

THE MEANING OF AN END

Stephen Henighan

Night blots out the luminous white streamer of foam squiggled along the curve of the beach as the van zigzags into the shantytown. Evasion scores Sophie's lips with the rough pucker of the salty air she tasted on the balcony of her hotel. For a moment she can almost believe that she never had a husband or children. Peering into the darkness through the windshield of the van, she feels her senses grazing a more fully realized incarnation of the phantoms that made her tremble at eighteen--phantoms she pursued to Rodolphe's firm mouth, trimmed mustache and soft, square hands, where they foundered in a long decline of years and children and bourgeois proprieties. Now those achievements have faded to distant pleasures, trophies of a life successfully managed. But the trembling, amplified by the hot night, grows more insistent. She feels her need deepening into a force that surrounds and contains her even as her body, barely capable now of doing her bidding, fumbles its last toehold of memory on the delighted, flesh-full joy she felt decades ago in Rodolphe's embrace. This other, richer resonance promises her the solace Rodolphe's lovemaking never provided, the wisdom that parenthood and a late middle age spent visiting her grandchildren could only sketch against the violent blue sky of Marseille: the knowledge of how to invest death with the significance with which she has been unable to imbue life. She turned seventy on the flight to São Paulo. Her detached slide through events shared by her friends—marriage, children, grandchildren, bereavement, resignation—denied her any sense of the meaning of an end. Her recent obsession with vital questions whose precise formulation hovers just beyond the tip of her nose has earned her a reputation for vagueness. Sophie is getting old, her family says. Sophie's not as sharp as she used to be. Only Manon, her youngest, displays any understanding of her mother's distracted impatience with a life she knows too well. In contrast to the stolid, disciplined children

she and Rodolphe brought up together, Manon, raised mainly by a Sophie released into negligent widowhood, understands restlessness. There were too many men in Manon's life when she was young, Sophie feels, but that phase has passed. At thirty-two Manon married a Brazilian painter who spoke French with a trilling accent that did not sound entirely out of place in Marseille. She surprised the whole family by consenting to follow him to São Paulo. Sophie compounded the surprise by announcing her intention to travel to Brazil for a month every year. You can't, they told her. Maman, you're too old. They meant: don't go bothering Manon, she wants to have her own life, don't interfere. But Sophie understands this. She is not seeking to tame or recapture her spirited daughter—only to share a few licks of her rebellious flame in the hope of reigniting the doused ashes of her own life. Manon's home in São Paulo disappoints her. Manon's husband may be an artist, but he lives like a banker. In one of the high-hedged residential districts that wealthy Paulistas refer to as a *jardim*, in frank admission of their fraught attempts to raise the walls of an artificial Eden against the surrounding turmoil of poverty and violence, Manon and Mário are perpetuating a bourgeois ideal of a purity that eroded long ago in Marseille. Is this where Manon's uncompromising intelligence has led her? Into the clasp of another Rodolphe, enmeshed by the structures of managing a house larger and more servant-laden than any that could be imagined by a European of her class? A week into her first visit, Sophie had had enough. I'm leaving, she said. Maman, you can't. It's dangerous. You'll get robbed, you'll be murdered. You don't even speak Portuguese. At my age, Sophie said, I have the right to flirt with death. She travelled to Rio by herself, stayed for two weeks, emerged relaxed and unscathed. Now she returns to Brazil for a month every year on the pretext of visiting her daughter and spends three weeks of her stay roaming beach and *pantanal*, jungle and *sertão*, on her own. She wears long dresses spangled with garish tropical patterns, adorns herself with a broad-brimmed straw hat purchased in a cowboy

market, carries in her luggage a spare pair of glasses and double sets of all her pills. She trusts her fate to gestured directions and chance encounters with speakers of halting French. Manon, knowing her needs are best not tampered with—or grateful, perhaps, that Sophie's incursions into her paradisaical *jardim* will be mercifully short—colludes in her travel arrangements, supports her subterfuges to conceal from the rest of the family just how much of each vacation Maman spends wandering on her own. Manon has not told her siblings that this year Sophie will be spending most of her holiday alone in Bahia. It would be folly to mention to Marseille business people, who decry the North African influx into their city and vote for Le Pen, that Maman is passing her vacation in the region of Brazil famous for Africanness, magic, music, thievery and murder. Just as Manon has kept Maman's destination secret from the other children, Sophie has concealed from Manon her determination to attend a *candomblé* ceremony—the goal that she and the other three passengers in the van are now on the brink of realizing. The man at the hotel, who initially steered her towards tourist *candomblés* in downtown Salvador, resorted to whispering into a telephone in a back room to locate this ceremony. In a *favela*, he told her. Thirty-five kilometres from the centre. Are you certain you wish to go, *Madame*? *Une femme de votre âge dans ce milieu-là...* She assured him that she did not intend to miss it, her effortless diction overpowering his misconstrued French—the advantage, she feels, of refusing to learn the language of the country: in any conversation one holds a position of linguistic superiority. The thought helps to subdue the estrangement prickling through her as the van turns off the highway onto a dirt road lined on either side by tall adobe walls. The driver stops, asks directions, turns down another dirt road. The headlights prod into a darkness in which small boys, collapsing patchwork huts and ambling mules take shape as abruptly as apparitions: a scurry, a twist or turn of the steering wheel, sucks the spectres back into the night. How much longer? asks Gabriella, the red-haired Dutch

journalist. She and her husband, Abdou, Senegalese, live together on a houseboat in Amsterdam. Sophie has never visited Amsterdam. They planned a trip there one summer but the older children were in their teens at the time and Rodolphe feared the city would lead them into moral lapses. Sophie did not question what he meant by this; today she would challenge him. Poor Rodolphe, though, is no longer here to be challenged. Sophie likes to imagine him, perched in some nook of the cosmos, watching her perambulations through Brazil, learning as she learns. They did not have time to grope together towards the meaning of the end of their lives; his abrupt departure has forced her to undertake the quest on her own. How much longer? Gabriella asks again. The driver, whose French is poor, does not understand. The fourth passenger, a skinny boy who speaks rapid non-native French with an accent Sophie cannot place, puts the question to the driver in Portuguese: *Falta quanto para chegarmos ao candomblé?* Sophie's comprehension of the question nags at her. This is her fourth consecutive summer in Brazil. Despite her efforts to block them out, familiar words and phrases are beginning to trickle through the screen of her consciousness. Understanding withers the tangible density of her perceptions. The driver's reply is a hurried grumble. He's getting fed up, the boy says. He's embarrassed he can't find the place. The dirt track narrows. A high stucco wall blocks off the lefthand side of the road. The van rocks to a halt. The driver jumps out, asks a question of a man slumped on a barrel and beckons. Abdou and Gabriella help her down out of the van. Her body aches. Watching the eagerness in the boy's step as he hurries through the gap in the long wall, she realizes that she remains impervious to the disorderly energy that must be agitating his brain and body. She sways into the yard conscious of her swaddled imperturbability. Between the tiny house and the small, lighted, dirt-floored dance hall behind, she meets the eyes of the woman whom the driver introduces as the *mãe-de-santo*. The mother of the saint, the boy says. Sophie feels herself examining the woman; the woman scrutinizes her with

equal attentiveness. She is dressed in voluminous white lace that swells her body to several times its probable dimensions. Her face is brown and creased, the length and texture of her hair concealed by the complex of scarves binding her head right up to the edge of her cheekbones. The sweeping train of whiteness that swishes behind her as she bobs along with jerky, agile strides funnels Sophie's attention towards the burning blackness of the *mère-de-santo's* eyes. The eyes of the mother of the saint are cavernous in depth, swimming with dark folds on the surface. In them Sophie meets the grip of another mother—a woman who may not have children yet who shares a mother's strength. She and the mother may know many of the same things, but Sophie senses that the mother of the saint knows them with greater purposefulness and clarity. The mother of the saint lingers long over their introduction, as she does when the driver introduces her to Abdou. Gabriella and the boy she greets with passing deference. She invites everyone into her house for green, leafy tea, the first tea Sophie has tasted in this nation of coffee drinkers. They sit in a circle in dusty high-backed armchairs. The mother of the saint leaves the door ajar. Children creep across the yard from the ill-lit dance hall and stare at the foreigners, clinging to the door post then, as more children arrive, to each other. The mother of the saint passes around a plate of rich treats. *Acarajé*, she says. *Vraiment?* Abdou sputters. In Senegal we call them *acara*. They're nearly identical except we use a different oil. The mother of the saint gives him a blank, intrigued stare. Somebody tell her, Abdou says. The boy translates. The mother leans forward, nodding her turbanned head. Abdou, his fingers snatching at the air in search of shared words, speaks in an African language. The mother of the saint looks bewitched. The ceaseless mobility of her eyes dwindles. At last she shakes her head. *Não entendo*. My spirit understands but I do not. I must go, she says, and bobs out of the room while the boy translates her words back into his twangy French. Come, the driver says. They get to their feet and cross the yard to the dance hall. Gabriella takes her arm. The dance

hall, open at the end facing the *mère-de-santo*'s house, is almost deserted. A scattering of women and girls sits on a wooden bench along one wall, a few men slouch on the bench lining the wall opposite. The driver waves to ensure they understand the segregation of the sexes, then follows Abdou and the boy to the male side of the room. Heads turn at the sight of Abdou's white tropical jacket and dark African face. As they seat themselves on the bench, Sophie feels Gabriella's girlish warmth spilling against her ribs. Gabriella's hand encloses her wrist; she nods towards the other side of the dance hall. He adores the way they all make such a fuss over him here! She's in love, Sophie thinks. How long have you been together? she asks. Three years, Gabriella says. We met in a journalism course in Paris. And what are your plans for the future? Do you want children? Of course. Gabriella pulls herself upright on the bench. *Est-ce que ça vous embête?* Not at all, Sophie says, realizing the impression her question, her bearing, her crackling Marseille accent must have made on this woman whose profession feeds on politics. How can she explain that she asked as a mother, not as a representative of the anti-immigrant vote? Rodolphe taught her to leave business and politics to him. Was she wrong to comply? Gabriella might think so—she reminds Sophie of Manon when Manon was younger, more militant—but Sophie is less sure. The broad sweep of Gabriella's knowledge overlooks the incongruities upon which Sophie finds herself fixing with ever greater attention as death approaches. What do you want besides children? she asks. Where do you wish to arrive by the end of your life? Gabriella's green eyes look startled. She tosses back her head. Oh, that's much too far away to think about. The drums begin to pound. Some of the men and women seated on the benches perk up. Others twitch to their feet and begin dancing with stupefied deliberation. Bypassers lean in the windows, survey the long benches, wave at dancing friends. The mother of the saint sways into the middle of the dance floor, the other dancers parting around her. The mother's liquid black eyes are swimming inwards. Her movements have turned

to rubber; she might be treading water in space. Yet Sophie knows that the mother of the saint is conscious of her presence; that part of this ceremony—an exorcism, the driver told them, organized to cure an ailing member of the community—is directed at her alone. Despite her mounting exhaustion, her gnawing need to lie down, she urges herself to follow each flourish and twist of the *candomblé*. A sleepy balding man begins to chant. Five or six of the dancers chorus the chants back at him. Listen to that, Gabriella says, they're using African sounds even though they've forgotten the African languages. The language of the chants is sharp and harsh-edged. It thrashes the night like a blunt saw, scourging the dancers into a bewildered trance from which, every now and then, one of them bursts into a frenetic bout of possession. The men double over in masturbatory, hip-shuddering spasms, the women collapse with whining moans. Other dancers catch them, haul them to the edge of the floor, ply them with cans of Coca-Cola. The possessed dancers revive, stroll and chat and make light of their experiences. The languid flow of their Portuguese vowels sounds ethereal against the background of jagged African chants. Sophie watches a long-legged man in a loose white gown tumble into unconsciousness with a passing convulsion no rougher than the touch with which Rodolphe's first stroke grazed him. Rodolphe's arms flopped forward; the smile on his face pulled into a higher, more rollicking lilt. She felt a blade of hope sheer through her imagining that he was clowning around, that a more relaxed Rodolphe was destined to enliven their retirement. Then he groaned in pain and fell to the floor. His illness increased his power over her; even the timeworn evasions of his authority became inexcusable betrayals once Rodolphe had established himself as an invalid. Where are you going? he would ask, as she slipped out the door to visit her cousin, take a wayward amble down by the harbour, have coffee with an old school friend. How long will you be away? She yearned to flee forever. The last five years of their marriage soured her memory of the preceding decades. Perhaps

by now, if he were accompanying her on her Brazilian wanderings, Rodolphe might have arrived at an understanding of her need to pack the years with meaning. Manon accuses her of idealizing Papa now that he's dead. Remembering a father who disciplined her every childish impulse, Manon fails to recognize that at eighteen Rodolphe himself was capable of peering beyond the surface of life. Oh, Maman, you're such a romantic! Papa was never like that. You're just imagining the kind of man you wish you had married. Sophie, who is usually preparing for her departure from the *jardim* by the time their discussions reach this stage, can only shake her head. Her glasses slide to the end of her nose. Gabriella catches her. You were sleeping. No, Sophie says. They've been dancing for an hour, Gabriella whispers. The mother of the saint, her arms extended on either side of her body, trots in through the open doorway. Sophie knows the mother will forgive her transport as a deeper immersion in the ceremony; unlike Gabriella, she will know better than to view Sophie's mental digressions as moments of inattention. The mother is ushering into the dance hall the man who is to be exorcized. He is young, his head shaven, a curious brown knob thrusting straight up from the centre of his skull. His muscular shoulders are dusted with bright, glittering stars of a dozen garish shades. He holds a long leaf with jaggedly serrated edges before his face like a weapon. The chants grow fiercer at his arrival; two dancers fall to the dirt in seizures. Skipping along behind the man is a girl about eight years of age. Her first communion, Sophie thinks, regarding her pristine white dress and dainty, rehearsed movements. The girl prances around the floor under the direction of the mother of the saint. At a nod from the mother, the girl unrolls short wicker rugs before dancers who are about to prostrate themselves and gathers up the rugs once the dancers have moved on; she weaves, twirls on her heel and glances to the mother of the saint for approval. Every few minutes she darts to the side of the room where a young woman, evidently her mother, kisses and encourages her and pushes her back out onto the dance

floor. Manon's first communion took place less than a month after Rodolphe's second stroke. When they returned from church Manon told him of the music, the pretty dresses worn by the other girls. Do you understand what your first communion means, Manon? Rodolphe asked from his bed. It means going to church was fun today, Manon said, and rushed into the kitchen in search of the cake Sophie had promised her. If I had been there, Rodolphe called after her in a quavering voice, you would understand the significance of such an important day! The drums have fallen silent. The first part of the *candomblé* has ended. Gabriella is making eyes across the dance hall at Abdou, but he and the boy have bowed their heads together in earnest discussion. The drummers are relaxing with canned soft drinks. The mother of the saint has vanished. Sophie feels bereft, worried that she may have missed a crucial moment of the ceremony. What happened to that man? He left, Gabriella says. Do you think it's over? No, Sophie tells her, how could it be? Gabriella looks at her strangely. The man hasn't been cured, Sophie says. That's why we're here. Gabriella's expression of perplexity deepens, twisting into a frown as a piercing, unbelievably prolonged shriek soars from behind the dance hall. The bystanders leaning in the windows fall silent. The drummers toss away their soft drink cans. In a moment they are seated again, pounding against the tension rising through the room. A tall, athletic couple in wafting white gowns takes to the dance floor, circling each other to the quickening beat. The mother of the saint slips out from behind a curtain to join them. With a slow, wounded gait, the man who is being exorcized returns. His body remains hunched; he continues to hold up the long, serrated leaf before his face. A plastered crown of chicken feathers covers the nob on the top of his head. Trails of drying tears stream down in all directions, staining the rolls of flesh at the back of his neck, slicking his eyebrows and scoring his cheeks. He reels, only the leaden heaviness of his feet preventing him from toppling over. The little girl, poised and self-possessed, sways in his wake. She seems to anticipate his every lurch,

sketching his stumbling course with intuitive grace. His eyes drowsy and lizard-like, the man blinks straight ahead. He is groping to find his way, Sophie perceives, he is seeking an outlet, a conclusion. The trembling of the drums scales her calves, beats through the de-sexed weight of her thighs. She feels herself slipping away from this place, remote from any present, whether French or Brazilian: her place is the past. No matter how hard she tries to infuse the wealth of this moment into her bond with Rodolphe the reverse effect seems to prevail. Rodolphe, refusing to remain peacefully receptive in a distant pocket of the heavens, is sucking her back into the mannered remove of her marriage. Tensed with anger at his gutting of her experience, she concentrates as hard as she can on the elusive, swivelling eyes of the mother of the saint. The mother's gaze skims past her, oblivious to her presence. Panic seizes Sophie. If it weren't for the drained lethargy gripping her body, she might fall on the floor in convulsions like one of the dancers. She is drifting apart from life. Her existence lacks a pattern. At some moment in the next few months she will realize too late that she is dying and life will end in the same senseless rush with which it has all unravelled itself up till now. The drums fall silent. The dancers file out the back door of the hall. The driver, violating the division of the dance floor, leans over her. The *candomblé* is finished. *senhora*. Wake up, Gabriella says, taking her hand. It's two in the morning. Abdou stands on the opposite side of the hall, surrounded by young men who are stroking his tailored French jacket and whispering: *Africa, Africa....* The driver herds them to the open end of the dance hall. Sophie looks around, but the mother of the saint has vanished. Can I say goodbye to her? she asks. Nobody responds. A strut holding up part of her chest gives way. Her stride falters and Gabriella catches her arm. *Vous êtes fatigüe, Madame*. As they step into the night, the skinny boy blocks the driver's way, his white skin and angular features standing out like evidence of deformity amid so many comfortably round faces whose hues barely disrupt the darkness. *Não é tudo!* the boy says. *Todos*

me dizem que falta mais uma parte. Ficamos aqui até ao fim. Sophie does not wait for his translation: the driver has tried to bundle them off before the *candomblé*'s concluding act; the end remains before her. Abdou and Gabriella look at each other. I'm tired, Gabriella says.... Profiting from Abdou's hesitation, Sophie turns around and walks back into the dance hall. She sits down on the women's bench. The boy, his meagre torso puffed up with self-righteousness, returns to the bench on the male side of the hall. Abdou and Gabriella shrug their shoulders and walk back inside. The driver throws up his hands. As the pounding of the drums resumes, he vanishes. The dancers return in flamboyant new costumes. Yes, Sophie thinks, this is what the end is like: a last defiant flowering. The tall handsome couple who attracted her attention in the preceding act have donned golden crowns. They prance with supernatural vigour over the dark earth of the floor, littered now with curled leaves and stray chicken feathers. The chants keen up around them. Abdou says the words they're using are from Benin, Gabriella whispers. They've survived since the days of slavery. But the language has died, Sophie thinks. Nobody in this room could hold a conversation with a person from Benin. Their ancestors could have done that, but the dead do not speak. The dead merely exert a pull which must be respected yet resisted by the living. It is Rodolphe whose life will be extended by her experiences; she owes no fealty to their shared past. A stab of energy rouses her from the sickly, headache-causing, joint-stiffening exhaustion besieging her body: the mother of the saint has returned to the dance hall, the sprightly little girl loping in her wake. This time the mother's eyes radiate their force straight through her, their waves of intuned strength buckling Sophie's innards into a trembling that calls up the long-lost vitality which fled her life the day Rodolphe died. The man who is being exorcized dances into the room in a bright green shirt. A puffy hat, midway between a beret and a jester's toque, covers his head. When she came in from her shopping, Rodolphe's face lay bare. Manon had discovered him lying on his back on

the cold red tiles of the kitchen floor. It was too late for medical attention. I'm glad you waited, Sophie told her two days later. I would have been desolated if I'd come home and found you'd sent him off to the morgue. At least you understood that was my role. It wasn't your *role*, Maman! I was just too frightened to know what to do! Sophie didn't know whether to reprimand her daughter or hug her. She sat up in her chair. Our life has changed, she said. A month later when Manon admitted that she had arrived in time to hear Rodolphe's dying words—his dying sighs, really; she couldn't be certain what he had been trying to tell her—Sophie felt affronted. Her husband's last words had been wasted on the inattentive ears of his least loyal child. His life had sputtered out in disarray, denying them the deliberate end their orderly marriage demanded. Rodolphe's final minutes had complicated family dynamics she had taken for granted, converting capricious Manon into the repository of her husband's death and life. Don't you understand, Rodolphe? she murmured inside her head. All the sense that anybody can make of you is trussed up in Manon's marriage in a country where I don't speak the language. *Réveillez-vous, Madame*, Gabriela says. This time it's really over. Sophie returns from her trance to glimpse the man in the green shirt and the puffed-up hat walking straight-spined and loose-limbed towards the door. He's cured, Gabriella says. One drum continues to stutter. It dies away as the four of them reach the door of the dance hall. Don't leave, a young man says to Abdou. The voice warbles on in Portuguese. The boy translates. We must bid farewell to the mother of the saint. The mother advances out of the darkness. Her elaborate white headdress has come partly undone. Sheets and trailers of whiteness settling around her shoulders, she stands in a dark niche with her arms extended. She meets the skinny boy's eyes, her gaze growing stronger and stronger until it overwhelms him. He crumples towards her, falling upon her shoulders. She embraces him. Her clasp appears to revive him: he springs away towards the van. The process is repeated with

Gabriela, then in a long exchange of deep stares, with Abdou. I've been left for last, Sophie thinks. The eyes of the mother of the saint, churning the darkness into a near-liquid sponginess that consumes them both, soak up the last residue of trembling in her limbs. She feels both strengthened and sapped. They are cradling one another in their arms. The mother of the saint is whispering to her. Are her words Portuguese incantations, ancient African chants? A phrase wriggles clear: *Eu também aprendi com você*. I, too, have learned from you. Sophie feels grateful for the shards of this language which, almost involuntarily, she has allowed herself to absorb. In all her delving and seeking, it has never occurred to her that she might be helping someone else. It has not struck her that such a goal could be laudable or even desirable. The mother's words escort her back to the van, propel her inside with the most perfunctory tug of assistance from Abdou. The driver slams the door shut, jogs around to the front and guns the engine. I thought that would never end, he says. *Candomblés* go on forever out here in the *favela*. Wait! Gabriela says. It's the little girl. The driver hits the brake with an exasperated grunt. The van heaves to a halt. Her white dress immaculate despite the late hour, the little girl calls out from between her neatly plaited black braids. The mother of the saint invites you all to breakfast. She says please come and eat with us! The boy translates as the driver waves his hands. It's too late, the driver shouts out the window, they have to go back to their hotels. What a shame, I'm so tired, Gabriella says. Abdou slides his arm around her shoulder. The boy sinks back into his seat. *Senhora, não posso ficar aqui mais um segundo!* I don't expect you to wait for me, Sophie replies. She reaches for the doorhandle, jerks the door open but lacks the strength to slide it back. Are you sure, *Madame*? Abdou asks. How will you get back to your hotel? Sophie hauls open the heavy sliding door and eases herself down onto the bare black earth. The little girl awaits her. Taking the girl's hand, she nods farewell to the other passengers. I'll find my way.

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