

MARYSE CONDÉ

The Wondrous and Tragic Life
of Ivan and Ivana

Translated from the French
by Richard Philcox

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Gradually your life knocked you out.

Alan Souchon, Le Bagad de Lann-Bihoué

IN UTERO OR BOUNDED IN A NUTSHELL

(*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare)

As if acting on a signal, an invincible force besieged the twins. Where did it come from? What was its purpose? They got the impression of being brutally dragged down and forced to leave the warm and tranquil abode where they had lived for many weeks. A terrible smell clung to their nostrils as they gradually, helplessly, made their descent, a smell that resembled a noxious stench. The twin who had a button between his legs preceded the smaller less developed other whose sex was hollowed out by a large scar. He butted his way down the narrow passage whose walls slowly widened.

Up till now their routine had been dominated by the single fact of being huddled one against the other. Their only inclination was to cling to each other and breathe in the sour but agreeable smell in which they were wrapped. The abode where they had spent many long weeks was somber: dark, but nevertheless porous to every sound. Among the many sounds they heard they had ended up recognizing one in particular and realizing it came from the woman who bore them. Soft, lilting,

and consistent, it washed over them its wave of harmony. Sometimes it alternated with other sounds, sharper, less intimate and pleasant. Then all at once there would be a genuine hullabaloo, a concert of indistinct, metallic tones.

While the fetuses continued their helpless descent they suddenly found themselves between two rigid walls that seemed to go on forever. Then they landed in a circular, oddly mobile space. Once they had made their way through, they abruptly fell onto a flat surface and were blinded by the light. Here they were gripped by the shoulders, a feeling that afflicted them as much as the light that hurt them. They instinctively rubbed their eyes with their fists by way of protection. Meanwhile a strange wind filled their lungs, making them suffocate and unconsciously open their mouths to let out uncontrollable cries. Without further ado they were soaked in a lukewarm liquid which neither smelled nor tasted like the one they were accustomed to. At the same time they became aware of their bodies as they were wrapped and laid onto a cushion of ample flesh whose penetrating smell filled their nostrils with perfume. Such was the feeling of well-being that it made them forget the horrible downward journey they had just made. They guessed they were lying against the breast of the woman who had borne them, recognizable only by her voice. With voluptuous pleasure they discovered her smell, they discovered her touch. They began to suck greedily on the bloated nipples full of a sweet-tasting liquid which were placed in their mouths. It was then, at that very moment, their life began.

Simone whispered into the ears of her new-born twins:
“Welcome, my two little ones, boy and girl so alike that one can easily be mistaken for the other. Welcome, I tell

you. The life you are about to embark on, and from which you will not get out alive, is not a bowl of arrowroot. Some even call it wicked, others an untamed shrew, and some a lame horse with three hoofs. But who cares! I'll grab a pillow of clouds that I'll put under your heads and I'll fill them with dreams. The sun that lights up the desolation of our lives will not burn brighter than my love for you. Welcome, my little ones!"

EX UTERO

The twins' first months on earth proved difficult. They were unable to cope with living distinct lives: sleeping in separate cradles, being washed one after the other, and taking turns to suck their baby bottle. At first all it needed was for one of them to start gurgling, crying, or screaming and the other would immediately follow suit. It took time for them to rid themselves of this annoying synchronization. Gradually the world around them took shape and color. They were at first filled with wonder by the ray of sun that entered through the shack's wide open window and landed on the mat where they lay. On its way through it took on mischievous shapes which made them laugh, and this laugh tinkled like small bells. They rapidly remembered their names, pricking up their ears and waving their little feet at the mention of these syllables so easy to retain. What they didn't know was that the priest at Dos d'Âne, a fat, dull-witted man, had almost refused to christen them.

"How could you give them such names," he shouted angrily at Simone. "Ivan, Ivana! Not only do they not

have a father, but you want to turn them into true heathens!”

Simone’s family was used to both multiple and singular births. In the nineteenth century, her ancestor, Zuléma, the first of a litter of quintuplets, had been invited to the Universal Exposition in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in order to prove what could become of a descendant of a slave when he breathed in the effluvium of civilization. Dressed in a tie and three-piece suit, he was a surveyor by trade. He had learned opera arias all on his own by listening to a program on Radio Guadeloupe called *Classical? Classical indeed!* It was he who instilled the love of music that had trickled down to all his descendants.

The twins quickly discovered the sea and the sand. How wonderful it was to feel the warmth of the sand that cascaded through their chubby fingers, their nails pink like seashells. Every day Simone would put them in a wheelbarrow which served as a pram and push them to one of the creeks near Dos d’Âne where the sea breeze caressed their faces mingling with the sounds of an ample maternal voice.

How many years passed blissfully, four or five? They discovered very early on the beautiful face of their mother, who was always leaning over them, and her black velvety skin and sparkling eyes which changed color depending on the mood of the day. She hummed songs to them, much to their delight. When she went off to work with sweat on her brow, she placed them in a sort of basket which she covered with a cloth and set down under the trees. And the women who worked with her came to peek at them in raptures. They soon realized their mother’s name was Simone: two harmonious syllables easy to remember and repeat. Gradually the decor

of their lives took shape. They had neither brothers nor sisters and had only to share their mother's love with an old grandmother, and that was okay. They never tired of letting that wonderful sand trickle through their fingers: golden sand, endowed with a smell that filled their nostrils, sand that made an imprint of their bodies and could be tossed playfully into the air.

After a few months they began to stand up and walk bowlegged until their legs straightened and turned into two pretty pillars. They soon began to speak and endeavored to put the world around them into words. When silence was required they learned not to make a sound. Consequently Simone could take them to her choir of an evening. They sat on their little benches as good as gold, sucking their thumbs, beating their hands in rhythm to the music. Famous from one end of Guadeloupe to another, the choir specialized in the island's old melodies, one of which, "Mougué," dated back to the time of slavery when the slaves were in irons.

Mougué yé kok-la chanté kokiyoko.

The song "Adieu foulard, adieu madras" dated back to the time when the crowds sang on the quay while the steamships of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique left for the port of Le Havre, their berths loaded with civil servants on administrative leave.

Adieu foulard, adieu madras, adieu gren d'or, adieu collier-chou.

As for "Ban mwen an ti bo," it was composed during the schmaltzy *doudouiste* period when Creole was considered to be nothing more than bird twittering and not a language of protestation.

Ban mwen ti bo, dé ti bo, twa ti bi lanmou.

After her singing Simone would dance barefoot and throw back her shoulders, her silhouette standing out

from the other women who were incapable of rivaling so much grace and beauty. She was often accompanied by her mother, who was just as black, but with hair powdery-white like salt. Her mother was called Maeva. With no milk in her breasts she would feed the babies with spoonfuls of savory cereal. Maeva and Simone would take each other by the hand, bow, and do entrechats. For the two children this was the first such performance they were to see.

Simone never failed to tell them why they were called Ivan and Ivana and why she had stood up to the priest. Ivan was named after the Czar of All the Russias, a capricious and atrabilious man who had lived in the sixteenth century. Ivana was a feminine version of his name. When she was younger Simone was too poor to afford a seat at the cinema on the Champ d'Arbaud in Basse-Terre. She only watched films when Ciné Bravo, a cultural association, set up a white cloth on the main square in Dos d'Âne. That was how she sat in awe through a series of films comprehending little of the cavalcade of images and matching music that filled her eyes. The children sat on numbered metal chairs in the first row. The older generations crawled out of the woodwork of their shacks like cockroaches on a rainy day. Everyone went on chattering loudly until a gong called for silence. Then the magic began. One of these films, *Ivan the Terrible*, had made a deep impression on her. She couldn't remember the name of the director or those of the actors. All she could recall was the lavish jumble of images.

While Ivan was born first, Ivana took refuge behind her brother as if he were destined to be forever and wherever in command. He was the first to learn to dance, filling all those around him with admiration for his instinctive sense of rhythm.

One particular date comes to mind. When the twins were five years old Simone gave them a thorough wash, put on their best clothes, two unbleached linen bodysuits embroidered with cross-stitch, and took them to have their photo taken at the studio Catani. This was one of the obligations that no inhabitant of the actual island of Guadeloupe (as Basse-Terre was called at that time) could shirk. Louis Catani was the son of Sergio Catani, an Italian who arrived from Turin in the 1930s because he had no intention of marrying a Fiat like his brothers. Car engines and bodywork did not interest him. He was more interested in portraying men's grim, pimply faces, or those with a fresh face and smooth skin, languishing looks or piercing eyes. Comfortably well-off from his wife's dowry, a rich white Creole heiress, Sergio Catani opened a photo shop he called *Reflections in an Eye*, which was the talk of Basse-Terre. On weekends he set up his camera in the countryside and captured everything that caught his eye. He published three books, now forgotten, but which at the time were highly successful: *Gens de la Ville*, *Gens de la Campagne*, and *Gens de la Mer*.

The portrait of Ivan and Ivana appears on page fifteen of Volume One, entitled "The Little Lovers." It features two children holding hands and smiling at the camera. For some reason the boy is darker than the girl, but just as adorable.

Ivan and Ivana lived in the company of women – their mother, their grandmother, aunts, cousins, aunts-in-law, and cousins-in-law – who each took turns washing them, dressing them, and filling their stomachs with food.

Of the two, Ivana was more inclined to dream. She would examine flowers and leaves, smelling their scents, and seeking the company of domestic animals. She was especially fascinated by birdsong and the color

of butterflies which her chubby, clumsy hands tried to capture as they flew by. Her mother devoured her with kisses and as proof of her love invented light-hearted songs especially for her.

Ivan considered his sister his own personal property and grudgingly accepted the love she showed for their mother. As soon as he was old enough, he was the one who washed her, chose her clothes, and tied her mop of picky hair into braided buns glistening with black castor oil. At night, more than once, Simone found them sleeping in each other's arms, which was not to her liking. Nevertheless she didn't dare intervene. The power of their love intimidated her.

The first years therefore went by in perfect happiness.