces folding under the weight of hidden frustrations. He knew that there would be so many like him that no one would pay them too much attention. Who would look at people like them?

He could see the imposing number of police officers standing around the perimeter of the church. He began to feel a bit too warm.

This suit he'd bought from the used clothing salesman on the Rue Tiremasse was clearly too hot. Since he was short he hadn't had much choice. He couldn't have worn his normal clothes to the funeral: sunglasses, jeans, sneakers, solid-colored button-down shirts. He hated T-shirts and never wore them. An old girlfriend he'd slapped several times had said as

she left him that it was because his scrawny body would look even more insignificant in a T-shirt. Button-down shirts with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow were part of his personal style. He had shirts in every shade, never white, but blue, pale yellow, green, grey, black. Today, though, showing his true colors was out of the question. After the funeral he'd give the white shirt to a teenager in his neighborhood, the one who'd become addicted to crack after his mother died.

All week he'd been hearing announcements on the radio for the patriotic vigil and the funeral itself. The assassination of the middle-aged couple, parents of two children, both active in humanitarian causes, had thrown the country into a frenzy of indignation and heated words. Callers on the radio spoke of nothing else, and the same was true of editorials, sermons, discussions between salespeople on sidewalks, passengers in buses, high school students, university students. Politicians from the opposition had quickly raised an outcry about repression—the murdered man, a member of a charitable organization, had been vocal in his criticism of the party in power. Was this a case of political retaliation? The woman had led a micro-credit business for more than ten years. Had she made enemies in that field? Had she stepped on someone's toes? After four days, the speculation died down, focusing on the hypothesis of a sordid theft. After all, the couple had been coming back from the bank with nearly eight hundred American dollars on them. Wasn't that enough reason for their death in this country where the most appalling impunity reigned? Where inves-

tigations went on so interminably that no one believed in them anymore?

No one could stop talking about the crime, about the vigil that was to take place at one of the state university departments. One of those departments whose students took to the streets at the drop of a hat. He'd watch them, sometimes, with envy and resentment. He would have liked to go to university too, but he'd had to stop at first grade. He'd heard that now you had to say Fundamental Education, that the first year of elementary school was equivalent to the first *année fondamentale*. A teacher he slept with sometimes had told him so, probably hoping to impress him. He'd forced her to kneel and give him a blow job right away after that, just to show her he was boss, and that he couldn't care less about school and books and teachers and notes. His father knew how to read, but he'd left for Santo Domingo so long ago that he didn't even remember what he looked like. According to his mother, his father had been a good-looking man, she couldn't understand why their son was so scrawny. After all, she was an elegant woman, with a slender waist and attractively arched shoulders—why wouldn't she have had a better-looking son? Like his older brother, the one who'd left for Miami. He, the younger son, hadn't been able to get a visa. Was it his fault if the American consul who acted like a queer had refused him the visa for no good reason? What's more, his idiot brother had been told by some other idiot about his kid brother's "criminal" activities and so now refused to send them money on the pretext that his mother should cut ties with her delinquent son. He had to get by

somehow—what did they expect? Was it his fault if the factory where his mother had worked in the Industrial Park had let her go, making her even more irritable and bad-tempered? He pretended not to understand that she brought men into their one-room apartment when she thought he wasn't there. In any case, once a client had seen his face and his revolver, he usually zipped up and took off, sending scared glances behind him.

But today he'd worn glasses, and kept his head down as much as possible. It was a risk, of course, to come to this funeral, but he hadn't been able to keep away. He hadn't dared go to the patriotic vigil, where he might have run into students who could have recognized him. Sometimes he was hired to introduce some real chaos into student protests. He would push people out of his way, yell slogans he found stupid, set tires on fire, break windshields, and then quickly, in the thick of things, throw some big stones here and there, particularly in the direction of the police. The way he saw it, they were already on the point of either running away or firing into the crowd. Nothing more to it than that! Never mind if afterward there was a student with a bullet in his leg or one with her jaw broken. Their causes and conflicts weren't his problem. He had nothing in common with them even though they were all about the same age. To begin with, he barely knew how to read, whereas they were at university and couldn't resist saying so all over the place; for them it seemed to be both a source of pride and a domain of permanent struggle. They forgot how privileged they were compared to so many like him. Sowing a little mayhem in

their demonstrations was one of his favorite things to do, especially since he took home a few thousand gourdes every time. He mumbled the words of the hymn. He knew this one, he'd listened to it often enough at the services his mother had dragged him to while she still could. "In Your kingdom, remember us, Lord! Remember us." Sure. In any case, for the kind of life he was leading, the best thing was to be forgotten by any all-powerful God. He nearly smiled sarcastically but held himself back just in time. The woman next to him was crying into her handkerchief. Did she know the murdered couple? Was she a friend of the woman? Was she sleeping with the man? Even if he was a do-gooder or an activist, he must have had desires or vices he didn't mention to his "comrades" at those meetings where they did nothing but generate hot air and help each other feel good about themselves. As if clandestine meetings like that could change anything in his world! He was stuck with hunger, dirt, overcrowding, and noise...unending noise. How he hated it! The voices, insulting, irritating, mocking; the laughs, booming, bitter, sardonic; the throat-clearing in preparation for spitting, the sniffles, sobs, slaps, whimpers, barks, roars, groans. Sometimes he wanted to take out his gun and fire at random just to make them shut up once and for all.

Who "remembers us"? Political candidates, when they want our votes and feel like showing off their popularity, they walk through a few hallways, hold their noses and hop straight back into their air-conditioned cars when the cameras stop rolling. Or NGOs, when they need to finish off reports with some semblance of interviews or fieldwork. Once the director of an or-

ganization had come to ask some questions. There were food vouchers for the people who participated in the survey. She'd come back a second time and asked to speak to the leaders, so he'd seen her again without the interpreter. She was a white American or Canadian, one of the two, and he'd noticed in her eyes that she was looking for something else. Between them there was no need for words. His mother had gotten into the habit of calling him scrawny, but he appealed to certain women. It was his face probably, his air of being obstinate and innocent at the same time—like an angry child, the teacher had said. With the foreign girl he'd propped her up against a table and pulled her close, had run his hand roughly over her ass which he found too hard—probably she worked out too much, she had no curves, but he didn't care. He'd grabbed her roughly, too roughly maybe, since she'd been scared all of a sudden. He'd seen it in her eyes, and she quickly put her official face back on, the one that said I'm doing humanitarian work, I'm here to help your country get its shit together.

The priest's sermon was a little too long. The words justice, impunity, gratuitous violence, respect for life kept coming back. We are all children of God, we can't go on killing each other. And in such a fashion! At least the representatives of human rights organizations had been smart enough not to open their mouths, but the priest had to do his job and reassure all the decent souls waiting to be comforted. All this nonsense was getting on his nerves now, and he wondered whether it had been a good idea to come after all. The priest was giving it everything he had, and he wasn't showing any signs of slowing down. It

was needful that the citizens of the same nation love one another. The same nation, what a joke! He felt his fists clench and had to make an effort to reach a more relaxed attitude. What nation was the padre from? From the rectory where he was waited on hand and foot, with his laundry, food and transportation all paid for? From the office of this man in the sharp suit sending texts to his mistress from his cell phone thinking no one could see him? From the home of the housewife sitting in the row ahead of him clutching her handbag, having no doubt identified all the faces from the neighborhoods she never went to and which she shunned on principle? He had the playful idea of grabbing her bag and giving her a slap, just for fun.

There was a commotion near the altar. He'd been once to the funeral of an elderly aunt and recognized the signs that the ceremony was coming to an end: the caskets were about to be closed. He rose with the others. There would be the morbid smell of incense, and the priest would do a stately walk around the casket, or the two caskets in this case. The sobs would become noisier, and one or two people would collapse. At his aunt's funeral, one of her neighbors had thrown herself on the casket screaming—he'd never understood why. As if she needed to rid herself of a sorrow she'd repressed for too long. He'd almost felt sorry for her. Until he found her sitting with a plate overloaded with food after the funeral, joking that the meal was well-deserved. He knew that a cry's first function was to call out to announce a death. In his down-and-out neighborhood, he often heard the shrieks telling a deaf indifferent world that a loved one had died. A child carried off by

a sickness that could have been treated, a young girl dead after a backstreet abortion, a son hit by a car that never stopped, another one killed by a bullet. In the houses of the well-to-do, there was no bawling like animals; they wiped their eyes, made phone calls, sobbed in silence, behind closed doors, they didn't show the world their pain. Here in the church they didn't cry either. They stuck close together, held hands and marched in dignified rows behind the body. He'd fixed his tie the way he liked it, one end hanging below the other at belt height, and he was getting ready to leave the church when it hit him. A solitary cry that punched him in the gut. Instinctively he wrapped his arms around his ribs. A second cry, equally alone and powerful, followed the first. The blow zigzagged from one zone of his body to another irrationally, from pelvis to stomach, nape to temples; he felt himself sway. He held on to a pew and closed his eyes while the caskets pushed by the employees moved past him.

He knew it was the two children who had screamed, one after the other. He knew it. No need to see them too.

He followed the crowd walking alongside the caskets led by the priest out to the hearse. Uniformed police officers were standing in line in front of the church; he stumbled a bit, felt more heat rise in him, and then went on his way undisturbed.

He didn't know why he'd pulled the trigger that day. He could have taken the money without shooting them both, but he hadn't been able to help himself. Maybe because of the woman's furious gaze, maybe because the man had tried to raise his arm, or maybe just because that day, anger had won out.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Many of Évelyne Trouillot's novels and short stories involve the reimagining of moments in Haitian history, both on the island and in the diaspora: not, typically, moments of major crisis and change, but what one might call historical lulls, when social forces and interpersonal troubles twine together in everyday reality, offering themselves up for exploration. Her novel *Rosalie l'Infâme* [*The Infamous Rosalie*] recreates the daily life of a slave girl in Saint-Domingue in the 1750s, and *La Mémoire aux abois* [*Memory at Bay*] alternates between the perspective of a woman who seems to be François Duvalier's widow, languishing in a French hospital, and the young Haitian immigrant nurse who tends to her while remembering what her own family suffered under the Duvalier dictatorship.

In "The Funeral," the third story in the 2017 collection *Je m'appelle Fridhomme*, Trouillot pursues her interest in the viewpoints of

victims and perpetrators (and the factors that blur those categories), this time in a contemporary setting. The story recounts the thoughts of an unnamed young man attending the funeral of a murdered well-to-do couple (based on a real recent event). The temporal indications are few: the funeral is taking place in a church that has not been rebuilt since the devastating January 2010 earthquake, and we are told that the murdered man had been critical of the country's leadership, presumably a reference to the 2011–2016 presidency of Michel "Sweet Micky" Martelly, a well-known konpa musician with connections to the Duvalier regime.

In imagining the frustrations and bitterness of a disenfranchised young man from a poor neighborhood in Port-au-Prince, Trouillot paints a picture of a fractured society in which the separation between classes is so great as to make attempts to overcome the inequality seem doomed. The promises of

change offered by institutions— political parties, school, university, NGOs, the Church, the American consulate—are shot through with hypocrisy. The story's protagonist grapples with these realities and searches for solutions in his past and among his peers (the "many like him," "people like him," who appear at intervals throughout the narrative). These reflections constantly run up against obstacles to collective action, such as the difficulty of tying student-led protest movements to broader social discontent and the solidarity-eroding effects of scarce resources, precarious employment, and bad living conditions. Nonetheless, it is possible to read the story's sole event—a young man, choosing to be present at the funeral of a couple he killed, thinking through the history that brought him there—as a turning point for a character led to seek structural solutions to problems correctly identified as structural.

By adhering to the sequence

of thoughts provoked by the funeral ceremony, with its overlong sermon full of empty words, its foreign visitors who would rather be elsewhere, and finally the unbearable sound of the murdered couple's children expressing their grief, Trouillot succeeds in communicating a complex denunciation of the political and economic realities of contemporary Haiti still reeling from the impact of the earthquake and riven by political strife from both within and without.

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ÉVELYNE TROUILLOT is a novelist, short story writer, dramatist, poet, and educator who writes in both French and Haitian Creole. She was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where she lives and works as a professor of French literature at the State University. She also founded and manages an editing, writing, and translating organization, *pré-texte*. After the earthquake, she and her siblings founded the Centre Culturel Anne-Marie Morisset in Delmas, which organizes activities and provides a library for young people.

