American Creoles

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1963 – I was twenty years old, the age at which we thrust words taut as fists into the sun’s face, when we burn through the days so as not to drag into old age. I had left for America as one summons life, without even waiting for it to beckon. In New York, more than a woman, black, or a student, I was an escapee. I was looking for a way out. Dense thickets still blocked many paths to me when, two years after my arrival, I met Scott Bradley, a black lawyer of the NAACP. In the eyes of exiled Haitians, I became from that moment on a sort of spoils of war to black Americans. Few were those in 1965 who understood that I was going from one anguish to another. And even today I suspect that they didn’t want to change the world so much as to Haitianize it, remake it in the image of their own wounds.

Luc must have smiled at me, but I am not sure. Maybe I wanted so badly for it to be thus that I believed it. It was raining, one of those tropical downpours, a straight rain, falling with no reprieve, no pity. I had taken refuge on the porch of the haberdashery where my mother had sent me to buy string. It was the month of September, and she was preparing our uniforms for the start of school in October. Rain in the tropics is always either miracle or upheaval, as if it could not content itself with being ordinary as it did under other skies. And squeezed against each other on that porch, we were already linked by

1 Translated by Nadève Ménard.
those waters that would just as soon make fruit grow as tear down walls or bury bodies. Joy at the sight was already marred by the imminence of disaster setting its huge dark wings somewhere. But for me, the world still smelled of innocence, and I felt both lost and happy as if in a huge shell of water. And it is perhaps because I thought him as lost and happy as I was that, turning, I saw Luc smile. He was talking to François and smiling. And when he saw that I was looking at him, he stumbled over his words, but continued to smile. In spite of the coolness brought by the rain, I felt a heat wave cross my body from the tips of my toes to the roots of my hair.

As soon as Scott proposed that I accompany him on a trip to the Southern United States, he became haunted night and day by the idea. Without at all suspecting what was hidden behind this obsession, I agreed to the trip with complete confidence. I so wanted to see, and especially to understand. Understand that staunch, obstinate silence with which he met me each time he returned from the South.

Scott had chosen an itinerary, and I was called upon to follow him wherever he wanted with the assurance that he was my guide, my tenacious, sweet and unpredictable brother. Our first stop was Richmond, in Virginia. We were then supposed to go to Atlanta, Georgia, then finally to Birmingham. Through having heard so many stories about the South, fear had started to make its way through my veins each time that Scott had gone there during those last three months. I didn't dare buy newspapers or listen to the radio, and I feared the ring of the telephone. And each time, he returned so broken that often, I didn't know how to start the conversation. I didn't even dare touch him for fear he go off like a charged rifle. For this trip, Scott gave me precise warnings:

First, you make sandwiches, because after Delaware, I'm not stopping at any restaurant, and I'm telling you above all that you will not be calling your aunt or your friend Claudia from our hosts’ home. Their phone is tapped.

We made the trip by car. Scott thought it was the best way for me to learn; stopping at the rest stops and seeing for the first time restrooms distinctly marked whites on one side, and blacks on the other. As soon as we left New Jersey, then Newark, I keenly felt the taste of the abyss. I sank into the South. Indeed, you head West, but you sink into the South as though it were an abyss from which a Black person in those years could only return banged up or dead. The South, like a big trap. I leaned out of the window to see better. To
miss nothing of this pilgrimage. Scott's hand touched the nape of my neck from time to time as if to reassure himself that I was still up for the trip.

It was also out of gratitude. Our first stop was in Delaware to get gas and drink hot coffee. It was the end of spring and we had chosen that time of year so as not to add the additional difficulties of the rigors of winter to a trip that in any case would be no easy journey for two blacks.

At nightfall, we approached Charlottesville where Mr and Mrs Mitchell were supposed to put us up. I had dozed off for a long while, and Scott, seeing me move slightly, woke me up completely with a strange question:

– Listen carefully. Do you hear anything?

After a while, I answered him:

– No!
– I do.
– Really. And what do you hear?

In the distance, cries, moans, groans, the click of a gun, a pack of dogs barking, the sound of boots. This very minute, somewhere in the South, someone is saying to a black man: 'What are you doing here? You know we don't serve Negroes.' At the moment I'm speaking to you, somewhere in the South, someone is killing an innocent. You can't recognize that sound, it's that of the Ku Klux Klan, of the John Birch Society and thousands of voices tracking us in the bushes and high grass.

I realized the extent to which these particular fears had been banished from the roads of my island. If we had other fears to confront, these ones, I knew, had been banished from our roads. We bore only the scars. Today, we witness our own errors, our own grandeur and weaknesses. We pay the price dearly, but they are ours. I myself had thought I'd paid, leaving the island hurriedly one Sunday, fear in my gut, rage in my fists, not knowing too well which one of us, Luc, François or Claude would survive on this road to Birmingham. I felt relieved of my fears, more than I should have been.

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_Could I have been born in a false paradise? With a sky as blue as a lie above our heads and all around, the violent poetry of the sea._

_The monstrous machine began grinding lives. Men in blue uniforms were wearing their first dark glasses, and the DKWs were already rolling in the night, blinding delirious innocents with their headlights. Very quickly, I lost my initial zest for the world: I understood for the first time that this world had its dividing lines. Irreversible ones. That it divided humanity according_
to what you possessed, your sex, your origin, the color of your skin. Faced with this disaster, an unknown anxiety oppressed me. I followed Luc, François and Claude in order to give a name to this distress.

Each day, Luc remade the world and the island in his head. And understanding that all he had left were his tenacity and his dream was difficult for me. The agitation that ruled the universities had largely taken over the high schools, and Luc was no stranger to it. The meeting of the Seniors’ association took place at the medical school, and when I got there, Luc was speaking to all of the students. Out loud this time, laying out the reasons why the world was no longer going well. That there was on one side, the rich, and on the other, the poor, the winners and the others. That here, on our island, everything got mixed up from the beginning. That the wheel had turned, dressing the losers of old in the clothing of those who had conquered and humiliated them. Everyone was looking at Luc like he was some sort of oracle, waiting for the words that would save them to fall from his lips. When I got there, Luc turned. His eyes had lost the brightness of the rain. I still wouldn’t know how to explain it today. They were burning when he looked at me from the depths of a mystery into which I could not enter, would never enter.

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We arrived at our hosts’ house at about eight o’clock. On a tree-lined street, we discovered a modest, but cute wooden house. Mr and Mrs Mitchell pulled aside a curtain downstairs to make sure it was us before opening their door. Mr Mitchell was a doctor and Mrs Mitchell a teacher in a nearby school. For a while now, they were being watched because of the ideas they expressed about the emancipation of colored people.

The dinner was full of warmth. Mrs Mitchell, an excellent cook, made us cornbread and honey pork chops. She forced herself to maintain a wise and bitter humor between herself and tragedy, determined to have the upper hand in spite of everything:

– You’d better eat and stock up, because where you’re going, people like you and I are not served, past a certain hour. And if God forbid we introduce ourselves to people, well! The whites, they think we’ve come to kill them, steal from them or rape their wives. So, be very careful! In such difficult situations, I play at being simple and I always end up getting what I want. It is the image of us that suits them most as it reassures them.

She turned to her husband:

– It pisses Jason off.
– Really! Sometimes Barbara exaggerates.
– Ok, she agreed. But don’t I get what I want?
– I have to admit that you do.
– At least it pays off and the white man and I are even. I’m frustrated and he’s been tricked.

After the meal, Jason Mitchell wrote on a piece of paper for us the name, address and telephone number of the people who would put us up in Birmingham. And he even drew a map of the city.

We decided not to go to bed too late. Scott had had the idea of interviewing some young blacks the next day. And they were supposed to arrive early in the morning to allow us to leave at the stroke of ten. In fact, they got there at about seven thirty. We waited for them in the kitchen. The youngest was barely sixteen and the oldest was about twenty. What I read in their eyes was the saga of thousands of people freed only to be delivered to a new and incomprehensible nightmare: the nightmare of poverty, hunger, humiliation, crosses burning in the night, blind massacre, and, above all, never-ending fear.

– Are there times in your life when you are not scared?

They were not expecting that question. Perhaps they had never asked it of themselves. So they looked at each other for a moment before answering, almost as one:

– No. All blacks live in fear. Rare are those among the young who have never been arrested or mistreated by the police or by isolated groups of whites.
– It’s one thing to know that you have to die one day. We all die. But it’s another to know you could be assassinated at any time. I never imagine the future. When the older ones go to work, my father, my brother, I never know if they’ll come back whole, or come back at all.
– Fear is within us, it’s everywhere. It’s like our shadow. Fear is the black man’s shadow.
– Why?
– Because that is what America has made of us. We did not choose it.
– Is that why you chose violence? It goes along with fear. They are very similar. Do you think it’s normal for people as young as you to live that way?
– You’re wrong, we’re not young. We’ve never been young. We are black and that’s the main thing. In America, other issues come afterwards.
Luc had forgotten how to talk to the little people among whom he was born. Those who didn’t have the words to express crooked houses, leaking roofs, streets like slimy ponds, illness, epidemics, the lack of love. No words to express deprivation, being packed together, the smell of decaying carcasses, houses burned by the tens. He had wrongly thought that political activism would give him those words. So he gorged himself with words, books, asking himself how such things could be written and said, and unlearned his people’s lessons of silence. He now lived apart, painfully distanced, and never wanted to believe it. To believe that man’s law could be so terrible.

The next day, the Mitchells walked us to our car and asked us to follow them. They wanted to show us the safest exit out of the city. Just like for our departure from New York, we prepared sandwiches, bought some fruit, filled a thermos with coffee and another with water. As we approached this second phase that was Birmingham, you might as well say that we were approaching Dante’s third circle: hell. The mere mention of that city made the hair on every normally constituted black American’s head stand up. But for Scott who had lived there, I knew it was a return to something even more profound, something buried in the deepest part of him.

Fatigue numbed us on the road to Birmingham. I felt a sudden dizziness tunneling through my stomach. And I wondered from the depths of what world Scott looked at me. He was sinking towards the South for erasure, to forget. But to forget what? Each instant, I accepted him with his fear, his sighs and his silences. I was following him into the roaring South, into a jungle that became thicker by the second.

The meeting was supposed to be held in a church. Scott was due to speak there. Reverend Williams had opened the doors of his Baptist temple to us, welcoming us with words of encouragement. There were all kinds of people there, mostly blacks, of course. Carl, who had a hard time hiding his violence, his aversion to systems, spoke rapidly. Louis, the Marxist, trying on the contrary, to make everything fit into his system, but getting caught up in a few contradictions, but also some whites like Jonathan or Reverend Williams. While we were in the midst of introductions, a young black man came to warn Reverend Williams that a group of whites from the area had been told about the meeting and were getting ready to respond. Reverend Williams announced the news calmly and added:

– And, of course, the meeting goes on. Besides, tonight, we welcome a
lawyer who first started out in Chicago and who, today, lives and fights in New York with the NAACP.

I watched Scott stand up. I hadn’t realized before how tall he was. He bent his head slightly forward. All heads turned towards him, attentive.

When Scott pronounced these words: ‘Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, brothers and sisters,’ his voice seemed older to me. He didn’t say anything that was really new. Nothing that everyone in the room didn’t already know. But the content was much less important than the innate power emanating from that voice. It carried the most secret, most intimate challenge and carried far, very far, beyond the streets, the houses, the bloodied bushes around the city:

– What I have to say to you tonight is very simple. I am beating on an open door. Something is changing in the United States of America.

After he spoke for about fifteen minutes, the Reverend advised us to shorten the meeting and to disperse. We did so cautiously in the early part of the Southern night, so surprisingly beautiful and profound. We returned home tired, but happy. The telephone rang at about three o’clock in the morning. It was Reverend Williams announcing that the young black man who had warned us had been beaten to death and had managed to drag himself to his door. He had had just enough strength to knock twice. He succumbed to his wounds an hour later. Scott stayed seated for a long moment. His gaze met mine.

– What are you going to do now?

– I don’t know yet. I am sad to death, Jocelyne. And I’m angry. In any case, I am not going to make things any easier for them by bringing myself down. He stayed bent like that and drank a half-bottle of Bourbon in silence. I touched his shoulder.

– God does not exist, if he does I fuck him!²

Then, he fell asleep, rage in his heart.

And in that Birmingham night, something became clear. I see us between those four walls. In a warm and cottony silence. The world was nothing but shadows, murmurs, and expectations. Scott turned in his sleep and took on that look of a troubled child that I knew so well. I thought for a moment that he was going to wake up completely. But he opened his eyes a moment, half asleep. I saw his lips tremble, then break into a grimace and I thought

² Original in English.
he was going to scream or cry. I almost crushed my hand against his mouth. He placed a tense hand on my forearm and I lessened the pressure.

– Is it you?
– Yes Scott. What’s wrong?

He didn’t answer that question.

– Stay here, don’t leave.
– I’m here Scott. Where would you want me to go?

And, for the first time, unexpectedly, Scott talked. Scott had an implacable memory, vibrant, precise. His voice came from very far away. Hollow and more troubling than all the shadows in this damned town. He blinked, like when you emerge from a dream, and sat up. He pulled apart the edges of that virile wound that he carried within him and that every woman unknowingly awakened:

– My mother was of Trinidadian origin, the daughter of a pastor who had emigrated to the United States. During my childhood, we were poor, but my father was my father and I loved him. I was proud of him. His dirty pants and his old, misshapen hat did not matter to me. No one could play the harmonica like my father, no one could work the land like him. No one walked like him. So straight, so strong. And since I was his eldest son, he talked to me about what we would do, once I had finished school. He told me about the importance of learning at Mr Brown’s little school, the town’s black teacher. Then, Scott fell silent. For so long that I had to ask another question.
– And then?

I served him some bourbon.

– One day we arrived at a grocery store. It was a Saturday. It was pouring rain. We weren’t very clean because we’d spent the day working in the fields. We had never bought from this grocery store. But the next day was my younger brother’s birthday, and mom wanted to make him a birthday cake with real icing and asked us to buy some at this grocery store. The door reserved for blacks is on the right, right next to a puddle. And it was raining so hard that particular afternoon that the water came up to our ankles. So, it was raining so hard that we went through the door on the left side that was reserved for whites, with the intention, once inside, of rejoining our ranks. Me, I’m so unused to being in a closed space with

3 Original in English.
whites that I hesitate in the doorway for a moment. But I still follow my father inside the grocery store. I know that he is the strongest. A lady with a hat and glasses … . Scott abruptly stopped his story, drank another gulp of alcohol, lit a cigarette, then continued …

– I will never forget that face. That cow looked at my father and screamed. The other whites stepped back, then turned. The grocer stopped serving clients, came out from behind his counter and grabbed my father by the collar, shook him like a sack of straw and slapped him:

– Didn’t you see that there was a door for people like you?
– It’s raining and I couldn’t use it with my son.
– I don’t want to know. Next time, I’ll strangle you and I’ll tell the cops you threatened me with a knife.
– I watched the scene without being able to budge. I was so ashamed that I was crying in silence. There are several ways to emasculate a man, Jocelyne. Slapping him in front of his son without him being able to react is one of them. Then the grocer shouted:

– Get out!

And he kicked my father to the wet floor. On the way home, I never turned around to look at him, even when he called me with his sad and humiliated voice. My father didn’t come home that night and made a habit of crossing our doorstep less and less.

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– Other people’s childhoods are a foreign land.
– You mean to say that no one can ever enter it?

He didn’t answer. Those were the only words he pronounced about the other world, the one over which he seemed to have no control, a world of mystery, the mystery of the vanquished. We were sitting on a small promontory near Fort Jacques. The memory of him in that sun still enchants me. I didn’t take him anywhere except to the brink of that childhood. He had nothing to give me except for the sensation of once again being able to set my feet there. While waiting for the one who would stir up his wounds with secret gestures, to better heal them. He turned and I knew in that instant that even when everything had played out in my life there would be the memory of those eyes. He took my face between his hands and placed his lips on mine.

The next day, he had joined François and Claude in hiding. Other worlds were waiting that we would not see together.

It was not until many years later that I learned to weigh that humanity in my hands, according to the more or less ugly things that each person was
willing to do to exist because suffering is not always redeeming, injustice having long contaminated the heart of the vanquished. Of Luc, François, and Claude, I kept the idea that revolt was still necessary.

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I moved close to Scott and laid my head on his shoulder, as distraught as if I was finding him after having lost him for a long time. He crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and slid his dry palms into the warmth of the sheets. Along with pleasure, Scott wanted to find, between a woman’s thighs, his childhood intact. The bed fell away from under me and the dizziness carried me even more surely towards him, towards a shared sleep that slowly erased the shame.

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1995 – And for several years now, I go over in my memory images of my island, the landscapes of the American South, words of sun and night.

   I see Luc’s eyes again as though crossed by fires. I still hear Scott’s voice, lightly rasped by alcohol and tobacco. I make out the smell of childhood and streams of their hair.

   I still have the imprint of their hand in mine, on my skin, gestures that link and unravel.