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A Hymn to Life
Shame Has to Change Sides

GISÈLE PELICOT

with Judith Perrignon

Translated from the French by
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ONE

I always set the table for breakfast the night before. I put out coffee cups, plates, cutlery, napkins, pots of honey and jam. Almost as a way of reaching across the hours of darkness that I fear, of proclaiming the harmony of the day to come. Then all there is to do in the morning is get out the butter, put on the kettle, and wait for the smell of coffee and toast to fill the air. All will be well.

That evening, as usual, I got everything ready. Even Dominique's clothes. Let's call him Dominique. I never used to call him that, I preferred affectionate nicknames – Doumé, Mino – but afterwards I didn't know what to call him any more. I called him Monsieur. Monsieur Pelicot. Now that it is time to tell our story, I have decided to use his first name. I put out a pair of bottle-green corduroy trousers and a pink Lacoste polo shirt the children had given him.

We had to be at the police station the following morning; the appointment was at 9.30. After we woke up, we drank our coffee and listened to the news on RTL. The global Covid pandemic had picked up with a vengeance and another lockdown was in force. I looked up at the sky through the kitchen window facing me. It was going to be a lovely day,

so I suggested a long walk after lunch as a way of defying the government's restrictions, and as an antidote to the morning's summons. Dominique sat opposite me and said nothing. I reminded him it was November 2nd; my brother, Michel, would have been sixty-nine today. He sighed and said he didn't like November, it was never a good month, no doubt an allusion to all the bills and notices of unpaid invoices that were about to come in. My ghosts and our money problems hung there between us in the kitchen for a moment. But we had always lived with them. And in a way, they had brought us closer. Dominique went to take a shower while I cleared the table. As we were about to leave, he pulled on a jacket that did not go at all with the outfit I had put together for him. I told him so, and he shrugged. We took my car. He drove us to the Carpentras police station.

Two months earlier, I had been staying with our daughter, Caroline, and her husband, Pierre, outside Paris, looking after my grandson until school started, and we had gone to spend the weekend at their holiday home on the Ile de Ré, off the Atlantic coast of France. That's where I was when Dominique called me sounding unusually agitated. He stammered something about having lost his mobile, he needed a code to activate the new one he had just bought to replace it, he'd had it sent to my number. I gave him the code, but everything about this usually methodical and organised man seemed suddenly in disarray. When he came to pick me up at the station a few days later he looked gaunt. We got home and he burst into tears. He said he couldn't bear to lose me. I thought immediately of my father's grief when my

mother died. Dominique sat beside me, shaking with sobs, and I was unable to console him. I feared he might be ill, that his cancer might have returned to take him away for good.

When Dominique finally confessed to me that the previous week he had done something foolish at the Carpentras branch of the Leclerc supermarket – he'd been caught by a security guard filming under three women's skirts, ended up at the police station and had his phone and computer seized – I was upset but I was also, in a way, almost relieved. It was terrible to think of my husband stalking these women, unbearable to imagine him as an offender, but it could have been so much worse. This was not irreversible. My fears were measured on a different scale: only death really frightened me.

So I told him that we would keep the incident between us; I wouldn't tell the children, so as not to hurt them. And I wasn't about to give up on him, but he absolutely had to apologise to the women he had filmed, and see a therapist. There wouldn't be a next time, because if there was, I would leave. 'I promise you,' he said, 'it won't happen again.' I would never be able to forget what he had done. It was a warning sign – but a warning of what? I had no idea. I just wanted our life to go back to normal. Life resumed in our little yellow house with blue shutters, the backdrop to our life in retirement in the South of France. The pool cover was on. The oleanders had finished blooming. Autumn was drawing near.

In mid-October I had gone up to Paris, this time to look after the children of my son David, who was due to undergo minor surgery. I was always going back and forth whenever I was

needed to look after one or another set of grandchildren. The school-holiday schedule became my own. I rushed up to Paris any time there was a problem too. I was Maminou, the travelling grandma. I wasn't afraid of getting old; I knew it was a privilege. Obviously when I was at David's I spent most of the time with my granddaughters. Every morning, Charlize stubbornly refused to wear anything but a tracksuit. Clémence, her twin sister, was always changing outfits and had a penchant for princess dresses. They were nine years old, the age I was when I lost my mother.

I didn't hear the phone ring that morning. I was sitting at the tennis courts. Clémence and I were watching Charlize as she ran after the ball. Her forehand had improved. I saw I had missed a call. Unknown number. I called back a little later. 'Bonjour, were you trying to reach me?' The man introduced himself: 'This is Deputy Sergeant Perret from the Carpentras police. Are you aware that we interviewed your husband a few weeks ago? Do you have any idea what this is about?' Yes, I said, my husband had told me everything. My answer resounded inside me like a quiet victory: transparency and trust were at the heart of our long marriage. And, I added, I had lived with this man for fifty years and he had never yet let me down.

'When will you be back?'

'On October 21st. I can come and see you straight away.'

'No, no. We have too much work to do. Come with your husband on November 2nd.'

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And so November 2nd arrived. Dominique had no reason to sob like Papa had when Maman died. 'Don't worry, it's only a formality,' I said to Dominique as we arrived at the police station, a low, unassuming, modern building, yellow like our house, the colour of Provence. We walked in, each masked up with one of those pale-blue rectangles that now covered every mouth on the planet. We had just reported to the reception desk when a man with a crew cut leaned over the balustrade on the first floor of the police station. It was Deputy Sergeant Perret.

'I'll see Monsieur Pelicot first, then Madame afterwards,' he called down. Dominique walked up the staircase in his ill-matching jacket without looking back. A short while later the police officer reappeared and motioned for me to follow him. I went briskly up the stairs, assuming that I would find Dominique in Perret's office. He wasn't there. The police officer indicated the chair opposite him, far enough away from his desk that I could take off my mask. I immediately apologised profusely for what my husband had done. The man across from me was tall and solidly built, with a strong face above his wide shoulders. He seemed to embody authority, and yet there was something gentle and cautious in the way he talked to me. He asked me to confirm my identity and the date and place of my birth: December 7th 1952 in Villingen, in Germany. Maiden name: Guillou. Parents' names: Yves Guillou and Jeanne Prot. He asked me how Dominique and I first met, and I told him it was at my mother's sister's house in July 1971. It was, I added, a genuine case of love at first sight. He wanted to know how I would describe my husband's character.

‘He’s kind, attentive. He’s a lovely guy. That’s why we’re still together.’

He asked if we liked to entertain. I replied that we often had friends over. He asked me to describe a typical evening. I said we didn’t really have a routine, we weren’t that old yet. He asked me what time I went to bed, whether it was at the same time as my husband, whether I took a nap in the afternoon. I was a little taken aback by his questions.

‘Are you into swinging?’

I didn’t understand any more. I heard myself replying no, never, how ghastly, I heard myself spluttering that swinging was not something I would ever consider. That I couldn’t imagine anyone else touching me. That, for me, there needs to be love with sex. He asked me if I thought I knew my husband well, and whether I trusted that he would never hide anything from me. I said yes.

‘I am going to show you some photographs and videos that you are not going to like.’

I sensed something rising in his voice – not only embarrassment, but a curious mix of danger and protectiveness. He told me that Dominique had been taken into custody for aggravated rape and for administering toxic substances. I think I burst into tears. I moved towards his desk and put my mask back on. He picked up a photograph and held it out to me. A woman in a suspender belt lying on her side. A Black man behind her, penetrating her.

‘That’s you in the photograph.’

‘No, that’s not me.’

I got out my glasses; he got out another photograph. The same woman on her back, a tattooed man alongside her.

‘That’s you.’

‘No.’

I did not recognise those men. Nor that woman. Her cheek was so floppy, her mouth so limp. She looked like a rag doll.

A third photograph. The man had kept his firefighter’s sweater on.

I couldn’t hear what the police officer was saying. Or rather, I could hear him but it had nothing to do with me. It was like the echo of a faraway voice. ‘This is your bedroom. Aren’t those your bedside lamps?’

So? That is not me lying lifeless on the bed. It’s a photo-shopped picture. Made by someone trying to hurt Dominique. Just last night while we were watching the news on television, there was a woman who had been intubated because of Covid, and he’d said how he would hate to see me like that.

The officer says a number. He tells me fifty-three men had come to my house to rape me. I ask for water. My mouth is paralysed. A psychologist comes into the office. A young woman. I don’t need her. I am far away, even though we are in the same room. I am secure in my happiness, *our* happiness. Our fiftieth wedding anniversary is coming up, and the memory of how we met is still clear in my mind. His smile. His shy expression. His long, curly hair falling to his shoulders. His Breton sweater. He was going to love me. My brain shut down in Deputy Sergeant Perret’s office.

T W O

It was July 1971. I had come to stay with my Aunt Andrée for a few days after she'd lost her husband. I wanted to be there for her as she had always been there for me. Almost as soon as I arrived she started telling me about a young man called Dominique she had recently employed. Now that my uncle had passed away, she and her son needed help keeping their small electrical business afloat. It was right next to their house, a company called Gagneux, a wooden-fronted workshop covered with billboards advertising all kinds of new electrical technology. Modernisation was moving full steam ahead in the French countryside. 'There's so much work to do,' my aunt often said.

I recognised in her the mute suffering of the local people, the obligation to keep pace with the changing times, but I also saw my mother's milky skin. My mother had died nine years earlier in our house, which was almost right next door. In my aunt's gestures and voice I spied similarities and echoes of her sister, her favourite sister, they'd been like twins, so close, thick as thieves. I had come back to the countryside of my childhood, to the turbid source of my melancholy and my joy. I listened to my aunt talking about this new employee, who was currently helping my cousin put in

electrical installations in neighbouring farms. I would get to meet him, she promised; he tended to stick around after work. He sometimes even stayed for dinner. His red Citroën 2CV was parked in front of the house, on the road between Châtillon-sur-Indre and Azay-le-Ferron. Nothing bad was ever going to happen to me here.

To get a sense of this place, you have to imagine the chateaux dotted around the landscape, the sometimes sumptuous, sometimes crumbling old buildings that were visible from the road or the train, and seemed to open doors on to other centuries, other worlds. When we were little, our mother brought my brother and me to stay every summer. I spent my childhood running around the grounds of empty castles. I don't think I ever dreamed of being a princess, or made up stories about Prince Charming, even though the round towers and pointed roofs of the Château d'Azay-le-Ferron might have come straight out of a fairy tale. I knew where I came from: my brother and I were the grandchildren of Marie and Roger Prot, peasants from the hamlet of Le Châtelier. I walked with my grandmother behind the goats and the dog, I watched her making cheese in the cellar, pulling the scalding laundry from the tub, piling it into the wheelbarrow to go and rinse it with a paddle in the public washing place in the village. And I drank *miot*, a mixture of water, sugar and wine, in which we dunked pieces of bread when we helped out at the grape harvest with our horse.

Lying in my little bed in the morning, I heard the voice of my grandfather, a carpenter, offering coffee to the workers. I listened to the reassuring ballet of the adults around me, felt

their presence, their roles, their love. On the long kitchen table, there was always a big four-pound loaf of bread cut into thick slices, a steaming pot of coffee, a bowl of fromage blanc, freshly picked peaches.

I think it is the memory of that table that I am holding on to as I set the breakfast table every evening; it is nestled inside me, like those extensions tucked underneath old wooden tables, ready to be pulled out to their full length for family celebrations. I would like to extend its promises into infinity. In my memory, the cockerel still crows. The sun creeps through the slats in the shutters.

This setting should have grown hazy and picturesque, a distant memory of holidays, but the twentieth century was seeing dramatic changes. World War Two was slowly receding into a profound silence. Young people were leaving the countryside for the city and the suburbs, just as Maman and some of her brothers and sisters already had. Land consolidation in the countryside would soon expand estates and wipe out smallholders, with their little fields full of hedgerows, thickets and rocky slopes where snakes hid. Soon, the baker's and butcher's vans would no longer come to the village, honking their horns before cutting the motor and opening up their back doors. All those rough linen sheets, washed with methylene blue and hung out to dry in the sun, would end up in flea markets. But in 1957, in a move that ran counter to the rest of the world, our family relocated back there. The course of life was reversed.

I was five years old, my brother six, around the age when

memories become fixed. Our parents rented an unheated house, originally an outbuilding of the chateau. We lived on the second floor in a suite of large rooms with high ceilings and huge chimneys. There was a kitchen at the back. No bathroom, just a jug and a basin filled with water that we heated in the winter and drew from the big tub left outside in the summer to warm up in the sun. We only had to cross the meadow to go and find Aunt Jeanne. Our grandparents were a few minutes away by foot. The house was at the end of the main road that led to the Château d’Azay-le-Ferron.

The groundskeeper knew us well – Michel, me and all our cousins. He would see us walking down the street, a few centimes tinkling in our pockets, stopping at Mother Tanchoux’s little grocery shop and then emerging, mouths filled with toffees, or fingers sticky from packets of sherbet powder, before heading back to the estate. We were as happy playing among alleys of trees clipped into straight lines in the French style as we were running along nearby paths and through fields. We crossed borders and centuries without noticing, understood nothing about the divisions between men, or their wars, for which Papa – a professional soldier who was only ever briefly home on leave – was constantly setting off.

But we were able to distinguish between the 2CVs and 4CVs that belonged to the locals, and the Citroën DSs that belonged to the rich people who parked in front of the patisserie in Azay-le-Ferron, famous for its millefeuille and a cake shaped like a melon (from which it got its name, ‘melon with almonds’) that was served with crème anglaise. And we