

Catherine Mavrikakis

FLOWERS
OF
SPIT

Translated by
Nathanaël

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Eight

YESTERDAY MORNING, I saw Caroline go by. She didn't look at me. That's how it's been since her niece died. Sometimes she stares at me, haggard, without so much as a greeting. Sometimes she barely says hello, avoiding my eyes. She speeds up. And then, another time, she'll throw herself into my arms, ask me to console her, hold her tight, tight. Tells me it's unbearable, that she doesn't know what to do anymore. That she misses the little one too much, that her brother is suffering so much, that it's awful. That she knows Mother is dead, that she knows what I'm going through. That she would like to see Rose, but that she can't. That children hurt her. The mere idea of them wounds her. She finds it terrible not to have even the slightest bit of generosity. The laughter of kids in the street is torturous, the sun stinks, the sky is pestilential. She's a sight for sore eyes. It's been over five years since Catherine died. She was only eight. And wouldn't be very old. A very charming child. Mirthful, good-natured. A giant leukemia carried her off. Two or three years of struggle. At that age, that's something. I'm a lucky bastard not to be an oncologist! A golden girl for not having to work with little children! That's not my specialization

and it's just as well. I didn't know little Catherine very well. But while she was sick, Caroline asked me to go see her. She knocked on every door, didn't know which way to turn. *Why not go see Flore? She may know what to do...* I'm a doctor, dammit, I should be able to do something... Catherine was a gentle child who could see death coming. In her eyes, one could see that it was there, but she wasn't afraid. For the peanut gallery, her parents, her aunt, the fairy godmother, it was, however, necessary to bluff. Console all her people. Children and death don't go well together. And yet, all those that I have known and who were approaching death were more knowledgeable of things and better able to enjoy their days. My friend Hervé is an admirable guy. I have very few colleagues whom I don't hold in contempt. Hervé saves millions of kids, but he sees some of them die. Often, he comes to cry in my office. Each time a child dies, he is shaken. And he continues. There are others he must care for. There are the parents to follow. The children move him, they reach him. He finds them wonderful. They teach him about death. I don't know how they do it. That profound force, that relationship to life. As though they were simply passing by this world. And just this morning I saw Caroline pass by. She was a wanderer, a shadow, a girl out of place. Nothing belongs to her. Not even the time for a game or a round. She was an unhappy ghost and I barely noticed her.

I'm afraid she'll do herself in. Her brother tells me she won't, that it's a way of life. She just lost her mother. The misfortunes accumulate. Her niece isn't coming back. Caroline waited for her for a long time. After a day's work, at her door, she would see her. Catherine would come pet the cats. Caroline lives next door to her brother. The little one was always there. Now she is no more and God knows where she is. I bumped into Caroline and I dreamt of Rose. In my dream, my daughter was speaking to me of blue-scented flowers. *Yes I know, Mother, I remember what I tell you in dreams, every night.* That's what she tells me in the morning, when I describe my sleep to her. My daughter is a pythia. A ripening witch. Sometimes she frightens me. She speaks like a poem. Sibylline words. Very mysterious words. Sentences that take on meaning, that unfold in time. A concentrated future comes out of her mouth. My daughter has a voice from elsewhere, a voice outside of time. I'm not at the level of my little prophetic. I don't always know what to do with my soothsayer. This morning she came into my bed and said: Mother, that's enough. Let grandmother go a bit. I want some pastries. We need a celebration full of cakes, chocolates. You have someone who can do all that for us. I was completely taken aback. I was completely gaga. I don't know what to say anymore, when she enters into the quick. *Where is this coming from, my soothsayer, my angel?* She'll be a

writer or a dancer, she promised. Our friend Hervé is showing her the way. Hervé is a great poet. A poet of death. The death of children. And Rose swears only by him and his daughter Anna. They speak in tongues all three of them, they glossolalie. I don't understand a thing and I watch them have a good laugh. Hervé tells me I should put myself to literature more than I do. How much better it would be than meds! That's where he finds consolation. But I don't know how to read. I only know how to spit. I'm like a dragon. I vomit words of fire. Literature is another story! I don't know it. My daughter wants me to live, for us to laugh, to dance. She likes the Crackpot. I think she's exaggerating. Hervé also likes to chat with him. It must be the poetry! The dead, all the rest... I don't understand a thing, and I don't want to understand. I must not be demented enough. There are the poets, madmen who have a screw loose, my daughter, my brother, Hervé, Anna. Those people are birds of a feather. And me, I'm elsewhere, shut into the straightjacket of my vehemence. There's nothing tender in me. I don't even have sweet folly. I'm sad after a few drinks, and too often, also after gloomy medication.

My daughter, my child, do you know that I love you? It begins with your eyes and I lick your lashes. I want them nice and wet, washed of all melancholy. Moistened by the tongue that traces signs onto your sleeping lids. You want me to live? OK, fine... What

must I do? I want to sweep everything aside, destroy love. Toss the Crackpot out on his ass, along with his friends. But you ask me to keep everything, to protect my big brother. You tell me you like him a lot, your uncle, the German. It's because he often vociferates in the Germanic language, and you and Hervé laugh quietly. You don't see that he's mad. That this could end badly. You tell me he's funny, a big joker. Rose, you want us to take the train, to speed ahead into the coming days. Choo, choo. You are my locomotive. I'm the big railway carriage that has trouble not derailing, that's much too overloaded. *Choo choo*, that's what you say, and the Crackpot helps you along, in my orange living room, to play train, or ocean liner, or airplane, or Russian rocket. My brother's stories go back to the Cold War. Rose speaks to me of Gagarin in the Luftwaffe. At first I wondered where she'd picked that up. Not on the radio or the television. That's Florent's childhood, it's mine in storage. Germany, the USSR, time gets all mixed up. Everything turns to mush. Rose says Gagarin and giggles. *Gagarin, all gaga gargles in the sky*. Her laughter is a waterfall. And the Crackpot laughs with her, and then I don't know how to kick him out. I often wonder what I'm doing here, I mean in my life. Why you, my darling, and then why the child? Why play at one's life with the life of a little one? But it's the sort of thing for which there is no answer, it's even the sort of question

one mustn't ask oneself, not even once. Because the answer is far too complicated. It brings us back to 'why this' rather than nothing and metaphysical problems I'd rather forget. I'm just a doctor. I'm nothing of a philosopher.

When I was a child, I believed the world was made just for me. That my mother, my two brothers pretended to exist, that everything was a set, that if I turned around fast enough, I'd catch sight of the truth. Looking over my shoulder at top speed became a tic, second nature. They wouldn't have had the time to reset the stage, the inauthentic stage of my existence. One day, after a thousand vain attempts at turning around extremely fast, I wanted to be clear in my mind. I had to intervene, I had to do something. I was five years old. It was time for me to know. I decided to carry out an experiment on my younger brother, Genêt. One evening, I went and found him. I announced to him, as he was falling asleep, that we were all fake and that he alone existed, that life was made of paste-board. *Soon we'll disappear and only you will be left...* I had told myself, knowing him well, that he would admit his misdeeds and cough it up. He would tell me that he, Mother, Florent had all been faking it for years. My little brother burst into tears. He howled with fear. My mother came running. I was punished for a long time. Though convinced of nothing. They were really very good. And God too, who

orchestrated it all. Sometimes I believe in God, but it's thanks to Violette, and now Rose. Rose will make me gaga and even Gagarin. Without her, I would have killed my brother, slit the throat of my brand new boyfriend, slain Madeleine just now and made minced meat of the old anesthetist, the pathological Englishman who still wants my head. For Rose, I stay alive. I owe her at least that. And then she doesn't care about death. She still speaks to Violette. She sees her often and has discussions with her and the Crackpot and with Hervé also. They have conversations. It almost frightens me. And then I feel excluded. I don't know how to laugh. I'm dull, macabre. I'm always sorrowful, with tears in my eyes, undone. And with my Rose a lot of the time I have epiphanies, apparitions of life that make sense. Plop, there it is! Plop, it's gone. That's also how I saw Mother. With her, something else happened to me, took place... The world unfurled. Under Rose's charm, it descends toward me, it proffers itself, it gives itself, it falls to me. Bing, bang, I take a big hit in the face, from the good lord, and it's fun! Rose turns into a place, a space, in a second. She fills time and serves it to me lukewarm, and a wonderful plate of white porcelain. *But let yourself be tempted, Mother, have some more. This cake of days is made for you. This angel's food cake, it's grandmother who's sending it to you. Close your eyes and have a taste. Fill your mouth full of it.* It reminds me of a story, a children's

Colophon

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