

1-1-1989

The Death of Irene

Terri Shanahan
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

Recommended Citation

Shanahan, Terri (1989) "The Death of Irene," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 19.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol5/iss1/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

The Death of Irene

TERRI SHANAHAN

Their mother's room was the very best place to be.

She had a big, wide bed, a bed wide enough for the three of them and for her and big enough for Irene's brothers to jump and try to touch the ceiling without getting hurt. At the end of her bed, there was a dresser with a colored television on it. Their mother's bottles of perfumes were scattered about on the dresser, mixed with small wrapped packages of chocolates. Irene and her brothers would spray her bedroom with her perfumes so that it would be like she was there and then they would eat her chocolates as they sat in her bed watching the television.

They all knew that there was nothing to be frightened of, no bogeyman in the dark, but on the occasions when Irene was frightened nonetheless, she brought her brothers to her mother's room and while they were jumping up and down on the bed, she locked the bedroom door and pushed one of the chairs in front of it. Irene imagined all kinds of terrible things that could happen to them. She especially worried that their stepfather would come back and choke them to death, the same way he had when he'd given a chicken bone to their brand new puppy, the one that had been a Christmas present from their father. Irene imagined that he would do to them whatever he did to the puppy when he locked himself in their mother's room with the puppy, even as they sat on the floor outside of the room listening to the whimpery chokes. Some time later, when he came out of the room, he told them to go to bed. When their mother came home, Irene heard him tell her that the dog was dead because the children fed it a chicken bone.

Their stepfather hated anything that had been their father's, including them. Once he married their mother, the very first thing he did was to line up the three of them in front of him and he told them from that day on, they were to call him, and no one else, daddy. If he caught them calling anyone else daddy, they would spend the rest of that day scrubbing walls. They found out later that it also included calling anyone else father.

But that stepfather had been dispatched during an argument that Irene and her brothers overheard, for they could hardly not overhear it, as their mother shouted and carried piles of his clothing and his suits from her bedroom, down the stairs, out the front door and into the snowbank. The three of them had watched, from Irene's bedroom door, as their mother removed the house key from his key ring and then

threw his key ring out the door into the snowbank with his clothes.

Before he left, he turned and saw them standing in the doorway at the top of the steps and he might have yelled at them except that their mother told him to leave and he stepped away, out the front door of the house and then he walked away, down the street, without his clothes or his car, and he was gone.

Then they had their mother all to themselves again. She was theirs. She even promised them that she would stop working nights as soon as possible, saying that she didn't like not being with them at night before they went to bed. She wanted to have dinners with them more often, to tell them bedtime stories, and to tuck them in. She would leave the hospital, if it came to that, and go into private practice.

But after six months, Irene and her brothers stopped believing her, becoming aware, with great alarm, that there was going to be a new stepfather. He lived less than half a mile down the beach from them and jogged beside the water every morning past their house. One morning he helped her little brothers build a sand castle and then he met their mother when she wandered down to the beach, barefoot, wearing rolled up blue jeans. Then he was there all of the time every weekend, even after they went to sleep. They watched him with great suspicion because he ran down the sand dunes and swam far out into the ocean with them. It took some men months before they tried to win their mother through them. But this one did from the very first day on the beach and Irene knew that he was trouble.

Her alarm grew as she watched her brothers, one and then the other, give up their places in the line of resistance and join him in his games. But he never tried to win her and that was probably what won her in the end. Irene was fourteen by then, and had become interested in other things. She even noticed that it was he who finally convinced her mother to leave the hospital and to open her own office in a building not far from their home.

Then their mother was at home nights, or if she wasn't, it was because she was with him. But Irene never got over the feeling that they hadn't really won their mother back. When she thought about it, she thought that he had won their mother. And she felt vaguely discontented when she was fifteen and their mother married him and he adopted both of her little brothers.

Her discontent grew when she moved into her father's house. Her stepbrothers and

stepsister had changed the house by bringing so many of their things into it and they had changed her father, too, by making him more interested in them than he was in Irene. And they were far less obedient to her than her brothers were even though she was still the oldest.

But even her little brothers were less obedient to her when she returned to her mother's house on the beach. In the year that Irene had been gone, they had fallen into other habits, mostly habits that belonged to the stepfather, who had, of course, changed since he had married their mother and become less interested in their activities. He no longer swam out into the ocean with them and no longer played on the beach. It was his house and while he lived in it, they played by his rules and in his ways.

Irene turned to her mother, looking for her in the shadows, finding her, inevitably, in her room, sitting at her dressing table in front of her mirror. Irene would sit on the edge of her mother's bed so that her mother could see her over her shoulder in the mirror. Her mother chattered about her patients, about her friends, about the stepfather. Sometimes her mother would ask her questions, about school, about her friends, but Irene never knew what to say and so she said nothing. Whenever her mother's tongue paused, she would try to catch Irene's eyes in the mirror and failing that, she would go back to her incessant chattering and clicking sounds: those sounds which represent language between mother and daughter.

Irene watched her mother as she progressed through one bottle on her dressing table after another, as the lines of tiredness disappeared from her face and then the lines of age around her eyes also disappeared.

When Irene looked in the mirror to see her own reflection beside her mother's, what she saw did not please her. She looked a great deal like her mother: they had the same overlarge eyes and mouths, the same lips and noses. Their faces were exactly the same except that her mother's was thinner and much prettier when she finished blending the colors of makeup into her skin, over her eyes, on her lips and cheeks. They even had the same shiny black hair; even though Irene's was longer and fell over her shoulders, it was the same texture, the same color, the same hair.

But Irene was much taller than her mother and that pleased her because she wanted to look like herself. And Irene wore blue jeans, which her mother never did anymore, and the large silk T-shirts her mother was always buying for her. Irene would stretch out her long legs on the bed in front of her and watch her mother as she chose a dress to wear from her closet. As she carelessly dropped her robe on the floor beside her feet, her mother always seemed to know exactly which dress she would wear from

the line of dresses in her closet. Irene looked at the lines on her mother's body, at the way the folds of flesh had loosened, before her mother fastened a dress around herself. But then her mother would say she had to leave, kissing Irene on the forehead before she went out of the room, telling Irene how happy she was that they were "so close." Irene would remain in her mother's room, looking at herself in the mirror before she also left, quietly closing the door behind her.

Irene started dating boys when she was sixteen and that was about the same time that she started sleeping with them. At first, she thought, "Is that all?" But eventually she discovered that every boy did it differently. After more practice, she changed her mind again. Most boys did it the same way. Some were nervous and some were too careful, but most of them were in a hurry, as if they were afraid she would change her mind. But there were the occasional dawdlers and those were the boys who Irene liked the best.

It was one of the dawdlers who finally got her into trouble. She had brought him up to her room and when her stepfather came home early, he heard noises and naturally investigated. And what he saw upset him a great deal because what he saw was Irene lying naked on her bed holding the head of a boy between her legs.

This also upset her mother a great deal.

After the stepfather dispatched the young boy, hurling threats, most of which Irene knew weren't possible anyway, and the boy had run out of the house still pulling his pants on, the stepfather continued making threats to Irene. Those threats she doubted as well. Irene hadn't felt even the slightest inclination to move or to dress herself. The stepfather had been standing at the end of her bed when he had, somewhat abruptly, taken the boy's place.

It turned out that Irene was a screamer, something that neither she nor her stepfather would have predicted. But of even larger surprise to Irene than even the careful hands of her stepfather, was the reaction of her mother when she discovered them somewhat later, tangled together in Irene's bed, Irene's legs wrapped around her stepfather's body. Her mother's reaction surprised Irene because it wasn't the stepfather who was sent away, it was Irene.

During her seventeenth year, the year Irene spent at the all girls' school, she discovered several of her male instructors had nearly the same abilities as her stepfather. They filled in the missing parts of Irene's education, that large grey area of inexperience — from the abilities of the boys who Irene brought home to those of her stepfather. But it was while she was lying in the arms of one of them that Irene began to wonder

what it was all about. Yes, she went back to her question: "Is that all?"

It occurred to her later that probably it hadn't been a surprise to anyone that she left without leaving a note. And even if anyone had been looking for her, which she doubted, Irene guessed that they would probably have looked somewhere in Europe. But it hadn't even occurred to her to go to Europe. It hadn't occurred to her to go anywhere in particular, only to leave. The first plane departing the evening she left her last male instructor was flying to the Bahamian islands and that was where she went.

The water intrigued Irene. Its immensity, its strength. She liked to lie at the very edge of the shore with her legs in the surf, absolutely still as the water crashed over her, as the sand ran down her legs and back into the ocean only to begin all over again. Irene also liked to swim far out into the ocean, until she couldn't see the islands anymore, until she could only see a horizon of water. She liked to float on her back and watch the gulls in the sky, to feel the minnows tickling her body like millions of little pinpricks. But most of all, Irene liked to feel that she was the only person on earth, that she never had to swim back to shore again, never needed air to breathe again, never needed land to step on again.

Irene learned to play blackjack in the casinos on the islands and she won a lot of money and lost it but then she won more. She sat on the high bar stool at the table, noticing that the other people always looked worried when they played. But nothing bothered Irene. She was a reckless player and she played every hand she was dealt even as she watched the others drop out, too worried to play. Irene was always perfectly happy when the other players dropped out because then all of the cards were for her. It was always less complicated to play alone because the house never gasped when she bet it all.

It wasn't long after her arrival that Irene learned to play with the natives. At first, she had mostly been interested in their size, but after awhile, even that ceased to impress her. What impressed Irene was the fleeting nature of their affection. The ability to be precisely there in her bed, absolutely, without the slightest distraction and then, by morning, be gone, equally absolutely, without a trace.

Except for their sperm. Irene would find it in her sheets and all over her body, even in her hair. One time, she even found it on the wall. Long after she had ceased to be surprised by their size, Irene had continued to be surprised by the number of times they could do it in one night. Most of the men that she met loved to play games in bed. One time, Irene woke and found her hands tied behind her back and her legs tied to the bedposts and even though the room was dark, she knew that she was alone.

She had been considering her options, not having anything better to do under the circumstances, when her errant lover returned with his friend.

Irene was pleased by her first experience with two men. They lit all of the candles in her room and carefully placed them on the floor around her bed and that had pleased her too, the blackness in the room, the flickering of the candles against the walls and on their faces. They had traits common to most of the men Irene met on the islands. They didn't kiss her, as Irene twisted and tugged against her bonds, they licked her. One of the men had a lot to say, he called her names in several languages, some of which Irene knew, and he scratched at her breasts and pinched her nipples until Irene tried to bite one of his hands and he put his fingers in her mouth and bit her ear every time she bit his fingers, laughing at her. They took turns with Irene, who watched them, each in their turn, watched their faces in the candlelight as they laughed, the candles casting light on their teeth and the huge whiteness of their eyes. They loosened her bonds before they left and licked every part of her body as she fell asleep, listening to their sing-song voices. Irene slept easily and deeply.

And then, when she was nineteen, Irene drowned.

She awoke one morning and ran out of her hotel room, naked, her long legs running across the brick courtyard, past the pool and the bar, across the long hot sandy beach, kicking the sand behind her, digging her toes. She stretched out her arms as she neared the water, opening her fingers, catching the sky in her hands. Irene crashed into the high waves, splashing and laughing. When the water began to slow her legs, she dove into the ocean and swam long, deep strokes until she was out of sight of the island. She rolled over and floated on her back, watching the gulls in the sky, letting herself drift with the current. And then she watched the sky through the water as one wave and then another crashed above her.