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INTRODUCTION

Edwidge Danticat

Fewer than a handful of Haitian writers have, both while alive and dead, inspired as much adulation, analysis, and discussion as Marie Vieux-Chauvet. In fact the small number in question constitutes a multigenerational triad of which Marie Vieux-Chauvet was the final survivor and the only female. Jacques Roumain, the grandfather, was the world traveler who returned home to write L’Espace d’un cillement (In the Flicker of an Eyelid), one of the first twentieth-century novels featuring peasant characters, and which was translated into English by Jacques Roumain’s American friends, the poet Langston Hughes and the scholar Mercer Cook. The father of the trio, Jacques Stephen Alexis, was the protest novelist who wouldn’t allow protest to mar his aesthetics, and who wrote novels which were as erotic as they were patriotic. I had the pleasure of working on a published translation of Jacques Stephen Alexis’s L’Espace d’un cillement (In the Flicker of an Eyelid), a novel that depicts the American occupation of Haiti as being as much of an assault on a country as on a woman’s body. I am equally honored to introduce you to Love, Anger, Madness, the seminal trilogy by Marie Vieux-Chauvet, the mother/sister/daughter of this trio, which represents, in my opinion, the cornerstone of Haitian literature.

Born in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, on September 16, 1916, Marie Vieux-Chauvet was a member of the “occupation generation,” that is, she was born a year after the United States invaded Haiti, launching an occupation that would last nineteen years. The U.S. invasion came in the wake of President Woodrow Wilson’s devoted profession to make the world safe for democracy. However, as soon as the marines landed in Haiti, Wilson’s administration shut down the press, took charge of Haiti’s banks and customs, and instituted a system of compulsory labor for poor Haitians. By the end of the occupation, more than fifteen thousand Haitians had lost their lives. A Haitian gendarmerie was trained to replace the American marines, then proceeded to form juntas, organize coups, and terrorize Haitians for decades. Although American troops were officially withdrawn from Haiti in 1934, the U.S. government maintained economic control of the country until 1947.

“...The United States is at war with Haiti,” the American intellectual and activist W.E.B. Du Bois wrote after returning from a fact-finding mission to occupied Haiti. “Congress has never sanctioned the war. Josephus Daniels (President Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of the Navy) has illegally and unjustly occupied a free foreign land and murdered its inhabitants by the thousands. He has deposed its officials and dispersed its legally elected representatives. He is carrying on a reign of terror, brow-beating, and cruelty, at the hands of southern white naval officers and marines. For more than a year this red-handed devilry has proceeded, and today the Island is in open rebellion.”

Growing up in the shadow of that rebellion, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, the daughter of a Haitian senator and a Jewish émigré from the Virgin Islands, would later use the turmoil of that period as back-story for Love, the first and longest novella of this trilogy. A voracious reader, Vieux-Chauvet was exposed to a great deal of Haitian and foreign literature, which contradicted everything this occupation was meant to represent. Equating her own unfortunate predicament as a thirty-nine-year-old virgin who, because of her dark skin, is considered less beautiful and thus less marriageable than her two lighter younger sisters, Claire Clamont, the main character of Love, echoes D. H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley and Flaubert’s Madame Bovary when she laments in her journal that there is “hunger of the body and that of the soul. And the hunger of the mind and the hunger of the senses. All sufferings are equal.” However, it is all suffering equal when the people who suffer are not considered equal.

“We have been practicing at cutting each other’s throats since Independence,” she writes of the country that we Haitians like to remind the world was the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere, home to the only slave revolt that succeeded in producing a nation. What we would rather not say, and what Claire Clamont and Marie Vieux-Chauvet are brave enough to say, is that this same country has continued to fail at reaching its full potential, in part because of foreign interference and domination, but also because of internal strife and power struggles. What at first seem like personal dramas in this book become microcosms of larger historical conflicts. In fact, the man Claire and her sisters are all pining after is French. However, the man who terrorizes them is a Haitian, who is given by an unseen dictator the power to decide who lives and dies in X, the pseudonymous town that could stand in for many Haitian towns.

It would be too simple, however, for X and its inhabitants to be plagued by a single terror. Not only are the hills and mountains breathtakingly eroded but American ships routinely leave X’s ports filled with the prized wood that is causing that erosion. Children die of typhoid and malaria. Beggar's drink dirty water from ditches and are routinely persecuted by the ruling colonel, who equally punishes the poor, the artists and intellectuals, as well as the aristocracy, to which Claire and her family belong. Even though this section of the trilogy is mostly set in 1939, five years after the end of the American occupation, it is obvious that it is meant to evoke 1967, the year the book was written, a time when what would end up as a thirty-year dictatorship run by François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier was becoming more and more severe, enrolling the poor as henchmen and -women, killing them to reduce their number, and persecuting intellectuals for their ideas and artists for their creations. That Marie Vieux-Chauvet ended up in exile in the United States in 1968 after a valiant battle to publish this book in France (see Translator’s Preface) is no surprise. This book, in three distinct, well-developed, nondidactic, masterfully crafted novellas, still manages to condemn totalitarianism and tyranny at every turn. Marie Vieux-Chauvet might as well have been speaking to Haiti’s dictators and many of her future critics when she has Claire write in her journal: “Feel free to shriek at the top of your lungs if you ever see this manuscript; call me indecent, immoral.” But she is neither indecent nor immoral, offering us not just prurient evil but the murkier and grayer areas in between. How can those who stuff hot potatoes in their child servants’ mouths fare against those who murder a poet or rape a neighbor? How can those who have been brutally enslaved turn and enslave others? In depicting the many layers of injustice that Haiti—one might even say the world—has never been able to fully suffer are not considered equal?

It is in Madness, however, the final novella of the trilogy, that we come closest to Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s own dilemma as a writer living
and writing under a brutal authoritarian regime. Depicting four persecuted poets living in a shack, Marie Vieux-Chauvet echoes her own membership in Les Araignées du soir (Spiders of the Night), a small group of poets and novelists who met weekly at her house to discuss literature and another’s work. Like actual spiders, they hoped to weave a protective web around themselves and keep out predatory pests. However, many were either jailed or exiled by the dictatorship from which Marie Vieux-Chauvet herself had no choice but to flee.

“There is a curious split in my behavior,” noted one of Madness’s own Spider poets. “I calmly go where I hear screaming, where I am certain the devils are committing murder. I avoid danger as I accuse myself of cowardice, loathing my own reactions. In the trunk, there are a few poems, unpublished, as are all of my poems about devils and hell. Enough of them there to get me pumped full of lead without anyone hesitating.”

Was Marie Vieux-Chauvet ever afraid to write? Especially after having three nephews and countless acquaintances and friends imprisoned, executed, or gone missing? Her triumph over her fears, if indeed she had any, seems to be infused in characters like Claire Clamont and Rose Normil and the poets who, in spite of the horrors they constantly face, refuse to stop living, to stop loving, and each in their own way, to stop creating.

“I write with my hand and my heart, not with my eyes,” declares the poet, who still manages to craft a few poems in the shack where he is hiding. Even with her first work, La Légende des fleurs (The Legend of Flowers), an allegorical play that was written when she was thirty-one and published under the pseudonym Colibri (Hummingbird), Marie Vieux-Chauvet was already displaying the type of caution that would have been wisely exercised by “songbirds” who feared the wrath of more powerful birds of prey. By the time she wrote this trilogy, however, she was already a seasoned novelist and was using her own name. La Danse sur le volcan (Dance on the Volcano), her epic novel on the revolutionary period leading to Haitian independence, was written ten years before this trilogy and was translated and published in the United States, joining Jacques Roumain and two Haitian brothers, Philippe and Pierre Thoby-Marcelin, as the only Haitian writers widely available to American readers who, during the occupation period, had been inundated by memoirs written by U.S. military officers who portrayed Haitians as savages, cannibals, and zombies.

Later, while living in Queens, New York, Marie Vieux-Chauvet wrote Les Rapaces (The Vultures), a novel that shows a writer wrestling with his work and his brutal surroundings after the death of François Duvalier. Through the valiant effort of an admirer, the writer’s work manages to live on, something which Marie Vieux-Chauvet must have dreamed for herself while writing about Haiti, in French, in the United States, not certain if either she or her books would ever find their way back to Haiti or would ever find an interested audience in the United States.

On June 19, 1973, at the age of fifty-seven, Marie Vieux-Chauvet died of brain cancer after five years in exile. The Duvalier dictatorship had been passed down from father to son, whom the U.S. government saw as a more acceptable face. Foreign investment flowed into Haiti, nurturing an atrocious sweatshop culture that added another layer of despair to the lives of a population that could not refuse to work, no matter what the pay. Other poor Haitians were sold by the Haitian government in secret deals to work in the sugarcane fields of the Dominican Republic and were shipped off like slaves to the other side of the island.

As a child growing up in Haiti at the time, I heard, along with the darkest of tales of the brutal Tonton Macoutes, or Chauvet’s “men in black,” stories of children being kidnapped so their organs could be harvested and used to save sick rich children in America. When one loves the work of a novelist who has prematurely died, one wonders what that writer might have produced in the years after his or her death. What would Marie Vieux-Chauvet have made, for example, of the period that followed the end of the Duvalier dictatorship when the son flew off into his own exile and the people, like the beggars of her trilogy and the masses of Les Rapaces, took to the streets in celebration and revenge?

During the final months of her life, Marie Vieux-Chauvet was researching and mapping out an epic novel called Les Enfants D’Ogoun (The Children of Ogoun). Ogoun being the Haitian god of war. We Haitians believe that our Iwa, or gods, do not “cross water” or migrate, but I like to think that Ogoun, charmed as everyone was by Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s legendary beauty, wit, and intelligence, would have crossed any body of water for her. Unfortunately, Marie Vieux-Chauvet died before completing more than a few pages of this much hoped for book. Still, we are fortunate to have the work that she had already completed and to have seen her books slowly return to print, first in France, where the publication of this book was abruptly stalled in 1968, then in Haiti, and finally here in the United States where she died.

“I would like to be sure,” she writes in Love, “that Beethoven died satisfied to have written his concertos. Without this certainty, what would be the point of the painful anxiety of a Cézanne searching for a color that escapes him? Or of the anguish of a Dostoyesky grasping at God in the thoughts swarming within the hellish complexity of the soul?” I too would like to be sure that Marie Vieux-Chauvet died satisfied to have written, among others, the book that you are about to read. Reading it again, in this translation, I am a bit more certain that she did.
In discussing the novel, I indirectly reveal much of the plot. For many readers, it may be advisable to read the novel first before continuing.

In Haiti, State Against Nation: Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism, Michel-Rolph Trouillot points out that womanhood became a disadvantage in Haiti after 1957 with the election of François Duvalier, because of “the Duvalierist preference for the sexual ‘conquest’ of females associated with the political opposition, from torture-rape to acquaintance-rape and marriage.” Indeed, there is torture-rape in each of the novellas in Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s 1968 trilogy, Love, Anger, Madness, and it is no wonder that in the last fifteen years most readers of the trilogy have focused on the plight of the female protagonists in the first two volumes. What is truly radical about Chauvet’s writing, however, is not just that she writes about political sexual violence and about sexuality, but that she allows her male and female protagonists to cast a critical eye on everything, including themselves. Indeed, they are never unambiguously heroic, innocent, or even sympathetic.

At the beginning of Love, which takes the form of a journal kept by Claire Clamont, a self-conscious dark-skinned intellectual from a conservative “white mulatto” bourgeois family, she confesses:

We have been practicing at cutting each other’s throats since Independence. The claws of our people have been growing and getting sharper. Hatred has hatched among us, and torturers have crawled out of the nest. They torture you before cutting your throat. It’s a colonial legacy to which we cling, just as we cling to French. We excel at the former but struggle with the latter. I often hear the prisoners’ screams. The prison is not far from my house. […] The police force has become vigilant. It monitors our every move. Its representative is Commandant Calédu, a ferocious black man who has been terrorizing us for about eight years now. He wields the right of life and death over us, and he abuses it. […] And cruelty is contagious: kneeling on coarse salt, forcing a victim to count the blows tearing at his skin, his mouth stuffed with hot potatoes, these are a few of the minor punishments some of us [members of the bourgeois mulatto class] inflict upon our child-servants. Upon those turned slaves by hunger, who must suffer our spite and rage in all its voluptuousness.

Setting aside a clichéd national pride about Haitian independence, Claire goes straight to the heart of the matter: something is rotten in the second republic of the Americas. During the course of the novel, in order to understand what is taking place around her and her place in it, Claire must free herself from paralyzing self-hatred and a host of illusions about who she should be and what she should want. Although she is committed to a rigorous critique of the beliefs tattooed upon her by her parents and a Catholic education, it takes awhile for Claire to dispel her escapist fantasies, confront her assumptions, and change her commitments. When she does, she has an epiphany and kills Calédu.

Whereas in the first novella Vieux-Chauvet can still imagine a heroic confrontation with the strong man Calédu, it is clear in the second and third novellas that the battle against the regime is a losing one. The thug who blackmails the Normil family in Anger, the second novella, confesses: “You look to me, such as I am, but I am only a cog in an immense machine. The one who gives us our orders is like God, invisible and all-powerful. We get our orders and we carry them out. That’s all. We often know nothing about the reasons for the things he asks of us and we just blindly obey.” In the second and third novellas, Vieux-Chauvet depicts individuals struggling against this machine and, ultimately, losing the battle if perhaps not the war.

In Anger, which seems to take place shortly after World War II, several years after Love, the protagonists are up against organized paramilitaries who have absorbed most of the beggars that had trailed them in Love and have become “the men in black,” fascist Blackshirts that resemble Duvalier’s tonton-makout (named after the Haitian bogeyman—literally, “uncle with a basket”—tonton-makout were soldiers and civilians who organized political violence on Duvalier’s behalf). By the second novella they have more guns, uniforms, trucks, lawyers, a hierarchy, recruiting and training structures, as well as a fortress. They seem to have come into their own, policing and polarizing civilians. In the midst of the storm stands the Normil family, whose land is being occupied by Blackshirts and who must appease or confront the group’s local leader, referred to only as “the Gorilla”—a dark-skinned man whose father was once the servant of a mulatto bourgeois man he now employs. He himself was once a beggar until he joined the paramilitaries and quickly rose within their ranks because of his talent for ruthlessness. The family is unable to react as a unit until the father takes the lead by trying to pull a bait and switch. He asks his daughter, Rose, to accompany him to the office of a lawyer who represents the Gorilla, advertising her beauty until he can borrow
enough money from his mistress to bribe the Gorilla and his lawyer. But he loses his wager: the Gorilla chooses the girl over the money. This is the deal he puts on the table: the girl must submit to sadistic sexual role-play and become his “girlfriend” for thirty days. Rose agrees to the deal without explicitly telling any member of her family.

Vieux-Chauvet insists on making the torture-rape victim a thinking subject. In fact, Rose can’t stop thinking. Her thoughts sometimes even wander past the fence posts that would make her martyrdom unimpeachable. But innocence is not Rose’s claim. She accepts her family’s guilt (her grandfather murdered the owner of the land who tried to cheat him out of it after he had bartered sheep for it) and her own coerced complicity in the sexual role-play. She expresses a secular kind of self-knowledge and self-acceptance that includes acceptance and compassion even for her torturer:

Human beings have an eerie resemblance to certain animals. I was struck by my resemblance to a panther I saw in a movie once. Same features, same fierce gaze veiled by false gentleness, same supple neck beneath an elegant head with wide, quivering, sensual nostrils. He, on the other hand, looks like a dog. One could easily mistake him for a gorilla, but that’s not the case. His hands are misleading since they’re long and hairy, but he’s just a dog; a poor dog craving affection who turns into a wolf as a result. […] An animal stench in our sweat, all of us. Man is just an animal hemmed in by a narrow conscience; this is why it is his lot to suffer. The struggle between mind and beast tears at him from within. A tragic fate, a relentless struggle where the mind rarely wins. God has toyed with us …

Though “the mind rarely wins,” that is nonetheless where she turns. She bows neither to the Gorilla nor to God. Nor does she seek shelter in the arms of any member of the family she is working to save.

The last novella, Madness, is a first-person narrative by René, a lower-class mulatto poet hiding inside his shack with two, then three, other poet-friends. He is living three plots at once: he is a starving civilian in a third-world country under siege, an armchair guerrilla fighting a war against what he perceives as an army of shape-shifting devils whose faces morph into the blinding metal of their helmets and weapons, all while hoping, like any young man his age, to catch a glimpse of the neighbor’s daughter. During this time René and his friends argue about the past. He claims that they have been arrested and beaten by the commandant before. The others do not remember, although one of them has a serious injury to the head he can’t explain. René and his friends seem to be lost at the intersection of false memory and oblivion. In this narrative, which keeps veering into something I can only describe as gothic science fiction, Duvalier-ism has transformed Haitian society beyond recognition: a surreal, war-ravaged landscape in which the church steps are littered with the executed bodies of men, women, and children, and where two lovers—the narrator and the bourgeois girl he loves—are reunited in the torture chamber. This novella, perhaps the most pessimistic of the three, describes the arrested development and death of an entire generation.

Although there are characters with the same names in the three novellas (a Mathurin and a Jacques in both Love and Madness), Vieux-Chauvet abstains from giving them the same biographies. This is not a literal trilogy that tells one story. Rather, its alignment is structural. It shares the three unities of classical tragedy: unity of place (Haiti), unity of time (after the 1915–34 American occupation), and unity of action (terror). To these three unities, I would add a fourth: unity of purpose. In each of the novellas, the “black power” populist pieties of a dehumanizing dictatorship collide with individual critical thought. At its core, the plot of each novella is a confrontation between a narrow-minded henchman with a gun at his hip or pliers in his hands, and Haitian civilians helplessly struggling up a steep learning curve, facing upheaval within and without.

Across the three novellas, Vieux-Chauvet’s protagonists have at least one thing in common: sooner or later they slip their racial, social, political, and religious bonds. They do so by learning to question everything. This is the cumulative thrust of the trilogy—and this unity is reflected in the history of its composition and publication. The author’s daughter Régine Charlier recalls that her mother wrote the trilogy over the course of six months in 1967. She shut herself up in her room and wrote in secret, against the backdrop of the reign of terror of François Duvalier, who had by 1964 proclaimed himself president for life. She sent one manuscript (not three) to Paris and threw a party when she got a contract for the book with Gallimard, the premier French press. One can’t help wonder if some members of Haiti Littéraire, a poets’ group of which Vieux-Chauvet was an honorary member in the early sixties and which included Villard Denis (aka Davertige), Anthony Phelps, René Philoctète, Roland Morrisseau, and Serge Legagneur, were able to attend the party. At the party she recited excerpts from the book for the first time. It was then that family and friends expressed concerns about how the book might, no matter what absurd formula Duvalier used to determine who counted as an enemy of the state, put the life of every member of her family and her husband’s family at risk. That response made Vieux-Chauvet, who was by then a mother of three, a committed writer. She stood up for her book and refused to postpone its publication. She hoped that it would cause an international scandal and draw attention to Haiti.

In 1968 Gallimard published Amour, colère, et folie, but right before its distribution an incident occurred that changed the fate of the book as well as that of its author. Haiti’s ambassador to France apparently saw an advance copy and expressed concerns for the family’s safety. This episode made Marie Vieux-Chauvet cancel the book’s
distribution and convinced her to turn her trip to New York into a permanent exile.

Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s daughter Régine Charlier confessed that many of her own questions about this story remain unanswered. The moral, social, and political complications of the failed launch of the author’s most important novel, however compelling, reinforce but should not overshadow or distort her true legacy: the work itself. *Love, Anger, Madness* offers a literary means of articulating the challenges Haiti’s history poses to its citizens and to the rest of the world, an articulation that is possible only because her protagonists are complex thinking subjects and not simply romantic heroes. When these subjects set aside racial, social, political, and religious affiliation (be it voodoo or Catholicism), what is left is pitiless self-investigation meant as a model for an investigation of the world. Of course, a sharpened mind can make for a raw heart. Then again, if the human being is but “an animal hemmed in by a narrow conscience” whose lot is to suffer, perhaps such lucidity is all we really need.

—ROSE-MYRIAM RÉJOUIS, BROOKLYN, 2009

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

Ten years ago, Régine Charlier, Marie Chauvet’s eldest daughter, wrote to me and Val about her desire to publish a translation of *Amour, Colère, et Folie*. Her letter came from Haiti and I remember being mesmerized by the distance between what the stamps commemorated (Renaissance art) and what was going on in Haiti (continual disappointment). Edwidge Danticat had given her our names. We wrote back right away, explaining that we had to decline because we had just returned to our Ph.D. programs and needed to focus on passing exams and writing our dissertations. We are moved that we were given a second chance.

A few words about our process: When asked how Val and I divide the labor of translating, I often respond: we take turns. When I defend the original, he defends the translation. When he defends the translation, I defend the original. This is still my best answer.—R.M.R.

TRANSLATORS’ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to the following people and institutions for their support of this translation: Judy Sternlight, Edwidge Danticat, Régine Charlier, Thomas Colchie, Thomas Spear, Holly Webber, Michael Dash, Joan Dayan, Ronnie Scharfman, Carolyn Vega, Jeanne Garane, Emmanuelle Ertel, Etienne Dobenesque, Alyson Waters, Patrick Erouart-Siad, Margo Jefferson, Jonathan Veitch, Neil Gordon, Noah Eisenberg, Carolyn Berman, Laura Frost, Lea Beresford, Vincent La Scala, Ann Snitow, Ferentz Lafargue, Elaine Savory, John Flicker, Jessica Waters, Exit Art, and the Simon R. Guggenheim Foundation.
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NOVELS


IN TRANSLATION


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Love
Quietly, like a shadow, I watch this drama unfold scene by scene. I am the lucid one here, the dangerous one, and nobody suspects. An old maid! No husband. Doesn’t know love. Hasn’t even lived, really. They’re wrong. In any case, I’m savoring my revenge in silence. Silence is mine, vengeance is mine. I know into whose arms Annette will throw herself, and under no circumstances do I plan to open the eyes of our sister Félicia. She is too enraptured and carries the three-month-old fetus in her womb with too much pride. If she was smart enough to find herself a husband, I want her to be smart enough to keep him. She has too much confidence—in herself, in everyone. Her serenity exasperates me. She smiles while sewing shirts for the son she’s expecting, because of course it must be a son! And Annette will be the godmother, I bet …

I rest my elbows on the bedroom windowsill, and watch: standing in broad daylight, Annette offers Jean Luze the freshness of her twenty-two years. Their backs to Félicia, they claim each other without the slightest gesture. Desire bursting in their eyes. Jean Luze struggles, but there is no way out.

I am thirty-nine years old and still a virgin. The unenviable fate of most women in small Haitian towns. Is it like that everywhere? Are there towns in the world like this one, half mired in ancestral habits, people spying on each other? My town! My land! as they proudly call this dreary graveyard, where you see few men besides the doctor, the pharmacist, the priest, the district commandant, the mayor, the prefect, all of them newly appointed to their posts, all of them such typical “coast people” that it’s nauseating. Suitors are exotic birds, since parents here always dream of sending their sons away to Port-au-Prince or abroad to make learned men of them. One of them came back to us in the person of Dr. Audier, who studied in Paris and in whom I still search in vain for something superhuman …

I was born in 1900, a time when prejudice was at its height in this little region. Three groups emerged, isolated from each other like enemies: the “aristocrats” to whom we belonged, the petty bourgeois, and the common people. Tugged at by the delicate ambiguity of my situation, I suffered from an early age because of the dark color of my skin. The mahogany color I had inherited from some great-great-grandmother went off like a small bomb in the tight circle of whites and white-mulattoes with whom my parents socialized. But that is the past, and I don’t care to return to what is no more, at least not for now …

Father Paul says I have poisoned my mind with education. The truth is that my wits were asleep and I have stirred them—with this journal. I have discovered in myself unsuspected talents. I believe I can write. I believe I can think. I have become arrogant. I have become self-conscious. To reduce my inner life to what the eye can see, that’s my goal. A noble task! Will I succeed? To speak of myself is easy. All I have to do is lie a lot while convincing myself that I’m really putting my finger on it. I will attempt sincerity: solitude has made me bitter; I am like a fruit fallen before ripening, rotting under the tree unnoticed. Hurrah for Annette! After Justin Rollier, the poet who died of tuberculosis, there was Bob the Syrian; after Bob now Jean, brother-in-law to us both—and she is not yet twenty-three. Our little town of X is emancipating itself. It would seem we have been contaminated by what they call civilization.

I am the oldest of the three Clamont sisters. There are about eight years in age between each of us. We live together in this house, an undivided inheritance from our late parents. As usual, I have been entrusted with the more vexing tasks. You have nothing to do, so keep busy, they seem to say. And they have handed the keys to both house and strongbox over to me. I am at once servant and mistress of the house, a kind of housekeeper on whose shoulders rests the daily round of their lives. As recompense, each gives me something to live on. Annette works. A nice bourgeois girl ruined, cornered by circumstances, floundering shamelessly in compromise and promiscuity, and where else but as a salesgirl with Bob Charivi, a Syrian of the worst sort with a store on Grand-rue. Jean Luze, Félicia’s husband, a handsome Frenchman, beached on our welcoming shores by who knows what miracle, is in the employ of Mr. Long, an American executive who has been here for ten years. I need very little, and thanks to them I am gathering a fortune. I have developed a sordid miserliness in my old age. You should see me patiently counting my nest egg each month. “It’s dreadful,” Annette likes to say, “how Claire neglects herself!”

Félicia shrugs.

Since she got married, only Jean Luze exists. Gorgeous Jean Luze! Brilliant Jean Luze! The exotic and mysterious foreigner, who has set up his library and record collection in our house, and makes fun of our backward way of living and thinking. A flawless man, an ideal husband. Félicia’s cup overflows with love and admiration. I won’t be the one to open her eyes. From my window, I spy on their every move. This is how I came to find Annette in the arms of her Syrian boss one night. She was in the back of the car they had parked halfway in the garage. I saw everything, heard everything, despite all the precautions they were taking in order not to wake Félicia. They hadn’t thought of me. How could the old maid, uninterested in anything having to do with love, suspect them for one moment? That affair lasted until Félicia’s engagement. After that, everything fell apart for Annette again …

Félicia is of average height and on the voluptuous side, light-skinned with bland blond hair and the delicate
features of a white woman. Although Annette is white too, there is gold under her skin. And her hair is black, blue-black like her eyes. Except for the skin color, she is a touched-up copy of me sixteen years ago. These two white-mulatto girls are my sisters. I am the surprise that mixed blood had in store for my parents, no doubt an unpleasant surprise in their day, given how they made me suffer … Times have changed, and I have learned with age to appreciate what has been given me. History is on the move and so is fashion, fortunately …

Jean Luze stares at Annette. He is struggling. And yet he knows very well that he will give in. When she has a man on the brain—and I have paid dearly for this bit of knowledge—she doesn't give him up easily. And this one is among the most glamorous I have ever seen. The broad strides he takes in the yard! The way he climbs the stairs! His voice so young, so cheerful, and yet somewhat subdued and unaware of the cheer it spreads. His perfect speech! The way his gaze caresses everything so casually. Even me.

“Claire, how are you doing?”

He passes me by and goes up to his room, their room. But he doesn’t desire Félicia anymore, that much I know. Annette is the one on his mind. Besides, Félicia is ill served by her pregnancy. She is in no shape to defend herself. Her smile is more and more trusting, more and more mawkish, as Annette’s glances become more aggressive, more tormenting. How will this end? I keep vigil. I stand in the wings, I don’t exist for them. I push them onstage skillfully, without ever seeming to intervene, and yet I am directing. If only by the way I encourage Félicia to rest on the chaise longue on the balcony, all the while knowing that Annette and Jean Luze will be alone together downstairs in the dining room …

I close the doors, seemingly indifferent, and I wait. They stand there silent, devouring each other with their eyes, senses melting as they move in for the kill. This is not the right time yet. Annette cannot forget that Jean Luze is her brother-in-law, nor he that she is his wife’s sister.

For a while now we’ve been hanging our heads like snarling dogs, harassed as we are by fear, by the summer, the sun, by hunger and all that comes of it. The hurricanes are responsible, unleashed by God to punish us for what Father Paul calls our lack of faith and our weaknesses.

We stick out our tongues in this terrible sun in the throes of a Haitian summer. A thick, enormous, slavering tongue, licking at our skin, cutting off our breath. We are being cooked alive. Our sweat flows without pause. There is no moisture in the air, and the coffee, the only source of wealth around here, is drying up. Any day now, Eugénie Duclan, a friend of Father Paul the parish priest, will organize processions to persuade the clouds.

“Rain is a blessing from heaven,” Father Paul asserts in a very Haitian way during the course of his sermons.

So then we are cursed! Hurricanes, earthquakes and drought, nothing spares us. The beggars outnumber us. The survivors of the last hurricane, crippled and half-naked, haunt our gates. Everyone pretends not to see them. Hasn’t the poverty of others always been with us? After growing for the last ten years, it has the frozen face of habit. There have always been those who eat and those who fall asleep with an empty stomach. My father, a planter as well as a speculator, with over six hundred acres of land planted with coffee, accused the hungry of laziness.

“What is it that you do for a living?” he would say to those imploring him for a handout. And then he would answer his own question: “You beg.”

“Heartless!” Tonton Mathurin1 would cry out, “heartless!” Ah, the brave Tonton Mathurin we had learned to fear as if he were the very devil! He’s been dead twenty years now, and all these twenty years I always think I see him standing there when I pass his front door, draped in his old houpland2 and spitting at my father …

Misery, social injustice, all the injustices in the world, and they are countless, will disappear only with the human species. One remedies hundreds of miseries only to discover millions of others … It’s a lost cause. And of course there is the hunger of the body and that of the soul. And the hunger of the mind and the hunger of the senses. All sufferings are equal. To defend himself, man refines the meanness of his heart. By what miracle has this poor nation managed to stay so good, so welcoming, so joyful for so long, despite its poverty, despite injustice, prejudice, and our many civil wars? We have been practicing at cutting each other’s throats since Independence. The claws of our people have been growing and getting sharper. Hatred has hatched among us, and torturers have crawled out of the nest. They torture you before cutting your throat. It’s a colonial legacy to which we cling, just as we cling to French. We excel at the former but struggle with the latter. I often hear the prisoners’ screams. The prison is not far from my house. I see it from my window. The gray of its walls saddens the landscape. The police force has become vigilant. It monitors our every move. Its representative is Commandant Calêdu, a ferocious black man who has been terrorizing us for about eight years now. He wields the right of life and death over us, and he abuses it.
Two days after his arrival, he searched almost every house in town. Anything that could pass for a weapon was confiscated, including Dr. Audier’s hunting rifle. Accompanied by policemen to secure the premises, he rifled through our closets and drawers, lips stiff with hatred. How many people has he murdered? How many have disappeared without a trace? How many have died under unspeakable conditions? And cruelty is contagious: kneeling on coarse salt, forcing a victim to count the blows tearing at his skin, his mouth stuffed with hot potatoes, these are a few of the minor punishments some of us inflict upon our child-servants. Upon those turned slaves by hunger, who must suffer our spite and rage in all its voluptuousness. My blood boils at the sound of their cries and those of the prisoners—rebellion grumbles in me. This goes back to the days when I hated my father for whipping the sons of our farmers for next to nothing.

Despite the ruins, despite the poverty, our little town remains beautiful. I realize this once in a while, in jolts of awareness. Habit destroys pleasure. I often walk past the sea and the mountains that frame the horizon in complete indifference. And yet, devastated as they are by erosion, the mountains are heartbreakingly beautiful. From a distance, the dried-up branches of the coffee bushes take on soothing pastel tones, and the shore is emroidered with foam. A smell of kelp seems to rise from the depths of the water. Small boats are tied to stakes on the shore. Their white sails stain the sea as the sky dives in and blends into the water. Once a week, we hear the American ship blow its horn. The only one moored in our port now, it leaves loaded with fish, coffee and precious wood. Our colonial-style house, part of its roof carried away by the wind in the last storm, is sixty years old. Each side leans on another house, Dora Soubiran’s on one side and Jane Bavière’s on the other—two childhood friends with whom we no longer associate for separate but equally valid reasons. Other houses, twins to ours, line the Grand-rue on both sides and are at odds with the modern villa of the new prefect, M. Trudor, a figure of authority whom everyone greets with a bow. We have lost our smugness and will greet anyone with a bow. Many a spine has been bent by all this scraping. M. Trudor hosts receptions to which all the former mulatto-bourgeois-aristocrats are invited. And the latter, taking thick skins out of their closets along with their silk dresses, respond promptly even as they grousse. One has to howl with the wolves, after all. And since the times have changed everything, we are making an effort to adapt. A few of us get our ears boxed, but Annette, bon vivant of the day that she is, takes care to represent us without overlooking a single invitation.

The rocky main street, just about demolished since the hurricanes, has been hollowed out by greenish ditches where mosquitoes nest. The mayor, a plump griffe with a taste for women and liquor, has other fish to fry. The decaying street is not among his preoccupations. He whiles away his time at the corner grocer’s, Mme Potiron, a grimelle who sells clairin infused with herbal aphrodisiacs. Beggars shivering with fever squat beside the ditches and cup their hands in the stinking water to drink it. In the narrow streets, some dilapidated shacks, holding on as well as they can atop their nearly ruined foundations, shelter suspect-looking families with hollow cheeks. A few poets hunted by the cops—who don’t trust what they call “the intellectuals”—also live there. The police are worried for nothing, since we have become as gentle as lambs and more cautious than turtles. Our endless civil wars have ages ago become the stuff of epic legend, regarded with a smile by our youth.

In the midst of this squalor, the prefect lives in style in his villa. He does not earn much, but he is rich.

“The good Lord has punished you,” he sighs when beggars hold out their hands.

“The good Lord is unhappy with you,” Father Paul echoes from his pulpit. “You are giving in to superstition. You practice voodoo. God has punished you.”

In the thirty years he has lived in this country and fought this religion, he hasn’t yet understood that nothing will ever uproot it. In order not to believe in it, in order not to seek the protection of the gods, one has to free oneself once and for all of everything, one has to shake the yoke of any divinity and count only on one’s own strength. Which I have done. But how can you stop this ignorant people from clinging to something they see as a life raft, when even its representatives, when even my own father, the Parisian mulatto, served his loas regularly.

My door is double-locked and I keep a key in my pocket. I do not let anyone in, not even my sisters. Still, just in case, I have hidden under my bed the romance novels I devour and the pornographic postcards sold to me one night on a deserted street corner by a suspicious young man with glasses, who was freshly arrived from Port-au-Prince and who fortunately vanished without a trace.

There is no such thing as purity, and the needs of the flesh are normal. Can anyone live without eating or drinking? I twist on my bed, prey to desires that nothing slakes. I close my bedroom window and make sure that my door is locked and take off my clothes. I am naked, in the mirror still beautiful. But my face is withered. I have bags
under my eyes and wrinkles on my forehead. The graceless face of a love-starved old maid. I hate Félicia for having brought this man home. My temptation. My awful and delicious temptation! When they leave the bedroom, I go and touch, I smell the sheets on which they made love, starving for this smell of seaweed mixed with male sweat, which must be the smell of sperm and which blends with Félicia’s bland perfume.

Annette no longer has Bob Charivi drive her home. Rain or shine, she walks home. It is a tactic like any other, designed to move Jean Luze. I concur with this tactic. I want Annette to be Jean Luze’s. I want her to take Félicia’s place in that man’s life. I don’t like Félicia. She is too white, too blond, too lukewarm, too orderly. Ah! If only I had Annette’s youth. As I am, I would never dare. I only have to look at my face, prematurely aged, to withdraw immediately. A wasted face! I blame it on frustration, for which I reproach myself. Why did Jean Luze choose Félicia?

I remember his arrival in this country, one morning last year around this time. A rented car, covered in mud and dust, with a black driver behind the wheel, stopped in front of our house by chance. All the shutters lifted at once and the newcomers fell under the scrutiny of the curious eyes behind our yellowed and dusty lace curtains. I was sweeping the porch. He opened his door and walked up to me. Did he take me for the maid? He barely greeted me and asked where he could find the office of M. Long, the American, the director of the Export Corporation; I pointed it out to him. Later on when he returned for a visit with Dr. Audier, who explained that M. Luze had come here with the intention of collaborating with the Export Corporation, Annette made arrangements to seduce him. As for me, he hardly seemed to notice me. Only when Dr. Audier said, “May I introduce you to the Clamont girls?” did I see him fix his eyes upon me in astonishment. In that moment all the complexes, of which I had thought myself to be definitively cured, were roused in me. His amused gaze took in the living room, grazed Annette, and stopped on Félicia. She looked up at him with eyes full of fright and admiration, as she beheld him with parted lips. I think I loved him from the very first minute. Unfortunately, I was too practiced in the art of deception, and behind my mask of detachment, I burned in silence like a torch. Rigid, stuffy, suspicious like a cop, I would make the most resourceful prospects run away. Even long before, with Frantz Camuse and Justin Rollier, two acceptable suitors, I was unable to react. True, at that time I would shrink because I was self-conscious about my dark skin, which our acquaintances hypocritically pretended was a most unusual phenomenon.

“She is so different from her sisters!” “Who does she look like?” But under their breath, they added: “This one really fell off the oven rack.”

Furthermore, I imagined sexual relations, caresses, even kisses, to be shameful acts that only the Church could absolve through the sacrament of marriage. Raised on absurd primers that drilled it into me, throughout my entire youth, that love is a sin, cloistered in this house, in this town which I had only left twice to go to Port-au-Prince escorted by my parents, I lived surrounded by people for the most part no more enlightened than my tutors. Shamefaced, I learned to repress my instincts. Any intimacy with those who did not belong to the highest level of society meant dishonor for my parents. Their narrow-mindedness influenced me to such an extent that the only people who existed as far as I was concerned were those we received at home. My mother avoided greeting any woman suspected of adultery, while my father found all women depraved. He was a womanizer, so he knew what he was talking about. To please such parents, you had to live like a recluse so as to escape malicious gossip, which was as damaging in their eyes as the fault itself.

I understood a bit late that the act of love is like any other physiological need of a human being. Just as late, I realized the stupidity of social classifications based on wealth and color. I became skilled at unmasking the social climbers, the hypocrites, guessing that behind their saintly little airs these artists spun the most elaborate embroideries of copulation. I have fun imagining such and such a couple going at it. And they appear to me either ridiculous or deliciously titillating, depending on whether their coupling seems grotesque or gracious.

The shade from the trees creates a refreshing oasis under my window. I see Jean Luze and Annette come in. He brought her home today. And Félicia welcomes them with open arms. She threw up five times today, she tells her husband as he kisses her absentmindedly. The smell of the food on the table drives her away. I am the one who serves Jean Luze. He eats slowly, keeping his eyes on his plate. Annette laughs because he almost spilled his drink. Her laughter rings like a chime on crystal, and her eyes, slanted like butterfly wings, shine as brightly as her teeth. This is torture for Jean Luze. He excuses himself and gets up. She calls him back to ask for a cigarette. The way she pronounces his name! Like a song on her lips. She pauses on its one-syllable note and holds it. She looks into his eyes as she lifts her cigarette to his lighter.

“Thank you, Jean.”
“You’re welcome.”
The tone is polite but it reveals a bad mood thinly veiled.
“You seem upset.”
“Me?”
“What’s on your mind?”
“Nothing at all.”
She goes up to the living room, puts a record on the turntable and starts dancing by herself. The needle squeaks.
“I beg of you, don’t damage my equipment.”
He is watching her without paying any attention to me.

A crowd gathers in the street: speculators, traders, farmers, managers, wholesale dealers and retailers grab each other by the collar and seem ready to eat each other alive. The noise is deafening. They accuse each other. Each blames the other for his losses or his ruin. How careless. Have they forgotten about the commandant and his men ensconced at the Cercle? They will pick them up tonight with nary a word, simply accusing them of subversive activities. Jean Luze is standing near me by the dining room door, which opens onto the porch. We look on.
“What’s the matter with them?” he asks me.
“They’re fighting.”
“As usual. And the tragedy is that no one seems to understand the real problem.”
He has an ironic little laugh, almost silent.
In one booth, a scale once used to weigh coffee sways like a cripple. Piles of sacks lie empty on the ground, a few coffee beans scattered around. Some beggars run toward us with their hands out. Jean Luze winces in disgust.
“It’s awful!” he says.
And really, they do stink.
A cop pulls apart these growling dogs and beats the more stubborn ones. A beggar in rags with a face devoured by hunger looks at us furtively.
“They are getting their heads bashed on top of it,” Jean Luze mutters through clenched teeth.
He has already learned to be cautious.
The beggar raises his arm to scratch his head and reveals a gun, secured to his waist by a rope.
It’s one of Commandant Calédu’s spies. The police chief is known to be a sadist. He loves to whip women, and once in a while he has them arrested just like that, one or two at a time for his pleasure.

With my own eyes I have seen Dora Soubiran, my childhood friend and our neighbor, walk out of jail after being accused of sedition. She is a completely harmless zealot who insists—perversely or not—that God is her only supreme leader. Calédu loves to be feared and to be shown that he is feared. Especially when the one in question is Dora Soubiran, scion of the late César Soubiran, former director of the lycée, schooled in Paris, former parliamentarian, who served as an ambassador in previous administrations. Dora Soubiran looks down her nose at him. She refuses to understand the march of history, its twists and reversals. So one evening, he came to get her himself. She followed him down the street, saying her rosary as people lay low in the dark behind their half-opened shutters. She came back two days later, haggard and unrecognizable, followed by the taunts of the beggars roaring with laughter to see her walk with open legs like a cripple. We hear her sob at night. No one dares rescue her. She’s a suspect. One of those who has been marked by Calédu, a man chosen expressly by the police to tame this little town famous for its arrogance and prejudices.

In three days it will be my birthday and they want to throw me a party. I don’t care for it. I have no interest in being on display. I’ll still make a cake, so no one will say that I’m a cheapskate … “A chocolate cake,” Annette adds with a comically avid expression, “just like you know how to make.” Yes, but where will I find the chocolate? Well, she’s going to have to make do with what’s on the table. She is brimming with life. She must be temptation itself for Jean Luze. He eyes her greedily, unwittingly. With every subtle movement, her long legs trace riveting arabesques. His courage and will are wearing thin. Félicia has not left her room in two days. They must feel as if they’re alone, more uninhibited. Is Annette really going to overcome Jean Luze’s resistance? He often gives her these long looks
that make me tremble. Maybe I’m getting more out of all that he gives her. I’m getting more than she is. What a miracle!

“Monsieur Long gave me two bottles of whiskey,” Jean Luze announces. “I’ll invite him to the party.”

“Fine,” nods Félicia.

“What about the commandant?” Annette asks.

“No,” I protest forcefully.

“Oh! You know,” she says coldly, “we are no longer living in the days of our dear parents. Prejudice is out of fashion.”

“This has nothing to do with prejudice,” I reply.

“We should still have him over once in a while,” prudent Félicia adds cautiously. “What good would it do to turn him against us?”

“Everyone receives him,” Annette insists, “even Madame Camuse. If he sours on us, what then?”

“Do you have something against him, Claire?” asks Félicia. “Of course what happened to Dora is most appalling. But she has always been heedless …”

“He’s not a bad guy, you know,” says Annette. “He has his orders. He can’t ignore them. In any case, he’s a handsome soldier. He’s a wonderful dancer and always brings gifts for the ladies. Just the other day, he brought back a magnificent necklace to Corrine Laplanche from Port-au-Prince.”

“Well, it’s normal for someone like Corrine Laplanche to accept his presents, but not you,” Félicia retorted.

“Why?”

“Because your name is Annette Clamont.”

“That’s rubbish,” Annette cried. “Corrine Laplanche is better educated than all the Clamont sisters put together. The only difference is that her parents don’t belong to good society, as you so often like to say, that’s all. And anyway, her mother, Élina Jean-François, was a classmate of Claire’s … Isn’t that right, Claire?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“I won’t bother asking why you didn’t befriend her,” she added. “Well, me, I choose the people I like wherever I happen to meet them, without giving any thought to their table manners. The only thing I ask of them is that they have qualities that I don’t have and can’t help but admire.”

My sentiments precisely. Did I put those words in her mouth?

“That’s very good, Annette,” Jean Luze offers approvingly, looking at her with interest. “You are not as harebrained as you like to seem. You should read more, for your own good …”

“I am only twenty-two! I have plenty of time. I don’t mind fumbling around before finding myself.”

“Believe me, you can fumble around just as well while educating yourself,” Jean Luze answered. “But it’s Claire’s birthday and not yours. Let her choose her guests herself.”

“So there won’t be anyone,” Annette concluded with despair.

“There will be us,” I replied calmly.

“And Monsieur Long,” said Annette.

“And Monsieur Long.”

Jean Luze caught up with me by the bedroom door.

“You hate him, don’t you?”

“Who?”

“The commandant.”

“I don’t like people I don’t know.”

“What about me, you must like me since you know me, right? Do you like me, Claire?”

“Of course I do. Aren’t you my brother-in-law?”

“That’s not a good enough reason.”

He laughed, leaning a hand on the wall.

“A piece of advice: don’t make a show of your antipathy for Calédu,” he said to me. “You could pay dearly for it. I am new here but I have already understood a few things. In the middle of the twentieth century your little town is
going through what France went through during the time of Louis XVI. It would be amusing if it were not tragic. Play along and keep your head down with the commandant and his people. Don’t make a show of your antipathy as Dora Soubiran did. That kind of attitude is pointless and can’t end well …"

I left him abruptly and went in my room. Who does he take me for? I, who tremble with fright at the slightest noise, I, who avoid suspects to the point that I won’t see Dora, I, who won’t exchange words or looks with these armed men, and here he thinks me capable of braving that hangman Calédu. The fool! I am a coward and I know it. My cozy bourgeois upbringing is like a tattoo on my skin. Is he that blind? How dare he confuse a lover’s loathing, a lover’s outrage, for something else, that’s what I can’t forgive!

I saw Dora passing by. She hobbling along with legs spread apart like a maimed animal. What have they done to her? What awful torments has she endured that for a month now she has been unable to walk normally? Dr. Audier looks after her but he keeps his mouth shut. I saw him leave her house recently, head down, a frown on his brow.

“And our neighbor?” Jean Luze asked him.

He stared at him without answering, lips contorted.

He is brave enough for looking after a victim, Dr. Audier must tell himself. The reign of terror has broken his spirit. The politician, the great champion of freedom and the rights of man that he was when my father was alive, is dead in him. He even smiles when he shakes Calédu’s hand. He is old and experienced. He smiles at the prefect. He smiles at the mayor. Despite his hatred for our former occupiers, he smiles at M. Long. M. Long, who buys anything that grows at low prices and who lives around here, has cleverly found shelter under the wings of the authorities in order to better suck our blood. And these black imbeciles seem flattered by the white man’s self-serving friendship. His house is protected with a wire fence, his water filtered, his food disinfected. He’s not taking any chances with microbes and mosquitos. Malaria and typhoid will not get the better of him. Since the authorities only have one thing on their minds—to get rich by any means necessary, to humiliate those who once humiliated them and crush the arrogant bourgeois—M. Long exploits this desire, nodding and applauding: Marvelous! Go ahead! God save Haiti!

Today is Sunday. I put on my long-sleeved dress and my black hat and went to mass. I followed the ceremony without participating, eyes on my prayer book and rosary in hand. My mind was elsewhere. Where are they? What are they doing? I was saying to myself. Jean Luze and Annette were still in bed when I left. I imagined them eating together. I could hear Annette’s laughter. I imagined Jean Luze’s eyes on her. On my knees, as the priest raised the wafer, I tried in vain to chase such thoughts away. It did not escape me that for some time now I’d been faking piety. I had lost my faith when I saw the children’s bodies piled high before my eyes after the last hurricane. Many of the oldest and meanest had been spared. Why? was the first unanswered question that gave me the courage to make my point. How many of these women kneeling to receive the body and blood of our Lord had never helped their fellow man? I asked myself that Sunday. All those around me were great sinners—usurers, exploiters, sadists, corrupters of virtue. I had known them from tender childhood. Not a soul you could praise to the skies. Not one who spared either Jane Bavière, or Agnès Grandupré, who died of consumption thanks to them, not one among them who failed to condemn the only just man among us, an old man named Tonton Mathurin, before whom my father learned to tremble.

They look so angelic in church! What were they thinking as they grimaced through their prayers? Were they trying to cheat God Himself, our overly tolerant God who calls all lost sheep to His bosom?

It was probably about seven in the evening.

I was on the landing and about to go downstairs when I looked up and caught Annette and Jean Luze exchanging glances. Annette took his hand first and pushed him into her bedroom. I pretended to go downstairs only to double back and put my ear to the door and my eye to the keyhole: they were still dressed and Jean Luze, his hands on her shoulders, stone-faced, unrecognizable, appeared to be fighting temptation. He threw her on the bed. Her skirt was tucked up, and he looked at her with a kind of hateful and appreciative curiosity. She moaned and brutally pulled him against her, eyes closed, nails biting into his back.

I suddenly stood up, overcome by some sort of prudishness, but I stayed a moment behind the door, heart racing, cheeks flushed. Then, agitated and dizzy from waves of feelings crashing together in me, I ran and threw myself flat on my stomach in bed. I left this position only when I heard Félicia calling me. I washed my face in a frenzy and
went to her. She wanted some soup and she asked where her husband was.

“He is in the living room,” I answered calmly.

“And what is he doing?”

“He’s reading.”

“Ask him to come give me a kiss. He’s always afraid to wake me.”

To gain time, I suggested that she freshen up a little.

When I left her room a few minutes later, I found Jean Luze in the living room where he was indeed reading. No doubt he was trying to seem calm, quite prudently. He stood up and chose a record, the same one as always. But in his distracted state he made a mistake and the second movement of Beethoven’s Concerto no. 5 rose in a flutter, discreet, melodious, before rushing headlong into an incredibly violent chord.

He gave me an infinitely sweet look.

“You like this concerto too, don’t you? You come in each time I play it. The first movement is just as beautiful but I made a mistake … Ah! I couldn’t live without music … I think I’ve brought a record player with me my whole life. I was hardly twenty when I gave up everything else and bought one for the first time. My parents had just died and I was trying to scrape together a living …”

Just then, Annette appeared. I searched her face, looking for traces of victory that I could enjoy. She lit up a cigarette with quivering hands and threw Jean Luze a sidelong glance devoid of the misty-eyed gratitude I thought I would find there. He stared at her like an enemy. Their attitude surprised and disappointed me. I was willing to live this love through Annette only if she could measure up to it. It was essential that she outdo herself. Had she profaned this act that was so important in my eyes? What did she say, how did she react? What happened between them? Could it be that their embrace came to nothing? That would be too devastating.

M. Long is a fat, puffy, congested man. It’s my birthday today, and we are literally being cooked alive, and M. Long looks like a boiled lobster. Jean Luze seats his boss and offers him some whiskey.

The cake is on the table, crowned with eighteen candles. Annette’s idea, naturally. They kiss me and offer me their gifts and all sing “Happy Birthday to You.” I got a sewing kit from Jean Luze, a box of handkerchiefs from Annette and from Félicia a gold medallion.

“I decorate you,” she said, pinning the medal to my blouse.

“Come now, give us a smile.”

Jean Luze held my chin and looked into my eyes. I’m afraid he’ll hear the disordered beating of my heart. He is tall and I barely reach his shoulder. I would like him to lean and take me in his arms to carry me very far away. Such is the incurable romantic that slumbers in all old maids!

We offer some cake to Augustine, the maid. The house is festive.

“Put on a record, Jean,” Annette proposes. “The screaming just ruins everything.”

The screams waft from the jail. Horrible, unsexed droning.

“Calédu is having a bit of fun,” M. Long exclaims with a jowl-shaking chortle. (His accent adds a childish note to his cruel remark.)

“A peculiar way to have fun, don’t you think?” Jean Luze asks him with a strange, almost hostile, smile.

“Oh, you know, I say to each his own. And anyway, you would have to be insane to try to change anything around here.”

He holds out his glass to Jean Luze, who fills it with another shot of whiskey.

Annette flutters around them. She pours on the charm even for this hideous American. She’s turning into a nymphomaniac.

“As I told you recently, Monsieur Luze,” M. Long continues, “the coffee harvest has been so bad that for the last three years we have had to fall back on timber. I’m waiting for an answer from the company. If we don’t export wood, we’ll have no choice but to close up shop. The timber stock in the mountains and even in the towns is just extraordinary! This island is amazing: the sea, the mountains, the trees! Yes it’s a pity, a real pity they are so poor and unlucky.”

“What will happen to the peasants and their small plots if they agree to deforestation? The rain will wash away the soil,” notes Jean Luze.
“Oh well, that, my dear friend, is their business. They can either agree to sell their wood or we can leave. We are not asking for a gift, not at all …”

I can’t fully follow the conversation. The screams make it hard to pay attention. I prickle up my ears. I feel obliged to listen for the faintest whimper. I am almost certain that it is a child crying. I am developing a trained ear. A final outburst ends on a hoarse note, so painful that I stand up with my hands over my ears.

“The cries upset you that much?” M. Long asks me.

“Not at all.”

Jean Luze hands me a glass.

“Drink,” he says.

The glass shakes in my hand.

M. Long speaks of his country, so rich, so beautiful, so well organized, it seems. What has he come looking for in this hole, if not wealth? What if not to fleece the sheep that we are?

After M. Long’s departure, Félicia goes to her room. Jean Luze lingers in the living room listening to Beethoven. Standing in the dark, Annette is watching him. I stay up with them for as long as possible. I’m on to them: they have a rendezvous tonight. I close the doors and wait. The house seems asleep. I hear the careful patter of their steps, the creaking of the door to Annette’s room as it opens. I imagine them naked, kissing, taking each other again and again. I get in bed, naked as well, ablaze with desire. I am with them, between them. No, I am alone with Jean Luze. Amazing how love cancels out all other feelings. I would hear screaming from the jail and pay it no heed. I am Annette. I’m sixteen years younger. I hear nothing, and then a terrible cry and the sound of a body falling. It would be inconvenient to witness any kind of drama. I stay still, waiting for things settle. Annette’s door is ajar and Félicia is lying on the floor. Jean Luze, appropriately dressed, is leaning over his wife, while Annette, in a dressing gown, pale as a corpse, looks at me. I know nothing. I understand nothing. Isn’t fainting normal for pregnant women?

“Go get Dr. Audier,” I say to Jean Luze.

He quickly carries her into their room and runs off.

I hear his steps creaking on the stairs and it’s now my turn to lean over Félicia.

“My God, what’s happened to her?” Annette exclaims, hands on her heart.

She can’t play innocent. Acting is not her strong suit. She didn’t want these complications. She’s nervous, and she’s nervous that she’s nervous.

I avoid answering. I am busy rubbing Félicia’s hands.

“Leave the room, Annette.” That’s all I say.

Félicia and I are alone. I rub some alcohol on her cheeks, slap her and call her name. She comes to and starts sobbing.

“Claire! Claire!”

Oh no, I don’t want to hear anything. I’ll take care of her as always, but I don’t want to hear her secrets. Spare this poor old maid!

“Claire! Claire!”

“Keep quiet. You will just make things worse and you will lose the child.”

Jean Luze returns with Dr. Audier. She hides her face in her hands and bursts into fresh sobs. After examining her, Audier gives her a shot and prescribes a few days’ bed rest.

“You better not leave her side,” he advises Jean Luze in a low voice. “She’s had a terrible shock.”

He is full of repentance. He kisses her and whispers something in her ear.

I am still there, watching every move.

“Nothing happened, I swear, nothing,” he repeats, now in a louder voice.

Does she believe him? She touches his face slowly, full of tenderness, as if she has already forgotten everything. What confidence she has in him!

“There’s no hemorrhaging, that’s good!” the doctor declares. “Just simple fainting!”

I see him out and then return to Félicia’s side. The injection has put her to sleep.

I turn to Jean Luze with the most sincere expression I can muster and ask:

“How did this happen?”
He looks at me casually.

“I have no idea. I was in the living room and I heard her scream …”

Oh, what good liars we are, both of us!

He did not go to work this morning. The door to their room is closed and Augustine has brought them breakfast in bed. Annette seems more nervous than last night. She paces up and down, eyes on their door. Why has he shut himself up with Félicia? What is he going to promise? The door opens in the afternoon and Jean Luze emerges, somber and so distant that it would take superhuman courage to approach him. Annette nevertheless calls out to him, and he looks at her with intentionally unconcealed antipathy. I hide in order to hear their conversation.

“It’s over, Annette,” he says, “I hope you’ve understood this. Félicia’s life and the baby’s life depend on your behavior. You have to control yourself.”

“But I can’t, I just can’t …”

“Let’s not overdo it, shall we.”

His tone is cutting.

“I love you.”

“Quiet.”

“Living like this with you but not with you, and to keep quiet? That’s too much.”

“In that case, Félicia and I will leave. I got married to have a home, children, to be done with being a man-about-town. I don’t want problems, understand? I don’t want trouble.”

His voice is so hard that I doubt ever having seen them in each other’s arms.

“So, you didn’t love me?”

Silence.

“So, you didn’t love me?”

He answers with total astonishment and profound contempt.

“Love you? Come on.”

There is another silence, during which I regret not being able to see the expression on Annette’s face. Mine is stubborn and unhappy. Is it because I think I could plead our case much better?

“No need to leave the house.” Her voice trembles.

“All right then?” Jean Luze asks.

“All right,” she answers.

They each return to their own quarters. I run to lock myself in my room. His words were a slap in her face, and I feel their heat on my cheeks. All right, she said. It’s not all right. I plan to fight this. I will not accept seeing this affair end so pathetically. If Annette resigns herself and turns the page like a good sport, well, I refuse. Her courage, the courage I never had, must be rewarded and she must live out this love to my full satisfaction, until she’s sated …

Feel free to shriek at the top of your lungs if you ever see this manuscript; call me indecent, immoral. Sprinkle me with stinging epithets if it makes you happy, but you will not intimidate me anymore. I have wasted my time taking you seriously and ruined my life. I want revenge. I am swimming against the tide. I’m letting go, filling myself with rage. My life is not enough anymore. Eating, running the house, getting drunk on sleep, that’s not a life. I want something else. Just like you, just like everyone else. Our serene little faces, that’s just for the sake of appearances; our satisfied little smiles are for others to envy. It comforts, makes life easier when others think we are the blessed of this earth. No need for me to pry into your private life. I know what’s there. All private lives are alike. Why would you be different from me? Suffocating fear makes freaks of all of us. That’s why we take shelter behind a façade. When the façade crumbles, we are handed over to merciless judges worse than we are. Their status protects them. I fear them. They have taught me hypocrisy. In my awful loneliness, I have discovered that society isn’t worth shit. Society hides behind a barricade of idiocy. Society is a killer of liberty. Unless we shake off our yoke, we will come into this world, suffer, grow old, and die, always resigned to our fate. Life is not generous to many. What has she given me? Nothing. I failed to assert myself, and she forgot all about me. Every old maid, it seems, must have a cat or dog beside her. Eugénie Duclan has her cat and Dora Soubiran her dog. I don’t like animals. Their touch repels me. The faithful dog licking your feet and the sweetest cat watching you so it can leap on the table disgust me. They remind me of my inferiors. For fear of scandal, I have repressed an ocean of love within me. I have wasted my
charms on self-absorbed solitude. My mating season has expired. I am a desert without refuge. It’s too late for me to start living. And yet everything lives around me as if to sharpen my regret, even the insects. I have more respect for them than for those who confine themselves to chastity and who flatter themselves that they have preserved their dignity. As if dignity were lodged somewhere in the body! The couples on my pornographic postcards offer me instruction on lovemaking: they attend to basic needs. The repressed have this in common: they exaggerate the importance of what they deny themselves. The priests conceal their desire under a skirt, the nuns under a veil, and yet they are both obsessed by it. “Our first duty is to avoid scandal,” my father, who lived a scandalous life, would say. He made a martyr of me, all for the sake of teaching me wisdom. Wisdom! I believed in this for a long time before discovering how empty it was. It’s debilitating. Happiness is fleeting. You need a touch of madness to catch it in its flight.

Annette did not come down for meals today. Neither did the Luzes. Since Félicia’s “indisposition,” Jean Luze comes home from work to lock himself up with her and I am alone in the dining room, putting together meals that I have Augustine send up. The house is quieter than a cemetery. As soon as Annette slips out, Jean Luze makes for the living room to listen to his music. I know his concerto by heart from hearing it so much. I love it as much as he does. It transports me so far away that when I return to myself, my nerves feel so naked that I find my daily life unbearable. Félicia, on the contrary, likes nothing that he likes. Music leaves her cold, books too. I secretly raid Jean Luze’s library. I have discovered real treasures on my own. Not even his science books put me off.

There is a crowd again on the main road. M. Long, with the prefect and the commandant at his side, tries to convince the peasants that the trees should be chopped down to sell the wood.

“Selling this wood will make you rich faster than coffee did,” M. Long says in the Creole of a petit-blanc.\(^7\)

“If you buy it at the price of coffee, we’ll still be poor, Mister Long,” one peasant replies.

From the doors of their stores, the Syrians follow the scene, exchanging opinions in a language known only to them.

“This money will run through our fingers,” declares another peasant. “Let’s leave our trees standing, that’s all we have left. The vultures have come down on us, caw, caw, caw, and they want to pick the skin off our bones.”

A great burst of laughter shakes the crowd.

Calédu is getting riled up. The beggars roll voluptuously in the dust.

“Caw, caw, caw,” they repeat, doubling up with laughter.

Where do they find the strength to laugh?

“Think about it,” says the prefect. “Monsieur Long is bringing you business and if you don’t want it, you turn it down. No use getting worked up about it.”

“Break it up, break it up, go home and think it over,” the commandant orders.

He walks away, looking self-important, twirling his stick. Weapons hang from his belt. He’s a living arsenal. One hardly dares look his way. The beggars crawl backward, the peasants return home with heads low. Defeated in advance.

Now Calédu and M. Long stand in front of our gate. I hear them talk.

“Knock them over the head,” says M. Long. “You want our deal to fall through?”

“They’ll give in,” Calédu answers. “Hunger will make them see reason.”

The sun opens its hellmouth upon us. The sea brews its heavy, foaming waves.

I see Jean Luze come in. He has opened the collar of his shirt and walks past sponging his face. Sweat makes his brown hair stick to his forehead. Never has he been more handsome. “How are you?” he asks, and sits across from me in an armchair in the living room.

“It’s so hot!” he sighs. “It’s hilarious because, back in my country, I pictured this island differently. What came across in the books I read was some kind of paradise where no one could suffer or die.”

“You are disappointed.”

“It was always my dream to go off to a distant place. Besides, nothing was holding me back home. I came all the way here seeking riches and paradise. I eke out a living in the heart of hell. And yet, who can say this sky, this sea, is not beautiful, so full of the serene charm of this corner of the world. Something must have come and transformed
“this town into a hellish paradise.”

“Do you believe in curses?”

“No, I don’t believe in them. But it’s unsettling sometimes to feel the weight of an invisible evil hand. What was your life like before?”

“Me, well, you know …”

“Quit hiding behind one mask or another. Say what you think, Claire, learn to fight back. You are clearheaded, intelligent. You can’t call what’s happening here a punishment from God. You’ve already given this some thought and you’ve understood the problem. Admit it.”

“There’s nothing to understand. Times have changed, that’s all.”

“What was it like here before?”

“Different.”

I lower my head, dour as a buzzard.

“You’re a cagey one.”

The truth is painful to admit when it is humiliating. I would admit it to others, but not to him. It’s enough that he has witnessed our disgrace, our degradation. He leans over me, the dimple on his chin spreading as he smiles. The hair at his temples is turning gray. It’s adorable. I slowly lift my hand toward his hair. He is no longer looking at me. He’s indifferent. Without a word he walks to Félicia’s room, where she is waiting for him.

Annette’s Syrian boss gives her a ride home, yet again. She’s holding his hand and laughing too loudly. It’s false laughter, crazy laughter. She’s been losing weight before our very eyes. She and I are both living in a trance for fear that he will keep to his resolution. We live with the same scorn, the same worries, the same pain. Sometimes, I forget who I am and believe that I am the one Jean Luze is avoiding, the one he once held in his arms. I bridle at the thought that Annette will not fight to keep him. How could she have given up so easily? What is she afraid of? A man such as this should have inspired in her a taste for battle. I refine my ruse. I keep Félicia company in order to leave him free. I will waste my day in their insipid private life. I warmly receive that old crow Gisèle Audier, certain that her chatter will force Jean Luze to flee the room. She rolls along on her stubby legs and leans her absurdly withered snub nose over Félicia.

“My dear! Unbelievable, this fainting fit of yours!”

Félicia smiles. Soon, she will be able to lie on the chaise longue and return to working on the layette of her future son.

“And where is the lovely Annette …”

“She’s in her room,” Félicia answers.

Her voice wavers imperceptibly, but she controls herself. Gisèle Audier moves on to the subject of the tree felling that started yesterday.

“They have sold an extraordinary quantity of precious wood. I have heard that Monsieur Long will pay them a good price.”

“Jean thinks it’s bad for the coffee business.”

“And Jules is furious. But the truth is that he could never stand the Americans. He claims they are responsible for everything. I guess it all goes back to his hatred for the Occupation. The Occupation killed your father, and it made a paranoid manic of my husband, who now sees the hand of the State Department everywhere, even in our worst political events. It’s really becoming an obsession.”

She laughs.

For a moment her words resurrect the ghosts of my father and his partisans. I can see Laurent, Justin Rollier and all the dead enter the Cercle l’Étoile, founded by the late M. Camuse, where, in a very different time, one after the other, the three sisters had made their debut in long silk gowns. The Cercle was ransacked by beggars on Calédou’s watch, and by now they’ve taken over the place. On that day, Mme Camuse nearly dropped dead of indignation …

Jean Luze plays a record in the living room. The notes penetrate me as he listens to them. My senses begin to vibrate so much that I rush to lock myself in my room. The sound explodes like a scream and then lingers in a caress. The entire house is suffused with it. What a hymn to life, this work born from suffering! …
In order to keep up appearances, I continue to attend mass regularly and receive communion every month. Father Paul hears my confession.

In order not to destroy the myth of the unblemished old maid, I admit to venial sins only. I keep the so-called mortal sins to myself. That’s between me and God. I will accept punishment bravely, no matter how terrible. I will appear before Him, pointing a finger at Him. I will be the one to accuse. I don’t care, everything may be perfect up there, but on earth, what a mess! I will tell Him what’s going on down here. I will open His eyes. In the meantime, as I have for the past twenty-five years, I will be one of the twelve Daughters of Mary at the procession for the Feast of the Virgin. Dressed like her, in a white dress and blue belt, I will escort our Immaculate Lady and carry her banner. With Father Paul’s help, Eugénie Duclan will launch her crusade to the Lord. This is the beginning of a series of processions, supplemented with songs and prayers, meant to move the heavens to pity and call on us its holy blessing. Father Paul has written a hymn: “May God make the rain descend upon us, may He wash this town of its sins. Mercy! Mercy! …”

Mme Camuse would never dare adorn her devotional display without my help. It’s a question of habit. She greets me with exclamations of joy:

“I knew you would never let me down. You’re so loyal. This time I would like a display representing a place in paradise where we’d have a saint wreathed in flowers. But who will be the saint?”

She simpers like a coquettish old cat and in a convincing voice declares:

“It will be you.”

“Me!”

“Yes, you’d make a great saint.”

“A much younger girl would be better,” I suggested, frightened to see her so attached to this idea.

“A younger girl, sure. But which one?”

“The prefect’s daughter.”

“The prefect’s daughter!” she exclaimed. “Oh no! What are you saying? That awful little negress! Look, and this is just between us, I can lower myself to make certain concessions, but not that far. People who come from nothing. Upstarts made rich by trickery! They are without manners, they looked the other way when the Cercle was pillaged, our Cercle founded by my poor husband, that once opened its doors only to the cream of society! They have turned it into their barracks and as we speak their filthy muddy feet soil our carpets and their armed rear ends are wedged in our armchairs! … Oh! I never thought you’d suggest such a thing, Claire.”

She’s literally suffocating.

“And yet you receive the commandant in your home,” I said to her.

She cast a worried glance at the door and lowered her voice:

“I never invited him,” she confided, “he came on his own. They are shockingly shameless.”

She is wearing a long-sleeved gray dress that falls to her boots. She takes a few small steps, clutches the cameo dangling on her chest at the end of a long chain, raises her head toward the French ancestor who stares back at her sternly and, changing the subject, says:

“I’d rather not do the display at all!”

She tidies her bun of white hair, pinning it atop her pretty and distinguished face, and changes the subject:

“I have heard from Frantz,” she informs me. “There’s a chance he will come visit me soon. I am sorry he didn’t marry you, believe me, because I’m somewhat afraid of this foreigner. Even though I have traveled, it’s surprising how provincial I am still. I’m at home only in my element … He seemed to find you charming, and that you were, my girl, that you were.”

She talks about me as if I were dead.

“Do you know my son is becoming a leading expert in the medical profession? And with his marriage to Mademoiselle Dechantre, he won’t have any trouble establishing himself in France.”

She struts, straightens her shawl and hands me a photo:

“Look how pretty she is,” she tells me.

She is indeed pretty, and much younger than I.

“So how are things at home with Félicia’s husband?” She adds, “I find him a bit … distant … a bit … strange …”

“Jean Luze is a perfect husband,” I answer dryly.
“Take it easy! So quick to get your knickers in a knot when it comes to him! In any case, he will give Félicia beautiful children ... I think of your parents ... This match would have made them so happy. I hope Annette will also make a match worthy of the name she carries.”

And passing as usual from one thought to another:

“Any news from poor Dora Soubiran?” she asks point-blank. “Seems like they maimed her. Have you seen her? I’m still waiting for things to settle down. Eugénie Duclan has seen her. In secret, but she did see her. She has nothing left down there ... It must have been awful. She told Eugénie she saw her own flesh fly as Calédu whipped her, lying on her back, legs spread open, held down by four prisoners, four filthy beggars to whom he then offered her ... I’m seventy-five years old. I have seen revolutionaries walk into this town, bandits; I’ve witnessed bloody battles, lived through civil war, but never, you hear me, never have I felt as evil and foul a curse hovering over this town as I feel it today ...”

From the house next door, a plaintive voice swells, then cries out with effort. I prick up my ears to listen.

“It’s Jacques Marti,” she tells me, abruptly interrupting herself. “He’s been quite delirious since yesterday.”

“Hot, so hot, I’m burning up,” the voice intones. “God has opened the gates of hell upon us. Flames pour from the sky and Satan is among us. Beware! oh my brothers ...”

“Shh ... Be quiet,” whispers another voice. “People will hear you.”

The madman cries out.

“I see Satan, I see him, there he is, right there in front of me, spitting fire. So hot! I’m burning!”

“Bah!” Mme Camuse sighs, adjusting the shawl around her thin shoulders, “he’s hot, I’m cold. It’s a matter of age and temperament. Poor Joël! He’s been trying to calm him since yesterday but it’s no use. It’s hard to have to take care of a madman at his age.”

She stares at the door, suddenly afraid:

“I hope Jacques’ words won’t be misconstrued,” she whispers to me.

She shivers and wraps her arms around her chest.

A dull, rhythmic thumping resounds from above.

“They’re cutting down the trees,” says Mme Camuse again. “Listen to the sound of the axes.”

“Bam, bam, bam!” screams the madman. “Satan is knocking at the town gate. Bam, bam, bam! ...”

“Shh ...” Joël says to his brother.

I leave Mme Camuse. In the street, I run into Calédu. He greets me but I pass without turning my head, haughty, contemptuous, pretending not to see him. Nothing escapes me, though: not the beggars clinging to him, nor their pleas, nor the kicks he gives them to make them let go, nor their reproachful faces, the hatred in the eyes of one decrepit old man shivering feverishly by the gutter.

I feel like getting a new dress. I feel like being beautiful for the Feast of the Virgin. Such things can happen to women my age, too, even to old maids. I will have Jane Bavière, our neighbor on the left, make it. It’s time I helped her—number one, out of bravado, and, number two, to annoy Félicia. I can imagine the exchange:

“You, Claire, are condoning vice,” she will tell me in a shrill and exasperating tone. “Just why did you pick her of all people? An unwed mother!”

You would think maturity has no part in our mental evolution. Jane Bavière was once a friend, and I have decided to reestablish our old ties. I have abandoned her long enough. I believe I have offered sufficient applause for our proper bourgeois nonsense. I am rising up against it now. There is nothing else to do. Is it because I think that she, too, has had her share of bad luck? No matter, when I am with her, I can relax. I am not yet able to confide in her, but what she has confided about herself, with a spontaneity I envy, is a most meaningful lesson about life. She is as serene as Félicia, just as happy. And I had thought that anxiety, suspicion, and bitterness were the wages of scandal.

“Criminal!” Eugénie Duclan once yelled at her. “You have murdered your mother and father.”

Her son is grown up and already ten.

“And Jane?” Mme Camuse asks again without pity. “Still living in sin, is she?”

I wish I had Jane Bavière’s courage. A kid would bring some purpose to my life. A kid would offer solace for everything. At least, that’s what I think. After all, if I reached this goal, wouldn’t I be disappointed? Is that really what I most aspire to? Aren’t I fooling myself by gnawing on my own unhappiness, on this idea that I’m a failure?
I’m too afraid of scandal to try it. I’m afraid of others and this fear is the guarantee of my so-called honesty. I prefer to indulge in artificial joys. I nurse a doll in secret. I play mommy, at my age. I try to fill my existence with this effigy that smells of glue. I convince myself that I love her and sprinkle her with cologne and powder to better fool myself. I bought her a little bottle. Ah! The ploys I invented to avoid Annette’s suspicions! She sold me the doll herself, at the Syrian’s, and the toy bottle too.

“Who is it for?” she asked me.

“For a goddaughter in Port-au-Prince. You don’t know her.”

“Who will deliver it?”

“Someone.”

I’m no chatterbox. She contents herself with my monosyllabic answers and keeps quiet.

Shut in my room, I hold Caroline tight. I am sometimes tempted to breastfeed her. How I wish milk would flow from my breast! I make her lie next to me and caress her dead black hair. I want her to be demanding, I want her to need me. Only small children can really need help and affection. That’s why we are moved by those who resemble them. I wonder if Jean Luze is capable of crying.

He takes his seat at the table again and looks at Annette with indifference. She’s lost her charm and has become forlorn, when she was always so cheerful. She shows her despondence, it’s awkward. In the evening, Félicia makes an appearance on her husband’s arm.

“Good evening, Annette,” she says, simply.

“Good evening, Félicia.”

There is no doubt about it. She possesses an uncommon moral force that briefly arouses my admiration.

We eat and the conversation revolves around trivial things. We return to the topic of the Feast of the Virgin, the devotional scenes, and the procession.

“Apparently, Madame Camuse will not present a display this year,” Félicia says. “The nuns are preparing one in the entrance of their school. A manger as usual, unfortunately.”

“With a big doll lying on straw,” Annette concludes with a yawn.

Annette is neither pious nor chaste, everyone knows this and she is turning our world upside down with her makeup and her low neckline. She is much too fashionable for this narrow community. She recently pinched Father Paul’s cheek and called him a handsome old man. Fortunately, this happened at home.

Jean Luze is neither more distant nor more friendly toward her than a brother-in-law would be.

“Cigarette?”

He holds out his case. Annette’s cigarette shakes in her hand. She gets up from the table pretending that he’s not offering her a light. She gives herself away. Jean Luze’s attitude is as perfect as hers is false. She suffers and he has simply gone back to being himself.

There is a disturbing vitality in me, made even more dangerous because I’m holding it back. I am like a cunning bedbug lurking in a furniture crevice. I patiently wait to suck the blood of my prey. Jean Luze is my prey now. If he wants, for his own peace and quiet, to settle for his lukewarm marriage, I will manage to prevent him from doing so. For now, he’s on all fours trying to make it up to his wife. He immerses himself in their dull daily routine. But he’s going to get bored with it. I am going to be a great help to him in this matter and a lot more skillfully this time around. I realize there will be much to do. How he hurried back to nestle himself against Félicia’s chaste body! She is so proper, Félicia, so careful, so sensible! I imagine their embrace. I know all there is to know about perfect coitus in theory. I know several pages from Lady Chatterley’s Lover by heart. The book does not leave my nightstand: it’s my aphrodisiac.

Despite the cataclysms, my eyes see the immutable dawn, sky and sea in their colorful splendor. Indifferent to our misfortunes, a merrymaking sky parades in the soft colors of daybreak, and far away the sea, calm, serene, sprawls like a silvery blue sheet of oil. I breathe them in, absorb them with brand-new pleasure, a pleasure so childish it treacherously takes me back to the past. I hear my father’s voice echoing like a drum, the neighing of horses. I hear my mother talking and I hear Augustine, whom my mother has beaten, crying. I hear the piano under my clumsy
fingers and my teacher, Mlle Verduré, yelling: “From the top, Claire, take it from the top!” The streets are cheerful. On the doorsteps, groups of men gather. Smoking the day’s first cigar, they share the political news gleaned from Port-au-Prince. The doors of the stores are open. European boats unload their merchandise on the pier, which teems with people of all classes. Vendors walk under our windows calling for their customers. “Madame Clamont,” they say, “I’ve got them here, your rice and beans, chickens and vegetables.” And my mother comes downstairs, leaning on Augustine, and sits on the porch to haggle. What has happened to Mme Bavière’s gorgeous store? And Duclan’s, where they sold French wines, liqueurs and boxes of chocolate of the best French brands? Ruined. One after the other, they went bankrupt. And the Syrians, like vultures, rushed for their remains and bought them up. They’re holding up well, the Syrians. They can compete with Haitians in any weather. “Unfair competition!” my raving father used to insist. “They’ve taken shelter under the wing of the European powers to benefit from their protection …”

“Down with the Syrians! Death to the Syrians,” added Dr. Audier and the other merchants. But it wasn’t the Syrians’ fault if my father lost his coffee fields before his death. His ruin can be chalked up to his fixation on becoming head of state someday. His lands were sold, piece by piece, to pay for ten years of campaigns. And my mother, who watched our dowries fall into the hands of his party activists, would weep in feeble protest.

There are people who let a fortune slip through their fingers and it’s usually not because they are particularly generous. Did he do the right thing, my father, in playing the millionaire in order to stun the masses while satisfying his ambition? It’s all coming back … But I am keeping memory at bay. I could yield to it, to be sure. But for now, I am engrossed only with the present.

Each morning, the Syrians open their stores to reveal displays that have been restocked by the American freighter. Their customers are Calédu, M. Long, the prefect, the mayor, and the few of us who can still afford the luxury of a few ells of fabric. M. Long’s boat supplies them duty-free, people say, because the inspectors have been bought. What’s more, they have also acquired American citizenship, though they barely speak a word of English. “It’s a gang!” Dr. Audier protests, but more and more weakly. With eagle-beak noses pointing from their crafty faces, the “Arabs,” as the common people call them, smile and take root in the country. Jacques Marti predicts their departure.

“The Syrians will throw their sacks on their backs and start on foot for their homeland. Famine is upon us,” he screams, while pacing down the street in big off-balance steps. “We will walk on our knees and we will eat the rocks on the road. Satan rules the town and God has turned his face from us …”

Calédu is getting annoyed. Mme Camuse is right. He will soon accuse Jacques of subversive activity and will have him locked up. He doesn’t like preachers of misfortune and this one is playing his part as only a madman can.

People quickly peer through their blinds. Everything here happens on the sly. We hide even when we speak.

“Go on, go on, Jacques,” they hiss softly, “tell us about Satan, tell us what he’s like.”

And to their great joy he screams and gesticulates:

“Big, tall, black, with horns, enormous horns, that’s how he is. You be careful, brothers!”

Laughing children surround him.

“Jacques! Jacques!” they cry, throwing stones at him, “are you crazy? Tell us if you’re crazy …”

He runs straight to the police station, and Violette, a prostitute from the stinking back alley, blocks his way.

“Go home,” she advises softly. “That’s better now.”

She takes his hand and he lets her. He seems very happy to walk arm in arm with her.

“Hey there,” Mme Potiron cries out and smacks her rear, “you found yourself a woman, business is good!”

Her whole body shakes in vulgar laughter.

Behind the blinds of my window, I stare at Violette. She is young. She is beautiful. She is free. She spits on us and she is right. I would switch places with her right now.

Leaves are falling from the trees, dancing and swirling in the air before landing flat on the ground. Insomnia has gotten me used to the living breath of the night. I distinguish the sound of each insect or lizard, the movement of each star, every quiver of the earth. I am naked in my bed, damp with sweat, palpitating with desire. A man’s arms hold my body prisoner. He takes me. Is it possible that, a moment later, nothing of this remains? Not a scrap of memory. Oh! The loneliness of suffering! I get dressed and I tiptoe to Annette’s room. She is weeping in the dark. I knock. A voice hoarse from weeping asks who it is. I answer and she opens. I’m no trouble, I am the big dolt, life
has rolled off my back without leaving a trace. She starts weeping again in my presence, then says to me:

“What do you want?”

I look at her without a word, then she throws herself on my shoulder.

“If you knew, Claire …”

Be quiet! Don’t waste breath talking. I was telling her in my mind. I know what you feel and I share it. The soul is cumbersome. It wants to meddle in everything. It creates bonds to torture us. Memories are ghosts, at least those that mark us. You are like a flower battered by the wind. I want it to carry away your vulgar joys and lift you into a great deadly whirlwind …

“I want to die! I want to die!” she suddenly cries out, with a passion that stuns her.

She rests her haggard, questioning eyes on me. My words have come out of her mouth. How tired she looks. How this love is wearing her out! Her morale is so weak! Jean Luze is not the man for her. The feeling he inspires in her is so strong that she is wasting away. Will she die of it? Too bad! I need her as an intermediary. I am old. I must smell rancid down there, clutching this starving, virgin sex between my legs.

Cry with me. It won’t last long, you’ll see. Trust your charms. You’ve got everything you need to seduce him. You can pierce his armor. He’s proved that much to you. You have to persevere. You are experienced. At fifteen you had a mind of your own, and you were already scrambling for a male. You stole my first fruits. I am going to torture you, torture you both, until I hear you beg for mercy …

“It’s your birthday next month. I will throw a little party. Invite anyone you want …”

“You’re talking to me as if I were a kid,” she protests.

My offer seems childish, but my goal, hardly. I want Annette to get her act together again, I want her to dance and laugh before Jean Luze’s very eyes. I will bring her to the limit of what she can endure. Suffering does not move, it provokes pity or annoys. I, usually so stingy, have now made up my mind to blow a lot of money on this party.

Morning, noon and night, the couple is with us, more united than ever. Félicia revives as her stomach grows more deformed. She is as serene as a statue. Jean Luze eats with a healthy appetite. He doesn’t smoke at the dinner table anymore under the pretext that the smell of tobacco bothers his wife.

“Pregnancy suits you nicely,” he tells her with a kiss.

Each time he shows her affection in my presence, I hate her for settling so easily for this bourgeois, measured feeling she inspires in him.

I swear I will shake him out of its tepid indifference. I will light his fuse. It won’t be too long. I will melt his ice. He looks at us too sweetly, all smiles. I like to see that dimple dig into his chin and his lips curl above his teeth.

The church bells have been ringing incessantly since morning. There I am, dressed as a Daughter of Mary. I look like a nun in the dress Jane Bavière made for me. I can’t reproach her; the worker always tries to please the master. I am the one who insisted on the long sleeves and the high collar. I look rather good, compared to the others in the procession. What a hideous cohort of shriveled old maids! All the same, I am the best among them. All old maids stand out. At least, the real ones do. Not those who, like me, were once torches and have become embers. The tangled webs of veins on their limbs, their pursed lips and darting glances, give them away. The dissatisfaction in their faces is unmistakable. Looking at them, I can’t feel so proud of my part, though I am the leading lady in this spectacle. This pious banner seems heavy to bear. Children’s heads crowned in white are moving in front of me; eyes cast down, they throw handfuls of flowers from their baskets. All the balconies are decorated, and garlands of artificial flowers made by the nuns sway slowly between the trees in the street. This is a festival for the young in which we should not be taking part. The Virgin, radiant, resting on a pedestal carried by four young men, is proof of this. We belong in the ranks of penitents. In the procession, we stand out like grumpy owls in a flock of turtledoves. This is the last time in my life that I will make such a spectacle of myself. We sing Father Paul’s choral arrangement while we wait. “May God above shower us with the goodly rain of His sweet blessing and may His Holy Name be blessed.” Up above, the blows of axes rain upon the trees. It seems to lend rhythm to our hymn. The prefect and the mayor, clad in their gray wool suits, sweating blood and water, watch the procession go by and cross themselves before the Holy Sacrament. Calédu and M. Long stand outside the door of the Cercle. The priest blesses them all. Jacques the madman comes running.

“The gates of hell have opened their mouth to devour you,” he screams, flailing. “God has cursed us. He has
opened the gates of hell upon us …”

The singing dies down. Calédu frowns. He brings a whistle to his mouth, and Jacques the madman screams again, pointing at him.

“Look out, Father, a demon!”

Calédu rushes up and grabs him by the collar. Face contorted in hate, he starts slapping him.

“Quiet, you!”

“Satan!” Jacques yells.

Then Calédu pulls his revolver from his belt and shoots the lunatic point-blank. Jacques falls to his knees without a protest.

The procession stops abruptly. In the silence, you can only hear the crying of the children in the first row. Some of the nuns clutch their rosaries in their shaking hands. Others clench them convulsively. We are standing, bodies stiff in a kind of hypnotic trance. But Jacques, red with blood, begins to crawl toward us, scraping the earth with his nails. Holding his head up, he moves slowly, painfully Dr. Audier, sweat pouring down his face, takes a step toward him, but a bullet whistling near his feet nails him to the ground, terrified.

The pharmacist twirls his hat in his hands mechanically. He spins it faster and faster as if his movements are not in his control. The women have hidden their faces in their kerchiefs; the nuns, eyes turned to heaven, drone a Pater Noster. The beggars lying on the ground are watching the scene without moving.

I see Joël Marti turn his head to the right and to the left, as if looking for help. With bulging eyes, he points at his brother, who has just collapsed face-first on the ground. He wants to go to him. Someone holds him back.


He steps back, smoking gun in his fist, as we remain frozen in place.

Father Paul then whispers something to the choir children, and in an instant, he is surrounded by a halo of incense. Raising the monstrance over his head, framed by the choir children, he walks up to Calédu.

“And now,” he says, “I ask for your permission to perform my priestly duties.”

The buzz of prayer becomes more intense.

Still walking backward, the commandant makes an impatient movement with his left hand to indicate his total indifference, and disappears around the corner.

This was the signal for a mad dash. The trembling nuns gathered their students. Men, women, and children rushed home. Dr. Audier and his wife followed me into our living room. We then told the entire story to Jean Luze and Félicia, whom we had awakened from their nap.

Crowding behind partly opened blinds, we watched Joël Marti, who was weeping over the body.

Jean Luze glanced at Dr. Audier’s sweaty face.

“Are you sure he is dead?” he asked. “That there is nothing more that can be done?”

“I will find out later.”

“Later!” Jean Luze cried out, “later indeed, while you stay here trembling with fear!”

“Hush! Calm down, dear,” Félicia said softly.

“It’s none of my business. It’s not up to me to stand up to your district commandant. This is your home, not mine. It is not the responsibility of a passing stranger to reform a place where he does not belong.”

He raised his voice and we trembled even more.

“Hush!” Dr. Audier said in his turn, with a glance to the porch.

“You have to protest, respond to this with a demonstration, face the danger together. They would never destroy an entire town. These murders, these tortures, are meant to terrorize you. But let one person here lead an uprising and the other side will tremble …”

“You don’t understand anything,” Dr. Audier said laconically, softly resting his trembling hand on Jean Luze’s arm.

Mme Audier was weeping and blowing her nose loudly.

Jean Luze opened the door of the living room with a gesture of unconcealed anger and went out. We saw him help Joël Marti carry Jacques’ body away, holding the feet awkwardly.
Jacques is dead. He was buried today. A few poets came out of their holes and carried his coffin to the cemetery in silence, heads lowered. Policemen and beggars were posted along the route. Violette followed the cortège with some flowers in her arms. As for the others, myself among them, we stayed behind locked doors, sitting quietly at home.

Jean Luze shows contempt in his eyes and in his smile. He can’t forgive our cowardice, reproaching us for it in every visible way. Each expression is a slap in our faces.

“Are you really that afraid to die?” he asked that evening of Dr. Audier, who accepts these insults in the detached manner of an experienced old man putting up with an impetuous son.

“You still haven’t understood a thing,” the doctor replied. “Fear is a vice that takes root once it is cultivated. It takes time to recover from it.”

Jean Luze shrugged.

“Who can boast that he has never been afraid?” he shot back at Audier. “At least you have been spared from war. As for me, I bear its mark on my body and soul forever.”

His eyes darkened. He was reliving the pieces of his life he preferred to keep to himself.

“But don’t you find hatred between compatriots to be even more horrid?” the doctor asked softly.

“What do you think France went through in 1789?” he retorted. “And let me stop you before you say that our cutthroats fought for an idea, for an ideal. What does all your suffering amount to? Maybe the goal escapes me. That’s why I’m afraid to put myself forward, to side with one party against another. Where does this hatred between you come from?”

“It is the end result of a long sequence of historical facts,” Dr. Audier declared, combing a hand through his white silky hair. “The hatred became swollen and toxic, and had to be punctured in the end like an abscess.”

“Without a scalpel?”

“You always need a scalpel to drain an abscess,” Dr. Audier added. “I am seventy years old and I have lived through plenty of things in this country. Our past is full of rebellions, we have seen days beyond description during which everyone, like the musketeers of old, demanded revenge for the least insult. Weapons were lightly drawn and men braved death just as lightly. I am more or less the last man of a dead generation. Maybe we deserve what we are going through.”

“Do you feel so guilty that you would just casually absolve those who persecute you?” Jean Luze asked.

“My dear young man, I have enough experience to know when to keep quiet and to keep the full range of my thoughts to myself.”

“Forgive me, I did not mean to pry”

“Don’t apologize. You are not so much curious about what I think, but about what could have brought us to hang our heads and resign ourselves.”

He opened the door of the living room and studied the street.

“Look!” he said. “Calédu is rounding up the poets. They dared pay their respects to an executed suspect and he’s using the occasion to get these so-called conspirators. Well, and take a look here: Monsieur Long is standing in front of his factory. He’s watching as if he were a mere spectator. And yet I wouldn’t be surprised if he was intimately involved.”

“Aren’t you exaggerating somewhat?” Jean Luze asked, skeptical.

“Look at things a bit more carefully and I am sure you’ll see I’m right,” Audier answered.

Félicia smiled, more serene than ever.

“He’s crazy,” she later explained to her husband, “his wife said so. In times like these, many of us need a scapegoat to excuse our own cowardice. The only guilty ones are these blacks who have been sent here to make us submit. They only associate with Monsieur Long because they hope to make money. As if money were everything!”

“Oh my wife, my dear wife,” Jean Luze said, “you are such a sectarian!”

“What do you expect?” she said to him, “you can’t snap your fingers and erase the mark of your entire upbringing.”

Down at the very end of Grand-rue, in that miserable back alley full of old rickety shacks, mothers wept as they watched their sons being handcuffed.

The days went by. The people’s misery grew. To each his own lot. Selfishness becomes our way of life. We wallow
in cowardice and resignation. Here I am, more than ever in love with my sister’s husband, and I want to think of nothing else but this love. It is turning into my refuge, my consolation. Félicia is again so sure of herself, so confident in her man, that she embraced Annette on her birthday. They gave her perfume and rice powder. Drench yourself in perfume and powder, I’m not afraid of anything anymore, Jean Luze’s smile seems to say. We’ll see.

These last few days, I have seen Annette lie in wait for him in vain, at the top of the stairs, in the living room, by the door of her room. He has managed to foil her schemes without even noticing them. She does not know what else she can come up with to seduce him. Yesterday, she came out of her bedroom in a bathing suit she made herself and, under the pretext that she was unable to close the bra, she placed herself in Jean Luze’s capable hands. She met with a friendly tap on the shoulder and the following words:

“There you go!” was the entire outcome.

I hated him at that moment. I felt as if all this trouble was for nothing.

He is more elusive than ever. His attitude is outrageous by its very excess of correctness. You had me once, but I won’t fall back in your nets, he wants Annette to understand. This is neither a game nor flirtation on his part. In one fell swoop, he has swept memory clean. What is desire, then, if it cannot be rekindled once it’s been satisfied? How would I handle being pushed away? Was life trying to spare me until now by keeping me away from these kinds of disappointing realities? Am I provoking it by desperately throwing myself into an adventure with no exit? My feelings for this man have taken so much space in my life that I can’t free myself from them. Nothing seems to move him. It could make a woman lose her mind. Annette had Bob kiss her right before his eyes to provoke him. He gazed at them with sweet indolence, like an angel, which was worse than a slap in the face.

Bravo for Father Paul! Bravo for Eugénie Duclan! It rained yesterday. A torrential deluge that lasted four hours. The weather hasn’t improved since. Fat dirty gray clouds hang like rags in the sky. We wade through the mud puddles like pigs. The potholed streets have become ponds. The indifferent ship loads the wood piled high on the pier. Business on that end is booming. M. Long, red as a rooster, manages the operation himself. The peasants have faces like whipped dogs. They sulk and hold out their hands for their payment as they look away into the distance at the devastated hillside. Huge white patches have spread on the mountain like leprosy. Immense rocks stick out of its sides like gravestones. They stand there, dressed in union blues, barefoot, their halforts across their shoulders, faces twisted with displeasure.

“Our land is finished,” one of them says. “We cut down too many trees.”

“I said don’t do it! Don’t do it!” cries another. “We should have created a coalition and refused all offers. But black hill folk never stick together. They are weak with the white men and the bourgeois. Here comes the rain again and our land is finished. The American is getting rich and the others with him. They are all against us.”

The mayor and the prefect accompany M. Long to the office, a small building with the following inscription: LONG & CO., EXPORT CORP. This is where Jean Luze spends long days bent over paperwork. He knows all of their secrets. Senior accountant, such is his title, and he keeps track of the numbers, his handsome face bent over their books.

No one suspects him. He’s a white man. And a white man can only side with M. Long. He hears them talking. And he learns a great deal from the time spent with them.

I watch for Jean Luze from my windows. It is four and he should be returning from work. I’m holding the paper knife he gave me yesterday, saying:

“You spoil me, so I’ll spoil you too. No, it’s true, you’re a grand girl. Look at this, it’s from Mexico. It’s a dagger. One of the best. Something to remember me by.”

“Are you leaving?”

“One never knows! …”

He’s not happy. How can we possibly hold on to him? If he leaves, what will become of me? How do we change things here? For the first time in my life, I shall redouble my efforts toward the common cause. I will transform this place into the piece of paradise he has yearned for.

I’m playing my last card. Tonight is the ball in honor of Annette’s birthday, which was three days ago. For this, I have overcome my repugnance and made the most awful concession. The commandant, the mayor, the Trudors and their son Paul, who is home on vacation, will be among our guests. I think I may have shaken Calédu’s hand without
realizing it.

Many guests, Corrine Laplanche among them, were already in the living room when Annette made her entrance in a blue dress that revealed her shoulders down to her back.

In my opinion Corrine Laplanche is as distinguished as any society lady. Pretty in a tasteful, long-sleeved dress of white crêpe, she leaned toward me to say:

“I am Corrine Laplanche, Élina Jean-François’ daughter. My mother often spoke of you. You were schoolmates, I think.”

I shook her hand with a smile.

“Who is that?” Mme Camuse asked me while teasing the pleat of her black taffeta blouse.

“The daughter of a schoolmate: Élina Jean-François.”

“Jean-François! I once knew a blind man of that name who delivered our poultry and pigs. Is that the same family?”

“Yes.”

“Oh that Annette! Unbelievable! I suppose one can either give in or stay home. Cattle breeders and rastaqouères in our living rooms! Now I've seen it all …”

The remark conjured up an Annette I’d never before imagined, a brave rock-slinger leaping over the barricades with the agility of youth.

This is what I thought as I looked at them: Mme Audier, Mme Camuse, Eugénie Duclan were gathered near the table to better stuff themselves with cakes. Augustine, white apron around her plaid dress, came and went among the guests, eyes lowered, anonymous and ageless. The young people chatted and danced, the girls in long dresses, the men in dark suits with roses in the buttonholes. Calédu stood out in his khaki uniform. Where was he concealing his weapons? In my little corner I felt frightfully old and out of fashion, and I tried with terrible force of will to forget myself and identify myself wholly with Annette. I saw her offering her cheeks for friends to kiss, receiving presents, drinking Rum Russians. She was only doing it for him. This was exactly what I wanted from her. He sat beside Félicia on the sofa smoking. She was rapt, immersed in his affection. The harmony of their life together was there for all to see. Would they prevail? After her third rum, Annette danced with the son of the prefect, a handsome and rather elegant dandy who plastered his black cheek onto hers. With this she began flirting in a way that appeared to leave Jean Luze completely indifferent. She then danced several times with Calédu. I was astonished to see him execute the latest merengues quite gracefully I think he searched me out in the crowd, just before he approached.

“Would you care to dance, Miss Clamont?”

Why Miss? Has he really become so Americanized since keeping company with M. Long?

“Thank you, but I don’t like to dance,” I answered coldly.

“With me, you will.”

And, wrapping an authoritative arm around me, he twirled me until I was dizzy. His hands seemed to possess such prodigious strength that I felt like my whole body was locked in a vise. I tried to free myself. He tightened his grip. Our two bodies intertwined and seethed with hatred. Suddenly I stopped short and his feet awkwardly caught mine. I tore my hand from his.

“Tired?” he asked to save face.

But the look in his eyes belied the worldly smile playing on his lips, and I understood that only then had he realized the extent of my hatred for him.

“I have heard, Miss Clamont,” he whispered wickedly, “that in the old days a bloody incident took place up there on your land, on Lion Mountain. So it seems you and I both have killing on our conscience. Mine doesn’t bother me much. Does yours?”

Once again, he danced with Annette. Keeping his eyes on me, mouth against her ear, he whispered words I could not hear and the ninny listened smiling. He then danced with all of our guests, pretty and ugly alike. He seemed to pride himself on his uniform, on his position of authority, which easily opened doors no matter how tightly sealed. The worldly executioner in full! His murderer’s hands wrapped themselves around ladies’ waists, shook the hands of others. We were humoring him, hoping to be spared! I turned my eyes away so as not to betray myself, but this performance of his, shoved in my face, in my own home, had reinforced my hatred and contempt …
Toward midnight, Annette was drunk enough to demand that Jean Luze dance with her. He begged off, then, encouraged by Félicia, he accepted. Once again, there he was holding her in his arms. I focused my attention on this graceful vision and found in it a version of the hatred the commandant inspired in me. I scrutinized Jean Luze’s impassive face. Forgetting herself, Annette closed her eyes. I suddenly saw her grab his head in order to kiss him on the lips. He drew away quickly, and stared at her unsmiling:

“Are you out of your mind?” he said.
She bowed her head just as I did.

From that moment, nothing mattered to me anymore. There I was in my corner, incapable of thought, incapable of desire, half-dead with depression and despair. I saw people walking, heard them talking, all of it in a dream. Nevertheless, for a brief instant I caught Calédu’s eyes on me; I rose and left our guests for my room, double-locking the door in my rage.

I couldn’t sleep a wink. On account of what Calédu said. Who told him about us? Are we losing our pride and our solidarity to such an extent that we betray one another out of fear? Who was so indecent as to stir up the ashes of the past? To resurrect after so many years the bloody incident at Lion Mountain? Don’t they realize they are giving our enemies ammunition against us? Ammunition they will use to humiliate, shame and force us to capitulate even further. As for me, nothing will make me bow my head. I will never yield. Even if they club me, even if they torture me as they did Dora, I will hold my head high. I alone will never give in. I refuse to make my peace with this. I refuse to get used to this. I would rather stand with our old dodos and acquiesce to Mme Camuse though I dislike her behavior. Did they have to appoint such hateful and spectacularly criminal people to reform our backward little town? We’re on, Commandant! Whatever you may think, you are up against a strong opponent. Our hatred is mutual. Bless this love that imprisons me, praise be to Jean Luze the Frenchman who enthralls me so much that nothing matters apart from my love. You may be all bluster strutting about like a walking arsenal, but I’m smart enough to hide my game and look harmless to you. And therein lies my strength. I am patient, whereas you, like all fools, are impulsive. I wrap myself in the dignity of an old family line, as I nurse my serpent’s venom. You spread your cruelty, I know how to hide mine. You bite, I sting—stealthily, my eye trained by a bourgeois education, imbibed like mother’s milk, which makes me the most cunning of enemies. I wait for my moment. Because for now, love saves me from hatred.

Every evening, Annette comes home from Bob Charivi’s store more or less drunk. No matter how much I pull on the bridle, she completely escapes my control. I stopped by her room during her absence and saw a bottle of sleeping pills on her table. She drugs herself to sleep. I slosh about blindly in the darkness of my thoughts. I frighten myself. Seeking distraction, I pay a visit to Mme Camuse. I find her in bed, Eugénie Duclan by her side.

“It’s nothing,” says Mme Camuse, “a bad flu.”

At her request, I run out to get some turpentine at Charles Farus’, and we rub it on her back and chest. She then clamors for cat’s-tongue tea, recommending that I close my eyes when I pick out the three leaves to boil, as prescribed by local superstition.

“A terrible epidemic is upon us!” Eugénie Duclan sighs. “The rain will not cease. God has heeded our prayers, but the sun cannot dry our puddles. Yesterday, six children died of typhoid-malaria. There is no more medicine at the hospital and no nurses either.”

Mme Camuse shifts in her bed.

“We must pray, call upon our blessed dead to help us, our land is in agony,” she tells us.
She turns to me and takes the boiling tea.

“Claire,” she says to me, “have you been to your parents’ grave? It looks abandoned! I can forgive Félicia and Annette for neglecting it; they barely knew them, but you … the eldest daughter …”

How is this any of her business? Does she think I’m still the pushover she once knew? I kiss her and take my leave without responding.

“You’re upset with me?” she asks. “I saw you come into the world, your mother was my friend and my son once loved you. How can you forget this?”

No, I have forgotten nothing. My memories are intact but she will know nothing of them.

“I am not upset, Madame Camuse.”
Eugénie Duclan stares at me with veiled malevolence.

“You don’t look good either,” she adds. “We’re getting old, I’m afraid, you, Dora and I, without husbands, without children.”

“People say that you are still after that scruffy pharmacist,” Mme Camuse says to her. “You’re not going to marry him, are you, Eugénie? Impossible. To think that you, the daughter of Edgar Duclan, could marry the illegitimate son of a black woman and a nameless mulatto.”

“That’s better than staying an old maid,” Eugénie replies, avoiding my gaze.

Ten years she’s been hanging on to Charles Farus, a *griffe* we knew nothing about until recently. He baptized his shack “Grande Pharmacie de la Grand-Rue.” He seemed rather fond of the adjective. This is now our only pharmacy, since a fire destroyed Dr. Audier’s. With its dusty shelves, its jars stuffed with camphor and naphthalene balls, it looks, as Jean Luze once described it, like a field hospital. Charles Farus could fix it up but he refuses to do so, blaming hurricanes for having ruined him once too many times. A former usurer, he has, some say, a small fortune he keeps stashed, like old Grandet, at the bottom of a trunk, where he can count and contemplate it at his leisure. Who knows if his reputation as a rich man has not played some part in Eugénie’s decision. Also, it may be his connections. I have often seen him in the company of Calédu and the other men in charge. There was a time when his kind would never be received in our homes, so he must be gloating at the fact that a nearly destitute scion of one of our best families is now at his mercy. It’s hard to believe that Eugénie and I were once inseparable. How people do change! Not in character, because the core is immutable, but in taste. Luckily, mine has become refined with age.

Mme Camuse smirked at her with displeasure and gestured to me:

“Take these flowers,” she said. “They’re from the nuns’ altar, Father Paul offered them to me yesterday. They are still fresh, bring them to your parents. They were strict, it’s true. But look at what a perfect girl you are! And anyway, no point displeasing the dead, is there?”

I accept her flowers without thanking her and leave. The cemetery is not far. I walk there. The headstone is half buried in wild grass. I look around before throwing the flowers the way one throws a bone to a dog. Anyway, I will have the grave weeded and whitewashed so as not to invite criticism.

I turn to my doll for comfort, cradling her behind my locked door. Life has deprived me of the joys of motherhood, and a wealth of maternal love ferments within me. What crime have I committed to make me undeserving of such happiness? Maybe it’s not too late. Who wants to sleep with me? Who wants to knock me up? Free. No strings attached. No more bargaining … Well, I put on a good show. I’ll never have the courage. Besides, I am the kind of woman who does the choosing. My choice is Jean Luze. I hate my tired eyes, my first streaks of gray, and the wrinkles on my forehead. A star streaked across the sky and I wished on it. I sometimes feel like a monster. What am I running away from that I so drunkenly welcome this glimmer of love in my life? Maybe it is not merely unhappiness or my hatred for Calédu. I know that a battle has begun in me, and that, all the same, I will have to make a choice one day. What vocation calls me? How would I understand and follow the call? I am still rebellious. Just seeing Dora makes my blood boil, and not too long ago when the mayor shook my hand after mass, I almost laughed in his face.

“He is a joke, our little mayor,” Mme Camuse muttered in my ear that day. “He looks like a cheap sausage stuffed into that wool jacket. Look at the prefect’s wife! She’s got four bracelets on her fat arms and has hung a couple of chandeliers from her ears. Does she think she’s at a ball?”

She has kept her aristocratic lexicon. She’s not about to change at seventy-five. The sight of the Cercle occupied by armed beggars made her heartsick.

“They have taken over everything!” she groans. “Ah! Our good old days are really good and gone!”

There was a time when she ruled our district in high style, when she made her servants beat the drum and light the flame, when she organized cocktail parties at l’Étoile, when she presided at table opposite her late husband, who was dressed in his most elegant frock coat, when she angrily scratched out from the guest list names that were outrageously nouveau riche. Her time is no more. Annette and her peers have resigned themselves to this. Mme Camuse and Mme Audier think Annette is little more than a hussy. “A hussy,” they murmur to each other in the intimacy of their living room now sullied by the boots of Commandant Calédu and by the exceedingly shiny new shoes of the mayor and the prefect. It’s a cold war of resentment, rancor and hatred.
This morning, I brought Félicia her soup. Her belly is spilling out of her maternity blouse: a veritable sperm whale!

“Claire, my dearest,” she said to me, “Jean and I have chosen you to be godmother to our son.”

I smile and thank her. In my own fashion.

“Are you happy?”

“Of course I’m happy.”

I don’t want a child who is only a quarter mine. I want one who is completely mine. I don’t want to get attached to other people’s children. Even though life has denied me everything, I am not inclined to play the adoptive mother. I may kiss Jane’s son on his nice round cheeks but I remain detached, the door to my heart as solidly barricaded as the door to my bedroom.

Dr. Audier will be the godfather, naturally. He has served as witness to every wedding and stood godfather to every child born to the decent families, more or less. I will have a pleasant fellow godparent. A good guy, this doctor, who, despite his time in Paris, remained a classic Haitian country doctor to the core. He still forgets to tie his shoes and close his fly. Always a wet cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth; one time, by accident, some ash fell on Félicia’s belly. He’s the doctor the Luzes trusts, just as he was the one we trusted in the old days. In any case, we are hardly overwhelmed with options. And isn’t a doctor who studied in France something like a specialist? He continues to visit us every eight days, accompanied by his wife always caked in powder whiter than Pierrot. Does she still get her Antiphelic Milk by the case from Paris? No, for the French ships have deserted our ports.

“My God,” she would moan coyly, “my complexion is getting darker!” … She is all honey when she talks to the prefect and all honey with Calédu as well. “Commandant,” she once said to him, “the uniform really suits you.”

For the moment, she feels obliged to moan like a polecat over the layette of the expected newborn.

Jean Luze chats with Dr. Audier. They dredge up memories of Paris. How and when the conversation turns, I can’t say. I only hear Dr. Audier answer:

“Yes, I am taking care of Dora Soubiran just as I have taken care of all the women beaten by Calédu. I suspect we’re dealing with a sadist who is avenging himself for his impotence with women. At least that’s my suspicion, because he’s also a bitter man who may simply be punishing others for their social status. His choice of victims reveals that much.”

“Why not complain?” Jean Luze asks.

“To whom?” Audier replies. “To the people who sent him to purge this town?”

“But how is it possible that there’s nothing you can do!”

“So you still don’t get it,” Dr. Audier said with despair. “People are right to say that no matter how educated they may be, foreigners can barely understand us even if they watch how we live for a hundred years.”

“I think I’ve understood quite a few things,” Jean Luze replies smiling, “but what astonishes and disgusts me a little, I confess, is the well-behaved fatalism with which you pull down your breeches for the lash. I see around me neither revolt nor even the semblance of revolt, nothing that would show your discontent.”

“You are wrong. This region is caught in the line of terror. But maybe this is just for the time being. We Haitians have earned our independence in a way few nations can boast. We are still a very young nation. Maybe we find it normal to take the lash, as you say, from time to time. The response will come. In good time, it will come, believe me …”

“I won’t be around for that, unfortunately.”

“You”—Dr. Audier shook his finger at him—“the Export Corporation isn’t keeping you on.”

“My contract expires in three months. I’ve saved up quite a bit …”

He mops the sweat from his brow and smiles.

“I am going to lose it, I know it.”

Félicia looks at him without a word.

She will accept whatever he wishes. She, too, would follow him to the ends of the earth.

Félicia is decidedly better. I miss her illness, which provided so many excuses to intrude on their privacy. I would see Jean Luze in his pajamas, lying under the sheets, dreaming or sleepy. Once, on purpose, I opened the door of their bedroom without knocking. He was in boxer shorts.

“Hey, watch it, Claire,” he cried out with glee, “or your eyes will melt.”
And laughing, he threw on some pants.
That very day, in fact, Félicia talked to me about Annette.

“There are things that went on here,” she told me, “that my husband and I wish to keep to ourselves, Claire darling, and besides, it is useless to trouble you with such secrets … Annette worries me. The life she leads scandalizes even Jean. Because you have been a mother to her, I think it falls to you to question and advise her. Did you know she comes home every night after two?”

“She goes out with her friends, at least that’s what she tells me.”

“She gets drunk. She’s too young to lead such a life. Madame Audier, with all the tact she could muster, has told me that her reputation is compromised. If there were to be a scandal, God forbid, it would also reflect on us. Our parents left us an unblemished name, and Annette is sullying it.”

I took all of this in without adding anything. She must have thought this was more than I could handle.
So it was for fear of scandal that she has agreed to reconcile with Annette! It was for fear of scandal that she turned the page so quickly and that she tolerated the rival in her midst? It is true that we have equal title to this house and it would fall to her to leave this house, since Jean Luze has a good job. But she’s practical and she must have thought of everything: her health is fragile and she’s a bad housekeeper. Leaving the house would mean losing her housekeeper, the godmother-to-be she had planned on wringing like a sponge, the all-purpose old maid who will wipe her son’s ass while she pets her man. She’s thought things through. She is so afraid to aggravate things between her and Annette that she wants to use me as a screen. I will not be anyone’s screen. Annette is free. Let her float her own boat where she pleases. I won’t say a word to her. I’d rather lecture that hypocrite Mme Audier. No one can ever please her. She has a forked tongue that’s grown more venomous with age, though Father Paul lays the body of Christ on it once a month. A true pillar of the church, always devoted to the Holy Virgin or to Saint Jude, always airing everybody’s dirty laundry or simply inventing things to make conversation. She has always been a public menace, a seemingly harmless monster in great demand in idle circles. I have heard stories about her that are not so funny and behind closed doors my mother accused her of writing anonymous letters to cuckolded husbands to open their eyes. With Félicia, she plays the respectable woman condemning this one or the other. But a woman like her, overflowing with vitality and imagination even at sixty-five, it’s hard to see her settling only for her Jules. Or if she did settle it was only for fear of scandal.

From my room, I can hear the Creole mutterings of our Augustine, who has served the Clamonts for thirty years—the past ten of them for me, Claire the abolitionist, who claims to be restoring justice to the kingdom of this world, at least in my own modest way. I pay her, whereas she worked for my parents for free. What more can she possibly want? Perhaps she finds solace in talking to herself, but I don’t want her spittle on my dishes. We are both crabby. Does she also live without a man? What’s bothering this poor ignorant black woman from the hills? We live with daggers drawn. She is careless and I am obsessive. A character flaw in old maids—although I know that a few of us do live like pigs. I am enraged by a speck of dust. I sniff the tableware and the dishes with suspicion, something that exasperates her; I ignore her petty thefts. I am not naïve: a servant is faithful when it is in her interest.

“You’re poisoning everything,” Félicia protests when I chase mosquitoes from the nooks and corners of the house with DDT.

Like all idle women, she is a member of the live-and-let-live school of housekeeping, and thinks that everything is in order just because she’s embroidering clothes for her future child.

The truth is that tracking down dust distracts me. And what’s more, I take pride in being an impeccable housekeeper. When Jean Luze’s ash falls on the carpet, I go down on my knees to pick it up. Since his wife’s pregnancy I am the one who mends all of his clothes, and he turns to me for this more and more.

“Claire, can you sew this button, please?”

And there I am, caressing the fly of his pants where I am sewing the button. He thanks me by letting his gaze linger on me. His eyes are like precious stones in a velvet box. I will adore the wee one if he ends up looking like him, and that will be my cross, to fight a feeling I would rather suppress out of pride.

“Drink less and try to lead a decent life,” Félicia said severely to Annette this morning.

“What do you mean by a decent life?” she replied with impertinence.

“Félicia is giving you advice for your own good,” I added for good measure.
“Ah!”
Her butterfly-wing eyes flashed and she took the bottle of rum to pour herself another glass.

Jean Luze looked at her coldly, as if making an effort to conceal his disapproval, his contempt! He does not love her, it’s unmistakable. It’s true she has been acting like a little whore. Beautiful as she is, a man like him will never love her. And yet, how many love affairs he must have had! Maybe that’s what has made him choosy. All the easy conquests probably made him wary. He knows what he can expect from women. Maybe that’s why he picked the blandest of the three, the least interesting sister.

It was two in the morning and I was in deep sleep when someone knocked on my door. It was Jean Luze. Worried and distressed, he begged me to come help Félicia. She was wet with sweat and writhing in pain.

“We need Dr. Audier,” I said to him.

Jean Luze left, and in silence I put away the clothes draped on the furniture. Félicia moaned, crying and calling out to me:

“It hurts, Claire, oh how it hurts!”

A moment later, Dr. Audier, hurrying as much as his bent little feet and paunch permitted, was leaning over my sister.

“She’s in labor,” he declared to Jean Luze.

“But she’s only seven months along!” Jean Luze exclaimed without hiding his anxiety.

Audier tilted his head before responding:

“Many a powerful man was born before term!”

Jean Luze bent over his wife. He pressed her against him with infinite tenderness and wiped her brow:

“Be brave,” he said to her.

“Boil some water, Claire,” the doctor ordered me, “and have some clean linen ready.”

And turning to Jean Luze:

“You leave the room,” the doctor said softly. “She’ll hold up better if you are not here. The husband’s presence always complicates things.”

“Claire, don’t leave her,” he begged me.

“What’s going on?” Annette yelled from the landing.

“Félicia is having the baby,” Jean Luze answered.

“The baby!” she exclaimed, appalled.

I ran to the pantry to wake up Augustine. We boiled water and we took out sheets and bath towels from the armoires.

“Poor Madame Luze!” Augustine sighed. “How she suffers!”

Does she love us? Does she at least love my young sisters, who came into the world and grew up before her very eyes? In a prominent family, what is the place of a house slave who called the babies mademoiselle and conceded to their every whim for fear of being beaten? Jean Luze is more polite and respectful to her than we are.

She came and went, her black face sullen, responding to Félicia’s moans.

“She came and went, her black face sullen, responding to Félicia’s moans.

“Here, Mademoiselle Claire,” she told me, “here is the boiling water; it must be taken to Madame’s room.”

Holding Félicia’s hand, wiping her sweaty face, I felt my heart contract with bitterness: she was the one bringing Jean Luze’s son into the world.

In the living room, he and Annette were alone. That thought helped me forgive Félicia, who, instead of me, was about to bring the man I loved one of the greatest joys in his life.

The labor was turning out to be difficult. I stayed by Félicia’s bedside until six in the morning. Jean Luze was so nervous that he was not able to eat anything. Annette suddenly started acting mysteriously. I can’t tell if something’s happened between them.

Before my eyes my sister’s body was drawn and quartered. She was moaning and screaming as I patiently wiped her forehead.
“Claire! Claire!” she cried, hanging on to me.

Toward seven o’clock, she let loose an awful hoarse scream, and Dr. Audier, leaning in, cigarette at the corner of his mouth, welcomed the child onto the great mahogany bed where my mother had given birth to her three daughters in his care.

“It’s a boy” he told me.

He was so ugly I was sure I could never love him.

“And Félicia?” Jean Luze asked, opening the bedroom door.

“Everything went well,” Dr. Audier replied. “Wait a little before coming in.”

The child breathed feebly, half-purple. The doctor slapped his bottom and plunged him in warm water. He wriggled, then screamed.

“Give me some cotton, Claire,” Audier said to me. “I need a lot of cotton.”

He made him lie on a thick layer of cotton bedding and wrapped him in a blanket.

“He’s small,” he added, “keeping him warm will help.”

The news about the baby is alarming. Audier can’t promise anything. Félicia of course knows nothing. She is more serene than ever, patiently drawing milk from her swollen breasts with a pump. She got up today for the first time, doctor’s orders, and she took a few steps around the room. Jean Luze forces himself to smile for her. Fortunately, she’s noticed nothing! What a temperament! She’s stuffed with straw. She’s a scarecrow. I know this man’s every expression and can predict every reaction. How can she not sense his mortal fear? She eats with great appetite while he barely touches anything, though I myself take the trouble to prepare his favorite food. For him, Annette is as nonexistent as I am. He doesn’t even see her anymore. He lives in perpetual anguish, an anguish so overwhelming that it steals him away from me. He doesn’t even listen to music. He doesn’t care for anything. Yesterday, when he was in the living room smoking a pipe, I went in on tiptoes to put a Beethoven concerto on the turntable. He hardly listened for a minute, before getting up to worry over the baby still swaddled in cotton and more ugly than a little monkey.

Being spurned is making Annette sick. She seems to suffer as much as I do. She worries me. I forced her to live too intensely. She is not used to suffering and it has torn her apart: she looks like a madwoman in her eccentric dresses and her excessive makeup. She doesn’t eat anymore. Jean Luze doesn’t even seem to notice her absence at the dinner table. The tension is straining my nerves. Does his whole world consist of Félicia and the little runt she gave birth to?

There are guests in the living room. Eugénie Duclan and her pharmacist are among them. It so happens I have a prescription from Dr. Audier for Félicia. I give it to Charles Farus, who adjusts his glasses to decipher it. He shakes his head: no, he doesn’t have this medicine; it will have to be sent for from Port-au-Prince. *Then what’s the use of your pharmacy?* I want to scream at him. There they are, just about all of them, and all anxious to find out whether Félicia is dead or alive, how big the baby is. It’s obvious they are seeking entertainment and especially gossip. One can tell by their faces. They must be counting months, figuring out the dates. Jean Luze tries his best to be pleasant. They seem intimidated and even flattered to be shaking his hand. An inferiority complex? A foreigner has always represented the height of perfection in our eyes. He has always had the reputation of being rich, happy, knowing everything better than us. He opens our eyes on new horizons and unveils a mysterious, unknown world to us.

Eugénie Duclan offers her arm to the partly arthritic Charles Farus. Things do seem to be going swell for them. I have a feeling that soon we will see this forty-year-old sister go down the church aisle with this pharmacist, who, thanks to illness and old age, will end up using her as a nurse at the store.

“So, the news is good?” Eugénie insists.

“The news is good,” Jean Luze affirms.

“God be praised!”

“God be praised!” he acquiesces, imperturbable.

She is dressed in a starched skirt that makes her look like a puffed-up turkey. He is wearing a greenish alpaca suit and is clutching a grimy Panama hat.

“Oh for the love of God,” Jean Luze sighs after their departure. “It’s like they stepped out of a painting from
Another century."

That makes me smile.

Then, Mme Camuse comes. She disregards the doctor’s orders and walks right into the Luzes’ room without even a present in her hand.

“You! You, Félicia Clamont, my own goddaughter! I would have never thought! Madame Audier has taken it upon herself to spread the news that you got married pregnant, my girl.”

“What does it matter, godmother,” she responds, “as long as I am married?” And she exchanges a complicit little smile with her husband that would have made a saint green with envy.

Audier has reassured us. The baby will make it. He finally took him out of his cotton cocoon. Jean Luze calmed down a bit. My nerves loosened, otherwise they might have snapped.

Unfortunately, that’s when Annette decided to try to commit suicide.

That evening, when I opened her door, I found her deep in sleep, moaning as if she was in pain. I called Jean Luze and without saying anything, pointed to the empty bottle of sleeping pills. He frowned and bent over her, taking Annette’s head in his hands. Her magnificent black hair ran through his fingers unnoticed.

“What have you done? What have you done now, for God’s sake,” he cried out.

He patted her face clumsily, and then turned to me:

“I’m going to get Dr. Audier,” he told me.

He let her head fall just as clumsily and left running.

Upon his return, he stopped briefly in the living room to talk to Audier. He whispered something I didn’t hear. I then heard the doctor’s voice very clearly.

“These kinds of girls, you know, take nothing seriously; life is all theater for them.”

“Yes, but I can’t stand these cracked-up women living only by their feelings,” Jean Luze replied. “Isn’t there a way to calm them down, to fix them? Surely there must be an appropriate treatment …”

“As long as they accept treatment, yes, one can help them: nymphomania can be treated. All you need is the patient’s cooperation.”

The tone with which Dr. Audier uttered his last words was worse than an insult. He followed us into Annette’s room, took the empty bottle that Jean Luze handed to him, looked at it for a moment and then put it on the table:

“I’m going to pump her stomach,” he said.

He roughly pried her teeth open with a spoon, opened her mouth and pushed a long tube down her throat. She hiccuped, coughed up blood and then vomit.

“Help me, Claire,” he ordered.

I shook with rage and apprehension. She’s solid as a rock, I said to myself. I was looking at Jean Luze’s unhappy face and felt as if I had climbed to the blazing peaks only to crash to the ground, every bone broken.

An icy wind dried the sweat on my brow. If Annette left him cold, how can I hope to move him? I told myself. He’s strong, and the strong are without pity even toward themselves.

A man shapes his desire according to his woman, and thus loves her only as much as he respects her, I told myself in consolation. So reasoning, I quickly realized then that Annette could never have inspired anything lasting in him.

“Is she better?” he asked Dr. Audier.

“Yes, she will sleep a day or two and then she will wake up.”

The ash from his cigarette fell on Annette’s face and Jean Luze, bending over her, blew it away.

I am watching and waiting for Annette to wake up. I am sitting by her side, arms folded. My eyes don’t leave her. It’s over. Let her live her own life. I failed to reach my goal with her. I am going to play my next card. No third party this time. Unexpected confidence fills me. Slowly I feel it emerge. Is this maturity? I run my hand over my face to feel the first transformations in my features. Yes, I have changed. My moist lips are parted on a tentative decision still unclear to me. I realize my worth. Everything that has fermented in my mind over forty years—my unappeased desires, my unheard pleas, the oblivion of solitary pleasure—is rising up within me. A revolution. I feel
ready to answer to the demands of my being.

Jean is anxious again. He’s got two sick women on his hands. He knows full well that he is partly responsible for Annette’s suicide attempt. What’s going on inside him? And what’s going on inside me—I who am fully responsible? For the second time in my life and the first time in the last twenty years, I don’t want to know what’s inside me.

Annette opened her eyes two days later. She didn’t cry didn’t say a word. She took the milk on Dr. Audier’s orders and swallowed it with a grimace. Legs shaky she went to the bathroom and then got back in the bed I had remade for her.

“I don’t want anyone else but you in the room, you hear me, Claire? No one else …”

Her mournful stare inspires no remorse in me.

“Not even Jean?”

“Not even him.”

“And Dr. Audier?”

“Well, he is my doctor.”

She too has taken a decision. Maybe we took it together.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she adds with a sort of dignity, “and I took too many sleeping pills … How many days was I unconscious?”

“Two days.”

I stop Jean Luze at her door with malicious glee.

“She doesn’t want to see anyone.”

“Not even me?”

“Not even you.”

He lights a cigarette.

“Naturally, I haven’t told Félicia anything,” he tells me, “and I’m relying on your discretion. Whatever Annette’s reasons, there is no excuse for what she did. She only thinks of herself. She’s only a dirty little egoist, you hear me? The dirtiest little egoist I have ever known.”

An emptiness in me. Graves, ravines, chasms, aren’t deep enough to bury me. I lie beneath the last geological layer, at once dead and alive. No, dead, truly dead. A kind of automaton. I no longer have a soul. Is this what despair is? I can’t fool myself anymore. If I were to throw myself at him, I now know what to expect. He has made up his mind about us.

“Dirty little egoist,” he said. “Cracked-up women” … And we are indeed that, me and Annette, I know.

I’m alone in the dark cradling my doll. Her little artificial body is cold in my hands. Cold, this hair the wind has never tangled, cold, every part of her is cold, like death, like Jean Luze.

There was such wealth in my impoverishment! Back then anything that came from him was bliss. What possessed me to be demanding? Look how I am being punished! I angrily swallow my hopes and my love. There is nothing but hatred in me. Its roots spread, I feel them take hold of every part of my being. In every human being there is a blessed soul made miserable by the pursuit of happiness. All those who pray demand favor from God. But He’s tired of it all and He gets His revenge by botching His work. We are merely the rough drafts Nature cynically employs in its quest for Perfection. Tormented creatures, a frightful mixture of the monstrous and divine, thrown pell-mell into an inhospitable world to wait for death! What choice do we have? But love must protect me from myself. I am afraid of finding myself alone with all this hatred. What would happen to me if I looked it straight in the face, if I gave in to it? …

The heat of desire scalds my soulless body, all the same. A new condition for me, but little by little I will become accustomed to it. I’m burying the sentimental old maid, her dreams of love, her false and overwrought ideas about life: love is nothing but two pieces of flesh rubbing together, I conclude cynically. Is this realist definition trying to retaliate against me? That very night, for the first time I saw another man’s face over me. I felt his hands caressing
me and I heard his voice begging me, crying out with love, weeping with despair. I closed my eyes and drew him to me, a naked, big, and black athletic body I did not want to recognize.

Jean Luze is cheerful again. He’s watching Félicia breastfeed his child.

I rummage around their room, under the pretext of tidying up. I open drawers, explore their trunks, out of morbid curiosity. Hatred and jealousy have made me so vigilant that I want to penetrate into their most intimate spaces. In a fury I break the lock on one of Jean Luze’s suitcases while Félicia sleeps. I find the picture of a very young woman with big, sad, dreamy eyes who looks strikingly like Félicia. A relative of his, no doubt. Not a terribly revealing clue. Nothing. Look at me now, spying on their life in earnest.

The stars multiply, separate, and scatter. Everything comes to an end and then starts again. Suddenly, the moon’s cheerful face smiles in the naked sky. No, she’s not in the sky. She promenades between sky and earth. Alone like me. She smiles. She carries out her lunar duties with bliss. She accepts her lot. She is at peace.

I continue to take care of Félicia and the child. I am the one who bathes them, I am the one who prepares their meals. I live in their room more than in mine. Jean Luze comes and goes, uses the bathroom, changes his shirt, paying me no mind. All they talk about is Jean-Claude. They talk about that larva as if it were a human being. When Félicia says “our son,” Jean Luze looks up at her adoringly. Larva or not, for them he exists. And that’s what matters.

Mme Audier also came with a gift for Félicia. She wiggles about like an old monkey under Jean Luze’s impassive gaze.

“All is well now. Jules told me so. Isn’t that wonderful?”

She always feels the need to imply that her husband is a miracle worker.

The way her eyes are darting around, she must suspect something. She can’t contain herself any longer.

“And what about our lovely Annette? I don’t see her anymore.”

“But she’s at work right now,” I answer.

She smiles hypocritically. How has Dr. Audier managed to live with this woman for so long? And what can you expect from such a man? Despite all the respect I have for him, I can see why Jean Luze snubs him. He sets an example of caution, resignation and cowardice for the younger generation. I feel like shouting this at his wife. She is watching for Félicia’s reaction as she speaks. She talks up Annette’s beauty, mentions her flings with an angelic little attitude in contrast with her wrinkled, cunning old devil-eyes.

“She’s just a stylish girl who isn’t made for provincial life. If she didn’t make an effort of some kind, she would mildew with age! She is right to shake off her yoke …”

She laughs but her laugh rings false. One can feel how she is embittered by old age. How she must hate Annette for her youth! With her dwarfish legs, she has always looked like a vile jointed doll. Jean Luze is in the way. As long as he is there, she will hold back her venom. Is she completely tactless, or is she intentionally talking about Annette hoping to see Félicia snap? But she will not get such satisfaction. I know my sister. She will submit to torture before betraying herself. We try to wash our dirty laundry only among family. I will do my part to disappoint Mme Audier and save face. Jean Luze leaves, and she starts in on Jane Bavière.

“She’s a disgrace. She has no shame. There she is now, parading her kid right under the noses of decent folk. What a pity you were not able to attend mass Sunday! Father Paul’s sermon was clearly directed at her …”

If the things happening in this town haven’t changed this old woman, well then we are truly lost.

In any case, I can’t imagine Jane prattling about Mme Audier, watching her every move. She must not even remember that she exists: you attack your neighbor to mask your own envy, but what could Jane envy her for?

Just to shock her, I want to praise Violette, the prostitute, but I dare not. Confident I share her opinions, she calls on me as her witness. The strength of habit! I am unable to loosen my tongue and speak my mind.

Tonight, I hold a mannequin in my arms the size of Jean Luze. A mannequin so perfect it would appease Messalina’s ardor. I close my eyes, offering my naked body. My imagination rages! The hand stroking mine is his. I am taut as a bow. Gasping for air, I whisper his name. My head roils on the pillow. I am no longer seeing him but
another. Who is it? I don’t dare comprehend. Despite my efforts, a feeling of frustration lingers. I come with lassitude, with regret and remorse, as if my body disapproved of this duality.

Freedom is an inmost power. That is why society limits it. In the light of day our thoughts would make monsters and madmen of us. Even those with the most limited imagination conceal something horrifying. Our innumerable flaws are proof of our monstrously primitive origin. Rough drafts that we are. And we will remain so as long as we lack the courage to hack a path through the tangled undergrowth of life and walk with eyes fixed on the truth. The hard conclusion to an ephemeral life on the road to perfection. One can’t reach it without sacrifice and suffering. I would like to be sure that Beethoven died satisfied to have written his concertos. Without this certainty, what would be the point of the painful anxiety of a Cézanne searching for a color that escapes him? Or of the anguish of a Dostoyevsky grasping at God in the thoughts swirling within the hellish complexity of the soul? All of them proof of another life, mysterious and intangible, clamoring for its share of immortality. Each of us must find within ourselves the possibility to meet such demands. It is a matter of will and action. Of choosing to be puppets or to be human beings. As for me, I sometimes feel I have gone off course, standing for years in front of a door that would not open for me and that I was afraid to force. Afraid perhaps out of sheer terror of facing the truth. When the time comes to follow my own path, I lose my nerve. Oh, what wouldn’t I give to seize the essential thread of my thought once and for all! Something I can’t define is rising from my innermost being in short-lived flashes. And here I am, my hands open and more empty than ever.

Life continues in its monotonous and petty course. Fortunately, I carry within me a world quite different from the one I live in. I have even broken with Annette. Her mediocre taste repels me. I aspire to find some kind of happiness beyond myself. Now I want our fates to be independent of each other. I don’t like this boy who paws her in the evening on the veranda, this Paul Trudor who’s been after her since the ball.

“She’s about to make a bad match,” Félicia confessed to me warily. “Try and speak to her.”

And why should I be against it, personally? He’s the man she needs. He’ll whittle away until her fire dies down. I hear Annette laughing. Her old waterfall of laughter. It’s over, Jean Luze will never be able to turn her head again. She brushes right past him, undulating in her tight skirt, and blows a mouthful of smoke in his face.

“You know,” she says to him, “I can’t make up my mind about your son; he’s so small that I can’t tell whether he’s handsome or ugly.”

Jean Luze laughs. He shakes Paul Trudor’s hand and watches them as they leave, entwined around each other …

I can’t help it, I like his reactions. Even looking at him through others’ eyes, he does not disappoint me. Or maybe I can’t be objective when it comes to him. I know passion blinds, that one lends people and things whatever color one wishes. That’s how one day I got it into my head to water a pretty plant Annette had brought back from Bob Charivi’s, marveling at how it seemed to revive with cool water. I only realized my idiocy when I heard my sister laughing because the plant was in fact artificial.

“No doubt my eyesight is going,” was the excuse I tried to make.

By what miracle had I seen this plant sparkle at the touch of water? Ideas are powerful, mysteriously so. Doesn’t everything, good and bad, have its own smell? I have always compared people to pure or rancid things, depending on what I associate them with. I have to admit that when it comes to Jean Luze the comparisons are more and more flattering Temperaments made of whole cloth displease me. I don’t like the born killer or the long-suffering saint. There is both violence and gentleness in this man, strength and weakness. Could he, frail and pure as he is, appease this swamp of desires that at times reduces me to a sordid little beast?

This morning, Annette announced her plans to marry.

“What?” Félicia cried out, but caught herself quickly. “I congratulate you, Annette,” she added, lowering her eyes.

“Good for you,” Jean Luze said simply.

“Do you like Paul?”

“You’re marrying him, not me, right?”

His tone seemed equivocal, as if he was nursing some rancor. Or is he, like us, simply unhappy about this match?

“Claire,” Annette told me afterward, “get ready to spend a tidy sum. What I want is a really beautiful lace dress. And you, Jean, what will you give me? At the store there is a gold bracelet I like.”
“It’s yours,” he replied simply. “Find a way to order my trousseau from another town. Even the Syrian stores are going bankrupt here and all you can find is junk,” she added.

“Monsieur Trudor,” Jean Luze suggested enigmatically, “travels often enough to Port-au-Prince. Surely he could do a favor for his future daughter-in-law.”

“Now, that’s a terrific idea,” Annette replied.

Félicia waited for Annette to leave, then looking irate she said to me:

“A black man! A black man in our family. And one of the lowest sort! Can you believe this?”

“My God!” Jean Luze said, stroking her hair indulgently, “there is no need to get worked up about this.”

“It’s not so much the color of his skin that I mind, but his vulgarity and especially his father,” she stammered, a little ashamed of herself.

The wedding preparations have turned the house upside down. Annette comes in from time to time with lingerie that she displays on the dining room table for us to admire: bras, nightgowns, slips, nothing is left out. And Jean Luze must give his opinion. He knows about such things, she insists, he’s traveled a great deal.

She opens her arms, buoyant and charming. “Oh, if only I could go away, far, far away!”

She leans toward Jean Luze. “Tell us some stories,” she begs him. “What was your life like? What did you used to do? You must have been with so many women …”

He gets up. A little too abruptly.

“I don’t like telling stories,” he said coldly, “and I never had much time to carry on with women …”

He walks away. I look at Félicia. Her eyes follow him with concern.

“He never talks about his past,” she says slowly, “never …”

“He never talks about his past,” she says slowly, “never …”

“Not even to you?” Annette asks.

“Not even to me.”

She gets up.

He has confided in me though. Does he trust me so much that he would honor me with secrets he keeps from his wife? Or is it that he can let himself go with an old maid, telling her snippets of his life from time to time precisely to spare the one he loves, to keep her away from what’s past in order to preserve present love and future joys for her? Too bad! I will still have secrets to share with him, a painful, miserable past that I will help him bear. How I wish I could be sure he has never really confided in Félicia …

The baby is still quite ugly. He snores softly in his crib. Félicia fusses over him like a mother hen. She would hide him under her wings if she had any. Since his arrival she has never trusted me with him. On the other hand, I’m the one who washes the bottles and who keeps track of feedings. I have always had a supporting role in life. I resign myself to it more and more poorly. I will never love this kid. He is so small I have trouble believing he will ever grow up. He’s all phlegm. I have no desire to take him in my arms. His nose is always clogged with mucus and his skin is still peeling.

“My beautiful darling,” his mother whispers to him, “my cutie!”

It’s started again. This morning, Calédu bludgeoned several peasants. He’s furious. I watched the whole scene from behind my shutters. Other eyes in the neighborhood were spying too. I saw curtains moved by trembling hands, eyes glowing behind other blinds; I heard whispering to the right, to the left, and piercing the whispering at almost regular intervals, Calédu’s swearing, the peasants’ cries of pain and protest: they went on strike against M. Long to demand a better price for their wood. In response M. Long unloaded an electric saw from the boat docked in the harbor for the past two hours, and the commandant made the peasants haul it themselves. It was taking too much time to chop the trees down with axes, and M. Long was in a hurry to buy all of the mountain wood at the price he had fixed. One of the peasants kept talking despite the blows:
“Don’t give in!” he yelled. “Hang on, and if I die, don’t forget you must stick together.”

He was taken to the prison dying …

I clutch my doll against my chest. Alone in the dark, I gaze at the moon and attempt a smile. Desire is fading. I feel purified. I hear the church clock chime the hour. Another sleepless night washes away and the day rises without pity and lines up behind the other days of my life. My wrinkles deepen and my features wilt. Old age is coming soon. Oh, I want to live, to live before it’s too late! Suddenly, I am starving for tenderness more than ever. My own is being wasted and I would like to give it to someone. I open the window. Dawn rises fragrant with the night sap oozing from the trees. I imagine Jean Luze lying next to Félicia. She sleeps with her back to him. He is alone like me. Alone with his memories and the heavy past he drags after him like a ball and chain. I see him. He is thinking, one hand behind his head, the other twisting a pajama button. I’m wrong, he’s in the living room. His favorite melody reaches me, muted. He is with Beethoven. Why did he flee his bedroom? What comfort does this music bring him? What’s going on inside him? I open my door carefully. He is there in his bathrobe, head in his arms, bent by what pain I don’t know. I gently close my door again and go to the window: another man is walking in the street, his face turned toward my house. A lit cigarette betrays the jerky movements of his hand. Who is this man watching?

This solitary patrol beneath my window reveals either love or hate.

Today Jean Luze’s brow is lined with concern. He smokes endlessly and walks up and down the dining room. We are alone. Félicia is in her room and Annette has not come home yet. I steal a glance at him but can’t bring myself to question him. Meanwhile, he suffers, I know it. He stops in front of me, looks at me for a second and draws a long puff from his cigarette.

“You know what Monsieur Long suggested to me yesterday?” he said. “No, it’s loathsome. He wanted me to doctor the books so that he could prove he paid the peasants three times more for the wood than he had. Naturally, I would get my cut. It’s really a gang and the Syrians are in on it too. I saw proof of this recently …”

He seems beside himself.

“I may be stupid,” he adds, “but I can’t compromise, I refuse to get rich that way. Maybe I’m old-fashioned, I see that now. After all, robbery and exploitation are the rule these days. Monsieur Long chose a foreigner as his accountant. He knows full well why. Because, after all, how is this any of my business, he must tell himself. But he forgets that a man, no matter where he is, takes his ideas and convictions with him. I slaved hard all my life. I’ve never had to get involved in any racket. That’s more than I can bear. By working for Monsieur Long, I feel I’m committing a dishonest act against you. An American friend offered me this position and I accepted it. Simple as that. You think you’ve seen it all and then you see this kind of corruption and realize you don’t know anything about life.”

“Quit, Monsieur Long,” I said to him very simply.

“Do you want me to live here at your expense? Do you think that could be a solution for me? No, the only thing I can imagine is leaving. I’m waiting for my contract to expire before talking to Félicia. She’s so fragile, so emotional!”

He gets up and looks at his watch:

“It’s already six o’clock! Excuse me, Claire, I have to get dressed, and thanks for being a friend to me …”

I didn’t have the strength to throw myself in his arms to confess my love. What he had just said about Félicia held me back. It’s that naïve, childish, delicate side of her that he must love. For him, I’m the eldest, the experienced woman who has made her choice, who didn’t marry in order to remain independent. He would never believe that I have suffered so much from being this way that I now doubt myself. He comes to me like I am a sister, he opens his heart, what more can I ask for? If only he knew that my experiences are merely secondhand, if only he knew that romantic love would make me melt! What would he do then? Can he really think there have been men in my life? Having seen how Annette lives her life, can he even imagine that other women have grown old without ever having had a single affair, traumatized and shriveled? He talks about himself and I keep quiet. All I have ever known how to do is keep quiet.

“Augustine!” I shouted to take my unhappiness out on someone, “what are you waiting for, set the table!”

“I won’t stay in this hole,” Annette blurted out this morning. “I will leave. They want to stop Paul from marrying me. They’re telling him all kinds of stories about me. The biggest cowards among them are sending him anonymous
letters. As if they had nothing better to do. But he will marry me, I swear …”

She is reaping the nastiness she has sown. She is forced to deal with others for the first time in her life and is just appalled.

How can I convince her that only the most base people of any social class pay attention to gossip? It would be imprudent and useless.

“They don’t exist for me,” she shrieks. “Why are they meddling in my affairs?”

The young Trudor dines with us that evening. Annette is so ravishing he can hardly eat. She leads him into the living room. Later, after the Luzes retire to their room, I catch him kneeling before her. He is caressing her slowly, deeply, his mouth on her breast. Then he pushes her back and buries his head between her thighs. She moans and finally lets out a little muffled cry almost like she’s in pain. He wants to take her but she pushes him away. She pulls down her skirt impatiently and strokes his hair. He will have her only on their wedding night. She’s not as harebrained as she seems. She knows how to make a man do her bidding.

Jane Bavière made me a blue dress to wear on the day of the baptism. After all, the godmother shouldn’t look too dumpy. The baby is a month old. His limbs are growing, to my surprise. He is not as skinny as before. He bleats and stares at the ceiling with eyes that look like his father’s. I can’t stand to hear him cry. I’m a little obsessed with keeping track of his mealtimes. It’s odd. Could this be love?

Tomorrow is the baptism. The godfather has given me perfume that I hate and flowers that I put in a vase in the living room. Let’s hope he will remember to tie his laces and close his fly.

Félicia is having me arrange an elaborate menu. Really, how inconsiderate! There is only salted fish and cornmeal at the market. And of the lowest quality. The chickens are scrawny and prohibitively priced, vegetables nonexistent. Augustine returns home every market day babbling: “It’s death,” she says, “death!” It’s an expression she likes and she uses to sum up any grim situation. Too bad, we will serve them fish every which way and nothing but fish.

The Trudors, their whole clan, naturally have to be there. I also invited Mme Camuse and Father Paul. This time, Jean Luze did not add M. Long’s name to the guest list and I managed to get Annette to accept that we will exclude Calédu. Whatever happens happens!

At the table we are a fairly disparate group. Mme Camuse is very distinguished in a high-collared black dress. And Father Paul, looking dapper, coughing loudly, a real wine enthusiast and gourmand; Mme Trudor, a black woman as sinewy as her son and as her thin, short, bald husband; Félicia, whose pallor looks green (Jean-Claude has taken to crying at night), and Annette, her long black hair floating on her shoulders, radiant with health; Paul Trudor, silent and gloomy; and Jean Luze, cordial and affable, a man of the world, I must say. Paul’s sister, some kind of idiot clucking like a mother hen, is sitting next to me. She has a devious manner I don’t care for. It seems the Trudors aren’t very good at bringing up their offspring either. Mme Camuse’s demeanor has me on tenterhooks. She’s watching the Trudors too closely. Her eyes turn from the wife to the husband, from the husband to the children; stiff-lipped, she follows their every gesture: M. Trudor scrapes too hard with his spoon and his wife forgets to wipe her lips before drinking. I avoid Mme Camuse’s looks and eat in silence. Dr. Audier, seated next to his wife, is listening to Father Paul’s rather tedious stories about the old days.

“Young Haitians laugh at the past,” Dr. Audier says. “Once upon a time, the past nurtured, gave hope and courage.”

“What do you expect,” Jean Luze answers softly. “All young people have learned to look toward the future and, in the process, they strive to forget the past.”

“Is it that easy?” Father Paul asks him.

“To forget the past? Yes and no. In any case, forgetting is necessary. In a country’s history the example of others, even if they were heroes, can’t help anyone. Contexts change. The struggle becomes different …”

“You are right,” Mme Camuse butts in, more thoughtlessly than ever. “And you seem to speak from experience. However little you know our country, what is happening here must have enlightened you. You’ll be astonished to hear that, not so long ago, we lived opulently …”

“Opulently, really!” Jean Luze exclaims skeptically.

“Oh!” Annette adds suddenly. “Today I saw a beggar swallow a raw fish. It seems he caught it by diving headfirst into the sea.”
“Only some of you lived opulently,” M. Trudor emphasizes, ignoring Annette completely. “You’ll tell me that nothing has changed or that the situation has even gotten worse; all that’s happened is the roles have been reversed. As the Haitian proverb goes: ‘Today it’s the hunter’s turn, tomorrow the prey’s.’ As for the beggars, only the hurricanes are responsible, isn’t that right?”

No one responds. Jean Luze grimaces involuntarily. Mme Camuse fixes an imperceptible smile, tilting her head with a more than aristocratic bent, meant to challenge the vulgarity of the “prey” to which the prefect and his family belong.

“And they were selfless, your heroes,” Father Paul continues vehemently, following his train of thought. “I don’t mean to criticize anyone, but I once knew men worthy of admiration, who put country before coin.”

“Selfless, who isn’t?” Mme Trudor cries. “Bureaucrats are so badly paid that they can boast of serving the Republic for peanuts. Isn’t that so, Julian?”

“You don’t get things done by choosing poverty,” M. Trudor declares again. “You do it with this”—he taps his belt where a weapon is concealed—“and with some of that”—he slowly rubs his fingers together.

“Hmph!” Father Paul grumbles.

Jean Luze tactfully changes the topic of conversation. Turning to Paul, he asks if he enjoys reading.

“Yes, detective novels,” he admits frankly.

“Well, now, that’s very good,” Mme Camuse nods with a mocking smile.

And turning to Jean Luze:

“My dear sir, would it be indiscreet to ask you how you like it here?”

“My work keeps me here, Madame,” he replied coldly.

“You see, I was just going to say,” she adds with some uncertainty. “Choosing this Haitian province wasn’t the right thing for a man like you. How did you end up here, I wonder?”

“I go where work calls me, Madame. Unfortunately, I don’t have an estate.”

“Bah!” Mme Camuse says softly with her usual eloquent little toss of the head, “but nevertheless you’ve managed to find happiness here.”

“Yes,” Jean Luze answers, again without looking at Félicia, “that’s true.”

“The Europeans adore us. I’ve heard that back in colonial times, Frenchmen deserted their wives for the beautiful mulatto girls,” Mme Camuse recounts. “I, for one, am a direct descendant of noble French colonials of the name de Camuse. But what can you expect, time has rubbed away the full name as it rubs away everything else. All you can do is adapt to the new and minimize the damage. Hmm! …”

We were having coffee now. Father Paul, all red from too much food and drink, stroked his belly with a satisfied expression on his face and went so far as to accept a glass of anisette, declaring:

“We better ‘push’ that coffee, Monsieur Luze, we better.”

This loosened up the guests, who were tense because of his overly frank remarks, the prefect’s awkward rebuttal and Mme Camuse’s tactlessness.

We moved to the living room. Félicia decided to comment on the fact that Vera had not said a word during the meal and seemed rather shy.

“Our little girl? Well, she’s only fourteen,” Mme Trudor answered. “Who isn’t shy at that age?”

“One can be shy at any age,” Annette answered. “Take Claire, for example.”

“Don’t confuse shyness and reserve,” Jean Luze quickly added. “Claire is not talkative, that’s all.”

“Indeed, Claire has never liked to talk a lot,” Father Paul agreed.

Mme Camuse’s eyes went from Jean Luze to me.

“Her reserve may be the result of too strict an education,” she said. “I knew Monsieur and Madame Clamont, they were rather stern. Weren’t they, Claire?”

“Yes, indeed …”

“And there is something else,” Dr. Audier slipped in. “Psychological complexes, for example.”

“Complexes!” Jean Luze exclaimed.

“Can you imagine, my friend: for a long time Claire had a complex about not being her sisters’ equal, about not being as white and pink as a lily.”
I quickly turned in the direction of the Trudors. Fortunately, they were at the other end of the living room. I gave Dr. Audier a reproachful look and caught one Jean Luze was giving me. It was so strange and unsettling that I lost my composure and spilled anisette on my skirt.

“You dope!” he hissed at me later when we found ourselves alone. “You big dope, back then you must have been the most beautiful of the three Clamont sisters!”

Oh God, now look at him, just like Mme Camuse, talking about me in the past tense.

How mysterious a human being can seem to the very eyes spying on him. Even the secrets he tells you are at best partial revelations. How can you really know what’s going on inside Jean Luze?

Very reluctantly he agreed to give Annette away at the altar. On the other hand, he was quick to give her that gold bracelet she lusted for and he got two kisses on the cheeks for it. The house bubbles with effervescence. She is getting married tomorrow and the gifts keep flowing. The lace gown, courtesy of M. Trudor, which cost me an arm and a leg, is spread on an armchair in the living room, as is the veil adorned with orange blossoms.

“You’ve put on weight since the baby,” Annette says to Félicia. “You have to try to eat less.”

Jean Luze involuntarily looks at his wife. Does he realize the extent to which she’s lost her looks? Another washed-out white woman like all the others he has known. Annette looks at Félicia sternly, shakes her head, looks Jean Luze straight in the eye, and then walks off with an irresistible and provocative syncopation of her hips. Now there’s a Haitian girl who could tempt a saint. Despite her light golden skin, nothing about her could make anyone confuse her with a white woman.

The next day I strapped Félicia into a corset, which didn’t make her any thinner. We left the baby with Augustine and went to the church.

A pressed and powdered crowd jostled inside. Not exactly the “cream of society” as Mme Camuse would point out, elegant and old-fashioned in her long black dress and the feathered hat she wears only for special occasions. Annette glittered on Jean Luze’s arm. Two maids of honor dressed in pink walked before them. Then came the groom on Félicia’s arm, M. and Mme Trudor, Dr. Audier and his wife, Eugénie with her pharmacist, who was dragging his partially paralyzed leg, the mayor dressed like the prefect in his eternal gray suit and black hat, and others from Port-au-Prince whom we did not know, friends of the Trudors. On my way to church I noticed Jane Bavière standing by her door with her son, and Dora peering through her blinds. The sight of them unnerved me. I had not dared invite either of them, thereby acquiescing to the rules of good society and the established order.

The crush of people at church had prevented me from staring at Jean Luze to my heart’s content. I noticed only his distant and chagrined expression as he walked Annette to the altar. He seemed so miserable that I thought he was jealous.

“Look how furious Jean looks,” Félicia whispered to me. “I had to scold him to make him do this. It bothers him to put himself on display.”

Was she as sure of herself as she seemed?

Back home, as the guests gathered in the living room, champagne flutes in hand, the commandant arrived. He greeted only Annette and Paul Trudor and remained standing, his back to the wall. Our eyes locked. He slowly walked up to me and hissed:

“So our hatred is mutual,” he said to me.

But his expression seemed to belie his words.

I started to tremble while my eyes clung to his lips, his teeth, his hands. I saw him smile, so I turned my back to him abruptly.

Again I found myself across from M. Trudor, who was about to speak, surrounded by guests straining their necks to get a good look at the newlyweds.

If the speech was dismal, fortunately there were too few of us to notice.

Jean Luze made me his partner in crime, winking at me with an amused smile, as if I were colluding with him in witnessing this disaster.

Another sleepless night, thanks to Calédu. I’m angry with myself for having trembled before him. I have no other choice but to curb my hatred if I want to decipher the frightful expression on his face. It took some doing, but I
managed to chase him from my thoughts.

How empty the house feels without Annette! You might think you were in a funeral parlor. No more dance music, no more peals of laughter, no more stormy exits. We eat lunch in silence, Jean Luze, Félicia and I. I do the laundry as before, wash Jean-Claude’s bottles and look after Félicia. Am I regaining confidence in myself? To what should I attribute this sudden joie de vivre that has me flinging open the window, drawing deep breaths of the cool morning air into my diaphragm, then closing my eyes and throwing myself across my bed with arms splayed like a cross? So luxurious to lose oneself in a dream-world where one lives only for oneself! Floodgates opened, barriers collapsed, shackles broken, I am now joyfully bounding toward freedom. Just me, face to face with myself, with no one around. Will I die without knowing the firm embrace of a man? There comes a time when virginity seems indecent. Has my upbringing so marked me that it seems out of the question to satisfy my needs in an irregular way?

Annette showed up with Paul eight days after the wedding. We were having lunch. She came in running and kissed us with exclamations of gaiety and joy.

“Félicia, my poor dear! You don’t look so good.”

This is turning into persecution.

Without waiting for Félicia to respond, she rushes to the crib and returns with Jean-Claude, whom she simply woke up.

“Look, Paul darling, he’s so adorable!”

She devoured his cheeks with kisses before finally putting him back on his mother’s lap.

A mad dash to the pantry where she likewise kisses a grumpy Augustine, another mad dash into the living room where a swinging tune soon fills the air. The house is alive again!

“Has anyone here missed me at least?”

She sighs without giving us time to answer:

“Unfortunately, we have to go,” she adds, “some friends are expecting us. Did you see my tan? I live on the beach. Fortunately, this awful old-fashioned paleness is going away …”

She’s gone now. She waves one more time from the car. Her smile cuts dimples in her golden cheeks.

“It’s death here without Mademoiselle Annette,” Augustine suddenly blurts out.

She has dared to say what perhaps all of us were thinking, for habit indeed creates ties and even the most shallow human being leaves behind a void.

Irreproachable as he is toward his wife, the feeling he has for her, is that love? He lacks the spark, the joy the lightheartedness that love brings. Am I fooling myself? I still love him—that is, if love means melting with pleasure at the slightest movement of his hand, if it is unreserved admiration, or sharing common tastes in secret but not daring to give oneself away by speaking of them. How much longer will I be prey to this sterile passion? Am I going to settle for mind games for the rest of my life? I complicate things and, like a masochist, invent a thousand ways to torture myself. Idiot that I am, I did nothing with my youth, when naïveté lends self-confidence. I know too much now to lie to myself without revulsion. I know, for example, that only suffering would lead him to me. How love can make one cruel and sadistic! Am I not just like these torturers? I have suffered too much. It’s time for a truce. I will find it in a different way of life. Platonic love is a myth. Only freaks can settle for that. My love is full-bodied: it’s a nice mixture of sexual drive and lofty sentiment. Just what is necessary not to frighten the respectable woman I am.

I throw myself on my bed and wrap my arms around Jean Luze. I feel the weight of his body on mine. My dry lips always return me to my solitude. Alas, I am alone, alone. More and more I have come to hate these meager compensations, these proofs of my cowardice. Why aren’t you alone, too, Jean Luze? Why aren’t you free? I banish Félicia from my mind. Now I am really turning into a criminal! I am terrorizing myself. A long scream startles me. Someone is calling for help in the dark. I run to the window. I hear the clatter of weapons and a woman cry out. I imagine my neighbors, ears pricked up, trembling and listening like me, just as I imagine the woman in handcuffs being led away by Calédu. I press myself against the wall and open the window a crack. I can’t hear or see anything anymore. Everything has fallen into a kind of deathly silence. I’m surprised at the trembling of my hands and at my heaving rage. What does this have to do with me? And yet, I had the definite impression that, for a minute, I was prey to a dangerous and unbidden thought, one that I shook off willingly. The thought crosses my mind again in a
flash. A flash of lightning flying like a dagger from my head, shining before my eyes like a sign. I hide my face in my hands and try to banish this terrible vision by sinking voluptuously into memories of the past.

Can that be me, the little girl hopping on one foot in the stairwell, with beaming eyes and joy in her heart? How old am I? Six, seven years old. All of that is so far away now. My first memories go back to those days. Before that I don’t exist. Suffering is the revelation that makes you aware of yourself. There must be some extraordinary significance to that age because that was when my parents became strict and suspicious toward me. I was reprimanded for no reason, spitefully watched. My mother put sewing work in my hands, and I spent most of my time sitting on a low chair at her feet. Every day my father called for me in a gruff voice to make me repeat my lessons, and pinched my ear hard enough to draw blood for the smallest error. “It clears the mind,” he would say to reassure me about his meanness.

To toughen me and perhaps to punish me for his disappointed paternal hopes, he decided to raise me as if I were a boy. Every morning, he would ask for his horse and put me in the saddle. I screamed the first time, frightening the stable hand Demosthenes, an old black man who was enslaved by his meager wages and who trembled before my father. I fell the second time. Demosthenes picked me up, and my father told him:

“Put her back on the horse.”
Crying, I clung to his neck.
“Put her back in the saddle,” my father screamed.
The poor man had to obey.
I fell again and Demosthenes grabbed me in his arms and ran to the house.
“Madame,” he said to my mother. “He’s going to kill your little girl.”
My father came to get me. He struck Demosthenes, angrily tore me from my mother’s arms and stood me in front of the animal.
“He’s not going to do anything to you,” he said, “look!”
He put my frozen hand on the horse’s muzzle, sat me back in the saddle and whipped his rump.
I screamed in terror, and then stiffened my legs and thighs around the horse’s warm belly. A month later, he galloped with me beneath the trees in the courtyard.

While waiting to be dispatched to France, I spent my time with other daughters from bourgeois families at the École Nationale of the French sisters, whose mother superior was a friend of my mother’s. This meant I was watched closely. At home, it fell to my father to make me do my work. Every day I was punished for the blots in my notebook. The punishment consisted of kneeling with arms crossed, chin up, next to my father. Eyes closed, trembling with fatigue, I would wait for the “get up” that signaled an end to my torment. Sometimes I would cry, and then the punishment lasted much longer.

Twice a week, from my room I heard my father yell orders to the servants and gallop away to Lion Mountain, which is what they called the six hundred acres planted with coffee, from which he extracted our prosperity. My father, very proud of his coffee, bragged about having studied agronomy in France and, unlike the other planters, personally watched over his field hands.

When I turned ten he gave me my own horse, which I promptly named Bon Ami, perhaps foreseeing the moral solitude that awaited me.

People tended to keep to themselves. When we did have guests, and this was rare, our living room would open to the Granduprés, Bavières, Soubirans, Duclans, Camuses, Audiers, M. Prétat, a French merchant set up on Grand-rue, French ship captains and crew, and all the best society from Port-au-Prince, always received in the French style with plenty of wine and champagne. Our port was opened to Europe and the United States, and Grand-rue overflowed with French, German, English and American products. The Syrians, recently naturalized as Haitians in order to benefit legally from all of our privileges, were also supplied by these boats.

In the year 1912, I was barely twelve when I became friends with Térésa Aboud, a very sweet Syrian girl with long black hair who spoke nothing but Creole. I only saw her at school, and even then only while concealing it from the mother superior. One day she came and told us that the Syrians were being driven out of the country by the president of Haiti and that they, the Abouds, would starve to death in Kingston, where they planned on taking refuge. My friends and I found such a measure truly unfair and took Térésa under our protection.

“Papa,” I asked my father at the dinner table, “why does President Leconte want to drive the Syrians out of our town?”
“Because they are getting rich at our expense,” my father replied. “What’s more, they spend little, hoard money, and are seeking protection under the wings of foreign powers whose citizens they now claim to be. Because of their disloyalty, the competition has become unfair and the poor Haitians are being driven to bankruptcy.”

“We waited too long to drive them out,” my mother interjected with rancor. “The competition ruined my parents.”

“Is that true, Mama?”

“It’s true, my child.”

Back in school, I avoided talking to Térésa and also refused the candy she offered me every day.

“Why?” she asked me.

“You have ruined my mother’s parents,” I answered harshly, “so go back to your own country.”

One evening, I saw my father come home all worked up, announcing that British warships had weighed anchor in Port-au-Prince harbor to protect their Syrian subjects. Dora Soubiran, Eugénie Duclan, Jane Bavière, Agnès Grandpré and I trapped Térésa at the gate and beat her up.

The next day, my father received Dr. Audier and my friends’ fathers. They seemed really worked up, and the cocktails prepared by my mother, who tiptoed in and out like a shadow, stoked their vigor and agitation.

“The foreigner has invaded our country,” my father barked. “Our businesses are now in the hands of the French, the Germans, the British and the Americans. The Syrians are mere surrogates. All of this is simply competition between the great powers. Who is it that’s arming the people and teaching them to say: ‘Down with the Syrians’?”

“The French,” Dr. Audier replied.

“And who is openly protesting the expulsion of the Syrians?”

“The Americans and the British,” Dr. Audier answered again, looking to the others as witnesses.

“The United States is afraid to be supplanted by the Europeans in imports,” my father added. “It’s a cold war between Europe and the United States. What are we in all of this? Lost lambs devoured by wolves. Only one man has been able to meet the challenge and drive out these Syrian undesirables, and this man is none other than our beloved leader. Long live President Leconte!”

“Long live Leconte,” they roared, raising their glasses.

“You are a patriot, a nationalist, and I will defend what I believe to be the national interest until my dying breath …”

“Long live Deputy Clamont!” a short, chubby man named Laurent cried out.

“Long live our deputy!” the others echoed.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” my father answered quietly, as if he were not privately enjoying these outbursts of enthusiasm. “My hour has not yet struck but I am sure it will. For now, I will continue to give my full support to our leader and to watch the opposition closely. I am returning to Port-au-Prince on the next ferry. In my absence, anyone who betrays him must be denounced to the police and punished without mercy …”

My mother found me hiding under the table, my eyes fixed on my father.

The next day, at dawn, the clarion call of the district commandant got us out of bed. We rushed to the balcony. He was resplendent in his uniform with its huge epaulettes and his bicorne hat. He was reading out a statement, surrounded by a police force of “little soldiers,” whose shoulder sashes emblazoned with the word Police were the only thing that distinguished them from beggars.

“Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” he began …

And we learned that the Syrian businesses had just been notified of the order of liquidation.

I wasn’t there to witness the departure of Térésa Aboud because I was in bed with measles. My friends had been forbidden to come near my house for fear of contagion. When a week later I was able to leave my room, from the veranda I noticed the sealed doors of the Syrian shops, and Dora told me that a fanatic had struck Térésa’s mother with a stone as she stepped aboard the American ship.

A little later, our simmering little city learned that the Palais National had been bombed and that more than three hundred soldiers had perished with President Leconte. Reports accumulated and spread far and wide. Day and night, men were scuttling in the streets at all hours or gathering at the Cercle to discuss politics more freely. Who gave my father such an absurd idea? I never found out. But soon he launched his electoral campaign and began preparing his
speeches.

Tonton Mathurin, who lived alone in a large beautiful house like ours, was for a time tolerated by decent society in our little city. When he was suddenly accused of consorting with riffraff and of luring local young maids to his home for unsavory purposes, he was quite simply quarantined. My parents threatened to lock me up if I ever spoke to him.

“He lives in sin,” my mother explained to me, “and sin is contagious.”

Despite my precautions, once in a while I caught a glimpse of the man sitting in a wicker chair hidden behind a bush a few paces away from his gate. Once, coming home from school, I found myself face-to-face with him and stood there mesmerized, staring at his enormous eyebrows and his good-natured black face, his wide innocent mouth grinning ear to ear. I spit at his feet and made a sign of the cross.

“Heh heh!” he said. “Do you think I’m Satan in the flesh?”

I fled when I heard him say that, and the next day sought comfort in confession with Father Paul for the vile sin I had committed. In return, each time Tonton saw me he’d thumb his nose at me or show me his fist.

The Grandupré house was next to his. Poor Agnès reminded me of Sophie Fichini, gaunt and weepy-eyed, shrieking every day under the blows she received. She too was pilloried. One day, my mother said:

“You are not to play with Agnès Grandupré anymore, neither in school nor at her house. You’ve got that? She’s a nasty little girl who goes to old Mathurin’s house behind her parents’ back.”

Agnès’s vice intrigued me. I thought about it so intensely that I began to spy on her from my house. One day, I saw her weeping on her veranda after a thrashing. I called her over. She showed me her legs and arms covered with scratches and, turning a distraught eye toward her house:

“They’ve beaten me again, Claire,” she said to me. “They won’t let me see Tonton Mathurin, but he’s the only one who’s good to me.”

“What does he do to you? What does he say to you?”

“He strokes my hair and tells me about Suzette, the daughter he lost. I look like her.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes, I swear.”

I heard my mother scream. My father rushed up and when he saw us together turned pale with anger.

“Come here, Claire.”

Agnès leaped to the street and ran home.

“Come here,” my father repeated.

And when I was before him:

“Who gave you permission to play with the little Grandupré girl?” he yelled, smacking my back with such force that it knocked the wind out of me. “Who? How many times have you seen her? What did she tell you? What have you done together?”

Each question was reinforced with a terrible blow from his belt. At the third lash, I started screaming as loud as Agnès; at the twentieth, I passed out. The next day, I had such a high fever that my mother sent for Dr. Audier.

“I must say! I must say!” he said, shaking his big head, as I saw him staring at my father reproachfully under his glasses.

“What do you expect, my friend, I am instilling values and I mean for them to be respected,” he said to him. “Ours is a race lacking discipline and our old slave blood requires the lash, as my late father used to say.”

“Is that the slaveholder I hear in you?” the doctor gently asked him.

“Maybe! We mulattoes have a little of everything in us, as you know. Tell me, if you hadn’t known me for so long, would you have believed that I have black blood in my veins? This means that my own black blood has been reabsorbed and that I inherited certain traits that will blemish her unless I correct her.”

At that moment, I noticed the milky whiteness of his skin, hardly more tanned than my mother’s. I stared with astonishment at my dark arms resting on the sheets. Was I really their daughter? No, it did not seem possible. How could I be the daughter of two whites? My mother wept quietly and I saw Dr. Audier give her arm a gentle squeeze before leaving.

We lived surrounded by servants my father worked with an iron rod. Some were hired like that young boy a scapegoat my father took in after his parents’ death and brought home one evening from Lion Mountain. He turned
out to be insubordinate and insolent.

“Black, you’re black like me,” he once said to me, pulling my hair, “and when I am bigger I will marry you.”

I repeated those words to my father, who beat him so badly he ran away. We never saw him again. He was replaced with Augustine, whose parents themselves brought her to us from Lion Mountain, and from the abuse we heaped upon her, I learned to give thanks for my social position and to appreciate my father despite the beatings he continued to visit upon me. We were about the same age, Augustine and I, and I would have loved to share my games with her, but my mother flatly refused to permit this.

“She’s just a servant,” she said, “a black girl from the hills we don’t even pay! Your father would be furious if you played with her. Invite Jane, Dora and Eugénie, and leave that girl to her work.”

Dodging my parents’ surveillance, I sometimes went to meet an old stable hand, a jack-of-all-trades they called a “groom” in Parisian fashion. He slept on a mat in the stable near the horses. I took out the sugar cubes I had stolen for him.

“Thank you, Miss Claire,” he would say. “A good person, you are.”

Then I went to hug Bon Ami, who would wrinkle his nose to eat the sugar out of my hand.

Félicia was four years old at the time. My mother, who didn’t trust the servants, forced me to help look after her. I had no time to myself. After learning my lessons and doing my chores I had to look after my sister without a break. I took revenge on the sly by leaving her to her own devices as much as possible. Once I let her take a tumble down the stairs on purpose and this got me another thrashing. Yet another comment by Augustine about the color difference between my sister and me prevented me from loving her, and gradually I began to envy her.

The day I turned thirteen, my father ordered Demosthenes to saddle our horses and we galloped to his plantation. I was in a riding habit he had ordered from France, and he was in riding breeches, pith helmet on his head. In my long skirt, frilly white blouse, goose-feather hat, I had the pretentious air of a snob aristocrat of the eighteenth century. I had begged them to take out the feather, pointing out my youth and the embarrassment I would feel exhibiting myself in such a getup.

“Allow me to introduce you to the finer things,” my father said angrily. “You will soon know why.”

The coffee was in bloom. Thinking back, I can still smell the bitter-sweetness of the coffee cherries wet with dew, of mango and quenepa branches like open parasols over the fields; the smell of birds frolicking in the leaves, flying low enough to brush past us; the smell of fresh resin warming in the sun along the coarse trunks of oak and logwood trees. Caw, caw, the seahawks screamed, as the peasants chased them away waving their arms and shouting. I hadn’t seen the farmhands for some time and they were amazed to see a young woman before them. They shook my hand limply in the peasant manner, and one of them scratched his head and said:

“By God, that’s one beautiful black girl you got there, Agronomist.”

My father’s laughter seemed forced. He replied in a pretentious Creole:

“Our race has surprises in store for us yet, Louisor; no one here can predict what type of child will come from his mother’s womb.”

“Except for the real blacks, Agronomist,” retorted Alcius, the oldest of the farmers. “They know they can’t be fooled. A black man and a black woman will give you naught but little black babies. And that’s the truth.”

My father changed the subject, crushed a coffee cherry between his fingers and breathed it in:

“My coffee is the best in the region,” he exclaimed with satisfaction. “Listen, farmers, I know what’s happening on the other plantations: it’s a mess out there. The big planters are abandoning their coffee to dishonest people who steal from them. You know I trust you, but twice a week during harvest I come to check on your work. You can see the result …”

He gestured at the immense verdant expanse, where cherries gleamed between the leaves like rubies.

“Even if I should disappear,” he continued, “you must faithfully keep your commitments. God declined to give me a son, but my eldest daughter will see to the proper upkeep of my business. Such is my will.”

The peasants turned to me and stared with curiosity.

Were they reassured that this very young girl, inoffensive and incapable, would replace my father in the event of his death? They fixed their amused and scornful eyes on me, and I bravely returned their stares.

“But,” my father added, thumping his chest in a highly theatrical gesture, “I am solid as a rock and I will die when I’m a hundred. I am the lion who watches over this mountain, and even when I sit in the president’s chair, I will still make sure everything is in good working order here.”
“God is good,” Alcius responded calmly.
He gestured to his daughter-in-law, and she ran to the hut and returned with coffee steaming on a tray.
“Sit down, Mademoiselle,” she said to me, pointing to a wicker chair.
“So, will you be chief of state soon, Agronomist?” Alcius asked my father.
“God willing.”
“Agronomist,” said Louisor, Alcius’s son, walking toward my father and standing before him, arms crossed, locking eyes. “We have been working for you for a number of years now, but what you pay us isn’t enough to feed our children.”
“Louisor!” Alcius exclaimed.
And his fearful look was fixed farther away, at a hut whose door was closed.
“Look elsewhere, black man,” my father answered Louisor simply, “and if you find better, you have my permission to leave.”
“I built my hut on this land,” Louisor replied. “Might as well stay.”
My father quickly gestured to Alcius and they walked to the hut with the closed door and knocked three times. An old man with a white beard came out, gave my father a military salute and made him come in, putting a familiar hand on his shoulder. Louisor’s wife squatted at my feet, knees at her chin, skirt gathered between her thighs. Her six children were playing under the mango tree, screaming and chasing each other. The oldest child, who looked about ten, was gathering palm seeds to grind and eat. They were dressed in short red jerseys that came to their navels. Even the oldest was not dressed more decently, and I tried hard not to look at what I called his immodest outfit. The youngest began to sulk and ask for bread. The wife gazed at me silently. Her long face stared at my own, and I could find nothing in it but a kind of stupid astonishment. As the child cried harder, I told her to make him be quiet.
“Quiet, quiet,” she screamed at him, “enough.”
“What’s the matter with him?” I asked.
“He’s hungry.”
“Let him eat.”
“It’s not mango season yet,” she said. “There’s nothing in the house; he’ll have to wait until tonight.”
“Why?”
“That’s when Louisor will come back with the money he gets from selling the two bundles of herbs he takes to town.”
“What do you do with the money my father pays you?”
“Money!”
That was all she said, and rising, she took the child and forced his thumb in his mouth.
“Suck, suck,” she said gently, “suck.”
The woman’s young face seemed hewn from stone. I got the feeling that neither joy nor pain could affect it. I was bombarded by a thousand thoughts I was unable to sort out at that moment. My father appeared at the door of the hut with Alcius and the old man. His neck was adorned with multicolored necklaces and his head was bound in a red kerchief. My heart skipped a beat. He called me, and addressing the old man:
“There she is, Papa Cousineau,” he said.
The old man contemplated me for a full minute without saying a word, and then held out his hand to me:
“She looks you straight in the eye, Agronomist,” he said, addressing my father. “That’s a sign that she has a strong head.”
“I raised her like a man,” my father answered, “and now she is old enough to keep my promises.”
“Since you are alive, keep your own promises to the loas. Lion Mountain will not survive if you abandon it. Your daughter will only succeed you upon your death, only upon your death,” the old man firmly stated.
“Then she will have white hair.” My father burst out laughing and thumped his chest. “The lion is still strong, Papa Cousineau, solid as a rock. But don’t forget I am often absent. I will be campaigning soon and my chances of becoming president are good. I have given up on sending her to France, I have taught her to ride horses, I have taught her math only so that she can manage the land. She too must serve the loas”
I looked him straight in the eye.

“I only have one religion, Papa,” I slowly articulated, “and I will never serve the loas.”

“Then you will lose Lion Mountain.”

“Don’t rush her, Agronomist,” the old man cautioned. “The Catholic priests and nuns have stuffed her head and talked of voodoo as if it were damnation. Give her time to grow up and she will come to it on her own like every good black woman.”

“I will never serve the loas” I repeated.

And I ran to my horse, which I mounted full of rage.

Under my whip, Bon Ami galloped down the trails, nostrils quivering. I soon heard the hoofbeats of my father’s horse, reined in but champing at the bit. Guava branches stuck to my skirt, smacking me in the face and snatching my riding hat as their trophy. I arrived a few minutes before he did at the entrance to town. It was a Sunday. I found my mother at home all dressed up and, noticing me, she asked where my father was.

“He’s coming,” I answered.

“You barely have time to change and accompany me to vespers,” she told me.

Augustine, her head bristling with nappy little braids, was following Félicia like a dog.

I listened, panting, for my father’s steps. He opened the door, walked up to me and slapped me so hard that I almost fell to the ground.

“What has she done?” my mother asked him.

“Stubborn as a mule! Stubborn as a mule!” my father yelled. “You will obey me, you hear, and I will break you, even if I have to do it with a whip.”

My mother lowered her head and sniffled. I went up to change and accompany her to vespers.

“What have you done to your father this time?” she asked me on the way to church.

“He does voodoo, Mama. I saw him at Papa Cousineau’s, dressed like a disciple.”

“Alas!” my mother answered, “he was rash enough to accept the legacy of his black grandmother and he’s afraid not to keep his promises.”

“I won’t keep them for him,” I screamed with tears in my eyes.

Hush!” my mother said, rolling frightened eyes. “God forbid someone hears you and makes a scandal.”

I didn’t sleep that night. I was so agitated with shock and distaste that I was feverish. Voodoo, which until now I had considered a shameful religion practiced only by the poor, suddenly took shape before my eyes and engaged me in a struggle I had very little chance of winning: I feared my father and dreaded standing up to him.

“Resist, my child,” advised Father Paul, in whom I had confided out of sheer desperation. “Resist with all your might. In such a case as this, disobedience is permitted.”

I resisted and was whipped for it. Time went by. My father was not elected. He reproached me for bringing him bad luck and swore he would break me.

“I made a promise, you understand, I promised that you as the eldest would continue the legacy. But that was before your birth. How could I predict you would be a girl?…”

Although my studies were rather intense, up to now I had read only ancient history and the fables of La Fontaine. My father declared all books unwholesome and my mother, on his orders, cleaned my room herself in order to better rummage through my things at her leisure. My girlfriends’ fates were no happier; I resigned myself to mine, awaiting the marriage that would set me free. As I got older, I put together a life for myself. A very full and secret life to which no one else had access. Not even my friends. Solitude and idleness were my accomplices. To protect myself from prying eyes, I learned the importance of hypocrisy. With my parents I played the part of a perfect young lady. Once their backs were turned, I would undergo a revolution. Quickly changing my attitude, I arched my waist before my mirror, posing languidly, waltzing around and humming in a low voice.

Around that time I saw Frantz Camouse again. He was returning from France, where he had been studying for several years. Our mothers had been friends and were seeing each other again for the first time in six years. He would visit us on Sundays with his mother, who would stroke my hair and who kept saying that I was the prettiest girl she had ever seen. She repeated this so often that I began to doubt her sincerity. My parents welcomed them warmly and went through a great deal of trouble to host them. Frantz was handsome and I began to think about him.
I whispered his name in bed at night, my heart full of a delicious feeling, but I remained petrified in his presence.

“The Camuse boy seems interested in our daughter,” my father said one evening to my mother. “Let’s give her a good dowry to encourage him. I am not able to get anything out of this stubborn mule, might as well marry her off. The Camuses are nearly ruined, they will be happy to dust off their coat of arms for us.”

“They think they’ve sprung from the loins of Jupiter,” was my mother’s response.

“I have money enough to make them stuff their prejudices, and after all, I haven’t given up my candidacy.”

“Henri!” my mother implored with a look of despair.

“This marriage will happen,” my father continued. “My money will help them forget certain things.”

“Alas,” my mother sighed, stealing a worried glance at me.

Félicia innocently took my hand.

“Why is Claire black, Mama?” she asked.

“But she is not black,” my mother answered, lowering her eyes.

I abruptly pulled my hand away.

“The sun burned her a little,” my mother added. “It’s a pretty brown.”

“No, she’s black and we’re white.”

“Enough, Félicia,” my father yelled.

Félicia cried and my mother took her in her arms as I ran up to my room. I spent a long time alone there looking at myself in the mirror of my dressing table.


And I began to loathe the forebear whose black blood had slyly flowed into my veins after so many generations.

The days that followed were torture. Long family discussions that included Mme Bavière and Mme Soubiran had given me such a complex that I no longer dared look into the blond pink face of Frantz Camuse. I obeyed my mother and wore the new dresses she had made me try on while raving about their “flattering” color. I played the Chopin waltzes that my piano teacher Mlle Verduré had taught me, served drinks and cake to our friends, but my heart was heavy. “Never will he love me, never,” I kept saying to myself. I could see Dora and Eugénie circling around Frantz, clucking like turkeys. I felt the weight of his gaze upon me. But I was too young to realize the sincere interest I had aroused in him.

One evening, he came around without his mother and asked me to walk him to the gate.

“I am leaving for Port-au-Prince next week,” he said. “I would like to write to you.”

“No, don’t ever write to me,” I answered.

“Why?”

I began trembling so badly that he looked at me with astonishment. He grabbed my hand and I jumped as if he had stung me. The contrast between our joined hands had overwhelmed me. I shoved him so hard that he exclaimed:

“Do I disgust you that much?”

“Don’t mock me,” I shouted. “I’m warning you, don’t mock me.”

I made a run for my room and watched him from behind my window blinds. Tears of rage and bitterness ran down my cheeks, and when my mother came into my room, I cried out:

“Why am I black? Why?”

“Your father will make a rich heiress of you.”

“I don’t want anyone to marry me for my money. I will never get married, never.”

“Claire!”

The next day, my father left for Port-au-Prince, accompanied by Laurent. I had seen my mother hand him a bag of money and I heard her cry and reproach him for wasting everything we had to satisfy his vain political passions.

“You are ruining your children, Henri,” she was saying. “You have already sold almost two hundred acres. You have to stop.”

“Let me try my luck one last time,” my father answered. “Over a thousand men are with me. The best families in Port-au-Prince have called for me, all I need to do is to earn the people’s trust and I will win it with this …” (He pointed to the bag of money.) “I will be gone for some time. Have Demosthenes go to the fields with Claire. Let
them make sure we aren’t being duped by the peasants. Adieu, my wife. Perhaps you will soon be the First Lady.”

Demosthenes went to Lion Mountain by himself because I refused to go.

“Think how angry your father will be, Claire,” my mother repeated to me. “Think how angry.”

But I stood my ground.

Well before my father’s return, we learned that Tancrède Auguste had been elected. Father returned from the capital looking old, demoralized and nearly ruined. He was welcomed by his diehard supporters, who ranted against the new president, whom they called incompetent.

In less than two years, the country saw four other heads of state come and go well before their terms were up, due to the unremitting anarchy, poverty, killings, and the constant uprisings by the Cacos of the North. The insurrections completely drained state funds. The political climate in our province, as well, suggested that the country was rolling through one disaster after another on its way into an abyss. The government of Vilbrun Guillaume Sam was cornered and appealed to the Americans for financial assistance. That day I saw my father’s faction give in to their anger, roaming the streets, drawing crowds. They seemed to have gone mad.

“Incompetent!” my father yelled. “All of them, incompetent! They are leading us straight to our ruin. You will soon see Americans in charge of all our institutions. They are waiting for the right moment to jump at our throats. They want to run our financial affairs. They will get control of customs. They’ll throw a noose around our necks. If we keep fighting and spilling our blood in fratricidal struggles, we’ll see an army of American soldiers land on our soil. Haitians don’t know what they need. The only man who can save them from this disaster, they will never choose him, they will never put him in power.”

“Long live Clamont!” the crowd cried out. “Long live Henri Clamont!” He was carried off in triumph this time, and my mother, despite her tears, had to give him another bag of money, which he distributed to a group of strangers who were asking for an audience and who called him the future president. More and more optimistic, he neglected his plantations. His fixation with power gnawed away at him. He was always leaving for Port-au-Prince, by boat and on horseback, each time returning more disappointed and visibly older.

“We have only a few hundred acres left,” my mother complained. “We are nearly ruined! What will become of our children?”

“Oh, my wife!” my father vituperated, “give me your support instead of your recriminations. Do you think that all those who have assumed the presidency just crossed their arms and put their feet up before their election?”

“But you will never be elected president,” my mother tried to reason with him.

“Enough!” my father ordered. “I will take you to Port-au-Prince just so you can witness my popularity with your own eyes. I bask in praise there, and my speeches are applauded with such force that I choke up with emotion. They don’t want brawlers and rebels anymore, they will choose an honest tiller of the soil like me to save the country from disaster. We are weighed down by debt. After I presented my plan for economic independence the audience carried me away in triumph. My wife, are you listening? In triumph I was carried away, and not by a band of flea-bitten bums but by men of culture who represent the cream of Port-au-Prince, the only sensible, capable and representative class of people.”

He noticed me, came toward me and said:

“Even though you refused to help me, you will choose the man of your dreams, I promise you that.”

He twirled his mustache, stuck out his chest and left.

“Down with Clamont!” we heard.

“Who dared say that?” my father roared.

Tonton Mathurin, dressed in his old houpland and beret, stepped out of the bushes where he was lying in wait.

“Me,” he shouted. “Clamont, you are nothing but a pitiful ignoramus, a pretentious and narrow-minded mulatto. The degree in agronomy you picked up in Paris would impress only an imbecile like yourself. A phony! You are nothing but a phony and I swear no man with any sense will back you. We have seen four incompetent men come to power, and that’s enough. That era is past before it even began.”

“Mathurin,” my father barked. “How dare you speak? You, the immoral one, shunned by society …”

“What society are you talking about, Clamont? The one made up of stubborn people like you who boast of being white and who close their doors in the faces of worthy black men? Have you forgotten your grandmother, Clamont, the black woman whose loas you still serve?”

“I have forgotten her in fact,” my father replied, pale with wrath.
“There is your eldest daughter to refresh your memory. I thank God for arranging things so well.”

A crowd gathered. Some listened smiling to Mathurin’s words, others like Laurent and Dr. Audier pulled my father by the sleeve to drag him home.

“He’s just a crazy old man,” Laurent whispered to him.

Hidden behind their blinds, the ones who dared not show themselves tried not to miss any of the spectacle. I saw their glowing eyes, heard their cruel muffled laughter, comments, judgments, against which my father could scarcely defend himself. My fear of him died that day. I had seen him blush before my eyes, shaken and beating a retreat. A vague premonition alerted me to the falseness of our situation, and I was surprised to find myself agreeing with Tonton Mathurin deep inside.

The next day, six masked men broke into Mathurin’s house and took him away. He came back three hours later, his clothes torn, his face bloody: he had been dragged into the woods and horribly beaten. He found my father, walked up to him and spat in his face.

“Coward!” he yelled. “You are not yet sitting in the presidential chair and you are already abusing your powers, you hypocrite. Look, all of you, I have spit in your candidate’s face.”

My father ran home, took down his rifle and fired at Mathurin, whom he fortunately missed. There was a rush to disarm him, and to calm him down and settle his bad blood my mother gave him two spoonfuls of castor oil that he swallowed without raising an eyebrow.

That evening, I thought for a long time before falling asleep … I remembered Mathurin’s insults, and realized that we had not once invited to our house the parents of Alcine Joseph and Élina Jean-François, two very smart black girls my friends and I knew at school. And the word prejudice became heavy with meaning for me …

A few days later, a French boat in our harbor supplied our merchants: glassware, lingerie, wines, liqueurs, clothes, jewelry graced the display windows, and my mother, spending our last reserves on my father’s advice, bought some linen and a new piece of crystal she was planning to exhibit at her next party. Three linen blouses embroidered with lace and ribbons were added to my trousseau, and the night before the party my mother spread on my bed a frilly white silk dress, black leather slippers and a beaded velvet purse. We had sent out many invitations and my father, who was to leave for Port-au-Prince on the French boat in three days, invited the officers on board that he knew. Dora’s twenty-year-old cousin Georges, a pianist and a talented poet, was to play contredanses and waltzes.

The coffee harvest was at hand. My father paid a quick visit to the farmers and came back happy to report that there would soon be sacks full of coffee and then of money.

“I rule like a lion king over my land,” he said laughing. “The peasants are afraid of my ‘voodoo spells’ and they never steal from me.”

Was he a good enough actor to play at voodoo to keep his naïve farmers in check? I couldn’t answer that question.

It was July 3, 1915. A choking heat fell on the town. There was no breeze that morning to dry the sweat off the brows of our “little soldiers” pacing up and down the streets with rifles on their shoulders. Political discussions were rife and the news that arrived with students who disembarked from the French boat alarmed the patriots. According to them, representatives from the State Department had cornered President Sam and were negotiating a contract that would give them control over customs.

“If President Sam agrees to this contract with the United States, then all is lost,” Dr. Audier prophesied. “France and Germany will demand an equal share. Clamont is right, they will have the skin off our backs. It’s time he be put in charge.”

My father, despite his many disappointments, sacrificed two more bags of money in vain. A rumor went round that he was conspiring against the government, and one evening Augustine came to tell him that a man was asking to see him.

“What’s his name?” my father asked.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Is he well dressed?”

“No, sir.”

“Is he a beggar?”

“No, sir, but he is dark-skinned.”

Leaving Dr. Audier, M. Camuse, Laurent and my friends’ fathers in the living room, my father went down. He
opened the door to the dining room and found himself in the presence of a black man of great physical stature, neatly dressed, with a straw hat that he quickly took off his head.

“I am Horelle Jean-François,” the man said to him in French. “Your oldest daughter knew my Élina at the school of the Holy Sisters.”

“I had no idea,” my father replied.

“Monsieur Clamont, be careful,” the man continued. “You have been denounced as a conspirator and the district commandant is keeping an eye on you. I came to warn you because I am also a supporter of yours.”

“Thank you, Jean-François,” my father answered. “I will take precautions.”

“I will bring you many followers. We must stand up against American interference in the nation’s private affairs.”

Élina was standing behind her father. I saw him reach out and grope for her.

“I am blind,” he explained.

“Ah,” my father grunted. “Would you like a chair?”

“No, Monsieur Clamont, thank you, I have to go. I’ll come back another time.”

“Jean-François,” my father then said, “if it’s all right, I would like to meet with you and your friends at Lion Mountain.”

“That’s fine, Monsieur Clamont, then I will come back here without them. Only my daughter will come with me.”

“No, no, don’t trouble yourself, I know your house, I will come to you myself.”

“That’s fine, Monsieur.”

He closed the door and then, noticing me:

“You, I always find you on my heels,” he said to me, as if he were ashamed of himself. “Is it true you knew this girl at the Sisters?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Did she finish school?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Very well, very well, go inside and help your mother. There’s a lot to do today. Our guests will be here at eight.”

Indeed at that time the ship’s officers arrived in dress uniform. The table was adorned with food and wine, taking on the elaborate and well-appointed look of a Roman feast. The new glassware spread out on the ecru lace tablecloth began to fill with champagne and wine. Georges Soubiran sat at the piano and launched into a waltz by Chopin, and couples began to dance. Frilly dresses whirling in the lamplight! Hairdos embellished with pearls and diamonds! Bare necks almost as white as the pearls arrayed on them. Busts delicately pressing against taffeta ribbons that fell in butterfly wings down the back! Black pants, frock coats and audaciously twisted mustaches! Masculine hair, blond and black, gleaming with fragrant pomade! Elegant movements of the hands and feet! Clever cunning glances! Arched waists and elegant bows! And the flowing champagne helped me and my friends overcome our shyness. The trembling fingers we rested delicately on the arms of our dancing partners betrayed us, and I remember my teeth chattering in front of the handsome French officer who bowed before me.

“You are very original, Mademoiselle,” he said, taking me in his arms.

I lowered my head and didn’t respond.

“Could it be because the atmosphere of this Haitian salon this evening reminds me of Paris that I find you so alluring? Only you possess that warm color that island people have. You must believe me when I say that, for us, you are like a black goddess come down from her throne to welcome us lowly mortals.”

The compliment, too nicely turned, rang false in my ears.

I thought he was making fun of me. I let go of his hand and ran away.

At the beginning of the ball, I had already noticed myself in the mirror, in my white dress, standing between Dora, Eugénie and Jane, and felt I looked like a fly in a bowl of milk. I was surrounded by respect and flattery owing only to my social position. Who would dare shun the daughter of a white-mulatto like Henri Clamont, owner of the best house on Grand-rue and six hundred acres of coffee, as though she were no better than Élina Jean-François or Alcine Joseph? I felt out of place among the French crewmen, our European store owners and the handpicked mulattoes. My mother found me in bed in my ball gown, weeping, head buried in my pillow.

“What now, Claire?”
“I feel sick, Mama.”
“In that case, get undressed. I’ll tell the guests you had to be excused.”

A quarter of an hour later I was in my nightgown and had slipped under the sheets when I saw Dora come in.
“What’s going on with you?”
“Nothing, I just don’t feel well.”

“That handsome officer is asking for you. He told your father that you were the prettiest black girl he had ever seen. You know, Claire, these foreigners are stupid. If your skin is a little tanned, they think you’re black.”

“Leave me alone. I’m tired.”

“Frantz Camuse just arrived. He returned by boat. Try to get up.”

“No, leave me alone, Dora, I’m begging you.”

“Madame Camuse told me: ‘Go get Claire, she is no more sick than I am, and Frantz will be disappointed not to see her.’”

“No, I really am sick. Go tell Madame Camuse and let me be.”

When she left, I quietly jumped off my bed and cracked open the door. They seemed to have forgotten about me. Smiling his cruel feline smile, my father waltzed with Mlle Verduré, who was virtually swooning. His black hair was parted along a line that seemed glued to his skull, and his white face looked swollen. My eyes sought out my mother. Limp, fat, and white, she was sitting between Mme Duclan and Mme Audier, who inspired petty comparisons with an ugly doll Félicia had. Eugénie was waltzing with Frantz, and Dora and Jane with two French officers. I closed the door and went back to bed. The music prevented me from sleeping until the guests left. Georges Soubiran, Dora’s poor relation who was tolerated out of compassion, was harnessed to the piano and played nonstop until two in the morning.

Agnès Grandupré grew up under quarantine. She was erased from our lives, and I sometimes forgot she even existed. I caught a glimpse of her only at mass, where her arrival always provoked whispers and distraction. Gaunt, her feverish eyes glued to her prayer book, she held herself straight, chin proudly held high; her reserve was moving. It had been long since she had stopped visiting old Mathurin and she led a dignified and modest life. But society, spiteful and querulous, always seeking sacrificial victims, never forgave her. Her parents themselves had fueled the scandal by punishing her so spectacularly, for fear people would say they weren’t raising her right. “That nasty little Grandupré girl next door,” Mme Duclan called her. And even Mlle Verduré, whom I had once caught kissing my father at the piano and who was unmarried at thirty-five, would raise her eyes to heaven and cry out: “And she dares hold her head high!” This young woman’s tragic face seemed to conceal something other than vice. One day Georges Soubiran recited poems of such infinite sadness and refinement, and then admitted they were by Agnès. He was an orphan. Dora’s parents, with whom he lived, accused him of having spoken to Agnès and ordered him to break up with her. He packed his bags and left in response. Mathurin took him in. This time the scandal went too far and became the talk of the town. Agnès and Georges were in love and met at Mathurin’s for several days. The Granduprés almost beat their daughter to death and locked her inside the house. Tonton Mathurin stood in the middle of the street hurling insults at the “idiots and provincial bourgeois,” barged into the Grandupré house and went up to Agnès’s room. She was in bed, burning with fever. He knelt at her bedside and spoke to her softly. Then he got up and asked the flummoxed Granduprés for Agnès’s hand on behalf of Georges Soubiran.

“He is poor, and she is not rich either. I have money enough for both of them. They will not be in need,” he announced to them.

Then he went down to the street again.

“I am a black man,” he shouted, “and I spit in your faces. Dreadful are you who see evil everywhere. You soil every noble feeling with your stifled and bastardly minds. I am certain that God spits on this province as I do, and the day will come when you shall feel the weight of His mighty and avenging hand.”

Curious onlookers gathered on the veranda and crossed themselves piously. Eight days later, Dr. Audier was woken up in the middle of the night. He only had time to throw on a robe as his servant led him by flickering candlelight to the Granduprés’. Agnès was already coughing up blood, and she died in Georges Soubiran’s arms, holding old Mathurin’s hand.

Her parents seemed to be in a daze. Sitting by the coffin of their only child, they watched a procession of heads go by that only yesterday had been turned away from them. Then Mathurin rose:
“We will bury Mademoiselle Grandupré without you,” he shouted. “Let her at least rest in peace.”
And Mme Grandupré, suddenly feeling her pain, ignored my mother’s outstretched hand.

I looked at Agnès, so pale and white that I envied her. Her hands were clasped on her chest, and Georges Soubiran was kneeling near the coffin in tears. I wish I died in her place, I told myself. Pursing her lips, my mother then pushed me aside and we left the Grandupré house. I stole away from home and followed the funeral procession up to the cemetery. Standing beside the freshly dug grave, Georges Soubiran recited one of Agnès’s poems and swore that her name would be forever engraved in literature …

The terrible political news that reached us that evening by way of a few passengers off the British boat prevented my parents from punishing what they called my insubordination. It was July 27, 1915, a dreadful date that would forever destroy my father’s political ambitions, ruin his good health and lead him straight to his grave.

The next day, we were still in bed when we were startled by Dr. Audier’s voice calling for my father.

“Clamont! Port-au-Prince is up in arms. The Palais National was attacked and the political prisoners were shot.”
“Where did you hear this?” asked my father, looking haggard, his hair disheveled.

“From a student, Justin Rollier. He arrived on horseback last night.”

Then Laurent arrived, out of breath, to announce that President Sam had been assassinated.

“They broke into the French embassy where the president had sought refuge. They murdered him. His body was mutilated and dragged in the streets … Ah Clamont, I can’t go on, I really can’t …”

“What?” screamed my father. “Speak, Laurent, I beg of you.”

“The Americans!”
“What? What about the Americans?”

“Their troops have landed at Bizoton. They are taking every key position in the capital.”

“Laurent! Come now!” my father said as gently as possible, “have you lost your mind?”

“Alas! No, Clamont.”

He didn’t notice Dr. Audier gesturing in protest behind my father’s back. He brought in Justin Rollier, still covered in mud from his long trip on horseback.

“Tell him, Justin. Tell Monsieur Clamont what you saw with your own eyes.”

He noticed me at the door of my room in my nightgown and he stuttered in embarrassment. I quickly shut the door, threw on my robe and went down to find Augustine in her quarters.

“Up already, Mademoiselle Claire?” she exclaimed in astonishment.

“I’ll have my coffee here.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle.”

“Give me some bread and butter, too.”

“There, Mademoiselle … I’ll see if Mademoiselle Félicia is up now, and then I’ll come back to get a tray for Madame and Sir.”

I heard a scream and rushed upstairs: my father lay on the ground before Justin Rollier, and Laurent was helping Dr. Audier undress him.

“By God,” the doctor muttered, “I tried to tell you to keep quiet. To give this kind of news to such an excitable man without preparing him, just madness!”
“Lord! Lord!” was all Laurent could say.

My mother ran up in her nightgown and began screaming as well.

“Stay calm, Madame Clamont,” Dr. Audier said. “He’s just passed out, that’s all. Consider the child you are carrying.”

And turning to me:

“Claire, take your mother back to her room and send Augustine here with a basin and some towels.”

Despite several bleedings, my father died the same day. Six months later, my mother gave birth to a little girl as white as Félicia. She held her out to me and said: “Raise her, my daughter, like your father raised you, and take your sisters under your wing to keep them from sin.” Three years later, she died as well, of an unknown disease that Dr. Audier was inspired to call … lassitude.

In the meantime, one morning the American Marines arrived on our shores, taking control of the police station, the Customs House, the Public Works and the Sanitation Department. They dismissed some and appointed others. They built a new hospital, dug new gutters and cleaned up the town. All the “little soldiers” disappeared, as did the district commandant and his bicorne hat. They were dismissed for reasons of health and were replaced by others selected by a low-ranking American officer according to their physical build. We also learned that there was to be a new police force. This was an occupation, with all the humiliations and benefits an occupation brings for a poor, undisciplined, indebted people, their strength sapped by all of its internecine struggles. Dr. Audier flatly refused a position as head of the new hospital. M. Bavière and M. Duclan, mayor and prefect respectively, submitted their resignations. All those on the payroll of President Dartiguenave’s government were lumped together by our nationalists and labeled “dirty collaborators.” The years went by. Some died, others were born. The Syrians reinstalled themselves in our town, and little by little we got used to the khaki uniforms worn by the Americans and our policemen. We familiarized ourselves with certain American expressions like “goddamn” or “son of a bitch.” Then there was the uprising: the Marchaterre Massacre, the student strike, and finally, in 1934, the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Students returning from Port-au-Prince told us how they witnessed, with tears in their eyes, the restoration of our flag over the barracks built by Leconte, where it hadn’t flown since 1915 … But let’s return to what my life was like during that stretch of time.

And so one day I suddenly found myself the head of a family with about sixty acres that had been saved by some miracle from my father’s costly ambitions. Right away I faced countless difficulties. I was only nineteen years old and I now regretted that I did not go with my father to the fields more often. However, to imitate him and to prove my competence, twice a week I got up before my sister, whom I left with Augustine, mounted my horse and galloped to Lion Mountain. Papa Cousineau, the voodoo priest, had died a few months before my mother did and his hut was sealed forever. Unlike my father, I was neither feared nor respected. The 540 acres he had sold to pay for his electoral campaign had come into the hands of black peasants who now worked for themselves. With my ridiculous reserve and coldness, I confronted Alcius, Louisor and a few other peasants whom we hired during harvest. I would give orders, squint at processing equipment I knew nothing about, and return home convinced of the futility of my visits. The first year, Louisor brought me a meager sum of money that he assured me came from the sale of the coffee, and I accepted it without protest. The second year, I received a much smaller amount. The price of coffee had gone down, he told me, and I only owned sixty acres. Was he trying to discourage me until I gave up my land to him for a pittance?

“At that rate,” I remarked, “we’ll soon have nothing to chew on.”

“Business is bad,” he replied.

And in the look he gave me I thought I saw bad faith, verging on hatred.

I then tried to win them over. I brought clothing for their wives, rum for the men, I went to their homes with candy for the children, cleverly trying to buy their devotion by spoiling them. I learned the hard way that it wasn’t enough, because the next year I got even less money from Louisor.

It was around then that a German named M. Petrold settled here. He bought up coffee, shipped it on a German vessel and began to grow wealthy. Soon, there was a rumor he was trying to set up his own factory and was eyeing Lion Mountain and wanted to buy it. I went to see Dr. Audier for advice.

“I’m not getting anything from the farmers anymore and I’m struggling to make ends meet,” I admitted to him.

“Are you thinking of selling what’s left of Lion Mountain?” he asked me.

“Yes, if the German gives me a good price. All we have left is about sixty acres, but the factory is worth its weight in gold.”
“Do you authorize me to speak to Monsieur Petrold on your behalf?”
“Please do so, Doctor, I need help.”

To ruin the peasants and get my revenge on them, I set the price for my coffee myself that year and gave preference to M. Petrold.

“Who fixed the price of their coffee at twelve centimes? Who is the greedy swine pushing us into bankruptcy?” the peasants yelled the next day at M. Petrold’s door.

Concealed in my room behind the blinds, I could see the peasants raising their fists at my house.

“You don’t want to sell?” M. Petrold was saying to them. “So go home with your coffee. If Lion Mountain is selling coffee at twelve centimes, why should I pay you more?”

“Maybe Lion Mountain has a secret way of breeding money,” one peasant shouted, “some big secret that put the Lion and his wife in their grave. But thank God, we’re still kicking, and Lion Mountain will have to answer for this wicked deed.”

My father’s farmers paid with their lives for my brilliant idea, because about twenty planters armed with machetes descended on our land and slaughtered them. The next day, sitting stiff and straight on my horse, I saw with my own eyes the bloody bodies of our farmers, their wives and children, all hacked to pieces. The killers were caught and the rural administrator brought them to jail. The police, represented by a soft, inexperienced young lieutenant, could not prevent retaliation. No one dared openly attack me, the daughter of a great despotic and merciless landowner, but I was responsible for everything and everyone knew it. I finally received the young lieutenant, who questioned me about my coffee plantation.

“My farmers were stealing from me. So I sold my coffee to Monsieur Petrold at a price that was too low. That’s all,” I explained, “and they took it out on my farmers.”

“You are a terrible businesswoman,” he replied. “To avoid such incidents in the future, get some advice before doing anything.”

I thanked him, and almost in spite of himself he added:

“It seems as if things will get more complicated. To get revenge, the peasants have sent emissaries to Port-au-Prince. They bought the silence of the rural administrator, and what was initially a matter of private order seems to be taking on terrible proportions.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged and left without adding a word.

Eight days later, a terrible hurricane flattened the coffee, tore the roofs off houses and drowned the cattle. For forty-eight hours, the skies were dark. Heavy black clouds, thick and suffocating, rolled along the horizon. A thin rain mixed with wind lashed the paving stones and by the end of the day began to whistle and scream, swelling the sea and flooding the rivers.

“Hurricane coming,” people cried from one window to the next.

Two hours later, all the doors were boarded up. I called for Demosthenes to shut himself in the house with us but he was gone. Augustine, my sisters and I were left to listen to the lamentation of the trees uprooted by the blasts of wind, the whistling of the roofs ripped from their beams that flew past us with a sinister beating of wings. Water invaded the Grand-rue and began to slowly filter out of the storm drains. It rose and soaked the furniture. We could hear awful screaming. The ground shook in protest. Everything moved. We found ourselves on the ground, clutching each other convulsively. The untold damage ruined most of the growers and herdies. Many of us were killed, and Father Paul started going around to bless the dead and comfort the orphans. The Daughters of Mary, to whom I belonged, were asked to help, and the day after the cataclysm twelve young women dressed in the colors of the Virgin administered first aid to the wounded. I had no tears left by the time I threw myself upon the bodies of Demosthenes and of my horse, both found in the flooded river.

“We have been damned by our sins,” Father Paul preached to the small crowd of survivors gathered in the church. “God has punished us. We must repent and do penance. Blood was spilled. What right do we have to make our own justice when God is watching over us?”

Bodies were piled in the freshly made puddles. They were identified and the municipality inscribed their names on a list. The dead included: Tonton Mathurin, who had, we later learned, left his fortune to Georges Soubiran, who went to study in France; Laurent; Mme Marti; and all those who had in one way or another tried to rescue their possessions from destruction.
Up there, the mountains greened, resplendent despite the ruins, in spite of death. All of nature seemed to rise up purified from the squalls. At Lion Mountain, the coffee plants lay destroyed and uprooted atop a foot of soil that had been churned up by spindrift. In town, waterlogged goods piled up unrecognizable in the stinking muddy shopwindows. Haitian and Syrian storekeepers alike were crying and wailing. Of course, those hit hardest were the peasants. Homeless and destitute, they came down the mountain to swell the ranks of the beggars. The harsh sun returned after the hurricane and dried out the enormous mounds of garbage choking the streets. Mud turned to dust, a thick, blinding dust that became a whirlwind at the slightest breeze. Typhoid, malaria, and influenza kept everyone in their sickbed. Poor children died every day by the dozen for lack of care. Father Paul continued to draw on our devotion and the Daughters of Mary worked like galley slaves. Eugénie Duclan, Jane Bavière, Dora Soubiran and I helped Mme Camuse, whom Father Paul made president of the Relief Association. Mme Marti, our dressmaker, had died under rather mysterious circumstances. She was found at her home, her neck half-slit. “She tried to save our little dog! She ran in to get our little dog!” her children sobbed. Mme Camuse took them in. Fifty coffins were blessed in a ceremony attended even by the least pious among us. Father Paul’s sermons spared no one. Our bloodstained land had been washed clean by God’s mighty waters, he repeated, and the wind, he hoped, had by the same measure cast out the Evil Spirit. One strange detail troubled me, however: M. Petrold’s house had suffered no damage, and at that moment I began reconsidering God’s ways. Despite the failure of the harvest, M. Petrold bid on our piece of land and bought my factory, my piano and the sixty remaining acres of Lion Mountain. Discouraged, many of the landowners followed my example and sold their fields and went to work for him. I had put my money in the bank, following Dr. Audier’s advice. I calculated that by living frugally, we could hold out for a few years. Life stretched before me flat and hard, without joy or surprise, and I lost hope of ever getting married.

When the streets were nearly cleared by the prisoners and other volunteers, we received a delegation of doctors and an American commission who arrived by boat from Port-au-Prince. The State Department, without any bitterness, played its philanthropic role, for the Americans had left our country four years ago. I saw Frantz Camuse at his mother’s. He seemed astonished by my self-assurance. His eyes had acquired a kind of acuity, no doubt due to his profession, and he looked at me for a long time.

“What’s happening to our province?” he asked me. “There is much talk of it in Port-au-Prince as a perpetual source of turmoil.”

“I don’t understand…”

“The killings, the clan feuds have been brought to the attention of the police. Your district commandant is about to be replaced by another, who, from what I hear, will know how to keep you in line. What happened on your land, Claire?”

“I no longer have any land,” I answered dryly. “Lion Mountain no longer belongs to the Clamonts.”

He walked me home, indifferent but friendly. For eight days, he bandaged the wounded and gave as much help as he could. Once I caught him shaking his head before a child whose legs had been shattered by a fallen tree.

“We are cursed, according to Father Paul,” I whispered.

He frowned and looked at me without answering and then leaned over his patient. When he finished with the bandage, he looked up and said:

“You are quite changed, Claire.”

“For better or worse?”

“I don’t know. But something in you rings false.”

“So then, for the worse,” I said triumphantly. And I pressed my lips together tight.

_Imbecile!_ I felt like yelling at him. _I’m not the little prude you once knew, take me in your arms._

He left two days later without trying to see me again.

That very evening, I received the lieutenant, who came with Jane. She was pretty, lively, spontaneous. The lieutenant loved her and wanted to marry her. From where I sat, I could see movement behind Mme Bavière’s blinds; like all mothers in this town, she tyrannized and spied on her daughter. I gently closed my door to prevent her from seeing what was going on in my house. How did I become so open-minded if not from the desire to avenge my strict upbringing? Rebelling against everything that had been branded upon me, I insisted on destroying all myths without seeming to do so and was shaking off my yoke in secret. Through the open door, Annette mischievously spied on the enlaced lovers. Soon enough I saw her hanging off Jacques Marti’s neck, kissing him on the lips. I smiled. She dared do what I, sixteen years her senior, never could. Frantz Camuse was lost to me forever; I knew that all hope of getting married was to be buried. What man here could ever replace him?
But then one day Justin Rollier returned from Port-au-Prince. Twelve years had passed since my father’s death. We saw each other again with pleasure, and in the evenings once again a man’s voice could be heard in the house. Annette caressed and kissed him and kept repeating that he was the handsomest man in this province. Had all three of us been in love with him? Félicia smiled calmly over her embroidery while Augustine and I set the table as quietly as possible and served our guest. Once, I caught Félicia staring at him and realized then that she too could become a dangerous rival one day. Justin was cheerful. He sang beautiful love songs for us and recited poetry.

“My three Graces!” he cried out one evening before the charming group we made under the lamplight.

“Which do you prefer?” Annette asked. “Which of us do you find most beautiful?”

“My heart cannot choose between the three of you,” he answered laughing, but his eyes met mine in a very loving way.

Annette was just a child. Justin was thirty years old. In private, he gave me one of his poems and asked me to wait three years for him. The deadline he had given himself to find a position and save up a little money so he could start a family.

“I am leaving, Claire, I have to. But if you promise to wait for me, I will come back and I will marry you. Three years go by quickly. At least that’s what we’ll tell ourselves to be more patient…”

I didn’t even have the guts to give him my hand.

When he returned, Annette was fifteen. She jumped on his neck but in a different way. He defended himself, sought me with his eyes, but he stared at Annette with admiration. He was visiting just as often as before, but he wasn’t coming for me, as I quickly realized. Annette had eclipsed me without even trying, and in comparison I could feel the decline of my youth. One night I caught them kissing and I ran to my room and locked myself in.

“I love Justin,” Annette told me the next day, “and he loves me. Oh! Claire, I’m so happy!”

We learned of her engagement at the same time we learned of Jane’s. Three months later, Justin died of pneumonia and Jane’s lieutenant in a car accident on his way to Port-au-Prince where he had been recalled.

Annette cried, then forgot. Jane, however, was pregnant. I was the first to whom she confessed this. Tattooed as I was by my bourgeois upbringing, I feared the responsibility and abandoned her in her distress. Her parents shut her away. She fled. I let her run without helping her. During the five years she lived in the lowly quarter where girls from good families were forbidden to go, I avoided talking to her or even greeting her. I think this is the only mistake for which I reproach myself. A few days after the death of the lieutenant, a new district commandant arrived by the name of Calédu.

With this name I will return to the present. Dawn rises on my sleepless night. I have tried to revive without too much distortion those I have known and those cut down by death. I don’t know to what extent I have succeeded. This resurrected past appeared to me as through a thick veil behind which I have evolved separate from my real self: an astonished spectator of my own life.

The corner grocer is the latest victim. I just learned this from an overexcited Mme Audier. This somewhat undermines Dr. Audier’s diagnosis regarding Calédu’s attacks against the bourgeois class. Mme Potiron’s little grocery has literally been pillaged.

“The agenda is not the same this time,” Dr. Audier explained to Jean Luze. “Believe me, Madame Potiron will not be tortured. The armed beggars have to eat, don’t they? Jacques Marti’s murder, the arrest of the poets, the arrest of the grocer, all reveal the excessive zeal of a soldier hoping to attract the attention of his superiors and earn distinction. But the torture inflicted on a certain category of women conceals something else.”

“What do you mean?” Jean Luze asked.

“Well, simply that our commandant must have often been humiliated by our beautiful bourgeois women and is now avenging himself in his own fashion.”

“Class again!” Jean Luze said, frowning.

“And color. I don’t think I need to tell you that in this black nation, color prejudice is as subtle and dangerous as in the United States.”

“Have the blacks in this country suffered that much?”

“To be honest, yes,” Audier confided, lowering his head.

“Does that really mean Calédu needs to act like a savage?” Félicia then said. “We’ve tried to accommodate his sensitivities. We opened our doors to him. What more can he want?”
“For you to welcome him as a friend, perhaps,” Dr. Audier answered, “or for one of our beautiful ‘aristocrats’ to agree to marry him.”

“Oh no! Never that!” Félicia protested. “The concessions to which we’ve stooped are quite enough. And besides, who but Annette could be to his liking? All we have left is a bunch of old hags.”

“Félicia, dear!” Jean Luze said, “take it easy, this topic always upsets you.”

“I hate them, I hate them,” she stammered, Jean Luze’s hand on her cheek. “Annette’s marriage has already lowered our standing. I kept quiet. I put up with everything. But it was horrible …”

“Now do you see what I mean?” Dr. Audier asked, shaking his head at Jean Luze. “I wasn’t exaggerating, as you can see.”

“Yes, but between us,” he answered, “Calédu and the others in power do nothing to make themselves likable. One is a vulgar criminal and the others are vile upstarts ready to do anything to fill their pockets. Surely there must be men of a different caliber somewhere in this country.”

“Well, you are beginning to get it, then, and for once you have come to the heart of the matter,” Dr. Audier said jubilantly “Do you think, my friend, that people worth their salt would act like Calédu or like Monsieur Trudor? They have been chosen precisely because of what they represent.”

“Yes. But their abuses can only make things worse.”

“They have found an opportunity to take revenge, to have their turn at humiliating us …”

And suddenly turning toward Mme Audier, who hadn’t said a word:

“You, my wife,” he said, “what did you once tell me after I invited Dr. Béranger for dinner?”

“That I had never seen blacks at my parents’ table,” she answered impatiently.

“And the same was true for the Clamonts,” Dr. Audier continued, “and for the Camuses, the Duclans, and the Soubirans, the same was true for all of us.”

“Too bad the commandant is a criminal,” Jean Luze then said, looking straight ahead, “because otherwise I might sympathize with him. In any case, he has made himself the representative of hatred and violence and no honest man could agree to absolve him.”

“By no means,” Dr. Audier concluded. “He has gone about it altogether badly. They should all go to hell!”

And seized with panic, he sprang to the door, opening it slightly in order to inspect the street …

Yes, maybe they’re right to behave the way they do, I then told myself. Yes, maybe I would be just as covetous if I were in their shoes, and just as ruthless. One thing remains true: hatred only breeds hatred.

Calédu recently spit in my path with contempt. His armed beggars are aggressive and act as if they were great leaders in their rags. They track us down like wild beasts. We walk around like beaten dogs, tails between our legs and noses to the ground. Terrorized and tamed by flea-bitten bums and upstarts. How humiliating! …

Last night’s dream disturbs me still: I was alone, standing in broad daylight in the middle of an immense arena framed by stands filled with agitated, terrifying crowds. They were screaming and calling me out and pointing at me with their fingers. What were they accusing me of? I ran, ashamed of my nakedness, looking in vain for a dark corner where I could hide, when suddenly I saw a stone statue before me. At that moment, the crowd’s cries became deafening. The statue, with its enormous phallus stiffened in a voluptuous and painful spasm, was of Calédu. The statue came to life and the phallus wagged feverishly. I threw myself at its feet, submissive and rebellious, hardly daring to look up, my thighs shut tight. I heard cries: “Kill, kill!” The crowd was cheering on Calédu to murder me. Cold metal caressed the skin of my neck as ferocious laughter replaced the screaming of the suddenly silent spectators. The weapon sank slow and deep into my flesh. For a long time I remained immobile, frozen in terror. Then, rising, I walked in a thick mist, my hands in front of me, beheaded, with my head dangling on my chest. Dead and living through my death …

Such nightmares are familiar to me now. How many times have I been chased by mad bulls, by low beasts, monsters, all wanting to rape or kill me? When I was a little girl, I often dreamed that my father had been transformed into a roaring two-legged creature with a lion’s mane, whipping me as I searched in vain for the key that would release me from his cage!
We were invited to spend the day at the Trudors’. Jean-Claude could have been my excuse to stay home but Félicia wants to take him along because of the beach.

“I know you,” Annette said to me, “no last-minute cancellation. I’ll go get you myself if the Luzes come without you.”

So, whether I liked it or not, I had to go.

The prefect’s modern villa is the only beautiful building in our area. It looks ostentatiously out of place beside our old buildings with their twenty doors and windows and their balconies and gables, which instantly evoke the original history of a fabulous past. If, as Mme Trudor said the other night, her husband serves the Republic for peanuts, then he must also have discovered a gold mine. In the midst of their chandeliers, silk curtains and carpets, you forget all about the beggars and become convinced you have been transported into another world. It is less hot today. The sea is before us. The water is so calm that one can look on its sandy depths undulating as far as the eye can see. Under a veranda covered with bougainvillea in bloom, Mme Trudor is frantically arranging a monumental buffet, and she greets me with enthusiasm.

“At last, an intelligent person who can help me with this,” she says to me. “These servants can be so dumb! …”

Does she think, as I do in fact, that my place is in the pantry? In any case, I’ll be kept busy and that’s fortunate. I feel ill at ease beside these half-naked women. Félicia has put Jean-Claude down on some cushions at her feet and Annette is cooing over him, posing in adoration. Jean Luze is chatting with M. Trudor, drinking whiskey on the rocks. He seems pretty cheerful. The sight of so much female flesh must not be unpleasant for him. I catch him staring somewhat frequently at a tall bimbo with tanned skin, a very fashionable girl from Port-au-Prince staying with the Trudors and playing the ingénue. He goes inside to get changed and comes back in bathing trunks. Mme Trudor and I are the only ones not swimming. It would amuse me to see her half-naked. It doesn’t flatter me to be paired with her. Do they think I don’t have a good body? Even Annette doesn’t have my sculpted abdomen. Félicia wears a more decent bathing suit, probably to hide her bulges. She doesn’t suffer from false shame; she’s lucky that way.

Gleaming with sweat, M. Trudor prances among the ladies, happy to play the pasha in his luxury villa. He gives Jean Luze a tour of the house, waving his finger in the air.

“You are an intellectual, one can sense that. Come, I will show you something you will appreciate.”

He takes him to the library to let him admire his books. One gets the feeling that they are sitting there for show. Perhaps they have never been opened.

After they leave, I take a look around the library: it’s actually a very good one. I gaze for a moment at the nude body of Salammbo embraced by a colorful snake on a morocco leather cover; I quickly scan a few familiar titles suddenly made less appealing in their pompous finery, and then sneak away to mingle with the others outside.

During dinner, the girl from Port-au-Prince turns to Jean Luze. They go around the buffet together chatting. She offers to guide him; there she is, picking out dishes he points to with his finger. I look for Félicia. She is cradling Jean-Claude and sipping a cool drink.

They say people are always disappointing the more you get to know them. Is it because I hope to be disappointed that I watch Jean Luze’s every move? Everything I have seen of him has only increased my admiration. Even his harshness toward Annette is justified in my eyes. Repression has given me the nose of a good hunting dog. I can smell the squirming of others’ thoughts merely by dilating my nostrils. Despite reassuring appearances, my nose tells me things aren’t going well for Félicia.

She who is generally so confident now seems to give off something nervous and unstable. She always remarks others in her own image. Even after the scene she witnessed with her own eyes, she still somehow sees Jean Luze as a man without weaknesses, a man Annette provoked in vain. In the same way, she also refuses to admit that Jean-Claude has worn her out. He must be the best baby in the world for he is her son. Despite the sleepless nights, she insists that he only cries when he’s hungry. I shudder to see her being so stubborn as to banish the thought that he could get sick.

More nonexistent than ever, I continue to keep my vigil. I am so dull that I have become colorless. In any case, that’s the only way to escape being bad-mouthed. At least they have left me alone. Even Father Paul gives me communion without confession, as it were. He could cite me as an example in his sermons. Does he really believe in purity? I would call purity a total ignorance of the torments of the flesh or else the triumph of the will over them. If this victory can, according to religion, save the soul, how can one explain the sexual stirrings of a woman who has
lived in eternal chastity.

I can hardly imagine my life outside this house. It shelters all the sad memories of my childhood and my youth. Running away might heal me of my passion. But the thought of leaving makes me sick. As shabby as it is, this province is the apple of my eye. Could I really break all my habits if Jean Luze were to take me with him? Am I nursing impossible hopes? Aren’t the friendship and admiration he has for me strengthening these hopes? Nevertheless, mysterious as he may be, have I not put my finger on his weakness? After all, he almost gave in to Annette. In fact, he did give in to her completely and lied to Félicia.

He’s grown friendly with Joël Marti. They talk about music and literature. I am astonished to see him so animated. He gets all worked up during these conversations and is full of exuberance.

“But no, no, you’re wrong, Chopin is still a poet, a melancholy poet, a musician for neurotics; Beethoven personifies courage in suffering, the struggle against misfortune. His infirmity enriched him instead of diminishing him. His behavior should be an example for us. All of his compositions are hymns to life. Listen …”

He plays Chopin’s Concerto no. 1 for a minute and then Beethoven’s Concerto no. 5.

“Compare them,” he adds.

“Well, my old phonograph doesn’t have the same sound. It’s a very old machine, you know.”

Jean Luze laughs, he is happy. He needed friends! I bring them glasses, ice and what is left of the whiskey M. Long brought.

“No, Claire, some rum, Joël prefers rum and lately so do I,” Jean Luze tells me.

He leans over Joël.

“You are only twenty years old,” he tells him, “and you live in an outdated world. I will guide you. What authors do you like? It’s amazing to discover someone like you in a place like this, someone so curious, educated, enthusiastic and sensitive.”

“A lot of those arrested by Calédu were like me, hungry for more education. There were many of us here writing poetry, interested in music and literature. Our meetings were forbidden. We protested and they hunted us down. Some have disappeared and others have fled. I would like to leave too but, sadly, I am too poor.”

His shaking hand reaches for the rum bottle, and he helps himself. Later in the day, I see him staggering home.

Jean Luze has no idea how easily these misunderstood poets can get drunk.

Maybe this vice of theirs brings them a false sense of transcendence.

I’m being unfair. They are right to seek distraction from their suffering, to drown their unhappiness in a sea of alcohol, because their future is as dark as an abyss …

Jean Luze now feels compelled to restrict Joël’s drinking. He even preaches to him about it.

“Take it easy, Joël, easy,” he said to him today, taking the rum bottle from his hands. “It’s a slippery slope.”

Joël, already drunk, doesn’t take it well.

“Oh no, absolutely no lectures please or I’ll drink elsewhere.”

He becomes abusive and Jean Luze calms him.

“I only want what’s right for you, you know.”

“I know, I know. But what bothers me about our friendship is that you will never understand …”

“Never understand what? That you want to get piss-drunk. No, I’ll never get that. I understood your despair better when you were trying to console yourself with poetry. All of you seem to think you have a monopoly on suffering. Nothing can better drag a nation into moral and intellectual bankruptcy than believing its misery is special.”

“And what do you know about misery?” Joël screams.

“I know what I know!”

“Do you know who my brother was? Do you know what he meant to me? When my parents died, he took care of me like a father. He was intelligent, honest. They drove him insane. It’s their fault, you hear me, their fault! And I too will go insane one day …”

“Oh, enough of that!” Jean Luze lashes out in a voice so forceful that the boy is startled. “Are you also going to throw yourself headfirst into the trap they’ve set for you? You want it to be your turn to serve as their target?”
Joël looks away.

“What’s the use, they’re going to get us all,” he mutters in a mournful and desperate voice. “We’re caught in the teeth of the gear and the only solution is flight or despair.”

“No, you have to fight.”

“With our bare fists?”

“You have to hope,” Jean Luze replies more gently. “Those who sow hatred will reap it one day. Those who beat and torture are only cogs in an already weak system. Behind their hatred lie other hatreds. You have to hold it together and wait for your moment.”

Joël listens to him passionately.

Oh, imagine following him in pursuit of some impossible dream! Yes, he’s an idealist. But how rejuvenating it is to hope wildly and even dream about building a new and better world.

Last night he entertained Joël’s friends. Sad poets, overcome with alcoholism, who stumble along the walls when the sun goes down. He has found people to protect, guide, advise. He feels he’s doing something useful with his life. Maybe thanks to them he will decide not to leave!

“Jean has finally made some friends,” Félicia says. “I hear Joël is incredibly intelligent, and that he likes music and books as well.”

How lonely he must have been! I am ashamed of us. Oh! What I wouldn’t give to get rid of my complexes. They stop me from opening my mouth and expressing my ideas even when I’m choking on them. We put all of our intellect in the service of profit and flattery Whatever Dr. Audier says, terror has turned us into resigned cowards. Who will help us? Who is fearless and has the courage to cry out the truth if not Jean Luze? I listen without taking part in any of these conversations. The screams wafting from the prison make both of us wince. “Filthy torturer! Filthy torturer!” he muttered the other night, angrily running his hand through his hair. He’ll end up making himself a suspect. I can see the moment when Calédu will accuse him of meeting with “suspicious intellectuals.” My silent hatred has even contaminated Félicia. “I can’t take it anymore,” she once burst out, covering her ears … She was so afraid of her own voice that she suddenly fell silent with her eyes closed and her mouth agape. And I could see her lashes trembling with tears.

Eugénie Duclan is getting married. She is happy as a lark, going door-to-door to announce the joyful event. Annette bursts out laughing when she shares the news with Félicia.

“Paul is sure that poor Charles has been ‘past it’ for ages, if you know what I mean. Eugénie will be so disappointed! But who would think to get married at that age!”

She takes me as her witness.

It seems that past a certain age, marrying for the sake of convenience is as ridiculous as marrying for love. Custom is as powerful as fashion—impossible to disregard either without giving offense.

Eugénie Duclan
is so bold
at forty years old
to let it all hang …

sings Annette. She did not invent the song, everyone knows it, as she is amused to tell Félicia.

Eugénie wants a first-class wedding and dares invite me to be part of her procession along with the other Daughters of Mary. She has done her hair and made herself up like a young girl. It looks like she’s wearing a wrinkled, sexless, tragic mask.

“I know people are making fun of me,” she tells me, “but that’s too bad. Would you agree to be my maid of honor? We have to stick together …”

Who should stick together, and why?

I nearly throw her out after promising to do everything she wants. The only thing I’m afraid of is Jean Luze catching me in such grotesque company. I don’t care to belong to any sisterhood. The idea that I’m an old maid, set apart and original, pleases me …

Jean Luze is talking with Joël in the living room as Annette flits around them. Félicia is nursing Jean-Claude. Jean Luze is so absorbed in conversation that he doesn’t even notice Annette’s presence. He is leaning over Joël and
speaking to him in a low voice. It’s Joël who seems distracted. His eyes follow Annette, and Jean Luze turns around angrily.

“Why are you buzzing around us?” he asks her.

“Me, buzzing around you?” she asks, taken aback. “But I’m doing no such thing.”

She runs downstairs and joins Félicia in the dining room.

“Apparently, I am a nuisance to our gentlemen and their philosophical discussions. I wonder what your husband thinks is so special about that little birdbrain.”

“He’s very cultivated for his age, Jean told me.”

“Bah! he’s a man all the same, isn’t he?”

“What do you expect? Intellectuals are interested in things besides women.”

“That’s a shame!”

Félicia yawns.

“But you yourself have nothing to complain about. Are you happy?” she asks Annette.

“Yes.”

“Paul is a good husband?”

“He’s a good lover.”

“What does that mean?”

Annette smiles wickedly and fixes a lock of hair on her lovely forehead.

“It means what it means. You’re no choir girl. It’s just that some husbands don’t do right by their wives. Making love is little more than an obligation for them. Wham bam, and that’s it! Such husbands are bad lovers; but others treat their wives like mistresses: they are good husbands and good lovers at the same time.”

“What theories!”

“Well, it’s not so bad in practice either, believe me.”

She said this protectively, sure of herself. Is she trying to diminish Jean Luze in Félicia’s eyes with these insinuating comparisons? Or was she offering her opinion of him in light of her more recent experience?

“I’m only telling you what Paul taught me,” she continues cruelly. “If a man is holding a woman in his arms and restrains himself, he’s either impotent or abnormal.”

I notice a worried look in Félicia’s eyes.

“Well, I assume that’s never happened to you,” she says weakly.

“It did, once.”

Félicia’s fingers curl around the arm of her chair.

“Ah! Well, what does any of this matter as long as people love each other,” she adds, annoyed.

“I used to think the same way before Paul.”

“So your Paul is a god?”

“No. He’s a black man and he knows how to take a woman. He is so passionate that all he would have to do is brush against your hand to desire you.”

“Don’t tell your friends about that.”

“I’ll kill anyone who comes near him.”

“You’re crazy,” Félicia replied simply.

But she was gasping.

The rain requires fresh processions, this time to make it stop. It’s raining interminably and, as luck would have it, right after the extensive clear-cutting of trees. For fifteen days, we have heard the whine of M. Long’s electric saw without interruption. A tree falls every five minutes. I crept around the coast yesterday to witness this bloodbath. Immense trees fell to the ground with what sounded like a great roar before their dying breath. The whole region had already been cleared and the peasants, harassed by Calédu, wore inscrutable, hostile, troubled faces. Avalanches of soil slid down the mountains and piled around their feet. Coffee is nothing but a memory for all of us. Timber export has replaced that business. When the wood is gone, he will go after something else. The slave trade, perhaps. He
could easily ship hundreds from among the beggars. There’s been recent talk about hiring out peasants to cut sugarcane in the Dominican Republic. This was mentioned in the Port-au-Prince newspapers that Dr. Audier regularly receives. A commission composed of doctors, typists and accountants is expected to arrive next week. The human trade known as Operation Fight the Famine has begun. Is M. Long also getting in on the scheme? Word has spread and the peasants are abandoning their bleached, bled-dry land to watch the cars arriving from Port-au-Prince. Their number swells day by day.

I hear that they’ve been reduced to eating dogs at Lion Mountain. “Why not? We do eat beef and goat, after all,” Annette says. I can see it coming, we’ll soon turn into cannibals. Many of us find this entertaining. “Ugh! Eating dog! It must taste awful! And what criminal instincts these children have!” Mme Audier opines. Eugénie Duclan simply accuses them of being gluttonous and abnormal. “There’s no other way to understand it. Other people’s problems are their own business, of course, that’s as sure as death.”

“In the street I see people so filthy that I want to throw up,” Annette complains. “It’s disgusting. They could at least wash.”

She is pregnant and her husband has taken the habit of imposing her upon us more and more. Is it so she won’t get suspicious? He always claims to be detained by business meetings. Annette goes after Félicia without mercy. She can hardly think what else to come up with next to hurt her and destroy her peace. Does she envy her, contrary to what she says? Tension is rising between them. Félicia can be pretty resourceful when it comes to defending her man.

“But I’m not talking about Jean,” Annette protests hypocritically. “What makes you think I am?”

Félicia’s lips are trembling. She has to restrain herself in order not to make it obvious she knows Annette is just a woman scorned. That’s my view of her as well. In any case, she’s getting her revenge on Félicia. The way you take revenge defines you: she does it in a petty, boorish way.

Showing up an hour late, Paul is greeted with cries of joy at the living room door. Annette looks around to make sure they are alone, and then changes her tone and expression:

“I don’t believe you and your business meetings,” she says angrily, “I don’t believe it.”

I can see the day when she comes to regret this union, and when Paul will reproach her in good Haitian fashion for not being a virgin on their wedding night.

The recruitment agents have arrived. They are lodged all over town and have set up shop in Mme Potiron’s former store. Hundreds of peasants pass through in single file, and are accepted or rejected depending on their health and age. Apparently some of them go so far as to purchase work permits from doctors who are exploiting the situation. Dr. Audier refused to issue health certificates to three patients with tuberculosis, but they left with the others anyway. In the distance, the abandoned mountains rise impassive. The recruiters are leaving tomorrow and the peasants are already piling into the trucks with sacks on their backs.

“Where are you going?” people ask them.
“Off to cut cane in the Dominican Republic.”
“For money?”
“Of course! Do we look like we would sweat for nothing in some white man’s country?”
“What do you have to do to get hired?”
“Go sign up at the desk. And if your health is no good, pay someone and you’ll get a spot for sure.”
“Will we come back rich at least?”
“Who knows. We’re going to try our luck.”

The mountains continue to empty out, growing even more impassive.
It’s amazing that the trade of our compatriots could leave us so cold.
“Thy’re going to seek their fortunes elsewhere,” Mme Audier told me. “They’re better off than we are.”

Félicia is steadfast in her principles. I am not unaware of this, but I go to Jane’s more and more often.

“You’re going too far, Claire,” she told me recently, “and you are setting a bad example for Annette. Don’t you think?”

“Jane needs help,” I responded.
“Fine, give in to your soft heart, send her some work, but don’t see her so often. Soon there will be gossip about this friendship, you know our little world.”

Father Paul went after me as well. I ran into him just as I was just about to go inside Jane’s home.

“What do you want in that girl’s house, my child?” he asked me.

“She’s making dresses for me.”

“Félicia is right. You are getting dresses made for yourself quite often these days. I don’t need to tell you these visits worry your sister and that she’s the one who alerted me. I hope there is nothing untoward in your relations with Jane Bavière.”

He leaned on his walking stick and looked like the grim reaper under his black robe. I’m not young anymore, and he should have realized this. But he had known me to be so fainthearted and timid that he refused to believe I’d changed.

“What do you mean, Father?”

“Life has denied you certain pleasures, my child; try not to seek them in sin.”

“There is no call for such vile accusations,” I answered, shaking with rage.

“I am a priest, I am fulfilling my priestly duty in protecting you from yourself …”

I interrupted him impertinently.

“Yes, but I don’t like priests who preach slander by example.”

“You are defending those who live in sin so bitterly that you have forgotten yourself in this case. I don’t recognize you anymore. Don’t you know that men visit her at night?”

I turned my back on him and went to knock on Jane’s door. She immediately realized I was beside myself.

“You’re shaking,” she said, “are you sick?”

She read my silence. Her face became sad.

“They’re giving you a hard time on account of me, aren’t they?” she continued. “I know they condemn me. Your friendship is precious to me but I won’t ask you to come back.”

She had me sit and then returned to her work.

“I don’t know how to make these people happy,” she continued. “Because I had a child outside of wedlock, I am guilty of every possible sin; you deprived yourself of everything, yet they don’t spare you either. I really don’t know how to make them happy.”

She took her son in her arms and kissed him tenderly.

“Well, I’m happy, too bad for them,” she added.

“I’m not.”

She pushed the child toward me.

“Give Claire a kiss too,” she said. “Give her a big hug.”

And the child, putting his arms around me, gave me a gentle peck on the cheek.

“He’ll be a man soon enough,” Jane added. “And you’re never lonely with a man when you love him.”

I am surprised by my interest in Jean Luze and Joël Marti’s discussions. They could never accuse me of buzzing around them. No, I sit too humbly in my chair with my sewing. Who would ever look askance at me? Therein lies my strength. I am also surprised by the sympathy I suddenly feel for Joël. This Joël whose birth I witnessed without ever taking the slightest interest in him. That was true even when he became an orphan, because you can look without seeing, meet without knowing, give without sharing. From the outset, I refused to have anything to do with others and remained neutral. Now I am becoming too human, too involved. It’s Jean Luze’s fault. It’s dangerous. I am taking on too much. I am making everything my business. But oh, my head spins! It releases secret enthusiasm in me!

Félicia is bedridden again. Could she be pregnant again? Jean-Claude is only six months old. She doesn’t deprive herself of anything. In any case, I’m taking care of the child now. He spends more time with me than with her. I soothe and coddle him.

This morning, while I was strolling with him on the veranda, Jean Luze addressed me, somewhat uncomfortably.

“Claire,” he said, “though I am a little ashamed to take advantage of your kindness, I’m going to ask you to take
Jean-Claude into your room for a few days. I’m worried about Félicia’s health.”

He wanted to take the crib to my room right away but I stopped him, panic-stricken.

“Give me a minute to make room for him,” I protested, trembling to see him enter my sanctuary unexpectedly.

“Of course,” he answered. “By the way, while we’re on the subject, why do you lock your door?”

The minute he left, I ran to put my treasures in a safe place. I hid the doll as best I could in the wardrobe, made sure that my books were back under the bed, and opened my door, shivering as if I personally were about to be violated.

Jean-Claude has been my guest for several days now. I wake up at night to change and rock him to sleep. This hot, living little body against me. I’m happy to see him soil his diapers, empty his bottle, whimper for more. The smell of talcum powder and milk, it all makes Félicia ill. She kisses her son and throws up. She is definitely allergic to her condition. Jean Luze lives in my room. Blessed be this new pregnancy, this new pregnancy that tortures her. May she give birth ten, twenty times more so that she will give him to me. I will be nanny to all these children. I will work myself to death for them as long as their father is somewhat mine. He’s rolling around on my bed playing with his son, he’s resting on my bed. On my sheets he leaves behind the smell of a man’s body, of tobacco, of clean rough sweat. I deeply inhale the pillow where his head was resting; I kiss his son where he kissed him. I bask in my good fortune. He often returns from work with groceries, holding them out to me as if I were his wife. His eyes rest on me and he pinches my cheek to thank me, probably for taking such good care of Jean-Claude. I run to the pantry to get him that steaming cup of black coffee he loves above all things.

“You,” he says to me, “are a pearl among women.”

It’s been a month since I added anything to my journal. I have had neither the time nor the desire. My life is so full! I have a son and a man. My door is open all day long to Jean Luze. Why would I need an outlet? I live fully.

Félicia is four months along and her morning sickness is getting worse instead of better. She is wasting away even as her belly grows larger. Her cadaverous appearance is hard to look at. Dr. Audier gives her daily injections because she throws up the little she eats. She kicked out Jean Luze from their room the other day because she claimed he smelled of tobacco. Is she also allergic to love? Abstinence will make him easy prey.

Annette comes to the house almost every day. She is splendid in her maternity blouse. Triumphant, she continues to torture Félicia.

“Poor sweetie,” she cries out, kissing her, “you look so awful! It’s a crime! Your husband shouldn’t get you pregnant! …”

This in the presence of Jean Luze.

With mimicry impossible to reproduce she recounts Eugénie Duclan’s wedding. She imitates the pharmacist’s stiff walk and Eugénie’s childish posturing.

“And she had the gall to wear a crown of orange blossoms in her hair. It just made her look even older. Nothing draws one’s attention like contrast. What a dreadful display! At that age one should have the decency to have a simple wedding.”

Youth is pitiless, and with good reason!

I saw Dora Soubiran fall. She was walking with legs spread apart, a basket on her arm; she stumbled on a stone and fell. I ran down the stairs. I gave her my hand in the middle of the street and walked her home. Calédu happened to go by just then. He stopped. I did not look at him. Eyes glinted behind drawn blinds. Charles Farus stood behind his counter with his eyes wide and his hand over his mouth. Several beggars blocked our way.

“Let us through!” I shouted at them impatiently.

I led Dora inside her house and we stayed there a long time stirring up old memories.

“Watch out for the commandant,” she whispered suddenly, “watch out for him.”

“I will come back every day,” I replied firmly.

“Watch out for him,” she repeated.
Suddenly she began to shiver as if she were cold.

“With each blow, he would yell: ‘snobs, you bunch of snobs, mulatto snobs, I’ll make cripples of all of you, you
snobs …’

She hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

“He hates us! Claire, he hates us!”

The cause of this hatred is beyond her: she has never understood much about politics and her suffering is of the
most useless, most unfair variety that Calédu has ever inflicted on anyone.

The whispers from behind the blinds followed me home. Why was I afraid? And how little effort it takes to be rid
of that feeling!

“Do you remember,” she said to me the next day, “our wonderful evenings together in the old days, back in those
beautiful days? We would eat what we liked, weren’t afraid of anyone, and we were happy.” (She lowered her
voice.) “He may have crippled me but my soul has no master save the Lord, the Lord alone.”

Her stubbornness made me smile.

“I won’t hang my head before him either anymore,” I promised.

“They’re constantly spying on me, Claire!” she continued. “Night and day, they’re tapping on my door, it’s
unbearable! They’re watching me as if I were a ringleader. Look …”

She opened the doors to the backyard: behind the fence beggars standing on tiptoe were trying to figure out what
was going on inside her house.

“They’re all armed,” she whispers. “I’m going to flee to Port-au-Prince. I have already written to friends and told
them everything.”

“To whom did you entrust your letter?”

“To Madame Camuse. She promised to get someone reliable to deliver it for me.”

The beggars posted in the street followed me to my door with their eyes. Two of them even escorted me. Was it
out of weakness or fear that I opened my bag and gave them money?

Can it be that I am the most cowardly of all the women here?

Somewhere in the sky there is a ring of stars. I can’t sleep. Intense and mysterious is the night! It resembles my
inner life. A few stars play hide-and-seek. I see them run and chase each other in a corner of the sky. A luminous dot
under the trees on the street awakens my curiosity. Someone is still there smoking and walking alone. I recognize
Calédu’s silhouette. He can’t sleep either. I feel like running up to him to dig my nails into his eyes and drag him
blind and bleeding along Grand-rue.

I look after Félicia like a mother. I kneel down to make her drink her soup. I am at her feet …

I always thought that one would become generous if one became rich by chance, but I’ve learned that plain
happiness can make you good as well. Everyone has his own idea of happiness. Suffering has made me modest, so
for now I am content with life’s charity. I even tremble at the thought of getting too ambitious, for fear of spoiling
everything. Félicia’s presence is so negligible that it doesn’t bother me. I treat her like a sick child. How could I be
jealous of this wretch? I am Jean-Claude’s mother, really, just as I am Jean Luze’s wife. This idea brings me so
much joy that I would like to share it. I would like to play the Beethoven concerto at full volume. I want to set the
house ablaze with music. Félicia impatiently asks me to lower the volume; the concerto annoys her. This brings me
back to earth. She does exist. She is between us. Right now, she is listening to Gisèle Audier’s gossip. The woman
chatters like a magpie.

“Me, my dear,” she says, “I am against all these women who disregard the prescribed laws of society and claim to
be independent. Lately, it seems like anything goes, it’s disgusting. In the old days, it wasn’t like that. We’ve let our
youth off the leash. They’ve become depraved. I would never name names but I know of very young girls who
won’t say no to anything. You’ve probably found out by now what kind of life Jane Bavière leads. It’s appalling.
She entertains men after nightfall. Many have been seen going there. Who are they? We don’t know that yet. No one
has recognized them. They come at night and knock on her door. Eugénie Duclan saw them one evening. So has
Madame Camuse. Maybe she invites the prefect, and the commandant. She won’t be able to keep her secret for long.
The entire neighborhood is watching her. Oh! But we’ll learn their names soon enough! It’s just like what happened with the Grandupré girl. You know, I was the first to see that she was sneaking into Old Mathurin’s house, the old pervert. I told the whole neighborhood and Madame Grandupré beat Agnès until there was blood.”

My God! How I would like the right to slap her to make her keep her mouth shut! And how mean they are, despite everything that’s happened …

It was barely five in the morning and Jean-Claude woke earlier than usual and was crying in his crib, when there was a knock at my door.

I opened up and Jean Luze came in.

“Why is he crying?” he asked me. “Is he sick?”

“Our little gentleman has probably soiled himself and wants to be changed.”

He leaned over the crib at the same moment I did and our heads touched.

He smiled and lifted his face to look at me.

“Settle down your son,” he said.

“My son!”

My emphasis must have struck him because he quickly straightened.

“Isn’t he? Claire, isn’t he?”

He must have been affected by my loosened hair, the neckline of my dressing gown revealing my cleavage, because he exclaimed as if he were seeing me for the first time:

“You look awfully good like this!”

I was busy changing Jean-Claude.

“You look awfully good like this!” he repeated. “You must have been a splendid girl, and I wonder why you didn’t make a life for yourself. Dr. Audier mentioned those complexes, but I’m still skeptical. Perhaps you were disappointed in love. It’s none of my business,” he went on despite my silence, “but I think you have everything it takes to make a man happy. Claire! Are you listening to me?” He took Jean-Claude in his arms and fell on my bed:

“That godmother of yours, she never answers your question,” he added. “That’s how she discourages nosy people.”

Barefoot, in pajamas and on my bed, he unsettled me so much that I could barely look at him. I went to the kitchen to look for the child’s bottle and when I came back I found him smoking and thinking, lying beside the baby.

“Are you so unhappy with your lot?” he asked me.

“Why do you ask me that?”

“You look a little desperate sometimes …”

“Me!”

“Yes, you. And now you’ve fallen into the habit of sacrificing yourself, and people take advantage. It’s not fair …”

I bristle at his pity and interrupt him.

“All of that doesn’t matter.”

“But of course it does.”

He put his hands on my shoulders in a friendly and affectionate way.

“You have a hard time accepting things, Claire,” he went on, “and you live in a state of perpetual revolt. You’ll end up miserable all your life, like me. I’d like to help.”

“You! …”

The word came out of my mouth like a scream.

He dragged a few puffs from his cigarette without looking at me.

“You are like me,” he added, “I see it more and more every day. I happen to know the reason for those lines in your forehead. You have to forget Calédu, you must calm your sense of outrage. Do you know what happens to people like us? Do you know what they can expect?”

And in a halting voice, as if he was pulling the words out of himself, he said:
“I was only eighteen when I went to fight against the Germans. My father died the year before and I left my mother and sister back home. We were poor; they needed me. I only had one desire: to kill Germans and avenge us. I left and was dispatched to the trenches, into the thick of the fighting. A cold rage kept me going and I slaughtered Germans at point-blank range. I kept track of how many in a notebook, and in four years I killed about fifty. I was gravely wounded and sent to the hospital clutching my own guts, dying. Back home, I learned that my sister and my mother were both dead, and I found work far away from my country, seeking in vain to forget and to heal my soul. I had done what everyone calls my duty, but to this day I am still convinced that the war robbed me of my mother and my sister, who both died of anguish and poverty …”

“There won’t be another war,” I said.

“So I guess you don’t keep up with what’s going on in the world, my dear Claire!” he replied. “If my country ever fights Germany again I know that I will give up my wife and son. Nothing could stop me from leaving, nothing.”

He remained quiet for a while, then, throwing his cigarette out the window, he seemed to make a visible effort to control his emotions.

“Well, let’s set aside that wretched conversation and take care of this little cherub. As they say so well here, God is good, and there will be no war.”

He tried to feed Jean-Claude. Two little hands greedily closed around his.

“My little guy! My little guy!” he said, happy.

They belong so much to me that I feel like crying with joy No one will ever take them from me.

Sentiment rules the world. Cynics swear otherwise until one day it finally catches them. We are all in search of that “grain of sand” that will reconcile us with ourselves. Even those who are jaded end up dragging their boredom all over the world in the same hope. I have even forgotten about Calédu and his people. Jean-Claude and his father are healing me. I have recklessly broken the dikes. I’ve cupped a hand over my own “grain of sand.” I have transferred to these two beings all the love that was in my heart. Hatred has left me. I keep out everything that could distract me from this wonderful feeling.

Yesterday while Annette was there, Jean Luze needed a book in order to discuss it at greater length with Joël Marti. He looked for it in the library to no avail and called me over to ask about it.

“I can’t find that History of Religions I left here.”

“That book is in my room,” I felt obliged to admit.

“In your room?” he said, surprised. “Are you reading it?”

“I’m rereading it.”

He looked at me skeptically.

“No.”

“You’re surprised I read—do you think I’m an idiot?”

My tone was so bitter for once that he looked at me as if he didn’t know me.

“Here’s your book,” I said, giving it to him. “In one piece.”

“Come now, Claire. It’s not a reproach.”

There was so much gentleness in his voice and eyes that I felt ashamed I was so defensive.

He held me by the shoulder and leaned in to give me a friendly kiss, but I quickly pushed him away.

“What a chip on your shoulder!” he said, and pinched my cheek.

“Nice, Claire,” Annette cried out with a burst of laughter. “You play mommy to his son and wifey with him! …”

Fortunately, she didn’t see the look of hatred I gave her. No, you imbecile, I’m not playing. I am mother and wife in everything but name. Might you be jealous of me for once? You took the ground out from under me once without my being able to say even a word in self-defense. I pushed you into Jean Luze’s arms on purpose only to test my power. He will never love you. Do you get it? Never. Keep telling yourself that my role seems merely secondary. I exist only for him, anyone can see that. Or would you like me to prove it to you by making advances to him too? I am still superior to you in that respect. Our intimacy often invites me into scenarios worthy of you, but I decline. I don’t wish to seduce him like some manipulative sex kitten. I want more than his body. I am demanding and picky. I
know that certain kinds of conduct would be unforgivable in a woman my age. At forty you can persevere, but it’s too late to make your debut. At least, that’s true more or less. I know this and I am patiently biding my time.

Honesty is a truly difficult thing to learn! Besides, where does honesty begin and where does it end? In obvious bad faith, I refuse to see myself clearly. Certain thoughts, once born, are to be regretted as much as certain words. Sometimes, in my feverishly imagined love scenes, I get panic attacks. This panic is often triggered by the sudden memory of my father, who is whipping me with his belt. If Jean Luze were to burst into my room just then and take me in his arms, I would struggle, cry out and defend myself as if my life were threatened. Do I just like the idea of love? Have I not willingly chosen this unreal situation because I feel unable to go all the way? This is my challenge. I am going to belong to Jean Luze. He alone can help me. I have to know what I am made of.

More and more I have the feeling that my imaginary affair with Jean Luze is an ersatz substitute I have chosen on purpose because of its power and corrosiveness. How much longer will I be able to fool myself?

He’s mine, this kid I didn’t carry in my womb! I have made his first pants. He crawls around on all fours and stands with some help. He has eight teeth that came in without too much trouble. He is a stout little guy, very lively, and welcomes his father by holding his arms out to him. Although I keep whispering it to him, he hasn’t managed to say “mama” yet. I want to be the first he calls by that name. His presence in my room seems to soothe my feelings. His innocence is so disarming and his purity so contagious that I even feel shame when I am naked in front of him. That is why yesterday I burned everything that reminded me of the past, the doll, the pornographic postcards, etc. I am done with these old substitutes. I am nothing but mother and wife. I have moved up a notch.

“Call Jean for me,” Félicia sometimes asks. “I am so sick I don’t have the strength to love him.”

Without jealousy I watch him sit beside her and kiss her hand or stroke her hair. I have never caught him touching her as if he were in love with her. Despite himself, he treats her like a sick child. He pities her, not me.

“It’s the pregnancy,” he says to comfort her, “you have to wait a bit. It will be over soon. You’re already four months along …”

Such tenderness!

“Jean is nothing but an ethereal being,” Annette told me yesterday. “I bet he’s a shabby lover. I would definitely cheat on him if I were his wife. And I am grateful that life has worked out the way it has.”

I don’t believe a word of what Mme Audier and Father Paul say about Jane. Even though Félicia frowns on it, I visit her and Dora regularly. Dora and those crazed eyes of hers! Jane, stooping over her sewing machine, working late into the night, and seeing no one but me! I will never abandon them again. Jane’s son often talks to Pierrilus, the one-armed beggar who sleeps under our veranda, the only one beaten by Calédu for complaining—he dared ask for his wages—but probably the only one to hate him for his smug indifference to their plight. Does he think it’s enough to arm them against us, is he so stupid as to believe this will comfort them as they starve? …

Félicia keeps getting worse. She is skin and bones. I forbid myself to think of her death; but she looks too much like a woman condemned. How often I have done away with her in my mind! I did so to give flight to my dreams, to stuff myself with illusions. What perfect crimes, what unmitigated betrayals we store up in ourselves! Only deep within do we have the courage to really live, and that’s a good thing. I am the one who dresses Félicia, the one who feeds her. She has been handed over to her worst enemy. Today, Félicia threw up her soup. She can’t keep anything down. Jean Luze came home just as she suffered a mild fainting spell, during the course of which she lost blood. Jean Luze left to get Audier and came back alone.

“What do we do?” he asks. “Audier’s not home.”

Félicia is pale as a corpse. Jean Luze is kneeling by her. He calls her name, then runs off again. Félicia seizes on this as an opportunity to faint again. I rush to the medicine cabinet to get a bottle of alcohol. I return to find Félicia moaning. Where is Jean Luze? I don’t want to be alone with her. Finally, the door opens and Jean Luze walks in with Dr. Audier.

He leans over Félicia to examine her.

“What do you recognize me?” he asks.
She opens her eyes and nods. The examination is unpleasant, even painful. Dr. Audier takes Jean Luze aside and says to him:

“I recommend a few injections to give her enough strength to withstand an abortion.”

“An abortion!”

“It’s better that way, trust me. Your wife has a fibroma and has lost a lot of blood …”

“I’m putting her in your hands,” Jean Luze answered, completely unstrung, “or maybe it would be better if I left for Port-au-Prince with her? Your hospital is so poorly equipped, and I don’t want to reproach myself should anything go wrong.”

“The sooner the better,” Dr. Audier advises, only too happy to get rid of a new victim.

He hands a prescription to Jean Luze and turns to me:

“Pack your bags, Claire,” he tells me. “Félicia must get to Port-au-Prince without wasting any time and you must go also because of the baby.”

The cigarette was getting restive in the corner of his wet lips.

Without responding, I took the bags from the closet and filled them and ran to Jane’s house to let her know of our departure.

Félicia has been at the Saint-François-de-Sales Hospital since last evening. The car ride took eight hours. I watched Jean Luze clutching the wheel as he avoided the potholes; I listened to him swear at the state of the road; and I silently wiped Félicia’s clammy brow as she rested her head on my lap, saying to myself:

*Might she be wise enough to drop dead without my help?*

Now, with Jean Luze in my arms and my eyes on the operating room door, I wait. Jean Luze is in such anguish he can’t keep still. I am convinced my love will make him forget Félicia quickly. In the meantime, his distracted look seems to cancel us out, his son and me.

The door finally opens and the surgeon appears. Jean Luze rushes to meet him.

“It went very well,” he says. “She’ll pull through. I’ll be back later this evening.”

“Claire!” Jean Luze cries with a sigh of relief, “we can finally rest easy!”

I have to get used to this thought, I have to get used to the suffering it means for me if I don’t want to be crushed by it: Félicia is going to get better and we will return home and she will take back her place beside her husband, beside her child.

Here I am in a hotel room, making the most of this slight respite life has given me. I have no curiosity about this city that I haven’t seen in so long. In other words, I cling to my idée fixe, I hold on to my obsession, I remain indifferent to the tumultuous buzzing of cars and to the bustle inside the hotel. Soon I will be alone again. Won’t my past come to the rescue? Where are my old unhealthy habits? Where are the objects with which I fooled myself and that I was careless enough to destroy? My hands are empty, emptier than before. I am alone with my fear, alone with my suffering that stands there ready to spring and finish me off. Would I have the courage to kill Félicia? Ah! These long sleepless nights when even the air you breathe resounds with a life of its own, when each hour falls on the heart like a tolling bell! How these nights have furrowed my face and aged me!

Félicia is definitely better. She doesn’t need me. Jean Luze watches over her like a nurse by her bedside day and night. The red roses he gave her bloom on her table. She is beautiful in her blue silk shirt. Who tied that ribbon round her hair?

“Claire,” she says in a soft distant voice, “I’d like to hold my child.”

I hand her son to her.

A debilitating defeat. I no longer have the strength to delude myself. I know that for him I am an able and devoted sister-in-law who runs his household and whom he rewards once in a while by confiding in me or with a modest gift. He has never thought of me as a woman. This fact tortures me. I would perform heroic feats if it got his attention. Wouldn’t it be heroic to throw myself at him and confess my love? …

We are about to go home. The suitcases are packed and I am waiting for the Luzes by the hotel entrance with
Jean-Claude in my arms. The days to come will be agony! I will see them kissing, caressing each other, living together in their room. They will make me a witness to their love, they will share their plans with me, convinced they are making me happy when I am in torment. How will I bear this without falling apart?

Jean Luze, I was telling myself, do you have any idea what I am capable of? Do you know what kind of a monster this starving being can become when its hunger is so sorely tempted but left unquenched? You have been most reckless with me. You have given me a son and you are now taking him back after shutting the doors of your love in advance. For you didn’t let me do or say anything. Wretch! You’re the one who’ll be my scapegoat. Do you understand? Your indifference will be a springboard for that sterile rebellion of which you yourself have spoken. That’s the easiest explanation for my distress. You will relieve my conscience of the hard truths that assail my mind. Self-discontent, that is the venom that feeds malice.

Félicia is recovering very slowly from the exhaustion of that awful trip and I myself feel rather bruised from the lurching and the weight of my sister and her son lying on top of me. Jean Luze is right. I have sacrificed too much. I am going to think about myself a little more and make a final decision about my future. My glance is more evasive than usual. I am afraid someone will see my disordered thoughts. I take care not to reveal anything. Am I going to wear this stifling mask until the end of my life?

We’re home again! It wasn’t hard to leave behind those petty memories back in my hotel room and at the hospital. Our little town has been shaken by the disappearance of Jane and her child. What’s happened to them? Nobody knows. I curse that trip to Port-au-Prince. If I had been here, things would have happened otherwise. This is the last time Calédu attacks one of my friends. What will happen to Jane and her child? Some people say they saw them passing through midnight escorted by the armed beggars. Joël and Jean Luze whisper mysteriously to each other and seem to hide something from me. Are they working together to get rid of Calédu? Was Jane helping them? And the men who were seen going into her house, were they Joël and his friends? Three questions I am as yet unable to answer. But I am sure of one thing: the commandant only arrested Jane so that I might throw myself at his feet and beg for mercy. I would rather see Jane and her son die. I would rather die myself.

I’m listening to the screams. Are they coming from Jane and her child? I clench my fists and gnash my teeth. A kind of mysterious tremor stirs the town like the hushed sound of a wing slowly gliding over our heads. This shudder that courses through me cannot be merely personal, I know this now. Like me, all of them must be secretly working to free themselves from the constricting fear. I am not alone. All of them are here around me, and we suffer together, minds fixed on our impending deliverance.

Félicia is spoiling herself. The fate of Jane and her son scarcely seems to move her, since she has taken shelter so completely in Jean Luze’s love. She has everything and I have nothing. I don’t think I envy her, however. Envy is not enough to explain the dreadful hatred I feel for her. This woman is my enemy. She has placed herself in my way, she has blocked my horizons, she has thwarted my destiny, stolen my happiness as Annette did seven years ago. But this time I have decided to defend myself. With Félicia gone, I am sure Jean Luze would be mine more than he is now hers. I would destroy in him the very memory of the past. When you overestimate yourself, you are lying to yourself out of loyalty. All because you are aware you’re being duped. You draw strength and courage from your false idea of yourself. What terrible disappointment awaits me behind this veil of lies? Could I gather the shattered bits of my old self? I live the life of an unsung lover. I believe I am more ardent than Messalina, more seasoned than Cleopatra, more romantic than Emma Bovary. And I want Jean Luze to prove it to me. I am approaching narcissism. My abnormality repels me. I see it as a defect.

Tonight I will bring him to my room and confess my love. He must reveal me to myself.

I couldn’t take the first step. Twenty times I left my room to go to him, all in vain. I could never do it. Making advances is beyond me.
Being alone scares me right now. Here I am, like a poisoned rat in the house. Jean Luze is now in the habit of going out alone with his son. He goes and sits in our little town square and stays there a long while, holding him. Now I have hours of free time. I even avoid going to the kitchen. Nothing matters except this bitterness consuming me, simmering on a low flame. It’s dangerous. The thought of the crime haunts me. It alternates strangely with the outrage that engulfs me when I think of Jane and her son.

I’ve been spending too much time stroking the dagger Jean Luze gave me. In monstrous daydreams, I see myself plunging it into Félicia’s breast without hesitation.

Today, Jean Luze filled his wife’s room with flowers. They don’t need me anymore and unconsciously make me feel it. Here they are, all three of them in their own little world. The Luze family no longer wants an interloper around.

“We have imposed upon you far too much,” Jean Luze told me. “You should take it easy now.”

Félicia looks good thin. She looks like a child with that ribbon in her hair. There really is something disarming about her, both childish and serious. I caught her crying the other day, head buried in Jean Luze’s shoulder.

What is it that’s bothering her? Is she afraid for him? It’s true that he’s become too involved, that he opens his heart too much to his friends. They came back last night and stayed up until eleven, whispering in the living room. Now Jean Luze is infected. He’s become as much an armchair politician as we are. He, too, had better watch out that his words are not repeated lest Calédu take offense! Pierrilus never leaves Jane’s door. Could I be mistaken? I believe I saw Joël and Jean Luze speaking to him through the picket fence.

I have too much free time and my imagination wanders out of bounds. I explore every nook and cranny of my mind. What a terrible swarm of shapeless larvae! When the larvae become thoughts, they are born monstrous. My head is bursting. I am looking for a thousand pretexts to sneak into their quarters. I seek suffering. It alone can wrest me from this act I have not yet dared to commit. And yet I am in something close to a paroxysm of suffering. Can it get any worse without crushing me?

“Go to your godmother for a minute,” Félicia says, handing me her son.

I carry him under the trees, my eyes fixed and mortified, refusing to kiss him, surprised at my hostility toward him. I struggle against terrible temptation, but I feel like I am moving under the whip into the incandescent flames of a diabolical world. I am prey to insomnia again. I feel lost, as if stranded in the center of the earth. I toss in bed, blood rushing to my temples, throat dry. My life goes by as uselessly as ever. The thankless chores of an old maid disgust me. Supporting roles are no longer enough for me. The taste of victory has left its mark on me. I have held happiness. I know every line in its face. I cry rolled up in a ball. I feel tiny, shriveled up by pain. I cling to the crime as if it were a buoy. It alone can save me. I struggle, but it has me in its claws. I know I will yield in the end; I am caught in a spiral, committed body and soul in a merciless contest. I mask the struggle. I am like an animal on a leash with its head turned away from the route it must follow.

There is a knock at my door and Jean Luze comes in.

“Don’t stay in the dark,” he tells me. “It will make you more depressed. I realize that you are worried about Jane and her son. I realize this …”

I turn on the light without responding.

“You know, Claire, I have made a decision,” he continues. “We are leaving soon and I’m taking Joël with me. I haven’t been able to do much for all of you until now, unfortunately. But I will at least save this young man by getting him out of here. What about you, do you want to come with us? I mean it.”

“No, thank you,” I answer.

He nervously dug his fingers through his hair and lit a cigarette:

“You really don’t want to?”

“No, thank you,” I repeated.

“I am sorry to hear that, Claire. We’ll think of you often and your godson will learn to love you from afar. I’m really sorry you don’t want to come along …”

To hear that conventional little sentence in his mouth! Anger, resentment, outrage, rumble within me. He gives my arm a friendly squeeze and leaves.
I see the Audiers’ cat prowling around our house. He brushes against the wall with his tail in the air, his hypocritical gaze half concealed by his blinking eyelids. He has gray fur like an old man. His meowing has often woken me up at night. He is Augustine’s worst enemy, often stealing food whenever she is the least bit careless. I have an idea. I will use him as practice. I will kill him to see what happens, to know what it feels like, how much strength one needs to get it right.

Joël is alone with Jean Luze.

They are listening to music in the living room. I hear them talking in hushed voices. There is a quiet knocking at the door of the dining room and I see Joël run to it. He invites Pierrilus, the one-armed beggar, to come in, and takes a package from him that he conceals when he notices me.

“Careful!” Jean Luze cries.

Doesn’t he trust me anymore? I feel so humiliated it seems to me I no longer exist. He looks through us. He doesn’t see us anymore, except when we interrupt his interminable discussions. He looks at us in a cold, impenetrable, and disconcerting way. With utmost silence, I put down the bottle of rum and glasses he asked for. Félicia never dares to interrupt him. Finally, she suffers, she too! She has become a harmless rival. As affectionate as he is with her, as solicitous as he is, I know now that he never loved her.

In any case, her death will push him to me. I can only master him through grief. With her gone, I will once again be mother to his son. There will be intimacy between us again.

Here I am sitting in bed, dagger in hand. I contemplate and caress it. Its tip is sharp and its finely chiseled handle is slightly curved. Where does this weapon come from? What is its history? The main thing is whether or not it can kill someone with a single blow. Will I have to witness some drawn-out agony if I miss? Will I have the courage to strike several times to make sure the deed is done? I have considered everything. I will leave nothing to chance. The Audiers’ cat will be my guinea pig. I will plunge the dagger in his back as practice. I don’t want Jean Luze to have to worry about anything. Suspicion will initially fall on him. I will stage things so that the police shift their investigation and conclude that it was suicide. Invoking her upcoming departure, I will ask Félicia to inscribe a moving note on the bottom of that family photo taken on the day of Jean-Claude’s baptism, something along these lines: “Adieu, Claire, I leave you here with everything I love.” The police will not see through this because their plate is full: the police only care about politics.

After killing Félicia, I will put the dagger in her hand. They will say: “She committed suicide because she couldn’t bear to leave the country, poor Madame Luze!”

The cat is dead. I followed it, lured it with fresh fish, raised my hand high and struck. From my window, I look upon its dead body. It collapsed in the yard beneath my window. Its legs are already stiff. Its lips, curled in an awful grin, reveal sharp white teeth. “Good riddance!” Augustine will exclaim when she sees it. And Mme Audier will mourn it in good form, lamenting the demise of this sly and deceitful animal she never thought to feed in its lifetime.

Before it dropped dead, the cat looked at me. This is what I can’t forget: its eyes. Pathetic! A cat! Nothing but a cat! And yet I’m gnawed by remorse. Is it because in my eyes it was innocent?

The thought of crime haunts me. It is eating away at me. I feel as weak as a convalescent. What am I waiting for? Sleep has fled from me. I think of Jane. I think about her little one and I want to scream.

I am ready; Félicia is alone in her room. I am going to go in. In the meantime, I practice killing her in my head.

My teeth chatter. I bite my fist. I’m nauseous, sick to my stomach. My mind is blank. No, no! I mustn’t admit that I will never have the courage to kill Félicia. I will die instead of her. It is time for me to put an end to these desperate struggles. I’m burning up. Is it fever? So much the better! Come, delirium. It will give me a taste of death in life. I am used to burying myself all on my own. These plunges into the void are comforting. I hope they will spare me from reality’s torments. Thanks to them, I’ve become familiar with the idea of death. It doesn’t frighten me. I have my very own coat of mail, my own shell and insulation: my imagination.

Blood hammers my temples. Hammer blows raining on metal, my head bursts, blood runs down my face. There is some on my sheets, my shirt, on the floor, everywhere. No, it’s not true. I’m the one seeing red. From anger. I’m angry with myself. I overestimated myself and seeing my cowardice makes me sick.

I am nothing but a heap of mutilated flesh. I’m the one dying, murdered. The dagger buried somewhere in my
body. I don’t know where exactly. Ah! The hemorrhage of despair! Oh, to disappear! If only I could disappear without leaving a trace. It’s impossible. One doesn’t disappear that way. I exist. I am free, face-to-face with myself. I must act and this time I must not fail. Will I be up to it? Yes. My pride is intact. It will back me. The moon smiling in the sky scoffs at me. Its serenity reminds me of Félicia’s. Flashes from the past! The long and tedious unreeling of the sad film of my life …

Contradictory feelings claw at each other within me. I am seething with them. My heart is in shreds. What can be done without passion? The lukewarm are like reptiles: they crawl on all fours or drag themselves about. I don’t envy them. I’d rather croak standing. Who says suicide is an act of cowardice? That’s just an easy excuse to resign ourselves to living with our disgust, filthy puppets that we are with a hole in our stomachs to be filled three times a day! At last, like some vigilante, I’ve accosted life. I imagine grabbing it by the collar. I am deciding my own fate. I juggle my own existence! I’m drunk! I clench my fist tightly. And there it is, life, trapped in there. How easy it was to vanquish! I was the stronger one. Oh, I feel like laughing! Life is nothing. We can deal with it as one power deals with another. It’s just that our weapons are not comparable. Life dug a gaping hole beneath our feet to frighten us. Life bent us under a degrading dictatorship. With every step we bump up against the points of its bayonets. Life keeps stabbing us in the back. I am going to settle the score with it once and for all. I am sick of hanging my head and trembling. I look at my furrowed face in the mirror. I discover, to my surprise, that my face is asymmetrical: left profile, dreamy and sweet; right profile, fierce and sensual. Is this me or is this how I see myself? My hands also suddenly seem dissimilar, the one made for action seems thicker, heavier. Why this taste of venom in my mouth? …

Granting myself a final and supreme bit of vanity, I’ve put on my nicest nightgown, untied my hair and got in bed. Everything has to be perfect, it’s a point of honor. I feel wrapped in cool air. Am I hesitating? Ah! Cowardice, how full your disguises! The dagger is in my hand. I am preparing for death. The rough touch of my sheets is gone. I am gliding in silk. So sublime. Can this be me walking ecstatically, draped in crimson, toward that strange land of shadows? The fever is rising. Now I am buried in a shroud of flowers. I am spewing mist. I’m pierced by the freezing air. I am an iceberg pushed by the wind across the vast expanses of the sea. In the end this bitch of a life is not such a bitch when the heart has even the slightest reason to hope. Yes, but what about me, do I have some reason to hope?

I lift the weapon to my left breast, when the cries of a riotous mob shake me out of my delirium. Stretching out my arm with the drawn dagger, I listen. Where are these cries coming from? Now my attention is turned away from its goal. Life, death, do they depend on chance? I hide the dagger in my blouse and I come down. There are so many beggars that their stench overpowers me. The street is lit by the peasants’ torches. They are hollering, “Down with Mister Long,” and walking toward the American. He immediately aims a submachine gun: twenty fall. Calédu and his officers rush to the police station. They apparently intend to reestablish order by shooting in the air. I have the impression a bullet came from Jane’s house. Pierrilus draws his gun from his rags and aims at Calédu, and others do the same: three policemen fall to the ground. The bullets whizz by me, coming, I am now sure, from Jane’s balcony: I recognize Joël and Jean lying low behind the balusters. Uniforms are strewn on the ground. The commandant retreats as he fires. He is afraid, alone in the dark, hounded by the beggars he himself armed. He is moving backward toward my house. Does he realize that? Behind the blinds of the living room, I watch and wait for him.

I take my dagger from my blouse and open the door partway. He is on my veranda. I see him hesitate and turn his head in every direction. He is within reach. With extraordinary strength, I plunge the dagger into his back once, twice, three times. The blood spurts. He turns around, gripping the door, and looks at me. Is he going to die here, under my own roof? I see him stagger away and fall stretched out in the street, right in the middle of the gutter. The beggars, led by Pierrilus, fling themselves on his body like madmen.

No one has seen me, except perhaps Dora Soubiran, whose house is so close to mine. I cautiously close the dining room door. I hear Jean-Claude crying and Félicia talking. The wild cries of the beggars grow more intense. Behind the blinds glow hundreds of anguished eyes.

Jean Luze appears with a smoking gun. I hear Joël Marti holler:

“To the prison! Free the prisoners!”

A vast clamor rises in response.

Jean Luze grabs my hands. One of them still holds the dagger red with blood.

“Like an animal, he died like an animal,” I slowly articulate.

“You killed him? You? So you’re the one who got him? Oh! Claire …”

He squeezes me in his arms, almost smothering me. His cheek against mine, his breath in my ear.

“If you only knew how tired I am!”
Was it I who said these words? Was I the one who gently, very gently, pushed him away?

I leave him. He follows me with his eyes without moving. I go in my room and double-lock the door. Here I am on my bed, contemplating this blood on my hands, this blood on my robe, this blood on the dagger …

From the window, I catch a glimpse of the torches wavering in the wind. The doors of the houses are open and the entire town has risen.
ANGER
That morning, the grandfather had been the first to come down to the dining room. Hidden behind a half-open door, he was observing a corner of the yard, eyes wide with fear, ears pricked up.

Men in black were driving stakes around the house. Their uniforms glistened with sweat in the sun of what was still morning. Their decorations, weapons and hammers reflected intermittent flashes of light; and the grandfather told himself they looked like plundering birds of prey walking around like that, bent over. What ghastly uniforms, and what right do they have, driving these stakes into my land? he said to himself.

The last steps on the stairs creaked, startling him out of his thoughts. He quickly wiped his face as if to erase the fear that had been imprinted there, and turned his head toward his son:

“Men in black uniforms are on our land. They’re driving stakes all around our house,” he said to him.

“Stakes!” the son cried out.

“Look!”

With a hand that was still firm, he drew him behind the door and pointed to the back of the yard:

“Look!” he said again.

At the sight of the men in uniform, the son mumbled a few unintelligible words that betrayed panic checked by immense willpower.

“They’ve been here since dawn,” the old man added.

His beard trembled. The son, afraid his father would burst into one of his terrible fits of anger, looked at him intently, annoyingly calm.

“Take it easy, Papa, above all keep calm.”

The top of the stairs creaked this time, just before a nineteen-year-old boy of athletic build all but tumbled down into the living room.

“Good morning!” he said.

And turning toward the table:

“Where’s Mélie?” he asked. “Has she decided to let us go without food this morning?”

He broke off, pricking up his ears, and before anyone could stop him he threw himself at the door, flinging it wide open.

“What’s going on? What are they doing at our place?”

“They’re driving stakes,” the old man said tersely.

“What right do they have?” the son protested.

“They’re here to bring us news of the death of our freedom,” the grandfather answered. “Don’t you understand that?”

He fell silent when he saw the maid. She entered slowly, dragging her feet with ostentatious innocence, and as she set the table she hypocritically observed the side of the yard where the men in black were working.

“At the very least we should ask them what they’re doing on our land,” the young man declared, “or else it will look like we’re afraid.”

“Keep still, Paul!” the father shouted, trying to rouse himself. “You see exactly what they’re doing: they’re planting stakes to keep us from our property.”

A heavy silence descended, which was especially uncomfortable for the maid, who now avoided lifting her eyes, her lips tight, features lifeless, like a statue hewed from the black stone of African antiquity.

Except for that moment when he had reprimanded his son, the father always spoke in a neutral, monotonous voice, in sharp contrast to the old man’s mute nervousness and the young man’s more exuberant manner. The grandfather looked from his son to his grandson. While the silence lasted, he kept staring at them with such
insistence that a casual observer might have thought him senile.

“Evil has come upon us. We will have to fight to defeat it,” he finally said.

“Above all, we’ll have to act with caution,” replied the father, who had been waiting for the maid to leave before breaking his silence. “We’ll get a very good and very clever lawyer who knows how to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, and we’ll need to follow his advice to the letter.”

“And if he declares, as I predict he will, that it’s a lost cause and that we have to accept this?” the grandfather asked.

“Well, then we’ll have to accept it.”

“I will never abandon my land to these thieves,” the grandfather yelled, walking toward his son, who quickly jumped to close the door. “My father sweated to acquire it, and I will not abandon my land to these thieves.”

He regained his composure with difficulty, pricking up his ears despite himself.

One could no longer hear the hammering. This unexpected silence coming from outside, as if in response to his anger, seemed so ominous to the old man that he pressed both hands on the table, bending his spine as if threatened by some immediate danger. The grandson crossed his arms, and knitting his brows, looked at his father; the latter seemed to have gone beyond plain fear. Huddled up, every muscle tense, he looked like a lion tamer locked in a cage with wild beasts and expecting to see them pounce and tear him to shreds at any moment.

“If they come, especially if they heard us, you’ll have to keep quiet and let me do the talking,” he begged in a voice so low that he could hardly be heard.

He clenched his teeth and the muscles of his face tightened.

The three of them stood like that for a long time. Then the young man looked away from his father, lifted his shoulders and walked to the door, opening it a second time.

“They haven’t moved,” he said with forced casualness.

And he sat at the table for breakfast. He pushed away the omelet that Mélie had prepared and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Maybe, like my father said, we’ll have to accept it,” he said.

Hearing these words, the grandfather, his eyes bloodshot, left the table and went out on the porch. Thumbs in his suspenders, he paced up and down for a long time, then stopped, suddenly slouching: all around him stood the houses of the neighborhood, that old quarter of Port-au-Prince where he had grown up in comfort thanks to his father, a peasant who had managed to make it in the bigoted world of bourgeois blacks and mulattoes by dint of honest and sheer tenacity. He earned his position by the sweat of his brow, as the grandfather loved to declare to his son and grandson, and their name was respected to this day. A farmer from the market town of Cavaillon, the old patriarch—intelligent, crafty, tireless in his task—dreamed of a different life for his son. This house, this “big-house” as he called it in Creole, had been built at the end of Lysius Salomon’s rule, and while everyone was finding their way into the troubled waters of politics, he had remained steadfastly committed to his business. During the 1887 currency adjustment that linked the Haitian gourde to the American dollar, he was able to accumulate a small fortune.

The colonial-style wooden house looked like all the established houses in the neighborhood. Rising up between courtyard and garden, they were decked with railed balconies and hat-shaped gables, and stood in the midst of sprawling properties planted mostly with fruit trees, mahogany and oak. Here and there, a few modern buildings lay flat and square at their feet, their scale limited by lack of land. Looking at them, the grandfather began to regret not having sold his properties, as others did, to the nouveaux riches and given the money to his children.

Humiliated by his father, a true Haitian black man who insisted on serving his loas faithfully he had renounced the religious vocation he had been drawn to very early on. Once he was orphaned, he had also refused to rent the house, refused to leave the neighborhood, though he had no income to live on. After all, who else would take care of his father’s grave? For forty years, he had made do with the income from the sale of his fruit to the local peddlers who would come around to haggle with him.

Every day during harvest, he went to the garden and paid a few young black men to climb up the trees with sacks on their backs. Down came coconuts lopped off by machetes at the stem, and from furiously shaken branches the most lovely mangoes in the country rained down, and in this fashion he earned enough to condescend to accept the fifty gourdes the peddlers gave him each month.

The stakes planted thirty meters from the house plainly separated it from the land—encircled it, in other words.
Now the porch was the only means of egress. The grandfather thought he could see a whole host of dark silhouettes under the oaks and he nervously searched his pockets for his glasses. But there was nothing moving save the leafy branches of the trees on their hundred-year-old trunks. The freshly whitewashed grave of the ancestor stood out under the green of the lemon trees he had planted himself. Being a stubborn and superstitious peasant, he had demanded to be buried in that spot, swearing to look after his lands in death as well as he had while he was alive. And his son, who was only twenty then, could do nothing but obey.

“I will get him out of his grave,” the grandfather whispered. “I will get him out of his grave.” And angrily he began to pull on his wiry goatee.

Across the street, in a newer-looking house with stone walls and picture windows, he saw his friend Jacob, a Syrian who got rich quick selling American fabric. At dawn he had already caught him watching from behind the shutters, and he chased away an unpleasant thought that had been running through his mind from the moment he stepped on the porch. He guessed he was being watched by many eyes and he feigned indifference, walking around as casually as he did every morning, trying not to look at the houses next door. He returned to the dining room where his son’s wife, a light-skinned mulatto woman, had in the meantime come down and was eating. He sat down across from her in silence, crossed himself and mumbled a prayer.

“Claude isn’t up?” she asked him.

At that very moment, a sulky young voice called for help. The grandfather, pushing away his chair, went up the stairs and returned carrying a scrawny eight-year-old child with a pale yellow face and two immense, burning black eyes. A young woman, putting the last touches to her outfit, followed them. The grandfather had the child sit while the young woman served herself café au lait and drank it standing. She was a brunette with long thick hair that curled up around her head and fell back in a ponytail on the nape of her neck. Her dark skin gleamed gold in parts of her face, especially the cheeks, which made it seem like discreet makeup.

“Sit down, Rose,” her mother said.

Paul was watching her lap up the melted sugar in her cup and thought she looked like a pretty cat with its face deep in a dish.

*She’s thin and fetching. Only a black woman can manage to be both thin and fetching: must have something to do with the shape of her rear end,* he told himself. And he remembered how she had slapped his rich and smug friend Fred for having tried to kiss her. *Thin, fetching without knowing it, but serious. Probably not an easy girl,* he thought again. And he looked away from her, not without a feeling of pride.

“In the name of the Father, the Son,” the grandfather began again for the child. “Let us pray that God spares us and let us ask Him to inspire us so we may defeat the evil within us and around us.”

And as he spoke, his gaze rested on his daughter-in-law, who visibly avoided it.

“Eat, Claude,” she said to the child.

Breaking off some bread, she gave him some.

“Let me be, Mama, I’m not a baby anymore,” he protested impatiently.

And he smiled at the grandfather who treated him like a man.

“You promised me a story,” he said to him.

“Have I ever been untrue to my word?” the grandfather asked him.

The boy spilled a little coffee on himself, and the mother quickly wiped his mouth.

“Be careful, sweetie.”

“I am not a girl, only girls are called sweetie,” he retorted without mercy.

“Fine. From now on I will only call you Claude.”

“Yes, Claude, that’s our name, grandfather’s and mine.” He gestured to the old man, who took him in his arms as he rose.

“Let’s go in the garden,” he begged.

“No, not today.”

“But I love to be in the garden with you when you tell me stories and give me things to read. Besides, it’s high time to pick the fruit or else they’ll rot.”

“I know, but today we won’t go to the garden. We’re going to sit here and listen to the church bells. Since it so happens that my story is all about bells.”
The child was normal down to his thighs. At the end of his scrawny legs were two atrophied feet whose angled shape reminded one of lobster claws. He was usually dressed in long shirts that concealed his handicap; but on the day of his eighth birthday, he demanded pants and socks which, according to his mother, was something the grandfather had suggested. For the latter, she was still persona non grata. She would always be little more than the daughter of a mulatto drunk who died prematurely from delirium tremens. He had objected to this union from the beginning. On the eve of the wedding, he had made a terrible scene before his son, shouting: “They’re a bunch of defectives, you’ll regret this.” And the invalid was born to prove him right. It was strange then, at least according to the others, that he preferred that little mulatto, born late, ungainly and in fragile health, but whose character resembled his more than his own son’s did. He was pleased to see him tear his hair out or bite his fist at the slightest frustration. “Except for the color of his skin, he’s my spitting image,” he beamed ecstatically, paying homage to the capricious laws of heredity, for he retained a sort of admiration, sustained by the memory of his fearsome father, for the black men of substance and courage from a bygone age.

“Have you warned your mother and your sister, Paul?” the father asked abruptly. “Did you warn them that under no circumstances should they venture beyond the stakes?”

“No,” the son answered tersely.

“Stakes? What stakes?” the mother asked, looking at her husband.

Rose rushed to the door.

“Who put these stakes up on grandfather’s land?” she cried. “What’s happened?”

“Hush!” the father said quietly, “watch the little one. He’ll be so heartbroken when he learns we won’t be able to take him for walks under the trees.”

“When did this happen?” Rose mumbled.

“My God!” the mother moaned.

She got up and went to look outside. When she saw the pieces of wood encircling the house, she closed her eyes, feeling as though a huge crowd was pressing against her, pushing her down an airless hole. She put her hand on her heart and opened her mouth, gasping for breath. Her still-young face became hollow, heavy, suddenly torn apart.

“My God!” she repeated, her eyes searching for the grandfather.

He was standing in a corner, the child in his arms, and she could see his beard trembling. The little invalid, tense and pale, lowered his head.

“What are they talking about, Grandfather?” he asked, as if refusing to understand.

“You heard very well,” Paul answered mercilessly. “They have seized our land.”

“They? They, who?” said the child in an insistently cheerful tone.

“No one knows,” Paul answered. “They wear black uniforms and carry arms. And they have helped themselves to our land. That’s all we know.”

“Is it true, Grandfather?”

“It’s true.”

“I want to see them! I want to see them!”

The grandfather carried the invalid to the door.

And seeing them:

“If I had legs,” he cried, “I would pull up all these stakes.”

“And what if the men in black shot at you,” Paul asked, “what would you do? Huh? What would you do?”

“I would kill them, kill them all.”

He burst into convulsive sobs, tore his shirt with his teeth, tore his hair, while his deformed feet dangled like two broken toys.

“Take him away, Grandfather,” the mother begged.

She leaned her head on the door and could smell the hot sap rising from the coarse trunks and the lighter fragrance of their fruit. The lemon flowers, blown by a sudden breeze, covered the grave of the ancestor under a white blanket, leaving it sheltered in the privacy of this immaculate shroud.

“They will desecrate his grave,” she whispered. “They will dig up his bones.”

She went back to her room and put some order there absentmindedly as if her actions escaped her control. After
listening for a moment, she turned the key in the lock; then, throwing herself on the bed, she burst into nervous, jerky laughter that sounded like painful grunts.
“Teach me to walk,” the child said to the grandfather.
“All right,” said the grandfather.
And he bent down to put him gently on the ground, on his stomach.
“Do you remember the story of the Indian chief who wanted to chase the white man out of his country?”
“Yes,” the child answered.
“How did he approach the enemy without making noise?”
“He crawled.”
“Well then, do as he did.”
And he began to crawl on his chest and elbows across the floor of his room.
“Look, I’m going faster and faster, look, Grandfather.”
“In a few days, you will crawl as well as that Indian chief.”
The old man leaned down and took the child in his arms again. He stood before the window, facing the almond tree whose leaves touched the roof.
“There they are!” the child cried out, and his eyes became so feverish that they fogged up with tears.
Thirty meters away, several men in black uniforms stood guard with fixed bayonets. A golden-feathered bird streaked across the sky like lightning and lit on an oak branch, trilling its sweet song. One of the men reached for his weapon and shot it. The grandfather felt the child shaking.
“Swear to me that you won’t let them stay on our land, Grandfather, swear it.”
“It will be difficult, you know.”
“Swear it.”
“They’ll kill us.”
“Swear it, Grandfather, swear it.”
“I swear to you.”
The sound of their voices was rising with the wind that feebly shook the leaves of the almond tree.
It was eight in the morning and it was time to come down for breakfast. They had already heard the father’s footsteps, the mother’s weary tread, and the galloping of the young people. When they came into the dining room, they found the family sitting at the table and Mélie circling around them. She rushed forward and wanted to take the invalid in her arms but he curtly refused.
“Did you sleep well?” his mother asked him.
“Yes. And I always sleep very well. Don’t I, Grandfather?”
“Dr. Valois thinks you’re big enough that a wheelchair would be useful to you,” his mother added.
“What’s a wheelchair like?”
“It’s like a little car. You steer it and it takes you where you want to go.”
“I think it will be fun.”
He gave the grandfather a surreptitious look.
“But you know, Mama, I believe that I’ll soon be walking by myself.”
The mother lowered her head and bit her lower lip. In the intervening silence two gunshots could be heard.
“They’re killing the songbirds,” the child sighed.
The father grew pale and Paul clenched his fists.
“Have you gone to see that lawyer?” his grandfather asked him.
“I have a meeting with him this morning.”
Taking his hat, the father got up as soon as he said this.
“Come on, let’s go, Rose,” he said.
“Where is she going?” the grandfather asked.
“She’s coming to the lawyer with me.”
“Why?” Paul asked him.

Embarrassed, the father coughed without answering, and the grandfather suddenly scowled and began to tug at his beard.

“I think they’ll show more consideration if Papa is with a lady. That’s all,” Rose said.
She got up and, arching her legs and waist, grabbed her handbag.

“Don’t wiggle your ass too much,” her brother advised, scowling like the grandfather. “It could cost you dearly.”
“If we’re successful, I’ll expect you to speak to me otherwise,” she answered, diving at him and pulling on his hair playfully “Do you know what could happen to you without my ass-wiggling? Rotting here and never discovering what a bench in an overseas university feels like.”

“Settle down,” the grandfather yelled, hitting the table with his fist.

The child immediately imitated him.

The mother closed her eyes, then opened them and looked at her husband for a moment. A slight grimace of disgust disfigured her lips. She lit a cigarette that Rose took from her hands with a smile.

“Come on, Papa, let’s go,” she said.

The mother lit a second cigarette and looked at her husband again.

“You are always right about everything,” she said to him slowly. “You’ve always been right, but this time you better be careful, be very careful.”

She watched them leave without adding another word. Pushing away his chair, Paul got up from the table. He remained standing across from his mother, looking at her for a long time in silence.

“If I was strong like you!” the invalid sighed, staring at him with admiration, “if I was strong like you! …”

The young man spread his legs and leaned over the child.

“What would you do?” he whispered.

And when no answer came:
“What would you do?” he yelled.

And he left, slamming the door.

Although the house was rather isolated because of the land around it (Jacob being their only immediate neighbor on their side of the street), he immediately felt as if he was being watched by the whole neighborhood. He walked quickly without looking around him. “If they think I’m afraid, they’re wrong,” he told himself. And with broad strides, he kept putting more and more distance between him and the house.
He reached one street, then another, and walked to the house of his friend Fred Morin, who was on the soccer team with which he had been training for two years. He noticed Mme Morin’s face seemed strained, unusually so. He felt like he was standing before a stranger he was seeing for the first time. She nevertheless invited him to sit and called her son. Fred shook his hand and inquired what was new in a voice that seemed as false as his mother’s. Mme Morin had slowly pulled in the front double doors. A gust of wind opened them slightly and she glanced over anxiously.

“What brings you here?” Fred whispered shyly and, as soon as he had spoken his eyes returned to the door, behind which whispering could be heard.

He got up so clumsily that he knocked over an ashtray. He went to lock the door this time and instead of returning to his seat, he remained standing before Paul, looking round for his mother and grinning so falsely and stupidly that Paul also got up.

“I’m making you uncomfortable,” he whispered in a choked voice. “They are on our land and you know it. As far as all of you are concerned, we’ve been marked and therefore best avoided.”

“I don’t understand you,” Fred answered in a cynical tone.

They stood facing each other for a second without Fred daring to add another word.

He had come to talk to him about the soccer team, about the next game they were to play against the international players expected the next week, and he had been hoping for a warm welcome to free him from his anxiety.
“I’m making you uncomfortable,” he simply repeated and opened the door himself.

As soon as he had, he bumped into a crowd of people who had gathered on the porch and who now closed in to have a better look at him in their curiosity.

“That’s him!” was what he heard. “That’s Normil’s son!”

He walked away quickly barely avoiding the cars that seemed to brush past him on purpose and from which unknown heads leaned out. A woman’s voice called to him. He stopped and recognized Dr. Valois’ daughter. He was about to join her when a stream of cars separated them. He waited. When the cars had moved off, she was gone, and in the spot where she had been standing a moment before were three men in black. He couldn’t help being startled and doubled back to a stone bench covered by the shade of the flamboyant trees.

He let himself collapse there.

“They’re multiplying then!” he heard himself say out loud.

He had rested for a few minutes when he heard their boot steps. He shot up like a coiled spring. Wanting to run away, he almost crashed into them before quickly walking backward and withdrawing behind the trees. Thousands of men in black uniforms, black boots and shiny helmets were marching to the sound of fanfare. Preceded by two men bearing banners painted with skulls and weapons, they walked in tight ranks, cheered on by the crowd. A horde of emaciated beggars waved their arms wildly, screaming and cheering.

How long, he thought, how long will I have to see and hear them?

Upon returning home, he was astonished by the hopeful shiver that came over him when his father and sister appeared in the living room.

“What did the lawyer tell you?” the grandfather asked his son without preamble.

“He wasn’t able to see us,” the father answered pathetically.

“So they had no consideration for my sister,” Paul pointed out with a sardonic chuckle.

Rose avoided responding, but she slipped her father a look so strange and mysterious that her brother was unable to interpret it.

The door to the dining room was closed, so the noise from outside was muffled. They ate in silence, slowly, as if forcing themselves, abandoned to a common anguish that each of them inwardly rejected, sensing a heavy invisible presence spying on their every move. Paul called for the maid, who didn’t answer. He got up to get the water pitcher from the pantry and saw her near the stakes serving water to the uniformed men. She was bowing and smiling filling glasses, breaking up ice. He waited for her to return, and, taking the tray from her hands, smashed the glasses on the floor.

“Oh! Monsieur Paul,” she said in dismay.

The noise brought the family to the pantry.

“She let them drink out of our glasses,” he muttered, trembling with rage.

“But,” the father said, casting an anxious glance at the maid, “if they are thirsty and ask for a glass, isn’t it more reasonable to serve them?”

The invalid curled up in the grandfather’s arms as if he were in pain. He stared at his father with immense black eyes that took up most of his face and suddenly brandished his fist in his direction.

“Not in our glasses, Paul is right, not in our glasses.”

“You can go,” Rose yelled at the maid, who was giving them an ugly look.

And when she was gone:

“You’re going to ruin everything,” she continued. “Papa is right, we have to catch them with honey. As for me, I’m letting you know right now that I will make every effort to save this land.”

She walked up to her brother and looked straight in his eyes.

“Don’t you want to get out of here? Didn’t you want to study architecture, or have you forgotten all about that? Would you rather waste your time and your youth, until you end up wearing one of their uniforms? Because from now on, if you want to live in peace, you’ll have to fall in behind them.”

She was pleading with him now.

“I’m begging you, Paul, be patient, let me and Papa take care of this, that’s all we ask, that you let us take care of it …”

She saw him turning his head as if searching for an available target, and then his fist struck the wall of the pantry.
The grandfather watched him with unfeigned astonishment, and the invalid cheered him on. Paul took him on his back and galloped with him through the house.

“You’ll make them turn tail, you will,” the child whispered when he stopped, out of breath.

The mother had closed her eyes. Something weighed on her heart and made it beat irregularly, slowly, then quickly. And as she listened to it creaking like a rusty old tool, she said to herself: It can’t take this anymore. One day, it will stop.

“As if this were not enough, my God!” she cried out loud.

Once more, the silence seemed to them so profound, so ominous, that they felt as though they could inhale it together with the air. The birds frolicked on the palm branches and their cheerful chirping seemed to punctuate and underscore the horror. She ran to the window. As soon as she saw the men in their black uniforms, she lifted her handkerchief to her eyes and began to cry. Then, they left the room one by one as if repelled by the tears she had been unable to hold back.
“Grandfather,” said the invalid, “tell me a story.”

“A long, long time ago,” the grandfather then began, “my father, having left the countryside to go to Port-au-Prince, learned that thieves had been trespassing on his land while he was away. At the time, many men rode horses and my father had a horse called Grand Rouge and he galloped like no horse in this world ever knew how. My father, who was in the cattle business, lived in Cavaillon with Mother, a beautiful and ambitious young peasant girl from Fonds-des-Blancs. He returned home right away, and calling the steward, he asked him: ‘Is it true that thieves came on my land to take my fruit?’ — ‘Yes,’ the steward answered. — ‘What did you do?’ my father went on. — ‘I whipped them and they left faster than they had come.’ — ‘With some of their loot?’ my father asked. — ‘No, sir, without any loot’ — ‘I travel often,’ my father went on, ‘if my son ever yields to the temptation of picking a single fruit from the neighbor’s garden, I order you to whip him too.’ My father only owned a quarter of this land. A thick gate separated the rest of the property. One day, the steward caught me over the gate, my pockets full of fruit. ‘If you so much as taste one of these fruits, you’ll be a thief and in a whole lot of trouble.’ And he made me turn back, roughly pulled the fruit out of my pockets and threw them back into the neighboring property. The next day, I heard the gallop of my father’s horse and I woke up, breathless with fear. I heard my father call the steward. ‘Everything all right?’ he asked. — ‘Everything’s all right,’ the steward answered. The thieves returned, raiding our land and taking the few fruits that were ours. The steward managed to catch one of them. He tied him to a tree before our very eyes and whipped him until he drew blood. ‘You see how close you came to this,’ he told me afterward. ‘Don’t ever covet the goods of others.’”

The mother got up slowly, put down her needlework, walked over to the old man and spoke into his ear.

“Look at him, Grandfather,” she whispered, “just look at him.”

The child was clenching his fists and grinding his teeth.

“Who will flog those who have taken our land?” he said without paying any attention to the mother. “Is there no longer a steward who can do it?”

“Alas, no!” the grandfather answered.

“Why not?”

“Because there are ups and downs in the life of a people. As the arrow rises, it gives birth to heroes; when it falls, only cowards come into the world. No steward would agree to stand up to those who have taken our land.”

The child was sniffing, and the grandfather guessed he was crying though there were no tears rolling down his cheeks. He told himself that his crippled and sickly grandson was the faint beginning of the next era of heroes and that the arrow had begun its slow ascent only eight years ago. Hundreds more must have come into the world the same time he did, he thought, and with feet and legs as well as a brave soul. A day will come when they will grow up and the birds of prey will have to account for their deeds to every last one of them.
As usual, the father returned from work at lunchtime. He brushed his wife’s forehead with a kiss, greeted the others with a wave of his hand and took his seat. At the end of the meal, he looked at his watch and Rose did the same. They got up and went to the door the grandfather had more or less barricaded. At the same time, they heard the noise of a powerful engine as a truck full of men in black uniform entered the property. Twenty men jumped out of the truck and began unspooling a long wire.

“They’ve starting surveying the land,” Rose said in a weak voice.

“Shut this door,” the grandfather yelled.

Paul leaped out of his seat and without a word began to climb the stairs at a run.

“I want to see! I want to see!” the child cried out.

“No,” the grandfather replied. “Let’s go in our room to pray.”

The mother took the child herself and set him down in the old man’s arms.

“Because me, I believe in miracles,” the grandfather said, looking at the mother ostentatiously.

“Prayer impedes despair and thereby frees the soul. Do you know the story of the alcoholic who didn’t know he should have prayed?”

“No,” answered the invalid.

“It’s an interesting story and one worth telling.”

He walked by the mother and her eyes followed him, full of hatred.

Yes, she hated him right now as much as he must have hated her. Why such hatred between them, she sometimes wondered. For what did he reproach her? It could only be her father’s misbehavior. A poor failed artist who had tormented his violin for thirty-five years without ever being able to get a proper note out of it. He had started drinking one night when he had tried in vain to play a Chopin waltz. She had seen him start to cry and then break his bow. That evening, she had waited up for him for a long time only to see him come home staggering.

He drank from despair. He died from despair. How could God, if he existed, hold that against him? And what right did the grandfather have to judge? Maybe she should just see him as a foolish old man and forgive him. At the beginning of her marriage, she had almost loved him. She had come to his house, trembling with emotion, daughter of an alcoholic who died under atrocious circumstances, as everyone knew. He had given her a piercing look and she lowered her head very humbly. His gaze seemed to say: “Don’t think you are honoring us with your presence, mulatto girl. Your father was nothing but a mulatto alcoholic and I went to school with people like him at the Saint-Martial Seminary.” He wasn’t kind, she had soon understood this. He was created in the image of a God of his own senile invention, a God he threw in your face at the worst moment, like blows from a club, savoring every twitch and heartrending cry. At times she could feel his forever-accusing eye, and she had come to understand that there would never be any love between herself and that God. Where was the grandfather’s God? Why hadn’t He already done away with injustice and bloodshed?

She lifted her head and noticed their neighbor on the right, Mme Saint-Hilare, an impotent old mulatto woman who had her chair positioned in front of her window so she wouldn’t miss out on what was going on in their house. If God exists, could it be that He spies on His creatures the way this old woman does? she wondered. She waved to Mme Saint-Hilare, who quickly lowered her head, pretending not to see her. It’s like we have the plague now! she realized, as her heart jumped in her chest. “Necessary trials!” she whispered, imitating the grandfather’s sententiousness. “Sadism!” she added. With that God you only earn your stripes through suffering. And the grandfather used to say that misery awaits those who have known happiness on earth! What could this demanding God want from His creatures? Oh, no! She wanted nothing to do with Him. She dreamed of another God, full of compassion and love, who would have pity on His creatures, would spare the innocent and punish the guilty. In solitude she had learned to pray in her own way, and at times a kind of peace would descend upon her, the sudden and mysterious comfort that comes from the certainty of divine protection.

She went up to check on Paul, who had locked himself in his room, and as she passed by the grandfather’s room she stopped to listen.
“Saints in heaven,” he was reciting.
“Chase away the demons,” the invalid said in response.
“Saints in heaven.”
“Smite the demons.”
Now she could hear their voices reciting the Pater Noster. She knocked on the door to her son’s room. He made her wait before letting her in and greeted her from under his sheets.

“Are you feeling sick?”
“No … why?”
She put her hand on his forehead and felt him burning.
“Yes, you are, you have a fever.”
“Ah … that’s what I thought. My mouth feels ashy.”
He sat up, grabbed the books lying on the bed and held them out to his mother.
“Lie down,” she said.
“No, it’ll pass. I don’t want to stay in bed anymore.”
“Being a little sick isn’t the end of the world,” she answered in a willfully abrupt manner. “Go on, stay in bed. It’s probably the flu.”

He obeyed her, sulking, and she tucked him in and sat beside him.

There was noise in the yard that could be heard through the window. Someone on the other side of the stakes barked out orders that were followed by a whistle blowing and the crackle of bullets. Paul sat up nervously.

“It’s nothing,” the mother said, “stay in bed.”

“Who were they shooting at?”
“At the birds. You know they like killing them.”
She put her hands on his shoulders and forced him back in bed.
“You haven’t been playing soccer lately?”
“No.”
“Where’s Fred? He doesn’t come by to see you anymore?”
“No.”

She had the horrible sensation of a foreign presence in the room. She turned her head toward the window and grew quiet.

“Don’t waste your time,” she continued with effort. “Study on your own until then.”

“Until when?”

“Until things get settled.”

She regretted these last words and lowered her eyes as if she were guilty of something. This nineteen-year-old man was as lucid as she was and it was tactless to treat him like a baby. By doing so she risked losing his friendship, which meant so much to her and which she had done so much to keep alive. She spoiled him in secret, like a wily Apache, slipping him money she had saved through great sacrifice. “Your stingy old man won’t know about it,” she told him with a complicit wink. She often went into his room to confide in him, to talk about the father, about his illicit nightly outings that could only have one purpose. He had protested, not being able to imagine this serious and mournful fifty-year-old man wrapped in a woman’s arms, but then one day he had seen him, suddenly young again, talking to a strange young woman in a car, and he had begun to have his doubts. But out of a kind of masculine solidarity, he had refused to betray him, although he became less affectionate and effusive with him.

“I’ll make you a rum punch,” she said to him.

“With lots of rum, please.”

“With lots of rum,” she acquiesced obediently.

She went downstairs to warm the milk into which she then mixed an egg yolk and some rum. She tasted it and added more rum.

Mélie looked at her without saying anything. The small slanting eyes in her black face glowed with mean-spirited joy.
Why does she also hate me? What have I ever done to her? the mother wondered.

“Madame Louis, your father-in-law told me to make sure no one touches this bottle,” she finally said in a honeyed voice in her drawn-out Creole.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, Madame Louis, but he told me, ‘Mélie, if anyone in this house drinks that rum without my permission, I’ll hold you responsible.’”

“Well, you will have to tell him that Monsieur Paul is ill and needed it.”

“Yes, Madame Louis, I will tell him. Monsieur Paul has the flu?”

“And a fever.”

“You’re right, then. What the grandfather was afraid of is someone drinking the rum for no good reason. He doesn’t like drunkards. That’s what he told me, Madame Louis. I’m going to boil a lemon for Monsieur Paul. But I’ll need money to buy it because I can’t just go pick one anymore … You understand?”

She pointed to the garden.

“Yes,” was all the mother said.

The hammering resounded as she stepped onto the landing. She looked through the window and saw two men nailing a notice to an oak trunk. She went into her son’s room, where she found him sitting and listening, trying to understand the sounds he had heard. He took the cup from his mother’s hand and drank down the scorching punch in one gulp.
The mother waited until the house was asleep and cautiously got out of the bed where her husband was sleeping. She threw on a dress and felt her way down the stairs. Outside, the beaming moon promenaded across the sky. Suddenly it was veiled by a cloud and all was plunged in darkness. The mother walked up to the stakes and stopped there. She looked at the notice, white as a tombstone, and read these words: NO ENTRY. She stood there a moment, motionless, staring at the trees, which seemed more massive in the darkness. A light gust of wind shook their branches and an owl hooted, as if awakened from its slumber.

“Who goes there?” a voice shouted.

A gigantic black silhouette rose up.

She involuntarily stepped back as a cry of terror escaped from her lips. She saw him, his eyes full of hatred, laughing silently, and she trembled. He drew his gun and pointed it at her: “Want to do it with me, mulatto girl? Want to do it?” she heard. She raised her hands to the sky and shouted, no, no, and ran back home. A bullet whistled past her ear. She threw herself to the ground and crawled to the kitchen door. As soon as she was safe, she closed her eyes and put both hands to her heart. Her fear and the shortness of her breath made the rattle in her chest unmistakable this time. She remained that way for several minutes, head tilted, listening to her heartbeat; then, opening her eyes again, she found herself at the sideboard, opened it and grabbed the bottle of rum. She took great swigs straight from the bottle and put it back in its place. The father was still sleeping. She went to bed, pulled the sheets over herself, and thought to herself: Such loneliness! she thought. In vain she tried to sleep, and dawn found her with her eyes on the ceiling and her arm across her forehead.

At that moment, she heard cautious footsteps brushing along the stairs. The steps were getting closer, halting to the rhythm of a pendulum, and the stairs creaked just as regularly, just as mechanically. She got up and opened her bedroom door: Rose was standing before her disheveled, eyes smeared with tears and shoes in hand.

“Mama! You scared me,” she exclaimed in a hushed voice.

“Where were you?”

“Mama, please. I’m twenty. I’m not a baby anymore. Surely you know that.”

“My God!” the mother said, closing her eyes.

“No need for drama, please. I know what I’m doing. Go, go get some rest,” the young woman added in a whisper.

Her mother left her and returned to her bedroom. The father was awake. She sat on the bed and, hiding her face in her hands:

“Rose spent the night out,” she said without looking at him. He coughed, hoping he had misunderstood, and rubbed his eyes:

“How should I know?”

“We’ll have to ask her,” he added, weighing his words. “Maybe she was with some friends, at a party. We’ll just have to ask her.”

At eight, Rose was sitting at the table like everyone else, bathed, made up, and so fresh one could swear she had stayed in bed all night.

“In the name of the Father and the Son,” the grandfather began before breaking his bread.

The others, except for the invalid, ate as they watched him do this.

“Oh, by the way,” Rose said in an offhand manner, “I had forgotten to tell you about it earlier, Papa, but I was invited out last night and it was too late by the time I remembered. I didn’t want to wake you and Mama, so I just snuck out.”

“Next time, you’ll let us know beforehand, won’t you?” the father said calmly.
“Of course, Papa.”
He had two new anxious wrinkles between his eyes.
“I have to run. Come on, Rose, we need to see that lawyer this morning.”
They got up and left immediately.
“My father is using his daughter to try to sway the lawyer. It turns out he’s a shrewd strategist,” Paul explained quietly. “There he goes taking Rose down the wrong path.”
“A little respect for your father, my grandson,” the grandfather shouted, interrupting him.
He pulled on his goatee and lowered his voice:
“You can’t lead anyone down the wrong path. A dog is born good or bad and the same thing goes for a human being.”
“In that case, we aren’t responsible for anything,” the young man added in a voice that invited no reply.
“We do bear responsibility for having been chosen as carriers of evil,” the grandfather said, finishing his thought.
“Ah, well, in that case!”
“That’s the law, grandson.”
“The law! What law?”
“Divine law,” said the invalid, having followed every word of the conversation. “Grandfather says God has chosen me to become a hero.”
“If you keep stuffing his head with such ideas, you’ll make him go mad,” the mother reproached him.
Her red eyes had dark circles around them. Her father’s eyes, she’ll end up an alcoholic just like him, because it is written that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God, and fear of Him banishes sin, but she fears nothing in life and life will win, grinding her down just as it did her father until his bitter end.
“Teach your daughter to fear God,” he advised sententiously “even if you don’t fear Him yourself. That’s my advice to you.”
He hadn’t meant to complete his thought out loud and had spoken almost despite himself. He saw her shrug and reply:
“For what could God reproach her?”
“You think she’s so innocent?”
“Yes,” she answered with dignity, “I think she is.”
“God willing, you’re right,” the grandfather replied simply. “God willing, you’re right.”
That afternoon, the grandfather had the maid bring the invalid to church. Once he found a seat, he took him on his knees and sent Mélie back to wait on the porch. From his pulpit, the Haitian priest delivered a sermon that displeased him because he spoke of obedience and acceptance not of the laws of heaven but of what passed for law in the kingdom of this world.

“We must learn to submit,” the priest was saying. “We must learn to resign ourselves, for nothing happens on earth without God’s will.”

A few people turned to stare at the grandfather. And for a moment he had the unpleasant feeling that the sermon was directed at him. “Should I, too,” he felt like shouting, “Should I, too, resign myself to having my father’s grave profaned and his bones dug up?” He knew the priest would reply: “Yes, if such be God’s will.” And therefore he had gone astray, for rebellion and vengeance swelled within him. Jesus chased the thieves from the Temple with a whip, and my father imitated him. Was he wrong? he wondered. No, and even when he stuck a knife in the back of that incorrigible thief who had managed to bribe the judges and get the law on his side, he was right that time too. After all, since when did a man, a real man, allow what is his to be taken away against his will? And the grandfather wanted to spit in the faces of all these curs, beginning with his own son. He left the church irate, the invalid in his arms. If the Church was on the side of the thieves, he might as well pray at home from now on. And God would in the end understand that the Church had sunk into corruption.

Jacob called out to him just as he was opening his house gate. He would not have stopped but the heavy silence that followed the sound of his name made him turn his head to make sure he had heard right. Jacob was standing in a doorway and gesticulating like an old puppet. The grandfather wondered what this mute commotion was all about. He entrusted the invalid to the maid and went to his neighbor’s. Mme Saint-Hilare craned her head, her features contorted by the effort. She saw Jacob’s door open and the men embrace.

“I’ve been waving to you for the past five days. My old friend, my dear old friend!”

“Yes,” the grandfather replied, “but five days ago you would have come over when you wanted to talk to me.”

“Alas, I haven’t been well. My sciatica. I can barely walk.”

And indeed, he was dragging himself about wearing horrible dust-green slippers on his feet.

“I wanted to send a note with the maid but she refused to take it to your house.”

“Why not?”

“Because of the … the men who set themselves up on your land. She claims that one of her brothers was executed by them.”

Only then did the grandfather realize that his friend sounded as though he had lost his voice. That was especially striking, for Jacob had a stentorian voice that he had never been able to control. Often during their endless card games the grandfather would scold him because he frightened the nervous invalid and sometimes startled him awake during his nap.

“The neighborhood is stunned,” Jacob continued. “The Demarquis don’t dare step outside, and Madame Saint-Hilare has been ill, suffering from shock. In any case, thank God you are all in one piece … Dear friend, I just wanted to give you a piece of advice: play dead, forget about the land. Life is more precious than property. If you are not too afraid to venture out this evening, come by for a card game. I’ll leave my door open. No one will see, no one will know.”

The grandfather thanked him, repressing the urge to insult him. Just as he was about to open the door, he saw him perform a silly little hop, belying his condition. He then put his hands on his back, grimaced and smiled sheepishly.

“Take care of that sciatica,” the grandfather advised, scowling at him, “and thanks for the invitation.”

Their cowardice is sickening, and their friendship is pathetic. God be praised for letting him probe their souls and see into their true feelings. For he had believed in them. Not without pain did he recall the long walks he had taken with Jacob, their babble after the invalid would fall asleep, the meals shared casually. When his only daughter died, Jacob grew so desperate that the grandfather didn’t dare leave him alone. They had followed the hearse arm in arm, and when the grave had been closed, Jacob sobbed on his shoulder. Of course, sometimes two men go around
together without any real feelings for each other. But he, Claude Normil, had never been able to treat someone he despised as a friend. He was disappointed, for there is nothing worse than misplacing one’s trust in another at an age when experience should have armed you against misapprehensions and illusions. How naïve he had been to believe for a single minute that a Syrian could feel sincere and disinterested friendship for a black man! He knew now that as long as a human being could still open his eyes, even at the bottom of a ditch, he would still have a lot to learn from life. “Pusillanimous and pathetic!” he added, and made for the bedroom where the child was waiting for him.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Rose went with her father to the lawyer’s on the appointed day.

There were a dozen people in a room that was furnished with only a few dusty chairs. Standing with her arms crossed, an outrageously made-up woman in a black tight-fitting dress gazed in agony at the young man in livery who stood watch over the door. A toothless, trembling old man approached and beseeched him in a respectful whisper. The guard froze the old man in place with his look. He trembled even more and emitted a sort of submissive falsetto chuckle as if he agreed with the guard. The other clients were farther off, likewise standing and casting furtive glances at the empty chairs. When they saw Rose and her father sit down, they exchanged winks of admiration that turned to mockery when the guard opened the door and had the woman in black go before them. There was a grumble of protest. So the woman turned around and said: “I’ve been here for two days and haven’t even sat down, isn’t that right, sir?” The guard looked at Rose and for a brief moment an elusive smile loosened the fixed expression on his face.

The woman in black remained inside over an hour. The trembling old man had looked at his watch with a desperate grimace and left the room. Sitting beside his daughter, Louis Normil was getting impatient and anxious. What new lie was he going to have to come up with to explain his absence at the office? On account of the harsh reprimands he received, he was losing the prestige he enjoyed among the other employees. They probably knew all about his predicament and went out of their way to let him know they knew.

“Well then, my little sheep, getting sheared are you?” one of his colleagues had recently asked. Overexcited from all these thoughts, he stood up and went toward the guard.

“I would like to remind you, sir,” he said, “that this is my third appointment. I’ve been waiting for two hours. Can I expect to be admitted?”

The guard leaned toward him without looking at him, his eyes on Rose, who was yawning and wriggling in her chair. At about eleven, a peephole high up on the wall opened up and eyes appeared behind it, noticed by no one save Louis Normil. The guard tilted his head to listen to someone talking to him from the other side of the door and immediately said:

“Monsieur Louis Normil.”

Rose got up, gestured at her father, and, shrugging her shoulders, went through the door that the guard held wide open. For a brief instant she waited for her father, who hesitated as if he had suddenly thought to run away. He was awkwardly trying to free himself from the other clients standing close enough to smother him. A myopic woman came so close to him to see who he was that her glasses touched his chin.

“Let the gentleman pass,” the guard said.

Rose held out her hand to her father and the door immediately closed behind them.

A stocky man, his eyes hidden by enormous black glasses, poked up his head over a pile of papers. Next door, one could hear voices whispering and the clicking of typewriters. A screen behind the lawyer’s table imperfectly concealed a leather couch and a coffee table with cold leftovers on top of it.

“Come in,” the lawyer said.

And he pointed to two armchairs a good distance from him, in which Rose and her father sat down. Louis Normil held out his hand to the lawyer, who did not seem to have noticed. He had the unpleasant and aggressive look of a starving bulldog. He tilted back in his chair, lifting a leg and resting it over one of the supports.

“How may I help you, sir?” he said in a slow, slightly nasal voice.

Ill at ease, Louis Normil decided on an almost familiar, friendly tone, and reminded the lawyer they had been schoolmates.

“I guess one could say we’ve been childhood friends,” he concluded.

The lawyer seemed to search his memory in vain for a convincing truce of this, and his large flabby lips became creased in distaste.

“Right … right … school, you say. Well, maybe. But I can’t seem to recall, though really I wish I could, ever
being invited to your house. Childhood friends, that’s saying quite a lot. Our lives have been so different.”

“Different!” Louis Normil exclaimed, flabbergasted by the turn the conversation was taking.

“You were raised in the well-to-do neighborhood of Turgeau, and I behind the cemetery, right? Is there no
difference?” he suddenly yelled.

Then, softening his tone:

“For a time, rich blacks played the same role in this country as rich mulattoes did,” he continued. “Your father
was as contemptuous and full of social prejudice as your Turgeau neighbors. I only have to look at you to know that
what I am saying is true. And now, actually, I think I do remember: I was a good student and you failed pathetically
at your baccalaureate exams: yet you ate to your heart’s content while I did not. I envied you and you knew nothing
about it, but, well, maybe that’s the secret of my success. You too would have worked really hard if you were
envious of someone.”

“I don’t see …” Louis Normil mumbled, disconcerted.

“But that’s not the point of your visit,” the lawyer cut in. “How can I help you?”

Until then he had paid no attention to Rose. She looked at her father who, having lost face, mumbled as he
outlined his situation. The lawyer listened without batting an eye, and when he finished speaking, became quiet and
said:

“Do you know what you are asking me to do?” he replied in a low voice so altered that Rose shivered. “This affair
demands time and considerable expense and the least stumble could cost me my head. First, I’ll have to resort to
approaching … certain highly placed”—he hesitated to say the word—“figures who will judge whether you do or do
not deserve to have your property restored to you. Next, I’ll have to act with extreme caution so as not to upset those
who have decided to seize your land.”

“But the land belongs to us!” Rose cried out. “My father was hoping to sell it so that my brother and I could go
abroad.”

He slowly turned his head toward her, and she had the unpleasant impression that he was undressing her behind
his glasses.

“You wanted to leave, you say? Aren’t you happy here, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes … of course … but we would have preferred to finish our studies elsewhere.”

“What do you have against our universities?”

“Well … nothing.”

Suddenly he turned away from her and began impatiently riffling through the pile of papers in front of him, then
grabbed an ashtray and rapped twice on his desk.

A third invisible door to the right opened and a typist walked in carrying a notepad on which she had already
started scribbling a few lines.

“Mademoiselle, please type this up,” the lawyer said to her. “On this day, February eighth, 19—, according to the
petition of Monsieur Louis Normil, residing in this town, it has transpired that he has been unjustly dispossessed of
his land …”

“Forgive me, but I don’t believe I used the word unjust,” Louis Normil added with a distressingly flattering smile.

“Strike that word, Mademoiselle,” the lawyer ordered, imperturbably calm, “it has transpired that Monsieur Louis
Normil has been dispossessed of his land … and an investigation is under way to determine whether these invaders …”

“I never uttered that word either, counselor …”

“Strike that, Mademoiselle … whether parties established on said land hold legal documents in accordance with
statute.”

The secretary flashed a crooked smile, then suppressed a chuckle.

At that moment there was a loud knock on the door and before the lawyer was able to answer it, a small skinny
man wearing a black uniform came in, his bony and disproportionately long hands dangling at the end of his arms
like the paws of a gorilla. The lawyer leaped out of his armchair and rushed toward the little man, bowing very low.

“How are you?” he asked, his fat lips open in an affable and welcoming smile.

With his two hands the little man lifted the weapons hanging on his belt and sat one buttock on the edge of the
desk.
“Sit in the armchair,” the lawyer gushed, “you’ll be more comfortable there.”

“That’s all right, that’s all right,” the little man answered, then crossed his booted legs and turned his head toward Rose, staring at her quietly.

“It just so happens, my dear friend,” the lawyer continued in his slow nasal voice, but this time in a congenial tone. “It so happens I was just thinking about you …”

Putting a light hand on his shoulder, the lawyer discreetly motioned to follow him behind the screen. They whispered for a moment, and when they reappeared Rose found the short man shamelessly ogling her again.

“Yes,” he said in response to a question the lawyer had probably asked him during their tête-à-tête. “Yes, that might work. Tell him so and present the conditions quite plainly. She’s not bad. As you know, I’m hard to please and I’ve been disappointed before. I don’t want to come out on the short end of this.”

At that, he burst into loud hysterical laughter that shook his whole body. He left the room still laughing and as he passed by Rose he brazenly brushed her knee with his hairy hand.

“Let’s go, Papa,” she said, feeling as though there were suddenly less air in the room.

“Now, now,” the lawyer intoned with his nose, “I see the little miss is in a hurry to leave us.”

“So then, counselor,” Louis Normil added in an attempt to break the grotesque and sensual atmosphere.

“Five hundred dollars up front,” the lawyer cut in. “And I am so sure that we’ll get our due process that I won’t ask you for more until the end of the trial. Send the money with this nice young woman by next week.”

“It will be my pleasure to bring it myself.”

“My dear, I have a soft spot for pretty people, and I really don’t like to be contradicted. I will only take the money from your daughter.”

“Fine, sir, goodbye, counselor. Come, Rose, let’s go.”

She wobbled on her legs and clutched her father’s arm.

“Must be the heat,” the lawyer said idly.

And he purred for a little while as if inwardly savoring a voluptuous idea.

This time, he said goodbye first and opened the door for them himself. He rubbed his hands as he watched them leave, though his lips were twisted in a hateful rictus.

In the hallway Rose breathed easier, even though it wasn’t ventilated any better. Her father grabbed her arm and whispered:

“Don’t you say a word, wait until we’re outside.”

They both staggered as they reached the street under the mocking eyes of the guard.

“My God!” Rose groaned. “My God!”

“Yes,” was all her father said in response.

They went home together because it was about one and time for lunch. They found the family sitting at the table, eating in silence. As soon as they came in, they were greeted by anxious eyes. They sat down and Rose casually heaped her plate with food.

“I’m starving,” she said, looking her brother straight in the eye.

Before putting any food in her mouth she suddenly burst into tears. Getting up from the table, she covered her face with her napkin and ran upstairs.

“What’s the matter with her?” the invalid asked.

“Nothing,” the father answered, “a little tired. We had to wait a long time at the lawyer’s.”

“And so what happened?” the grandfather asked.

“It worked out. The lawyer thinks there’s a good chance we’ll recover our property.”
CHAPTER EIGHT

The father knew how to find the five hundred dollars. He hadn’t given his word lightly. For the last six years, he had been seeing a very rich young woman who had often proven her devotion to him. He would go and tell her everything. She lived just outside of town. Maybe she didn’t know about any of this. He would pay her back as soon as he had taken care of things. So firm was his intention that he decided he would refuse to accept the sum without an IOU. He would drop by that very afternoon, after the office closed, and then return late at night in the car she drove like a madwoman on the deserted roads that led to her house. Was it because he had seen his wife day in and day out for the last twenty years that he was unable to desire her? He knew very well he had little cause to be unhappy with her save for that lack of spontaneity that made her ever the same, always a bit taciturn and plump, idle and wistful. Her nonchalance surfaced even in their physical relations, and he sometimes had the awkward feeling she submitted to them only out of duty. Was he sure of this? Had he tried to understand her? Did the coldness she affected conceal a mute reproach, some deep-seated and unexpressed grievance? Sometimes he wondered, was he blameless? He had been too flattered by the interest he aroused in this thirty-year-old heiress to linger on such questions. And to absolve himself he came to believe that all she wanted was to live in peace and that he spared her as much as possible. Levelheaded, modest, he had never boasted of this affair. Did his mistress love him? On that subject, too, he avoided self-examination. It was enough for him to hold her in his arms and hear her ramble on about love for him to feel fully a man, fully happy. He had once condemned adultery and was now astonished to find himself basking in it without remorse. The rare moments of happiness can be found only in love, he noted, and discovered that in the arms of his mistress his passion was still intact, that in the warmth of a new sensation he could forget the small humiliations he bore at the customs office where he worked as a simple inspector. In life, mediocrity usually destroys a man’s ideals and ambitions; you cease to believe in yourself, he had said to himself one day, so you might as well forget yourself in a woman’s arms. For her, I am a kind of god able to please her sexually, and that makes me feel alive …

The mother had gotten up. He calmly looked at this body of hers, still desirable, reassuring himself that she thought herself old. She stood by the window watching the stakes, nervously smoking a cigarette. Though she had her back to him, he had the impression that she was following each of his movements with sustained attention. Her thoughts were palpable to him and he thought, She’s angry at me, no doubt about it. And he understood that should she break this silence with a single word, he would no longer be able to lie to himself. At that precise moment, she turned around:

“Never again,” she said. “Never again will Rose go with you to that lawyer, you hear me, never again.”
There was such force in the measured tone of these words that he looked at her stunned.
He saw a grimace of disgust on her lips and he felt ashamed. The other woman is the one lying to me, he told himself, disconcerted. I may be a good lover, but I am not a man.

“That’s what I was telling myself,” he answered. “These lawyers’ offices have become veritable brothels.”
“You didn’t know that?” Paul shouted at him.
“No,” he replied, “I didn’t know that.”
The invalid began to fidget in his chair and would have fallen out if his mother hadn’t rushed to him in time.
“Calm down, come, come,” she urged. “Come, I’ll put you to bed.”
“I don’t want to go upstairs,” he protested. “Rose is crying and I don’t like to hear people crying.”
“Let him be,” the grandfather then said.
“He really hears too much for his age,” the father murmured.
“Grandfather says that heroes are predestined and that those who are predestined are beings set apart,” he pronounced in a superior little tone.
“Give us a fucking break with your heroes,” Paul retorted, looking him up and down.
“Oh, if you only knew, if you only knew … But I won’t tell you.”
“Come with me,” the grandfather said.
And getting up, he took him in his arms and carried him to the porch, from which one could hear them whispering.

The mother went to Rose’s room. She was lying on her bed and calmly reading a book, which she closed.

“I don’t know what came over me,” she said. “I have no idea”—she laughed in mild amusement—“probably just nerves …”

“You don’t need anything?”

“No, thank you.”

“And there’s nothing you want to tell me?”

“No, why?”

“I thought maybe you’d had a shock at the lawyer’s office, that you’d seen or heard things you might have found unpleasant.”

“No. He just insisted that I bring him the five hundred dollars he wanted from Papa.”

“Five hundred dollars! … I forbid you to return there.”

“I have to.”

“What does that mean?”

“That I’m old enough to stand up for myself.”

“Alas, my poor pumpkin! They’ll devour you before you can say how do you do.”

“I’m not afraid of them.”

“You talk like a child.”

“I’ll ask Paul to wait for me outside.”

“And if you take your time coming out?”

“He will come get me.”

“So they can tear him to pieces? Rose, you’re smart enough and you’ve seen enough to understand …”

“But, Mama, what is it that you want?” the young woman cried out with impatience. “That we fold our arms and wait to get old and die like you?”

Her mother closed her eyes and bit her lips before answering.

“You really think I feel that old and close to death?”

“Look, how should I know? Forty-year-old women put up with everything! But us young girls, we have to have our say, we have to fight even if it’s over nothing. Maybe that’s because we still have our strength, because life hasn’t yet knocked us around. Even though we know that life isn’t all peaches, we want to struggle with it, see where it will take us, just to test our strength. Do you understand?”

“I was young too once. I beg you, my little girl, think twice about what you’re about to do.”

“But you feel like it has to be done? For Paul, if only for Paul.”

“Don’t go, Rose, don’t go …”

With these words she ran away, and Rose heard the door to her room close behind her.

She sat on the bed, eyes fixed in front of her. Her senses were recording every sound as faithfully as a tape recorder. From beyond the other side of the stakes, she could hear the men in black talking and walking around, and she shuddered in horror at the memory of the Gorilla whose hairy hand had touched her knee.

If he ever touches me, I’ll die, she told herself.

When, at lunchtime, a truck dumped its first load of stones with a crash under the trees in the garden, they rushed to the dining room window. Under the watchful eye of the men in black uniform, twenty beggars dressed like convicts in striped shirts were digging around the stakes with picks, while twenty others mixed mortar.

“They are building a wall to cut us off from the land,” the father said calmly.

Paul, who in the past two days had only left the house to buy cigarettes, grew pale and bravely plunged back into his book as if he wanted to break all connection between himself and the noises outside that seemed to grow more intense minute by minute. The invalid asked to be brought to the window and stared at the trees with his strange, precocious and burning eyes:
“We’ll still see the oaks, wall or no,” he cried out. “It’ll never be as tall, never.”

Interrupting his reading, Paul looked at the invalid, his brow wrinkled as he considered a thought that this childish statement had randomly inspired in him. How difficult it is to escape, no matter how hard one tries, he thought. The noises outside entered into me, as did the voices of the grandfather and the child. They pursue me in my sleep and torture me. Now I know that, just like human beings, things have their own lives. Despite the screen that my will has imposed, I hear the noises of the picks and trowels, the heavy pounding of the stones. They ring in my brain, relentlessly. I have to get away from here, make myself forget for a moment. Neither Papa nor Rose will be able to accomplish anything. They can fool themselves all they want. Why was Rose crying? It’s the first time I’ve seen her like that. What is she up to? What about Grandfather? Why is he always whispering to the child? We have split up into two factions. And maybe Mama and I are in a third without realizing it. Is this what it means to take courage? To live. To go on living. When life, from birth until death, is nothing but fraud! No, the cheating doesn’t start until later! From earliest childhood, pure and carefree, until death. That’s why, despite his whims and moods, Claude has never known childhood. And Grandfather, who has found a friend in him, doesn’t know why he loves him. Why did they come on our land? Why this punishment? Why this curse? Is it to force us to take stock of our cowardice that life tests us? Or, rather, is it to help us find ourselves? I have to stop thinking about them and come out of my state of prostration. Otherwise, I’ll become sick. See Fred again. Don’t take no for an answer, get back on the team, find a girl ‘willing to love me. That’s it, love, love! Yes, but which girl? Anna, Dr. Valois’ daughter. Beautiful, wise, intelligent. Is it possible for so many qualities to be gathered in one woman? Rose? A big question mark for me lately. She carries on like I don’t know what. If I get to know Anna, won’t I find that she crumbles under my very eyes like the others? So narrow-minded of me! I’m just like Grandfather and he doesn’t even know it … Can’t listen to any of this anymore. Got to get away! Forget! Forget!

The sentences coming out of him displaced those scrolling under his eyes in the book. From the window, the mother watched the wall go up. She had undone the top of her blouse and was breathing with difficulty. She remembered that one morning she had noticed a bird perched on her window. The presence of the man sleeping deeply at her side as she counted the hours from dusk to dawn reinforced her feeling of loneliness. And the bird had suddenly popped up as if answering her call. It stared at her with its round eyes and tilted its head to the right and then to the left as if mocking her. *He has something to tell me*, she had thought childishly. *He came all the way here to show me what freedom is*. For a good minute or so they had stood there looking at each other, each of them absolutely still. Then the bird twittered and flew off on swift wings trilling its happy song. Alone again, she had invented touchingly naïve myths to console herself: a leaf whirling in the wind, a butterfly whether black or alive with color, the hooting of an owl or the graceful song of a nightingale, everything seemed pregnant with meaning.
“Tell me what your father was like,” the invalid asked the old man that day.

“Very tall, very strong and very dark-skinned,” the grandfather answered. “He dressed like a peasant, in a long coarse blue tunic and sandals.”

“Tell me how he became master of this land.”

“It could only have been thanks to a miracle,” the grandfather said, “and woe to those who don’t believe in miracles, for God’s hand guides our actions. All right, listen carefully to my story: One day, my father went to Port-au-Prince to sell his cattle. His horse carried him three days and three nights, accompanied by goats, cows and sheep and the barking dogs that herded them. For the country was wealthy and business was booming in those days. Have you ever seen sheep?”

“No, Grandfather.”

“They disappeared at the same time prosperity did. In the hill country, they say the malfinis, eagles with a taste for mutton, devour them at birth. See how they hover over our land.”

The grandfather pointed to a patch of sky right above the oaks where big black birds flew slowly, grazing the branches, diving beak-first, cawing and greedily eyeing the ground below.

“Grandfather, they look like the men in uniform who have taken our land.”

The grandfather lit his pipe, which he had been filling since he mentioned the sheep. He wedged it into the corner of his mouth and pulled on it until it caught.

“Then what happened?” the child asked.

“Then,” said the grandfather, “your great-grandfather arrived in Port-au-Prince surrounded by his sheep, his goats and his cows, and was on his way to the house of a very rich man who had long been buying his cattle, when he met a peasant on the way who said to him:

‘My master will trade these parcels of land for your animals. Say yes and you won’t be sorry’

‘Will he permit me to choose these parcels freely?’

‘Yes, indeed. And you will become a great landowner in one of the loveliest quarters of Port-au-Prince.’

“So my father followed the peasant. In exchange for three cows, eight goats and twelve sheep, he got a tiny piece of land. Look over there, under the first oak.”

“I see,” said the child.

“My father had a rough life back in the countryside. Early to rise, late to bed, he was tireless caring for his animals, and each time he brought them here he got another piece of land. When he had enough, he had this house built where he set up my mother and me, for I was old enough to go to school. My mother was expecting a second child and father continued to go back and forth between the country and the city at the cost of his health.”

“Why?” the invalid asked, looking into his eyes. “Why was it so important for your father to leave the countryside and acquire this land?”

The grandfather lowered his head without answering.

“Was he ambitious?” the child asked insistently. “He must’ve liked this nice neighborhood, didn’t he? You recently told me that your mother was ambitious too. Does God love ambitious people? …”

“Listen to the end of the story,” the grandfather interrupted a bit impatiently … “Where was I? Ah! Yes, I remember. My mother was expecting a second child …”

“What was your mother like, Grandfather?”

“A bit like you. You know, all the girls of Fonds-des-Blancs are more or less light-skinned. Look at your father, he’s different from me. Haitians are so mixed that there are all kinds. And that’s what makes us a very beautiful people. But let’s go back to our story … One evening, my father came back just in time to hear my mother’s cries of pain and watch her die, the child still clinging to her insides. I was your age then. He called me to him and told me: ‘Well, death seems to be knocking on our door. If something was to happen to me, I want to be buried here, on one
of the plots of land I acquired by the sweat of my brow. If your children or the children of your children are in need, I give you permission to divide them up and sell them. But swear to me that, as long as you live, you will not sell the piece of land that covers my bones …' And I can still remember how I made that oath in tears.”

“So you are now bound by two oaths,” the child said to him. “We have to act as quickly as possible. When will we start going to his grave to summon him?”

“Soon, once you have learned to crawl perfectly. Because I won’t be able to carry you. I’ll be carrying an ax and a knife. The same weapons my father used to get rid of the man who had sold him these lands and then thought he could take them back just because he was wealthy and powerful.”

“So he killed him?”

“Yes. To protect what was his.”

“They didn’t go after him?”

“No. Because God keeps an eye on the wicked, and sooner or later they must pay for the wickedness they do. Listen: when the rich and powerful wallow in lawlessness, they think they can smother the voice of justice and they forget the ever-watchful eyes of God. The judges had been bribed by the crook. They were all going to split up the plots of land. But my father, brave and intelligent, killed the crook and took the land titles to an honest lawyer who had him acquitted by threatening to expose the scandal.”

“So you don’t have those papers anymore?”

“I do,” the grandfather answered.

“Give them to a good lawyer like your father did.”

“Times have changed, my child, and the voice of justice has been quiet for a long time. Judges don’t fear scandal and advocates for good causes no longer dare raise their voices.”

“They are afraid?” asked the child.

“They are afraid,” the grandfather replied. “Wherever violence and crime rule, everyone is afraid, even the executioners and the criminals.”

“I want to fight for justice and for peace. Do you think that, even without feet, one can still fight, Grandfather?”

“Haven’t I promised you that you will die a hero one day,” the grandfather answered …

… That evening the father went out. He had returned right after his office closed and told his wife he was going out and would be back after dark. She had watched him furtively as he got dressed, eaten up by jealousy, curiosity and worry. From whom was he going to borrow five hundred dollars? Who was he going to seduce with that cologne? Was the woman who had stolen him from her that rich? What she felt was not exactly jealousy. No, this rather lukewarm reaction was more like a vaguely loving scorn. After all, she was the one who had sprinkled fragrance on the handkerchief she handed to him.

He got out of the car after a half-hour ride and paid the driver. These dates were costing him a pretty penny, but how could he complain? It was already night and one could barely make out the house at the end of the path lined with boxwood. The bitter perfume of the white flowers he picked on his way stirred his blood and he quickened his step. She opened her arms to welcome him and he held her tight.

“Each time you come, I’m always up, waiting,” she said, “as though I knew you were coming.”

He lifted her and carried her to the living room sofa, cluttered with colorful pillows he had seen her embroider with her beautiful expert hands. The Japanese kimono she was wearing traced her narrow hips. He leaned in and kissed her voraciously.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered.

Revived, seductive, charming, Louis Normil underwent a transformation.

“Look,” she said, freeing herself, and ran to the armoire, opening it to take out a beaded dress that sparkled in the lamplight.

“I made it myself,” she said proudly. “Would you like me to wear it for our little supper tonight?”

“Yes,” he murmured.

She undressed in front of him and slipped her sun-kissed skin into a dress that made her look like an Oriental princess.

An old black woman, who had been in her service since she was a child, came in to announce dinner. They went into the living room, where a princely table had been set. At the end of the meal, she lifted her glass, saying:
“I drink to our love.”

Beneath her many guises she played any role she liked, trusting in no one. Condemning marriage as a dull and revolting institution, she congratulated herself for having managed to resist the temptations of bourgeois life, and in this handsome grife, so self-effacing and impoverished, she saw the flickering shade of Armand Duval.\(^4\) She nevertheless snuggled up tamely into this affair and avoided displaying herself in the company of her lover, supposedly for his wife’s sake. Since even the wealthy may come to feel insecure, she suspected that her gentlemen callers lusted after her fortune more than her beauty. Orphaned very young, she had been raised by her old maid, who had learned to look away and keep her mouth shut, for since her early youth she had been drawn to mature and even graying men in whom she sought the paternal affection she had been weaned from too early. Her father, a government minister in all the past regimes, who had the wisdom to amass a tidy fortune during his political career, had died when she was only ten.

“You are my father, my lover, and my friend at the same time,” she had once said to Louis Normil. “That is a lot to discover in a single man.”

Once they were in bed, having had their fill of love, he tried in vain to bring up the topic of money. Finally giving up hope, he used a back door.

“Have you learned what happened to us?”
“No. What do you mean?”
“Some men in uniform have set up camp on our land.”
She gave a start as if stung.
“When? Why? What have you done or said to make this come upon you? Your children? Who have they been seeing? That kind of curse doesn’t just fall from the sky out of nowhere …”

He had the painful feeling that she was more frightened than saddened by their misfortune. She lit a cigarette with trembling hands.

“Have you taken any steps? Do you know anyone powerful enough to help you?” she added with forced calm.
“Yes, a lawyer. He has demanded five hundred dollars and I don’t have it.”
“Why didn’t you just say so, darling!” she said with relief. “Wait.”
She opened the armoire, grabbed a wad of bills that she put in an envelope.
“I would love to slip in a love note but you’re liable to leave it lying around.”
“I’ll pay you back, Maud.”
“But of course.”

He didn’t like her overly conciliatory tone, agreeing with him before he even said anything. And then the fear he had aroused in her upset him. Would she, like everyone else, fear being seen with him? This distracted him, and he forgot that he had promised himself to make her sign a receipt. He got up and got dressed. She stayed in bed, smoking, eyes half-closed, silent and suddenly so distant that he understood that his news had just destroyed the smooth course of their affair. He had dressed too quickly and only realized his tactlessness when he was done.

“You’re leaving … already?”
It seemed to him that there was a slight involuntary irony in her question.

“I’ll stay as long as you wish.”

He was too troubled. Despite himself, he was already thinking of the drama in store for tomorrow. He could see Rose going to the lawyer’s office, see her trembling before the short man with the gorilla hands who would be there, no doubt about it, and he decided right then to bring the money himself to the attorney.

“Would you like a ride home?”
He glanced at his watch and leaned in to kiss her.

“Would you please,” he replied.

The minute he had opened his mouth to talk about his problems, the evening had been ruined. Suddenly he had discovered that she too was afraid. She too was contaminated. Despite her wealth, despite the self-appointed isolation in which she lived and its assurance of some kind of protection. Perhaps he had only taken refuge in this affair to feel stronger! he realized to his surprise. Until now he had thought that she at least could allow herself to live with contempt for the permanent threat that had been hanging over all their heads like a curse for some time now. A threat made manifest in all the obvious signs that he had refused to interpret in order to preserve his peace of
mind and that false congeniality into which he had withdrawn once and for all. One recollection he thought long dead suddenly arose in his memory. About six years ago, he was going home after stopping by the home of a colleague when the noise of gunfire interrupted his stroll. He hid under the porch of a house and waited there trembling for a long while. Then, without any hesitation, he walked over the dead body of a man lying in the street and ran home with his head down. The next day, he read in the newspaper an article about the accidental death of an unfortunate father of blessed memory. How many along with him had witnessed this murder? How many had been careful to keep silent? Just like him. Right after that, there was Maud to comfort him and help him forget. But she had just disappointed him, and he felt as if he had been rejected from her life. Her reactions had not been those of a woman in love. And he was struck by an inadvertent recollection of several remarks she had made about self-serving friends who only cared about her fortune. Bah! When everything is settled, I’ll sell off one of the lots if I have to and pay her back and everything will be forgotten …

He was unable to fall asleep. His wife had her back turned to him and lay there like a corpse. But he was also sure she was awake. He leaned over her and noticed that her eyes were indeed open.

“You’re not asleep?”

She immediately changed her position and he saw she was crying.

“What’s the matter, Laura?”

She shrugged and huddled up in a corner of the bed.

“And you have to wake me up on top of it,” she reproached him dryly.

He mumbled something that she did not understand, so she pulled up the sheets to cover herself and pretended to sleep.

They both stayed that way, motionless, back-to-back. That’s all she could think to say to me, he thought bitterly. The brute! Nothing can bother him, he’s already sleeping, she was telling herself at the same time. They had both finally plunged into a deep sleep when a terrible noise from the yard woke them. They rushed together to the window to witness an onslaught: a truck and two motorcycles driven by men in black uniform parked under the oaks; about twenty men stepped out of the truck while the two on the motorcycles started them again and roared full speed across the property. Skirting the stakes, they entered the yard and stopped. Ten men, their weapons displayed across their shirts, walked up to the veranda and knocked on the door to the living room, which Mélie opened wide for them. The father saw his wife clasping her hands, disheveled, disfigured by fear. Lifting up the mattress, he slid the money beneath it and threw on his clothes as quickly as he could. From the stairs, he looked at the others.

“I’ll go down by myself,” he said firmly.

“Open up in the name of the law,” they heard.

“Yes, coming,” the father answered and went down.

He took the stamped papers handed to him and quickly ran his eyes over them without understanding a thing. The weapon that one of them had pulled from his belt to point to his temple—telling him “Sign here!”—left no room for discussion. He looked for a pen, was given one by the same man and signed. After which, the maid, opening the living room door again, said goodbye to them with a big devious smile and watched them walk away before closing it. In the blink of an eye the family was downstairs.

“What did they want?” the grandfather asked.

“To make me sign some papers.”

Louis Normil shrugged.

“They didn’t give me time to read them.”

“But, Papa!” Rose exclaimed.

The grandfather put down the invalid on a chair and walked over to face his son in silence.

“I did what was best, Father, believe me.”

“Hell and damnation!” the grandfather yelled.

“Shut the door, Paul!” the father ordered.

“Hell and damnation,” the grandfather repeated in the same tone. “So then you tremble at the sight of them?”

“And who doesn’t tremble at the sight of them?” Louis Normil replied calmly.

“I don’t!” the grandfather yelled again. “Do you know what you just did? You have just signed papers
recognizing that we were never the rightful owners of this land, that’s what you’ve done.” He was fuming with such rage that his goatee was wet from the spray of his words. The father looked at the others and said:

“With or without signed papers, the power is in their hands, Father, and you know this as well as I do. I did what was best, I swear …”

He stopped talking, felt around in his pocket and added:

“Now all that matters is not to waste any more time; I am going to that lawyer’s.”

“To waste your time completely,” Paul blurted out sarcastically.

“So what do you want me to do?”

He was caught unawares by the blood frothing in his veins. His ears were hot but he mastered himself and went upstairs to get the money.

Outside, he calmed himself and his features once again returned to their nice, calm, masklike stillness. He ran into two of his colleagues, who started whispering once they caught sight of him, and he waved to them without getting a response. It wasn’t yet eight and the lawyer’s doors were still closed. He walked past them, not wanting to seem impatient, and came back fifteen minutes later to find the guard opening them. The latter didn’t seem to recognize him. He wanted to follow the guard inside, but the trembling old man who had left the room when his patience had run out last time now jumped in front of him and, pushing him aside, sneaked in first. A bit out of breath, the old man rushed to a chair and was about to sit down when he saw the guard and changed his mind. So he remained standing, all sheepish, hat pressed against his stomach. Five other clients arrived and got behind him into a tight queue, nose to nape. “You’d think they were in a penitentiary,” thought Louis Normil, who had settled himself comfortably into a chair. He thought these people were clients who couldn’t pay the lawyer in any way besides flattery and he felt the money in his pocket with satisfaction. So he was more than a little shocked when he saw the toothless old man pulling out his wallet and taking out a twenty-dollar bill, which he slipped the guard with a conniving wink. The peephole opened and an eye slithered into its frame. As if awaiting this signal, the guard opened the door and had the old man go in. The others executed a sharp ballet step forward that brought them closer to the guard.

“Settle down,” he told them with a look of disapproval, like a schoolmaster talking to his students.

“But they pushed me,” the first one whispered humbly.

The old man’s visit didn’t last ten minutes. He reappeared, fidgeting and trembling more than ever.

“An arm and a leg!” he was heard mumbling. “Costing me an arm and a leg!”

Seeing the guard motion to another client to go in ahead of him, Louis Normil understood that the exact time of his appointment had no significance and that he would again just waste his morning waiting if he remained glued to his chair. So he went to line up behind the other four clients, having firmly decided not to give up his place to anyone. Two hours later, he was finally able to get into the lawyer’s office.

For a long time, the latter looked at him in silence, without even moving, as if he wanted his immobility to prove Louis Normil the futility of his endeavor.

“Really now, sir,” he said in a nasal voice, “what do you want from me?”

Louis Normil took the money out of his pocket and patted it between his palms:

“To bring you this,” he said. “Didn’t you ask me for five hundred dollars?”

“What right have you to present yourself without an appointment?” the lawyer yelled.

“But,” Louis Normil stammered, disconcerted.

“There is no but,” the lawyer continued. “I remember making an appointment with your daughter, not with you. Take this money back with you.”

Louis Normil felt his father’s anger rising in him. The shock was what saved him. He instinctively tilted his head to take his leave of the lawyer and made for the exit. He thought he caught a glint of mockery in the guard’s eyes, but he paid him no mind and went to work. It was about eleven and, to excuse his absence, he pretended he had been unwell and had to go see his doctor. The two employees he had run into earlier exchanged a quick look and smiled sardonically. The atmosphere of the office was heavy, smothered in layers of unbearable silence worsened by the sudden arrival of the director.

He was a reddish, paunchy mulatto who carried himself like a Jesuit and spoke to his employees in an insufferably soft voice. His myopic eyes, encircled by glasses, rested unforgivingly on Louis Normil.

“Late again, Normil,” he said, discomfited, as if he wanted the other employees as witnesses. “Is it your health
that is the source of the problem?"

“Precisely,” Louis Normil uttered, his tone a bit forced. “I wanted to see you to apologize. I am currently being treated by my doctor.”

“In that case, why not take a few days off! We’ll find you a substitute. How long will your treatment last? A month? Two months? You mustn’t neglect your health, take as much time as you need.”

“Thank you, sir,” Louis Normil answered, convinced that they wanted to get rid of him discreetly. “I am grateful for this, but fortunately I should be done with my doctor by tomorrow.”

The director coughed and left quickly as if he had made a sudden decision.

Louis Normil again felt the five hundred dollars in his inside pocket and tried to occupy his mind with work. Papers were piling up on his desk. Despite his best intentions, he couldn’t manage to focus and absentmindedly tried to look busy under the scrutiny of a neighboring coworker. “If I lose my job,” he kept repeating to himself, “if I lose my job.” And these words caused him such despair he began to shake and sweat.

“Are you all right?” the employee staring at him asked.

“Yes, yes,” he answered and continued shuffling papers around, pretending to be busy.

At the end of the workday, he went home and found the family sitting at the dinner table. No one asked him anything this time, but Rose tried to make eye contact and he shook his head with discouragement. He got up before the others did and went up to his room to put the money back under the mattress. Actually, why not in the armoire? he wondered. But he left it there, finding that hiding place more reassuring than any other. He washed his face, changed his jacket, and decided right there and then to go see his mistress, driven by the humiliation of owing her money and the need to dispel the awful misunderstanding that had dimmed their last evening together. She’ll advise me, women have amazing ideas, he said to himself to conceal the real reason for his impatience. I’ll tell her all about that bastard sending back the money and insisting on seeing Rose again. On the landing, he bumped into Rose, who was going upstairs.

“So, Papa?”

“He refused to take the money,” he admitted.

“Don’t you think I’m big enough to take care of myself?”

“Don’t get involved in this.”

“Papa!”

“Don’t get involved in this,” he repeated and rushed downstairs without looking at her.

She slowly opened the door to the bedroom, lifted the mattress, took the money and slipped it in her bag.
The next day, for the Feast of Saint Peter, there was a street fair on Place de Pétionville. Small colorful lamps decorated the trees beneath which the church ladies had set up their stands. An orchestra played a lusty merengue by the lawn where a few couples were already dancing. Vendors with trays of goods on their heads hawked their wares to passersby but ran off and set up on the sidewalks after they were chased away by the monks for whose benefit this feast was held. The gendarmes kept at bay a horde of beggars haunting the vicinity. Once in a while the beggars would elude the watchful eye of the police and scamper to show off their scrofula or their maimed limbs and plead for alms.

When a fanfare sounded, cutting off the orchestra, the crowd was suddenly silent and listened attentively. Men in uniform emerged like an immense black wave, rushing right into the square. Upon seeing them, the beggars yelped with joy breaking free of the police, who no longer dared interfere, they crowded round to cheer on the men.

“Long live the Blackshirts!” they cried.

A voice ordered: “Halt! At ease!” and they broke ranks. Arrogant, chests bulging, hands on their weapons, a few of them with their arms draped imposingly around young girls. The atmosphere changed, as if everyone were suddenly whipped by a mad whirlwind: the church ladies, who a moment ago had been fanning themselves quietly at their counters, were standing and laughing nervously as they dug into bags of confetti; girls went into electrified contortions on the dance floor; their partners resembled robots gone wild, mechanically crashing to the ground with every blast of the saxophone. The frenzy ended with the sound of bullets. Shots were fired in the direction of a man with his hands up. His path was blocked. The men in uniform caught him and dragged him to a tree where they tied him up.

“Let me go,” begged the man. “I haven’t done anything, I only said I was hungry. Let me go.”

“What right do you have to be hungry? Are you trying to foment rebellion?”

“Music!” another voice ordered the orchestra.

And as the musicians attacked a new merengue, the men took aim and riddled him with bullets.

No one in the anxious crowd dared move another muscle. A fanfare sounded and smothered the orchestra once more; the flag rose, the boots regrouped. The monks untied the man’s body and placed it atop a pile of others in a truck driven by an undertaker in a black uniform. The monks motioned wildly as they returned, trying to restore the peaceful and cheerful atmosphere that had been decidedly broken by the arrival of the men in uniform.

“The fair’s not over, the fair’s not over,” they shouted, rolling up their robes and striding briskly around the square.

Paul squeezed Anna Valois’ hand tightly. He felt her trembling.

“You want to go?”

“Yes.”

He led her away, but a few steps later, they bumped into Fred Morin, who raised his glass and said: “Let’s party! Let’s drink to happiness!” They were immediately surrounded by a group of young people.

“Let’s go, Paul,” Anna begged.

“Why? What’s the matter? The party’s just started,” Fred exclaimed.

He seemed drunk and the fun-loving smile flickering on his lips could not erase the expression of fear dilating his eyes.

Paul took Anna’s hand to leave with her but the circle of young men blocked his path.

“You’re not about to ditch your friends,” a player on his team protested. “You’ve abandoned us and here we are glad to be with you.”

There was nothing natural about their words and gestures. They looked like bad actors suddenly pushed onstage and asked to perform a difficult role.

Involuntarily, they kept turning their heads in the same direction. Paul followed their gaze. He was startled to see Rose talking to a man in a black uniform sitting in the backseat of a car, the driver impossible to make out save for a
patch of hair. The man in uniform leaned over, opened the door and Rose got in next to him as the car took off. Paul wanted to run after it, but his teammates blocked his path a second time.

“Leave me alone,” he yelled.

“Don’t do anything crazy,” the youngest on the team, who was only sixteen, advised him.

His hand fell on Paul’s shoulder and his nails slowly dug into his flesh.

“Don’t tell us you didn’t know,” Fred Morin said to him, forcing an increasingly false smile.

“Didn’t know what?”

“All right,” said another. “If you don’t feel like talking about it, that’s your business. But let’s set up our next practice. You’re our best player and we want to keep you.”

“Just like that, huh!” Paul answered, staring at them angrily. “I’d give anything to know why you’ve changed your mind. Eight days ago, I got the distinct feeling I was somewhat undesirable. Is it because my sister got into that car … you think that …”

“Lucky man,” Fred Morin said to him as he wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

He freed himself with a shrug and looked at Anna. She lowered her head. So then, she agreed with them. Or did she avert her eyes to spare his feelings? He fought off the desire to lay into them with blows and curses. He looked again at Anna and took off running. For a long time, he walked aimlessly through the city and only went home at nightfall. He found everyone in the living room except for Rose. He didn’t utter a word, but when she came back an hour later, he got up to meet her:

“Harlot!” he spat in her face. “I saw you!”

She turned to him with a face that was serene, almost wooden.

“You saw me, did you, so what? Is that how you thank me for trying so hard to save this land despite being afraid?”

And she started playing out the scene.

“He says to me, ‘Get in, Mademoiselle, so glad I ran into you, I’ll take you to the lawyer myself. He’s an old nutcase who gets strange ideas in his head, refused to take the money from your father, I know, because he wanted to see you again. He lost a daughter your age and you remind him of her.’ So he really did give me a ride to the lawyer’s, who promised that everything would be settled by next month. From now on, we can consider the case resolved. No, really, they’ve been very polite, very respectful, and I swear they are a lot less frightening up close than from afar.”

“You smell bad,” the invalid said suddenly.

“You!” she said, taken aback, arms wrapped around her own waist, legs drawn together as if soldered shut.

“You don’t smell like yourself, you smell bad, go away, go away.”

“You be quiet!” Paul said to the invalid through clenched jaws.

“I’ll be quiet if I want to. And if I could stand on two feet, I would flog her.”

The grandfather got up, took the child in his arms and walked past Rose as he made for the stairs.

She slowly went up after them and pulled the door to her room shut. She fell to her knees, doubling over, head nearly touching the ground, arms crossed on her stomach as if it ached. Then she took off her clothes, holding them using the tips of her fingers in disgust, and ran to the bathroom.

When the mother went into the bedroom, she was resting, dressed in a clean white nightgown, lying on her side, eyes closed and breathing evenly. She looked at the girl pensively for a moment and then went to her son’s room.

“She slept with that dirty dog,” he said with revulsion.

“I will never believe that.”

“That’s it, keep lying to yourself, keep seeing only what others tell you, and the rest of your life they’ll keep telling you the moon is made of green cheese.”

“No one has ever fooled me, you know that, not even your father.”

“So why do you refuse to face the truth?”

“As long as she won’t say anything about it, I won’t accuse her. What right do I have to judge my daughter when she shows more courage than I do?”

“Mama!”
“She dared to confront these wild beasts for your sake, for our sake, and we should scorn her for it?”

“I’ll kill him! I’ll kill him!”

“Calm down, Paul!”

There was barely a year’s difference between him and his sister and they had been friends since childhood. “My sister! My sister!” he kept repeating to himself, as a bitter taste filled his mouth. “Rose Normil! The lovely Rose Normil. Paul’s sister, don’t you know her?” people used to say. And he would smile without answering, smile with pride. The way she carried her head high with her nose in the air as if the whole world smelled funny to her! “I am going to kill him,” he said again, and imagined an enormous knife sticking out of the back of the little man with gorilla hands as he thrust it in to the hilt.

The next day, he went to Dr. Valois’ house and saw Anna again. He had to wait for some time as she was helping her father at his clinic, where she was a nurse. When she came out, pure and beautiful in her immaculate smock, all that weighed on his heart seemed to melt. She exists, you simply have to remind yourself that such women exist in order to reconcile yourself with life, he told himself. As for my mother, poor woman, my father has neglected her so much that she’s fallen in love with Dr. Valois. I saw it in how she looked at him. And that’s normal. Absolutely normal. Exactly like his daughter, he’s seductive in a way that’s not just a matter of looks but something deeper. And this thing that one feels in their presence is like an intoxicating perfume. They are solid and impermeable. Their nature is like an immutable boulder planted in the earth for thousands of years. A dangerous proposition. Anna! If I should smash my forehead into her, it would open up and drain all the blood from my body. And I would die of it. Good! What do I care! Death for the sake of death!

They stayed in the living room chatting for a long time. Not once did she bring up the question of the land, and she seemed to have forgotten he had left her on the day of the fair without saying goodbye. All the better, he thought then. He had come to her for a bit of happiness and comfort. And miraculously, he felt happy and comforted. A few minutes before he left, Dr. Valois came out to shake his hand.

“I will come by your house soon,” he promised. “I’ve been very busy and neglected my little patient. How’s Claude? Still has that temper of his?”

He, too, said not a word about the land. You’d think he knew nothing about it. Paul went home, his soul lighter, as if bathed in clear light. Such tact! he told himself. How they went out of their way to avoid embarrassing me or hurting my feelings! How I love Anna!
The wall rose a meter above the ground. But when she looked at it the mother felt as if it was higher than the house. A horrible nightmare had just torn her from her slumber and she sat up, breathless and shivering: she had just seen her children chained to a multitude of poor starved souls, walking skeletons, half-naked, feet bleeding. The invalid on Paul’s back was crying, but she could not budge and saw them moving farther and farther away even as the sound of the rattling chains grew more intense. Hand on her heart, she looked at the man sleeping by her side. Was she going to die in this bed helpless? She leaned toward him and called him quietly, but he didn’t move. So she got up and walked to the window. Her keen senses picked up the acrid smell of the stonework and the still-fresh cement, as well as that of the leaves and flowers of the lemon trees that covered the grave. She left the window, cautiously opened the door to the bedroom and felt her way downstairs. She had no trouble finding the bottle of rum in the cupboard. She brought it to her lips and took one gulp after another. She coughed and immediately felt the warmth of the alcohol spreading through her. I want to feel drunk, she told herself. For the first time in my life, I need to feel drunk! She drank again and went upstairs clutching the handrail. From time to time she would burst into a choked laughter, grotesque and loathsome.

She walked into the bedroom and fell on the bed. Everything spun before her and her arm came down clumsily on her husband’s face. Startled, he woke up and saw her with her mouth open, wild-eyed, and he smelled rum on her breath.

“You were drinking?” he asked her, his eyes wide with the surprise, and then shoved her away, overwhelmed with disgust.

She fell back in bed and then got up staggering. She made a clumsy dash for the window and, leaning out, began to throw up in silence. She remained in this position as long as he said nothing.

“You were drinking?” he repeated. “Walking in your father’s footsteps. But what got into you?”

She straightened up slowly and turned around. Without answering, she took a pitcher of water that was on her bedside table and poured herself a glass.

“I’m thirsty,” she finally said.

“What got into you?”

“How should I know?”

She sat on the bed, hand on her heart, which was beating at a wild, irregular rhythm.

“It helps,” she added. “For a moment, I forgot about it all, you, me, the children and everything else. When I’m intoxicated I become my double. In any case, I’ve learned one thing at least: I’m still capable of laughter.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“That’s just it! For a brief moment I was crazy. That must be what people who fall into drink discover. Madness! Madness!”

She erupted in a short-lived cackle that, because this time it was conscious, became atrociously desperate. They were speaking in hushed tones, and in the darkness he saw her as a shadow veiled in a transparent nightgown that traced her nipples.

“Come on, go back to bed,” he ordered. She lay down with her back to him, only to get up again a short while later.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, “sleep, don’t worry about me.”

He said nothing in response and pretended to sleep. But she knew he was awake this time and that he was tormented because of her, and she felt a dark sense of satisfaction. Standing at the narrow window, she saw the sky gleaming beneath a multitude of stars. Its splendor made the profound darkness of the yard even more sinister by contrast. The flowers are falling from the oak trees already, and so are the lemon flowers, she told herself. And suddenly, in the light of the new moon, the grave appeared, white in the midst of the mass of trees. Something moved a few paces from the stakes and she saw the outlines of a man and of an animal clumsily moving around with strange little hops. A shiver ran through her and she heaved over, hands reaching out, mouth open as if about to cry out.
“How long has this been going on?”
It took her a moment to understand.
“When did you start drinking?”
She got up slowly, her eyes still filled with the spectacle in the yard, and looked over at this man she had forgotten buried under the sheets, his head resting on a pillow.
“I’ll keep doing it,” she said dryly. “I’ll keep doing it.”
“You will die like your father. Wasting away from drink.”
“You have to die from something.”
“Spare your children at least.”
“My children! What children? They are already dead. Don’t you know that? Don’t you see that?”
“Quiet!”
“What’s a drunk mother to them after what they’ve been through? They couldn’t care less. Rose already stinks of death.”
“Quiet!”
He jumped on her and grabbed her by the throat.
“That’s it! Kill me! Kill me!”
He loosened his fingers and noticed their livid faces in the mirror.
“My God!” he whispered, imitating her inadvertently.
They went back to bed, each pulling on the sheets as if they could separate themselves from each other that way.
In the distance, the crazed barking of a dog broke and accentuated the horrible silence. A slight gust shook the trees and fresh air flowed into the room along with the strong smell of the soil and the trees.
She heard the stairs creaking, footsteps on the landing whispering and the closing of the grandfather’s door. But she didn’t budge.
And if there’s such a thing as fate, she told herself, then what can I do about it? Let things run their course, wait, let others act, then wait a little more. In other words, resign myself. I can’t do anything, nobody can do anything. That’s the really hopeless part about it. Should I fold my arms and wait? Or fly off the handle and end it all? In any case, choosing will resolve nothing. Caught like rats in a trap.
She thought she saw the father’s shoulder tremble, and fixed her eyes with curiosity upon this body so close to hers. What would he do if she suddenly touched him?
With that thought, she could see herself again when she was twenty, in her wedding gown, kneeling before a priest blessing their joined hands. Meaningless gestures but, when they were young, gestures that seemed to guarantee a future full of happiness. Her illusions had faded one by one and in the void carved out by their loss, old age slowly traced its way. The illness that would keep old age from overstaying its welcome made its presence felt, and she watched for it now without dread and even with a certain desperate complicity! Will I die at their hands or will I be good and dead on my own soon enough? she wondered again. Will my eyes be the first to close or will life force me to watch my children go in the ground one after the other, even though I already have one foot in the grave? Would she play such a dirty trick on me? A dying mother outliving her loved ones! My existence hangs by a thread, I know that, and yet I may have to see them all die. Sinking into her sweat-soaked pillow, fingers clutching the left side of her chest, she lay still and listened to her groaning heart and thought: We think we can fight back, but that’s all wrong. Rose and Paul don’t know it yet. They’re too young and don’t know it yet. They convince themselves otherwise out of pride. They tell themselves: we’re fighting back, we’re doing something, we’re making decisions, but they’re just drunk with their own words. There was a time when I too was drunk with my own words. But that’s over. I’m not moved by illusions anymore. I’ve come to be sufficiently acquainted with these criminals to learn that you can’t fight fate. We’ve been delivered over to their hatred, bound hand and foot. Utterly lost. Every last one of us. Rose dishonored! And Paul fixing his own demise! … No, I can’t go on living knowing all this and unable to do anything to save them. My God! My God! … If only I could leave it all in Your hands! To feel Your presence when misfortune strikes, to have the humility to kneel, beat my chest, and accept this as fair punishment! But I can’t, I can’t …
She saw the massive trees suddenly dashing themselves forward in a great leap as they smashed their thick branches against the roof of the house. The sky grew murky roiling with shapeless waves of blackening clouds. She gasped for air. Twitching feebly she passed out with the sensation of rough hands over her mouth and nose.
The mother went out early that afternoon. She walked for a long time under the sun, worn out from fatigue and fear. What she had decided to do was beyond her strength, she knew that, just as she knew nothing would stop her from doing something, even if it killed her. Doing something for absolutely no reason, perhaps, but still doing something, such is what life demands from human beings. Faint whiffs of hope would stir up illusions she had thought quite dead. So this is what helps, she told herself as she walked. So this is why suicide cannot be the normal culmination of a human life. I am going to try to do something. I’m going to try to believe that I can still make myself useful. She looked at the sky, the trees, the flowers, the people, as if she were seeing them for the first time. She opened her handbag and put money in the hands of beggars; confronted with a skeletal mother and her four starving, crying babies, she took stock of her own sufferings and found them acceptable. Men in black uniform accompanied by women bejeweled like princesses in luxury cars sped by at extravagant speeds, horns honking; several others on foot greeted them with respect, lifting hand to helmet in salute, beggars groveling at their feet. How had she climbed this steep slope without any help? At the top of the hill she could see the gigantic outline of a fortress protected by cannons, their charred muzzles like forbidding tunnels from a distance. A deafening drone swelled around her, which she mistook for engine noise. A dreary siren began to wail. What she saw then took her breath away: hundreds of thousands of men were emerging from every corner of the mountain. They gathered in close ranks, every one of them in boots and a helmet, and again the same drone. This time she understood it was no engine noise but the blurred voices of hundreds of thousands of mouths, all of them yelling in unison: “Hail to the chief of the Blackshirts!” The mother was shaking but bravely and slowly started climbing up the rocky roadside. Soon, she was on all fours. She could hear her heart pumping blood through her neck and in her temples but forgot to listen for the rattling in her chest. Breathless, she climbed, fell, got up again, then crawled flat on her stomach. “My God! My God!” she pleaded. She climbed higher and higher as her nails broke and her hands bled on the rocks. She could see them more or less clearly. They were a compact mass that reminded her of the cluster of trees in the yard in the dark. She still had a long way to go and the slope kept getting steeper and the fortress more and more out of reach. Suddenly she was unable to breathe, and, closing her eyes, she felt her strength draining out of her. She rolled back down, slowly at first, then faster and faster, and finally she lost consciousness. When she opened her eyes and found herself at the foot of the hill again, she yelled: “I want to get up there, I have to see their leader, I have to talk to him, I have to tell him what’s going on. He must not know how badly those he has armed and dressed in black abuse their privileges. He’ll learn the truth from my lips. My God! Help me! Help me!”

This time, she was startled by the unmistakable noise of an engine. She turned around: a truck approached, loaded with men in black. Terror rekindled her strength and she crawled up to hide behind a tree. She opened her handbag, found a handkerchief to wipe her face and hands, and brushed the dust off her dress. She walked slowly, head down, arms folded on her breast, and then she turned toward the hill. She stood for a while like that, gazing at the fortress. “No one besides them will ever get inside,” she heard herself whisper.

She had barely emerged from the deserted road when she was snagged by a delirious crowd shouting and singing a Carnival merengue. The drums beat to the step of the masked dancers. Dressed in yellow, the whippers led the parade, cracking their long lashes; then came the Indians walking with open arms, shaking their wigs and feathers. A group of half-naked devils with scarlet horns threatened the spectators with their gilt pitchforks. Two rows of giant laughing heads ran ahead of a queen of great beauty dressed in pink tulle blowing kisses to the crowd atop a float depicting the fortress in miniature. Other groups dressed in sparkling colors went into contortions, bottles in hand, drunk off clairin and drums.

The first day of Carnival and I had forgotten all about it! the mother said to herself. She moved forward, pushed and roughed up by the crowd, trapped in its froth. As she struggled in vain to get away, a “braided-ribbon” crew materialized behind the queen’s float. Hundreds of beggars in rags followed in its wake, arms in the air, swarming to the sound of a huge, colorful ribbon-draped drum pounded by crew members lurching to the rhythm. The ribbons swayed and interlaced to the beat of hips and feet. Eyes closed, delirious, the crowd shouted more and more, possessed by the drumming. Nothing existed anymore: not anger, nor fear, nor despair. The throng granted itself a reprieve through these ancestral rituals that, for the moment, offered a deceptive sense of freedom. Drumming, tafia, music, song, dance, cries, erotic ferment, all of it helped let off steam, like the idea of being possessed by
African gods in voodoo ceremonies.

The mother finally managed to get away from the crowd. She slowly walked the nearly deserted streets to her house. The grandfather was sitting on the veranda with the invalid.

“Did you see the Carnival?” the child asked. “Are there a lot of people there?”

“Yes,” she answered simply.

“Did you see any nice masks?”

“Yes,” she said. “The beggars were the only ones without masks.”

“And was there a queen, and floats?”

“A very beautiful queen atop a fortress.”

“They reign like lords and masters!” the grandfather grunted as if talking to himself.

She stared at him in silence, then went to knock on Rose and Paul’s doors.

*Where are they? she asked herself when no one answered.*

The father was also gone.

She looked at herself in the mirror for a minute, brushed her face with her hand, sighed and sat on the bed, staring blankly at nothing.

So she had failed just as all of them would no doubt fail. Or would she start over tomorrow and then again, every single day until she died? Wasn’t it her role to shower her children with love, to quietly help them conquer their terror, to shut her eyes and let them take action, all with the conviction that they too would meet with failure? Just make their lives a little easier, cover their heads with maternal hands that they could grasp in their distress or hide their weeping faces in. To attempt again what she had done today, wasn’t that, in truth, giving in to the pride of a death justified by them and by her? Should she run straight into suicide, cut short the days she had left? For they would surely murder her, she knew that much. They’d shoot her before she could even open her mouth to speak.

She could hear the distant, muffled echoes of Carnival. She tilted her head and listened to her heartbeat. It was panting, breathless, worn out like an old animal on its last legs. *I have to go easy on it, she finally told herself, go easy on it so I can outlive all of them; there, that’s the point of my life. To shoulder their sufferings, extend my days and live on to carry my cross and theirs …*
Doubt has worked its way into me. It’s horrible. I’m having doubts about Anna now. Dr. Valois came by with her last evening. All of a sudden, they’ve become overly generous, overly kind. I don’t like that. They had found out like everyone else did, and like everyone else they had avoided us. Why this sudden shift? If I have doubts about Anna and Dr. Valois, I’m screwed. I saw how they embraced Rose! She stood frozen as they kissed her, like she hated them. She seems to hate the whole world. She stares at everything strangely now, as if inwardly watching an awful performance. Mama was all aflutter looking at Dr. Valois, but he paid attention only to Claude. “So, you’ve made up your mind about the wheelchair? Yes, it’s expensive and times are tough. But a doctor can give a wheelchair to a patient who’s been good and who listens, can’t he? Have you been good, Claude? Have you done as you’ve been told? How often did you lose your temper since my last visit? Calm down, Laura, let’s not make a fuss, haven’t I? Well then! …” And he shook his handsome head and beamed his irresistible smile. His daughter’s smile. No, it can’t be … And yet, they did let two weeks go by without visiting. They behaved like everyone else. So that means Rose’s story, everyone knows it. The Gorilla must have spread the word, talked about her, laughed about how … Whore! Dirty whore! But he’s the one I’m going to kill. Who cares what happens after that. I’ll find him and I’ll kill him. Here in the drawer I’ve hidden a knife bought specially for this purpose. I will sink it into his back without a second thought. All this flattery around Rose! She’s becoming powerful too, thanks to the Gorilla. Where do these men come from? Who is their leader? They suddenly showed up in the country and have taken over without any of us being able to put up a fight. Have we become that weak and spineless? We live in terror, trampled by thousands of boots. Everyone knows they have a leader but no one has ever seen him. He confines himself in his fortress and paces about there, they say, like a lion in a cage, waiting for reports from his spies. Maybe we deserve this, and as always the many innocent will pay for a guilty few. Had we become that rotten? I know that we’ve been wallowing in error and concupiscence for a long time now, and personally I was hoping for a change. But not in this direction. I aspire to feel like a real man, a free man. Not like a recruit. For now only the beggars are recruited; they know it and outdo each other hoping to earn a weapon. First they come for the easy recruits, but I know our turn will come. All brought together under the banner of death and armed force. How do you fight them? Streaming from the deepest backwaters of the country, or from another planet, only history can judge them. Maybe some of those who are younger than me will stand up to them one day. After all, nothing lasts forever. We have to hope, otherwise life would have no meaning. They’ve been watching us carefully and have already arrested the most stubborn. The apathetic ones better watch out. Will I resist the temptation for long? Everything would be so simple. Twelve years of study, passing two baccalaureates with distinction, all of that to come to this. What do they have to offer me? Should I buy my rank and a few medals by offering up shameful denunciations? Use all my skills to elbow others off the ladder as I move up? For no doubt even among them there are big fish and small fry and that’s what will bring them to ruin. And I am afraid to face the fact that, no matter what you do, man is a wolf to man. More than anyone else I know, I have the desire to stand firm and fight for a good cause. But not with weapons. With my ideas. My hand extended in brotherhood, offering a fresh and sober example. I would follow anyone who passed austerity laws to halt runaway decadence and the vanity of unchecked ambition; I would support whoever could abolish hunger and poverty prison cells and torture, who would treat every man as a man and include everyone in the national dialogue. If I decide not to belong to any party, if I wish to remain free, then let that choice be mine. Alone and unarmed, I want the right to plead for justice and freedom and to shout from the rooftops that which I believe to be the truth …

I spent the day walking around the city. I saw flowers, landscapes, stretches of sky all done up like the faces of pretty girls. All of it brought tears to my eyes, as if the magnificence of this country was suddenly something flung in my face. Then I ended up on a deserted square where they were training some scrawny, sickly men, all of them following orders, eyes fixed, lips stiff as they goose-stepped with rifles on their shoulders. I saw one of them collapse. Two men rushed over. Lifting him up, they took him out of the ranks. After which the drill continued. I recognized beggars we used to give alms to. They were still gaunt and skeletal, but were now sustained by the hope of becoming powerful in their turn. I know very well that death is nothing to be scared of, that once you tame it, its grimace will turn into a smile. I started to look it in the eye yesterday. Anna! Anna! I will take refuge in her to save
somewhere by giving herself to the Gorilla? Tell me, little sister. I’ll summon the strength to listen to you without
their crimes. And that I could never do. I belong to a small unarmed opposition group. Does Rose think she will get
They spy on me and they can feel my hatred. They’ll go all the way until I kneel and beg for mercy and applaud
the point of all their tricks was to force me into their ranks, do I have the right to refuse and sacrifice my family?
shoulder? Wearing a uniform would put an end to our torment. No, I couldn’t. It would burn my body. And what if
smoke screens so she can be left alone to do as she pleases like anyone else.
on the radio. She’s forgotten her old habits. No more dancing, no more laughter, no more dramatic outbursts as
 doesn’t know it in order to justify his preference for Claude? He doesn’t like my mother: she doesn’t fly off the
disaster for all of us, I know that. No matter how my cowardly father tries to play the poor innocent and say that I
the Gorilla. An off-limits whore. I will kill him and then I will die. I’m not thinking of the others. My act will spell
new face? Frozen, dead, that’s right, dead. What have they done to her? No, I don’t want to know. Not now, at least.
It’s too soon.
Fred Morin and the others came by. I’m exasperated by their growing friendliness. In an unforgivable moment of
weakness, I yielded to their overtures and I’m back on the team now. We played for two hours this afternoon. Two
of the players told me they were planning to become Blackshirts. Fred Morin is right behind them, that’s for sure.
Something in his eyes gives him away. I can already picture him in his uniform, his shyness a thing of the past,
trying to pass for a big shot, earning his stripes, and throwing himself between the Gorilla’s legs to replace him by
my sister’s side. Only the sensation of power makes the uniform seem like something compulsory. The weak feel
strong only with their hand around a gun; the same goes for lesser beings. Only free will can truly fortify an
individual. Will I keep on seeing him though I despise him? Will I ditch my old teammates for their pandering?
They avoid uttering Rose’s name in my presence, but all I have to do is watch them when she’s there: all they do is
bow and scrape and cast furtive glances. They don’t even dare turn and speak to her openly. She is taboo. Thanks to
the Gorilla. An off-limits whore. I will kill him and then I will die. I’m not thinking of the others. My act will spell
disaster for all of us, I know that. No matter how my cowardly father tries to play the poor innocent and say that I
was reckless, he’ll get it too. Unless I miss my target. For as long as he’s alive, he’ll be stuck on Rose, and as long
as he’s stuck on Rose, we’re under the protection of his guns. Maybe they’ll manage to buy proof of my madness
and have me locked up! Who will protect me? Who will have the courage to shout the truth? My mother? Yes,
that’ll be the day she shows her claws. Faded but not dead. Just hearing how she defended her daughter makes one
suspect that a spark would be enough to set her ablaze. Just seeing how she stared at Dr. Valois. Bottled up, yes, but
not empty. Rose! Rose! It’s been five years since I saved her from death. I dove into the open sea and brought her
back to shore unconscious. We became friends. She’s as loyal as a man. She didn’t give me away that night she
caught me under the oaks with Jacob’s maid. A great girl.
Anyway, nothing has changed. They are still on our land. Is the Gorilla as powerful as he is said to be? Or is he
fooling Rose? Maybe from the beginning his goal was to help himself, with the lawyer’s help, to the land and to the
girl. How do I know he didn’t always have his eye on my sister! I will kill him and then I will die. My mind is made
up. Convincing myself of this fills me with a sense of dignity. These thoughts cleanse me, they cleanse all of us.
Corruption stops at our door, at least as long as I’m alive, the vengeance I nurture inside gives me comfort, keeps me
from resigning myself to our degradation. It doesn’t matter if it takes me months to carry it out. A long line of
hotheads, my mother once said to me. And it’s true. All of us brooding with God’s holy fury, and Grandfather
doesn’t know it. We are all alike. Cast from the same mold, and Grandfather doesn’t know it. Or is he pretending he
doesn’t know it in order to justify his preference for Claude? He doesn’t like my mother: she doesn’t fly off the
handle enough. He only believes in external appearances and refuses to see through the thick veil of propriety. What
about Rose’s propriety? I’ve called her a whore a hundred times to myself. They’ve killed her. She no longer turns
on the radio. She’s forgotten her old habits. No more dancing, no more laughter, no more dramatic outbursts as
smoke screens so she can be left alone to do as she pleases like anyone else.
On the other side of the stakes, their black uniforms draw my eyes like a magnet. Drenched in sweat, dripping,
bent by the sun, rifles on their shoulders. Are they happy? Are they fulfilled by the weight of a weapon on their
shoulder? Wearing a uniform would put an end to our torment. No, I couldn’t. It would burn my body. And what if
the point of all their tricks was to force me into their ranks, do I have the right to refuse and sacrifice my family?
They spy on me and they can feel my hatred. They’ll go all the way until I kneel and beg for mercy and applaud
their crimes. And that I could never do. I belong to a small unarmed opposition group. Does Rose think she will get
somewhere by giving herself to the Gorilla? Tell me, little sister. I’ll summon the strength to listen to you without
exploding. What have they done to you? Don’t be afraid that I’ll roar like a lion. I will keep my mouth shut, taking every precaution before I kill him. They’ll never know where the shot came from.

Dr. Valois comes by too often lately. Does he know my mother is in love with him? He brought Claude’s wheelchair and is teaching him to use it. He put the child’s thin hands on the wheels, looked him in the eye and said: “Go on, push!” And Claude pushed, bursting into laughter. Still, it must be hard on the old floorboards of the living room. Anna was smiling, sweet, affable, serene. Too late. She rushed to Claude when he almost fell clumsily trying to go faster. Concern? Flattery? Rose wasn’t there. They haven’t uttered her name. I saw Anna’s questioning eyes catch mine, and I turned away. My mother’s clothes and hair were elegant but she still looked like she was dying. Grandfather hardly opened his mouth and pulled on his beard intermittently with thinly suppressed rage. He smells something is up. Does he perceive things even more deeply than I do? Is that why he’s so intolerant, because he can see more than others can, see into the revolting inmost depths of each of us? Can he sense it, the noxious smell, the pollution and dread perversity of our passions? And the sick kid, his behavior so strangely precocious! They share terrible secrets. Claude’s figured it out. He’s smelled something on Rose that is unknown to him and that he finds disgusting. A man’s smell. Gorilla semen. I’ll kill him. Claude rolled his chair to the radio and turned it on and Rose got up. “No,” she said in an adamant voice, “no, I’ve got a headache.” A funeral! It feels like a funeral in here, but she’ll never admit that. She’ll never dance again. It’s over. Dr. Valois stepped in. He said gently: “Why not, Rose? Why not?” And he turned on the radio. She glanced at him quickly, very quickly, and said: “Actually, yes, why not?” And Anna said: “So you don’t like to dance anymore, Rose? You have to hold on to what you once loved, try, try to hold on.” “But of course I still like to dance,” Rose answered, “why shouldn’t I?” She found the courage to get up and started spinning and spinning before us. And then she stopped, looking dizzy, and stared at me blankly. “Come, come dance with me, Paul, come on, come on. Won’t you give your sister a dance? Come on, come on. What are you, sulking? Naughty boy! Well, then go, dance with Anna. A sister is just a sister, now go get Anna to dance.” “Let him be,” Anna said, “come on, let him be.” And I could see that my mother had gone pale, hand on her heart, wobbling. “What’s wrong, Laura?” Dr. Valois cried out as he rushed to her.

She pushed him away and walked slowly, with difficulty, to the window, a tense hand on her heart. He doesn’t know it, but this heart, her heart, is full of him. Blessed be whatever brings him here, she must tell herself, blessed be whatever awful thing brings him here so often. “I would like to examine you, Laura, lie down on the sofa. I need to examine you. You don’t look well.” He opens his bag and she lies down. He keeps his diagnosis to himself. This heart, so full of him, is about to burst. Will he say something? Could he betray her? Suddenly they, too, are sharing a secret. Don’t say anything, Dr. Valois! my mother’s eyes begged. Suddenly they, too, are sharing a secret. Don’t say anything, Dr. Valois! my mother’s eyes begged. I will never betray you, Laura, but you are crazy, crazy, and my job is to take care of you. Of course, I’ll do whatever you say, doctor, but don’t say anything. You see very well that they have enough to deal with, so, for my sake, please don’t say anything.

Grandfather flew into a rage when he discovered the empty bottle. “Who finished the rum? Who drank it?” he yelled. And Mélie, her lips drawn in a hideous grin, stared at my mother without answering. “It was me,” my father answered, lowering his head. “Since when do you drink for no reason, son?” Grandfather asked. “I needed a drink,” my father answered. Grandfather smashed the bottle on the wall of the pantry and my mother put a hand to her heart, answered, lowering his head. “Since when do you drink for no reason, son?” Grandfather asked. “I needed a drink,” my father answered. Grandfather kept yelling. Dr. Valois tried in vain to calm him. I was ashamed because Anna was there and I lowered my head. “No one will be getting drunk in my house, no one,” yelled. And Mélie, her lips drawn in a hideous grin, stared at my mother without answering. “It was me,” my father answered. Grandfather kept yelling. Dr. Valois tried in vain to calm him. I was ashamed because Anna was there and I lowered my head. Outside, the birds flew chirping from tree to tree. Claude says: “They’re not killing the birds anymore. Why were they killing them, Grandfather?” “When you give weapons to the weak, they’ll shoot at anything; when you give weapons to scum, they only want one thing: to prove to themselves how powerful they’ve become; when you arm idiots, they’ll murder their son or father to try to justify the important role you’ve given them. Do you understand? ” “Yes,” the child answered, “so they want to kill all the birds and all the children, mulatto and black alike.” Grandfather took the invalid in his arms and went away with him. Jacob was watching for him from behind his half-opened door: he didn’t wave back to him.

Mme Saint-Hilare, the frail neighbor next door, had grown tired of us. She had her armchair moved so that she now has her back to us. All we see of her is the tortoiseshell comb in her white bun. Contempt? Does she know of Rose’s affair with the Gorilla? After all, the men are always around, patrolling our property night and day. Nothing has changed. Guard duty on our yard! Right over our great-grandfather’s grave, covered in lemon flowers. Standing guard, rain or shine. Although it’s pretty obvious no one will venture past the stakes, they continue to terrorize us by shooting down birds. When I kill the Gorilla, they’ll murder innocents to set an example. They’ll be too happy to take the bait. Should I be giving them reasons to murder? But finding a better, more devious and refined means of revenge—not easy. They leave nothing to chance. It will be long and painful. Swallow my rage, appear resigned, play along. Machiavellian. If that’s what I have to do to get somewhere, so be it. Didn’t I rejoin the soccer team! Tiny steps toward submission. I’ll find my pride and my rage crumbling and I’ll be bowing and scraping like the
others. Let him through, he’s in uniform! Look how handsome he is in his nice black uniform! Right, left! Right, left! Raise high the banner of death and armed force. We’ll get every last one of them, I’ll leave a trail of terror.

Stick him up against the tree. No, don’t bother tying him. He won’t move. He’s too scared. Bam! There he goes. The traitor. Throw his body in the truck. Bravo! Paul Normil, you are worthy of your uniform! I will stand at attention and present arms. If the beggars want to eat, let them come to basic training. One, two! One, two! Yes, but the problem is they’re too feeble and keep dropping dead. One less recruit. Throw his body in the truck. No pity. Our cause knows no pity. A place for those who have been hungry humiliated, frustrated for so long that they’ll throw themselves on plots of land like birds of prey. Shame on anyone who stands in their way. Shame on anyone who doesn’t understand that nothing can stand in the way of them sinking their claws into what they decided must be theirs at all costs.

Yes, but me, I am a young black man who passed two university entrance exams brilliantly and who’s drawn to study architecture. I want my peace and quiet. I want my freedom. I want the right to choose and decide for myself. Maybe the two things would go together, maybe the uniform I would wear outside of school would assure me high grades in school and permission to live how I want, to do whatever appeals to me. I am not so sure, though. Now, that would be an interesting experiment: university benches filled with two hundred, three hundred students in architecture, medicine, all Blackshirts. Why not?

Dr. Valois? Who’s to say he’s not playing along so they’ll leave him alone? He and his daughter, pretending to applaud. No, no, no. They were indifferent to what’s happening to us! And now this sudden attentiveness! …

I’ve been practicing knife throwing against the almond tree. The only tree that still belongs to us now, since it stands right in front of our door, just off the street, the only entrance permitted the virtual prisoners that we are. It turns out I have unusual skills. The trunk of the almond tree is riddled with wounds. I am wasting my rage and rebellion on it. Every day for two hours, I strike it mercilessly, from afar and from up close. I am really astonishingly skillful, even in the dark. Not once have I missed my throw. Ready for the circus. Paul Normil, Knife Thrower! I’ll frame Anna’s body with twenty knives without a nick. Blindfolded, I’ll trace her outline head to toe. Paul Normil, Champion Bladesman. From whom did I inherit such a talent? A man can learn a lot about himself as his life unwinds. He is what circumstances make him, as they say. Could my father kill him? He’s nothing but a coward. Good for nothing save playing at Jesus. Good at holding out his left cheek after being hit on the right. The beggars have learned how to handle guns, and here I am dabbling in knives. Is there anyone who owns a firearm besides the men in uniform and their spies? I will slip on the uniform to kill the Gorilla. That way I will get hold of a weapon with which to defend myself. I’ll give a military salute and they’ll think: another one of us. My boots will crush the invalids, the indifferent, anyone who hasn’t joined up, anyone too suspicious to be invited to join, the impotent ones like my father who are scorned and hounded.

Palm shadows move and rustle beneath my feet! I walk over them with heavy steps, leaving my house far behind, leaving the others behind. Cutting myself off from everything! Forgetting my parents, imagining no one in the world will shed tears over me. Rose, skin and bones. My mother and her dim, suffering eyes! My father’s shoulders sagging with shame! A heavy thing, shame. Harder to bear than a ton of scrap iron. Coward! You throw your daughter to the wolves.

I sat on a bench nestled under the trees, on the edge of that little square where I like to loaf, and opened my textbook. It must have been eleven in the morning. A group of kids coming back from school filled the square, running, chasing each other, carefree. Immersed in their play, they paid me no mind. It made me miss childhood. Memories rose up, disappeared and reappeared. Grandfather said: “Not one sheep left in the country but the birds of prey are everywhere.” Did the little one understand that? He searched the sky for the heavy black wings of the malfinis circling above the oak trees, their beaks aimed at the ground. It’s true that it’s been a long time since we’ve eaten lamb. Will I kill him? Could I? Or just kill myself, that would certainly be easier. You’re born either a killer or a suicide. I tread upon tree shadows looking for my elusive self. Lazy. The self that likes books, the self that wants to be an architect. There are choices. Everything is here. But first, take out one of them, just one. Watch his blood spread like a red sheet over his black uniform! And after that, live my life. A lie. That won’t be enough. I’ll stagnate like the water in this stinking ditch, green, no strength to move, never realizing myself. Despair is like an itch; you satisfy it for a moment and then it returns. A useless gesture! I think too much. I’ll end up going soft, sinking into a refusal to act. Tell me what they’ve done to you, Rose, and I’m sure I’ll find the strength. But you won’t talk. You’ll take your secret to the grave, your mouth sealed with dirt. Full of spite, I trample the tree shadows. I can’t stand their serene indifference, their imperturbable mechanical movement. I’ve returned to the bench where I was sitting before. A blind man held out his hand to me and I closed my eyes, pretending to sleep under the slanting ray of sunlight hitting me full in the face. What’s the point of giving alms to one invalid when ten thousand others go hungry. I’ll
walk through our front door and present myself in uniform, weapon on my belt. And Grandfather will cry, “Get out of here this instant, you bird of prey!” I’ll present myself in uniform, weapon on my side, and my mother will clutch at her heart in shock and horror. I’ll say to Rose: “Sell the land and leave.” She will shriek: “Why have you done this? Why have you done this?” A complete waste. Her sacrifice would have been a complete waste. Unless maybe she enjoys it? Dirty whore! No, she’s skin and bones, I don’t want to point the finger at her. What man hasn’t wanted her? It’s a brother’s job to look after his sister. “You’re from another era,” Fred Morin once said to me. I had a dollar in my pocket. In broad daylight, I went to some dive and paid a woman. She was afraid of me and kept her eyes closed, saying: “What’s the matter? What’s the matter?” I left her to wander aimlessly through the streets. I saw cars rushing past and beggars running after them. They were almost throwing themselves under the wheels, holding out their hands, stinking and emaciated. A car for every man in uniform, that comes to thousands. I too will have one, and ride around with my women and my family. I returned to the bench in the square and opened my book again. I have to study, I must. I heard the shots and I hid behind a tree as if I were guilty. The fugitive ran past me, then saw me and stopped. I retraced my steps and he followed quietly a few paces behind me, not saying a word. I could hear him panting as I sat back down on the bench. So I took a look at him. He was about my age and his clothes and shoes were clean. The sweat streaming over his face was enough to give him away if the people who were after him were to find us together. I said to him:

“Sit down and wipe your face.”

“I don’t have a handkerchief,” he said to me.

Taking mine from my pocket to give it to him, I felt the point of the knife pricking my chest. Not far from us, we heard the sound of the boots, and he instinctively drew near me.

“What did you do?” I asked him.

“What do you think I could have possibly done to deserve execution,” he replied. “Don’t you know they kill for the sheer pleasure of it?”

I handed him my textbook. “Keep your head down. Read quietly.”

He did what I said. The sound of boots faded and we could hear the whistle blow for the squadron to regroup.

“Thank you,” he said to me as he gently slumped back. Then, resting his head on the back of the bench:

“I’m falling asleep, I’m falling asleep,” he said again.

And he quickly closed his eyes.

Why did I stay behind to keep a lookout as he slept? Lunch had come and gone by the time I returned home. I had left the stranger asleep, and the next day I learned that a student had been executed on a bench in the middle of a public square. That day, Fred Morin came by and I refused to see him. I locked myself in my room, afraid I’d come unhinged if anyone spoke to me. I felt as if I had lost a friend. I was in mourning. Horrible pain, part remorse, part rebellion, gripped my heart. Why? Why? I kept asking myself. Why had they murdered him? Why? Why? What was he guilty of? Did he refuse to offer his sister? Rose! My very own sister! Defiled! If I want to kill the Gorilla, I have to face facts. As for Grandfather, he’s filled with silent hatred toward her, as though she were the enemy. I fear the day he’ll ask to be served in his room in order not to share his meals with us. Skin and bones. So gaunt. I’ll kill him, I can feel it …

I wanted to see Anna again before doing anything. I have a pretty good idea what will happen to me, so I might as well feel a bit of joy before I go. It was seven in the evening and she was alone in the living room. She looked at me and began to sob.

“Are you angry at me, Paul?” she said to me. “What did I ever do to you?”

She tried to take my hands but I pulled back.

“Well, speak, say something!” she shouted.

I couldn’t. I tried to take her in my arms, but I was held back by something stronger than myself. A long line of hotheads. Never trusting anyone. My mother is right.

She mumbled:

“I don’t know why you’re like this. I don’t. I love you and I don’t know why you’re putting me through this. Is that fair? Or is it that you don’t love me anymore?”

I left and could hear her crying:

“Paul! Paul!”

I’ll return to her house with a weapon on my belt and that’s the day I’ll know the truth. I’ll know why she and her
father act like there are no men in black on our land. I’ll go all out, even if it means losing her, or death. I prefer losing her and dying on top of it than to have to doubt her …

My mother’s getting drunk. I saw her staggering upstairs. She looked at me with her dying eyes and then began to laugh miserably. A bloody throat clearing itself of crushed glass. A great open mouth rattling in agony. She’s going to cough up her heart. Rose, who was coming in just then, ran past us and shut her door behind her. My mother pointed at her, bent in two by the awful laughter that contorted her mouth. Then she suddenly fell silent, went to the window on the landing and leaned over as if she were about to fall. I looked past her: a shadow was slowly moving through the yard, accompanied by a completely white crawling, jumping thing. The shadow bent down to the ground and then stood up with the thing in its arms and walked over to the stakes. I heard my mother laugh. She wasn’t the one laughing, someone else was laughing in her. She turned around and said: “Paul, son, nothing and nobody can stop destiny.” She opened the cupboard and took out a bottle of rum that was three-quarters empty. Someone else laughed in her again, and after pointing her finger at the land, she staggered into her room. My father wasn’t there. I heard him come home an hour later. I stood up and went out on the landing. I saw light coming from Rose’s room and pushed open the door without knocking. She was on her knees beside her bed, head sinking into the pillow, breasts flat against the mattress.

“You might as well come in and close the door,” she whispered.

She remained on her knees on the floor, and I looked at her profile, not daring to move. Gaunt and beautiful, eyes swollen with tears.

“You’ll get to leave, I promise you that much.”

I grabbed her and struck her in the face.

“I never asked you to help me.”

“You have to get out of here, you have to.”

“I don’t want you to worry about me, you hear me?”

She threw herself on the bed and curled up under the sheets with her back to me.

“It’s not that much trouble, believe me,” she said again.

When I heard these words I left her and went to my room, sat at my desk staring into the darkness. And the sweat from my forehead drenched my eyes and burned like tears.
The lawyer had me come in right away and was very considerate. That’s because I was with the uniformed man I had met in his office, toward whom he had seemed so respectful and attentive. The lawyer reached for the five hundred dollars, but the uniformed man gave him such a savage look that he very quickly dropped the money on a corner of his desk as though he’d made a mistake.

“We have a deal?” said the man in uniform.

“We have a deal,” the lawyer replied.

Then he turned to me:

“You may begin by taking off your clothes,” he ordered me as if he were requesting a simple secretarial task.

After that, he left the room and closed the door. The lawyer had spoken to me beforehand and I knew what to expect. I began taking off my clothes and once I was half-naked, the man in the uniform pulled me sharply by the arm to drag me behind the screen.

“You’re not going to struggle, you’re not going to cry out,” he instructed me. “Because if you do, you’ll be sorry.”

He pounced on me with his long hirsute hands, tearing off whatever garments I had left.

“Lie down,” he said, “lie down, spread your legs and put your arms out like a cross.”

I refused to obey, so he threw me on the sofa.

“You’re going to ruin everything,” he hissed, “if you resist, I won’t be able to do anything. You have to do what I say, without hesitation, otherwise it’s no go, you understand? I can only be a man with pretty saint’s faces like yours, a defeated martyr with a pretty little face. Do what I say, do it or get out of here. But remember that no one else will ever be able to do anything for you and you will lose your land. On the other hand, if you are cooperative and do what I ask, then I promise, I swear to you on all that is most holy to me that you will have my protection and will have restitution of your property.”

As he was talking, he slowly opened my legs and splayed out my arms in a cross. He leaned over me for a moment, moaning slowly, his breath short, oppressed. He stared at me like this for some time, and then I saw his horrible hand approach my body and touch it ever so lightly with a kind of unbearable, sick curiosity.

“That’s it, don’t move, stay like that.”

Leaning over me, he caressed me, sniffing me like an animal, and a little later, popped the buttons off his uniform and stood naked before me.

“You’re a virgin, right? You didn’t lie to me, did you? This is going to hurt, hurt a lot, but I don’t want to hear a word, got it? Not one word.”

He was dripping with sweat and I felt defiled.

He rammed himself into me in one rough terrible thrust, and immediately groaned with pleasure. I bit my fist in pain and disgust. He got back up.

“You have the prettiest martyr’s face I have ever had. I have a feeling I’m going to like you. If you let me have it my way, we’re going to become good friends, great friends.”

He gave me my clothes without another word. Then he showed me the door, saying:

“I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll see you every night for a month. If you’re faithful, I will personally give you back the papers your father signed.”

It hurt so much I could barely walk. I took a car and went home. I saw him again the next day, but not at the lawyer’s. He drove me out of town to a grotesquely and richly furnished house where the only bedroom had wall-to-wall mirrors. Once I was naked, he threw himself on me so brutally that I cried out. He immediately let me go.

“I’ll open you up until my entire fist goes in,” he shouted.

I could see his reflection in every mirror, unsightly and frightening.

What’s it to me? I would have brought dishonor on myself only if I enjoyed it as he did, but he slept with a
corpse. A corpse, and he has no idea. That’s my revenge. “Feels good, no?” he asked me anxiously. And with my closed eyes I seemed to acquiesce. What’s it to me! A month will go by quickly. I won’t tell a soul, I’ll do whatever he wants. He’s made me bleed five times and I haven’t cried out. My cooperation knows no bounds. I have come to tolerate the horrible things without which he can’t feel like a man. “I’ve killed ten men point-blank,” he confessed to me, “and here I am trembling with desire before your little saint’s face. But women who turn me on are hard to come by.” His awful hands on my body! Inside my body, shamelessly probing my flesh. What do I care! I am dead. I could laugh, watching him moan over a dead body. “Your idiotic father,” he informed me, “came to beg me to spare you. He was crying and crying. You get your martyr’s face from him. And your brother? What’s he waiting for before signing up? He’s not against us, is he? No, no, calm down, I know very well he wouldn’t dare. Do you know what I was before I became this figure of authority protecting you with his powerful hand? No, I won’t tell you. You might run out of here and you mean a great deal to me. Wait. I’m going to lock the door … A flea-ridden beggar, that’s what I was. Yes, my beauty, a beggar, despised, shunned by haughty little saint’s faces like yours. And now, spread your legs. Wait, I’ll undo your hair. It makes you look even more like a saint. I love the saints. A long time ago, when I was little, I would go sit in church for long hours and gaze at them. Put out your arms in a cross. You’re pale. You look like you’re suffering. You’re perfect. That’s it, suffer in silence.”

You’re going to get out of here, Paul. My brother, my friend, so proud, so studious, so noble! The smell of death is upon me. Our baby brother knows it. I am dead. Has my mother realized it? It must be awful to bury your child, but even more awful to see your child die little by little without being able to do a thing to save her. We’re caught in a vicious circle. Everything’s changed, everything’s suddenly upside down since they took over our land. They are a blight upon us. Cursed, we’re cursed and Grandfather knows it. That’s why he prays, that’s why he steps out at night with Claude. I won’t say a word. At least let everyone be free to do what they need to do. As for me, I’ve tasted hell and it no longer frightens me. I’ll get somewhere, and Paul will leave. A few more days, just a few more days and this ordeal will end. My stomach hurts. I should go see Dr. Valois but I’m afraid of what he’ll think of me. And to think I once slapped Fred Morin for kissing me! I knew I would come to this, I knew it. To make sure he wouldn’t be the first, I had offered myself to Dr. Valois, but he pushed me away.

“You are too young, you have no idea what you’re doing,” he cried.

He wanted to run away, but I grabbed him.

“Don’t be ashamed that you love me,” I said to him. “Don’t be ashamed of that.”

“But I am ashamed,” he replied.

And he’d taken me in his arms, pulled me against him.

“Go now, Rose, go.”

“You have to do it, you have to.”

“No, Rose, never.”

“But you get it?”

And I had stayed with him until dawn, crying, pleading, but he wouldn’t touch me.

That night, when my mother found me on the landing, she feared the worst. And yet, I felt almost purified. Once this torture is over, I’ll have even more innocence and chastity to offer him. The soul, not the flesh, is the true seat of virginity, so I don’t know what lovemaking feels like. I have erected a wall between my body and my soul, a granite wall. When our property is returned, Paul will be out of danger. As for me, I no longer fear danger. I’ve come through the straits. Not only do I face danger, I swim in it with abandon, fully Paul doesn’t yet know where he’s heading, what awaits him, the forces watching him and perhaps already circling round him. And truly, I’ve convinced myself that I’m dead. He knows nothing about being an actor. I’ll put the same amount of talent into my resurrection act. He’s helpless in the face of this tragic unfolding of events, and I’ve foolishly convinced myself I’m pulling the strings. In the face of the element unleashed, I will be a force of nature. Should I fail, I’ll tell myself I was tempted by this role, that if I gave in, it was because I had a taste for it or out of weariness. Look how I’ve moved a killer with my sweetness and submission. Can it be that easy for me to draw on my own strength, and are my resources really infinite? When death comes, will I be able to welcome it with indifference, playing my role until the bitter end? Thirty days is a long time! But what can time do to me, since I’m already dead! I was about to kiss Claude and he said to me: “No, don’t come close, you don’t smell like flowers anymore.” I had put on perfume in vain. How could he know? Once upon a time, he loved me. He stroked my hair, undid my ponytail and buried his face in my tresses, saying: “They smell like wet oak blossoms.”

The hoarseness of his voice makes him only sound older, and sometimes his precociousness frightens me. The final stretch of his life. Soon, the final stretch of all of our lives, I’m sure of it. He has returned in this crippled form
to fulfill his destiny. Going from rough draft to hero. So many messy rough drafts around me! And what a messy rough draft I am! Only the hope that I will return to this earth gives me comfort for having to die one day. God owes it to Himself to finish His work, even if He has to redo it a hundred times. I am messing up this life with my obvious bad faith. It’s because I’m sure I’ll die soon. I’ll die and then I’ll come back. Is this my first life? I’m often overcome by fuzzy and mysterious memories, as if the gestures and actions of a past life weighed on my present one. Although I was a virgin, nothing about sex astounded me. I succumbed to indecency like a loose woman. If it had been another man in my arms instead, Dr. Valois for example, I would have been frightened. Far beyond the city, walking down a shady, tree-lined and deserted road with a river flowing beside it, I stopped, eyes on the luminous water, feeling its familiar and comforting coolness on my hands. Sweet nostalgia welled up in my heart as a mist of memories rose from the depths, slowly becoming clearer: I had been to this place before; that house, those trees, that river, I knew them. I had taken a walk under those trees and lived in this house. I was breathless with anguish as if a piece of myself still lived there, forever separated from me. Mutilated, but all the same walking the hard road to perfection. I can’t wait to die. Dead! I forgot, I already am. Murdered, martyred and canonized. I won’t have suffered in vain. Grandfather’s sterile rebellion, Paul’s mute despair, my mother’s terror, my father’s horrible, humiliating situation, are all reasons to fight. Of all of us, my father suffers the most. Head of the family, the man still responsible for the honor and the future of his children, forced to bow and scrape and kiss the feet of his torturers. I can see how he bears all this and how he suffers! I would never have thought he had the courage to face the Gorilla. Slapped a hundred times a day. Tortured a hundred times a day. Face stained with spit and yet always calm. Such shame! What shame! Not on us but on them, our persecutors. Every one of us suffers like Christ, but none martyred as spectacularly. “You with the martyr’s face, the saint’s face.” Me! That’s what he likes, that monster, that fleabag I have felt the very depths of horror. Thanks to him I have hit rock bottom. Submissive, too submissive for a virgin. Was I a virgin? An accomplice? Aren’t I getting used to it, aren’t I trying to enjoy it too? Damning thoughts hunting me down night and day. Not once have I missed a meeting, not once have I been late.

And yet I feel a burning pain when I try to move after these ordeals, and I have to make an effort to walk. I continue to rush downstairs so as not to worry my parents. Not a single day did he spare me. Tonight, he was crazy. He screamed, he sniffed and licked me like a beast. Then he thrust his fist into my body and watched in ecstasy as the blood poured out of me. Vampire! Vampire! I saw him sipping and getting drunk on my blood like wine.

From the beginning, I knew what to expect. Since these men showed up on our land, I knew it would come to this. A sixth sense? No matter how far away things are, I can recognize their scent. I have been able to detect the tenacious and intoxicating perfume on engravings of oriental flowers; and I’ve sneezed from the dust raised by the hoofs of a ranch horse stamping in a movie. My mother would say: “Have you caught cold?” “No,” I would say, “it’s all that dust.” “What dust?” my mother would ask. And I would point to the screen with my finger. But I have also dilated my nostrils at the majestic sight of the heavy falls at Niagara: they smelled of rainwater along with something else I can’t quite put my finger on. I scrape and scrape, deep into the very entrails of the earth. I dig and dig, and already know the warm humid flavor of its grayest roots, the musty stench of everything that crawls upon the buried bodies.

It was six years ago that my mother first put her hand on her heart. And that day, I heard it beat more heavily, more irregularly, as if performing hard labor. The day her heart stops beating, I’ll know before she does. “My God! My God!” she sighs, her fingers gripping her dress above her stomach. If Grandfather weren’t so old, if he weren’t so preoccupied with the little one, he’d realize a great many things. But he sees only Claude. Actually, we’re all alike, but each of us plays at hiding from one another in different ways. The little one has detected an indecent smell so preoccupied with the little one, he’d realize a great many things. But he sees only Claude. Actually, we’re all alike, but each of us plays at hiding from one another in different ways. The little one has detected an indecent smell. The day her heart stops beating, I’ll know before she does. “My God!” she sighs, her fingers gripping her dress above her stomach. If Grandfather weren’t so old, if he weren’t so preoccupied with the little one, he’d realize a great many things. But he sees only Claude. Actually, we’re all alike, but each of us plays at hiding from one another in different ways. The little one has detected an indecent smell. The day her heart stops beating, I’ll know before she does. “My God!” she sighs, her fingers gripping her dress above her stomach. If Grandfather weren’t so old, if he weren’t so preoccupied with the little one, he’d realize a great many things. But he sees only Claude. Actually, we’re all alike, but each of us plays at hiding from one another in different ways. The little one has detected an indecent smell.
undress and lie there with my legs spread, arms splayed in a cross, and wait. Torture! What torture! He has said to me: “If you wish, I will keep you till death do us part.” He’s learned to read my eyes and he anxiously monitors my every expression. “You like that, huh?” he cried out, although I was moaning in pain, “you like that too!” Still no response from me. “Rose, my little sister!” Paul used to call me. And he would carry me on his back so I wouldn’t have to walk on thorns. Once he was offended when a peasant surprised me as I was taking off my rain-drenched dress to wring it out. “Quick, hide, Rose!” he said to me. His eyes were full of tears. What does it matter if I give my body to the eyes and kisses of a monster, as long as I can save him. He’ll get out of here. Alone. As for me, I will slip down the slope of easy affairs, discreetly of course, very discreetly, with my saintly face. I’m full of self-pity. Is my fate so appalling? More than a few husbands probably behave just like this man. Vices sanctified by the sacrament of marriage. In any case, I have lost my innocence. Was I ever innocent? I understood the ugliness of life too early and it aged me. Jaded without experience, I’ve been like this since childhood. Like Claude. He can guess too many things as well. The day Anna began hating me because of the sewing box her father gave me, I felt it; just as I knew she’d torn my dress on purpose despite the innocent look on her face. I was only fifteen when I was already toying with Dr. Valois. That sensuous Normil force! His hard! Hell had its eye on us for some time and now we’re deep in it. The stakes have traced the infernal vicious circle, and maybe the hands that planted them are less guilty than ours. We are reaping what we sowed, the curse of our ancestors will disappear with our line. We must be hated and loved to the same extreme. I admire my father’s moderation, he’s the only one who stands out among us. How could Grandfather love him? Keep the sheep far away from us, for we would devour them. We, too, belong to a race of wildcats and raptors, that’s why we struggle so fiercely against those who’ve taken our lands. And the history of our property is quite murky. I heard my mother and father talking about it when I was six years old.

My mother was saying: “Grandfather insults me, he calls my father a drunk and a good-for-nothing; if I were mean I’d throw in his face what people say about his father.” “And what do people say?” my father asked. “They say he murdered a man to secure ownership of the land.” “Oh Laura, repeating such wild rumors?” my father replied. And my mother lowered her head.

One day, I had fallen asleep under the oaks. A man came to me in a dream wearing a bloody shirt that he took off to show me two gaping wounds on his back, and he said to me: “Look, he stabbed me with his knife to make his own justice. I will get my revenge when I put a weapon in the hand of one of his descendants, who will kill a man just as he did.” As he was talking, I detected his dull, atrocious stench. The smell of death, of clotted blood and rotting flesh. The memory of him has never made me feel uncomfortable, but I know he’s waiting there, two stones away from the ancestor’s grave. If Paul doesn’t leave, he will kill someone and I don’t want that. None of us will ever kill again. Grandfather must think that we deserved to be punished, that our tormentors were guided by a divine hand. The curse weighs on us and he knows it, but he rebels out of pride. It’s up to me to pay for this so that my children and Paul’s children can be free of it. Acquit myself without balkings and be done with it. I’ve lived long enough with the superstitious fear of this curse falling on my brother’s head. He doesn’t deserve that. I struggle with the conviction that justice is not on our side. What right do we have to property? What gives us the right to such privilege while others wallow in poverty? The poverty of the people my peasant ancestor must have exploited, the misery of the poor who looted his garden and whom he had whipped without mercy, the poverty of the beggars taking on the uniform, the poverty of the man avenging himself through me for having been rejected by the women he desired. Suppose one day I too was forced to beg, to feel humiliated, would I not be proud to see Paul in a uniform with a gun on his belt? I don’t know. It’s difficult to put myself in others’ shoes, and I am still too well fed to understand what misery and hunger can make you do.

Human beings have an eerie resemblance to certain animals. I was struck by my resemblance to a panther I saw in a movie once. Same features, same fierce gaze veiled by false gentleness, same supple neck beneath an elegant head with wide, quivering, sensual nostrils. He, on the other hand, looks like a dog. One could easily mistake him for a gorilla, but that’s not the case. His hands are misleading since they’re long and hairy, but he’s just a dog; a poor dog craving affection who turns into a wolf as a result. A beastly couple, made for each other. A lascivious and insatiable panther! I will tear my impure body with my nails. A dog biting simply to defend himself, a poor dog used to kicks, who barks and bites to prove that he’s something other than a dog. “Are you tired, my saint, are you tired?” he says, and tenderly wipes my forehead. How can he get it so wrong when it comes to me? He’s ugly and that pains him. I will tear my impure body with my nails and I will die of it. The stench of a wildcat in my sweat. An animal stench in our sweat, all of us. Man is just an animal hemmed in by a narrow conscience; this is why it is his lot to suffer. The struggle between mind and beast tears at him from within. A tragic fate, a relentless struggle where the mind rarely wins. God has toyed with us …

I caught Mélie with one of them. She was underneath him and was saying: “Kill him, kill them, you’re the strongest, kill them, they deserve to die.” Does she sleep with them only out of hatred for us? Who is naıve enough
to believe that you can win a servant’s heart with kindness? Inferiors only fear and respect you if you dominate them. Wearing one of my dresses, she spies on us, fornicates with the enemy and calls for our heads. A horde of beggars and ignoramuses finding salvation in crime! Is it their fault? Women and men together in uniform, women and men bearing arms, women and men marching, denouncing, murdering? Is that what awaits Mélie when she puts on a uniform? I can see her goose-stepping, rifle on her shoulder. I can picture my mother’s face when she sees that spectacle, imagine my mother seeing her son in uniform, rifle on his shoulder, goose-stepping next to Mélie. “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” she would cry out. The anguished question of a poor creature to Him who had promised her everything and had taken away everything, taken it away from a woman without a father, who has never had a father, and who is growing old alone as she waits for death.
Part Three
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The rocky road climbed abruptly, its sides shaded by almond trees, their leaves this time of year jutting from their branches like huge red tongues. Their dancing shadows traced strange arabesques on the ground. The sun hid behind a cloud and everything took on a new cast, bathed in filtered light. Paul climbed up the slope and arrived at the field where Fred Morin and the others were waiting for him. They ran to meet him, and lifted him up despite his protestations, carried him off in triumph. He struggled, meting out kicks and punches that the others took in stride. When he managed to get free, he faced them with his teeth on edge, hateful, fists up.

“If any one of you touches me I’ll smash your teeth in!” he shouted at them. “Bastards! You dirty bastards!”

He was yelling as loud as the grandfather would have, and he saw them draw back in perplexity, their shoulders drooping.

He ran his hand through his bushy mane and left without a word. Never again, never again, he kept saying to himself. He stumbled down the slope, retracing his steps.

They gathered around him almost immediately.

“What have we done to you?” Fred Morin asked him. “Why are you running away from us?”

“Let’s shake hands before you go, Paul, we’re begging you,” another said.

He watched them kneeling at his feet and he spit on the ground.

“Is it true you’re going to join the Blackshirts soon?” asked the youngest in the group, who was only sixteen. “If that’s true, put in a word for us with your sister’s friend. He’s important, mention us to him. We’d all like to wear the uniform. And when they give us weapons we’ll be feared and get some respect.”

A car went past them, slowed down, backed up and stopped. In the backseat was a man in a black uniform whom they all recognized. The man stuck his head out the window and looked at Paul for several long moments, then called him over with a flick of his long hairy hand: he wouldn’t budge. The man waited for some time, still leaning out the window; then he slapped the driver’s shoulder, gave him an order, and the car took off.

“Are you insane?” Fred Morin whispered.

A shiver ran through Paul. He gave Fred Morin a withering look, spat on the ground a second time and left. The grandfather was talking quietly with the child on the porch. He walked past them and into his room, opened the drawer, took the knife and tucked it inside his shirt, and went out again. He walked for an hour aimlessly and found himself almost randomly in front of the customhouse where his father worked. He pushed the door and went in.

Someone he didn’t know greeted him and asked if he could help him with something.

“I’d like to speak to my father,” he replied.

“And who is your father?”

“Monsieur Normil.”

The employee’s expression changed immediately. He smiled with deliberate friendliness and hastened to admit Paul into the first room, where two typists were at work.

“Come on through, please come on through.”

He saw his father at his desk. He was sitting in a rocking chair and was talking to a tall, very elegant man in a nicely cut dark suit. The man was bowing before him without daring to support himself and, not knowing what to do with his hands, ended up swaying back and forth as though he were walking.

Louis Normil tilted back in his chair, his crossed knees nearly reaching the height of his chest. From on high he looked at the man planted in front of him.

“My dear Monsieur Zura, how could I forget you?” he was saying. “Are you not my superior, rankwise? The key thing is to make an appointment so that we can meet at the notary. I am setting aside one of my best properties for you, I promise. It’s already well planted with trees and, believe me, the neighborhood is pleasant and clean. Trust me, this is an exceptional deal for you.”
M. Zura thanked him and went away without noticing Paul. Looking at the typist who was working across from him, Louis Normil saw that she was staring at something just behind his chair. He suddenly turned around.

“You!” he exclaimed, catching sight of his son. “What can I do for you?”

Paul looked at his father for a moment, then shrugging:

“Nothing,” he answered.

“But come here. Do you need me?”

“No, I was passing by, so I walked in.”

“Are you sure there isn’t something you’re not telling me, some bad news?”

He went pale as he uttered those words, and Paul saw him looking for a place to rest his hand or elbow on the table.

“No, Papa, no, really, it’s nothing.”

He suddenly left his father and made for the exit. He strolled until lunch and found the whole family home. The grandfather and the invalid mingled their mumbling voices in prayer. He took his seat and ate in silence.

“Claude, have you had your bath today?”

“Yes, Mama, Grandfather bathed me as usual.”

“What happened to your hands?” Rose exclaimed. “They’re covered with scratches.”

“I was playing with branches and they had thorns,” he said coldly.

“What branches, what thorns?” Paul asked skeptically.

The mother looked at the invalid’s hands at length and then at the grandfather. He was slowly chewing his food, distant and indifferent to what was going on around him. Indeed, he didn’t seem to hear the child who now turned to him.

“Grandfather,” he insisted, pulling on his sleeve. “ Didn’t I get these scratches from the thorns? Grandfather?”

The grandfather came back to himself and, turning to the child:

“What, who doesn’t believe you?” he asked. “And why would you lie? We only lie out of fear. And who could you be afraid of at this table?”

“In any case,” the mother added, “it would make sense to dress these scratches before they get infected. Come with me, Claude.”

She rose and took the invalid in her arms. He sought the grandfather’s eyes, ready to protest at the least sign of encouragement.

The mother took the child upstairs into her room. She opened his hands and dreamily stared at the bright little wounds.

“Are there more, Claude? Do you have scratches anywhere else?”

“Anywhere else? No, Mama. Why would I have scratches anywhere else? I was just playing with the branches, not rolling around on top of them.”

He laughed nervously, resting his overly large, sleep-deprived eyes on his mother.

“There’s nothing wrong with me, I’m telling you, nothing.”

His deformed feet dangled lifeless at the bottom of his pants. He was dressed in white and the long sleeves of his shirt concealed his scrawny arms.

“It’s much too exhausting for you,” the mother gently said to him, “too much for a sick child who barely eats anything. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He frowned and his gaze suddenly became severe and distant.

Fearing a tantrum, the mother did not dare insist.

At that moment Jacob came in. He had brought a deck of cards that he cheerfully spread out on the table.

“So, shall we resume our game, old friend?” he said in a jovial stentorian voice that immediately filled the house.

“No,” the grandfather answered laconically.

“You don’t want to play with me?”

“Yes.”

“And what are your reasons?”
“I don’t have any.”

“Come! Come!” Jacob said in a conciliatory tone. “You’re not going to give me the cold shoulder just because my sciatica kept me home for a few days. It wasn’t for lack of wanting to see you, I swear.”

“Don’t swear.”

“Often I waved to you and you never bothered to wave back. And you’re the one who’s upset, really now, should you be the one to be upset?”

“Jacob,” the grandfather replied ominously, “take care lest God’s holy fury rise up in me, and get out.”

“But for what reason?” Jacob insisted.

“I tell you again that there is no reason,” the grandfather yelled. Jacob picked up the cards spread on the table and left without daring to say another word.

“Is it really true that there’s no reason why you’re chasing away your friend?” the child asked.

“There are reasons, little one, good ones, I’d even say very good ones. But never show blood to the person who wounded you. You would only be making him lie to absolve himself.”

The grandfather’s comments probably reminded the invalid of several unpleasant recollections about his mother, for he immediately sought her out and gave her an evil look. She forced me to lie to her, he was telling himself. She forced me to lie to her. He leafed through his picture book, then lifted his head. Transfigured, he stared at the front door, at a vision of heartrending clarity.

The mother had her back to them, facing the window opened wide onto the trees fragrant with fruit.

“Grandfather!” he called quietly. “Grandfather!”

The old man quickly turned his head, stood up and took him in his arms.

For all these days, he had been patiently, cruelly, preparing him for the visitation of the late ancestor. Did he even believe in it himself? In the depths of his soul, legends he thought he had forgotten had been reawakened. Legends he was desperately using as the only weapons available to the revenge-obsessed believer that he had become.

“No matter what you see,” he whispered, “don’t give yourself away. Keep calm, little one.”

The child batted his lashes, his face growing horribly pale. He leaned his head on his grandfather’s shoulder and shivered.

“He is there,” he gasped, “I see him. He’s dressed in a high-collared jacket and a big straw hat. Just as you described him.”

“What is he doing?”

“He’s looking at us. He’s standing by the door and looking at us.”

The mother starting walking in that direction. The grandfather had to restrain the invalid. He was panting, eyes wide, mouth dry. The mother pulled the doors shut and returned to where she’d been standing.

“Good night,” she said. “Sleep well, Claude.”

They heard her walk upstairs, the grandfather clutching the child tightly, asking him:

“Did she lock him inside the house?”

“No. He saw her coming, so he stepped back and disappeared.”

“Ahh!” said the grandfather. “The main thing is he has answered our call.”

“His feet were bleeding as if he had traveled a great distance, and he was looking at us with sad, heavy eyes. Are you sure we were right to disturb him? Grandfather, were we right?”

“If even the dead refused to hear God’s voice and come to our aid,” the grandfather replied, “then what would become of us, my child?”
The first day of the month of March! the father said to himself. Alone, lying in bed fully dressed, he was filled with thoughts. An hour ago, he had given his wife part of his salary, saying: “Buy some clothes for the children and some medicine too: they need it.” The mother took the money without thanking him and got dressed to go out. Now he was alone and thinking things over. Twenty days had gone by since their property was invaded.

Stooped with age, he was developing a plan of incredible audacity, one worthy of the terrible adversaries he desired to confront. “Find your enemy’s weak point, and you shall be victorious,” he was repeating to himself. That sentence, found somewhere in a book he had forgotten, now resurfaced from the depths of his memory to guide and help him. He was going to risk his life, put it all on the table, he knew that, but he wanted only one thing: to save Rose and Paul at least. Cradling his heavy head with his hands locked behind the nape of his neck, brows frowning, eyes fixed on an invisible spot, he was lost in thought. Sweet, sentimental and importunate memories kept interrupting his daydream and he yielded to them, recalling the good old days of happiness and peace, now lost. Slices of his life unfolded before his eyes, and he relived them with depressing intensity and a vague feeling of remorse. How happy we were then! he was telling himself. Despite his father’s hostility toward his wife, despite the birth of the crippled child, how happy they were! In comparison to what they were going through now, everything had really seemed perfect! Of course there had been quarrels between him and his wife, the old man’s fits of anger, the mother’s heartrending tears when she saw the deformed feet of her third child, but on the other hand there had been so many compensations: the perfect harmony between Paul and Rose, studying together at the same table, their heads bowed under the lamp, the grace of their growing bodies, transforming before their very eyes! How had he neglected the opportunity to appreciate all of that? How indifferent he had been about the party the mother had organized to celebrate the children’s twin success in their philosophy exams! He had used an important meeting as an excuse not to attend and had taken advantage of it to spend the night with his mistress. Now he could see the scene in every detail—first the mother’s tears of joy the pride in the grandfather’s eyes that he tried to conceal by declaring haughtily: “That’s no reason to drag in the whole the neighborhood.” But at lunchtime, the old man had taken two envelopes out of his pocket and handed them to Rose and Paul:

“Go on, enjoy this wonderful day, my children.”

The night of the party, he had returned from his mistress around midnight to find the grandfather dancing with an imposing matron, to the delight of the guests. He went up to his room to compose a face in the mirror; the face of a serious man whose tired features revealed that he was still absorbed by his pretend business meeting. He had noticed his wife dancing with Dr. Valois, Anna and Paul off by themselves in a corner of the living room, Rose dancing by herself, her whirling hair in her eyes, and the invalid, who had refused to go to bed, lying on the sofa, smiling. Could it really be that this was just six months ago?

As he got up from the bed, he again saw Rose dancing by herself, her face happy and carefree, hair in her eyes, and as if to convince himself he suddenly said out loud: “It’s not possible, there’s just no way she gave in to the Gorilla.” Everyone around them seemed to have no doubt it was true, but this was nothing but wickedness on their part and sheer boasting on the part of the Gorilla. M. Zura put so much stock in it that he had suddenly begun to flatter him to get on his good side, outdoing himself trying to be friendly. Thus Louis Normil was becoming despite everything, a power broker, and he vowed to use that to his advantage. He had approached the Gorilla only once, in tears, to beg him to spare Rose. It was on that day, upon the unexpected reaction of this uniformed man, that he discovered hatred. The echo of demonic laughter that greeted his tears had suddenly awakened it inside of him. He had raised his head and dried his tears to look at the other man for a brief instant. But that instant had been enough to prove to him that he was capable of killing as calmly and quietly as the most ruthless murderer. This discovery had terrified him then, but he’d gotten so used to it that he grew cynical and now played the great man of the hour, honored and protected by the authorities, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“They guard our yard night and day,” he assured M. Zura in a loud voice. “The trees are full of fruit and thieves are everywhere. We want to sell it but there is so much demand we’re afraid of making people jealous.”

This meant that he was increasingly pestered by his boss, who now wanted to be included in the list of buyers.

He rarely went home for lunch now. He went to bars and public places in the company of the director, always surrounded by uniformed men.
“Your daughter’s friend is very powerful,” M. Zura had whispered to him once he thought he could speak as a friend. “His protection is rare and enviable.”

“What do I care!” Louis Normil felt like shouting. “He’s a murderer moonlighting as a thief!” But he had controlled himself enough to offer a friendly smile.

“So, that’s you, you’re the girl’s father!” a man in a black uniform cried out that day as he shook his hand. He went along with it, accepting the familiar slap on his shoulder, as several colleagues stared at him coldly with poorly concealed disgust.

Who are they to judge me? he thought. Are they going to get me out of this mess? And weren’t they the same ones treating me as if I had the plague?

He accepted such encounters and would only be seen in the company of the most decorated, most highly visible men in black uniform, and in their presence would praise the generosity of his daughter’s protector, swearing that he would one day show his gratitude.

“My word, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a father so admire his daughter’s lover,” one of them declared. He couldn’t go on after that and felt his courage flagging. He left them and called a car. He sat down, took off his hat and burst into tears. The driver turned around and saw him holding his arms out, hands gripping the back of the seat in front of him, his chest heaving with such deep and convulsive sobbing that the driver cried out:

“Really now, sir, why are you crying like that? These times we’re living in are no joke, it’s true. I’ll tell you, sometimes I start shaking for no reason when I see the Blackshirts and hear the things they say. But to cry like that! Ah! That, no! …”

He grew quiet and felt ashamed, put his hat back on, and sat with his head down, handkerchief over his mouth. So she did it, he told himself, so she really did it! And as he repeated this to himself, he realized that he had known for a long time.

The next day, he was at a restaurant with M. Zura. He was joined by several men in black uniform that he didn’t know, and when they were introduced to him and heard his name they nodded and gave him a friendly smile. He was raising his glass to his mouth when he saw the Gorilla walk in. The sight of him so repelled him that he felt like fleeing so he wouldn’t have to shake the man’s hand. But he fought the urge and, like M. Zura and the others, stood when the Gorilla approached. The reception given this man, scrawny and fattened with weapons, astonished him even as it convinced him of his popularity and power. M. Zura was the first to leap out of his chair to greet him. The others, stiff as posts, stood at attention, clicking their heels together loudly. Then they surrounded him, all of them talking at the same time. An immense man who looked like a boxer put a hand on the Gorilla’s shoulder in a familiar way, and he looked so diminished and ridiculous in contrast that two waiters by the door started whispering to each other.

“Where is the reward I was promised?” the Boxer asked as he leaned toward the little man and put his mouth against his ear. “I gave you five traitors I caught plotting in your midst. Where is the reward I was promised?”

“Can’t you wait a little?”

“I need that land.”

“And you’ll get it, but you need to wait. There are still a few formalities to wrap up.”

“Bull!” the Boxer answered impatiently. “You’re always doing whatever you want.”

He straightened and stuck out his chest, looking so menacing that the little man capitulated.

“Give me a few more days,” he snarled.

“Don’t forget me, please,” another begged humbly. “You promised to reward me, and I too want a piece of land.”

“I’ve been waiting a year,” another protested, “and I’m still paying rent.”

“So stop paying rent,” the little man said coldly. “I’ll protect you in court.”

Visibly unhappy, he tried in vain to escape this horde harassing and suffocating him. Standing on his toes in a desperate attempt to get a little air, he said in a cutting voice:

“And now, gentlemen, let me through.”

The group parted and the little man found himself in front of Louis Normil, who was sitting quietly with his drink. He hesitated, then took a few steps to the table, holding out his hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” Louis Normil said, returning his greeting. “I actually wanted to see you again so we could talk alone.”

He saw the Gorilla’s long hairy hands shaking. From fear or rage? Louis Normil thought. Someone in the room frightens him, but who? He turned around and caught the Boxer looking at the Gorilla. And suddenly he was filled with new strength. The Gorilla had taken a handkerchief from his pocket and was patting his face as he stared at
Louis Normil with distrust.

“Did you want to talk alone so you could start crying again?” he asked impertinently.

“The time for tears has come and gone,” Louis Normil said, and burst out laughing.

“Come, then. I’d like to have a talk with you as well.”

With a hand on one of his guns, he walked to an isolated table, called for a waiter, and turning toward Louis Normil:

“What can I get you?” he asked.


“Two whiskey-and-sodas,” he ordered.

And leaning toward his interlocutor:

“What do you have to say to me?”

Louis Normil took the glass the server had just put on the table, raised it, and raised his voice to say:

“To Rose’s health!”

“Ah,” the dumbstruck man said, “if that’s how you’re taking it …”

And then he started laughing, his eyes on Louis Normil, whose face suddenly hardened for a fleeting instant.

“My daughter cares for you,” he said with a frozen smile that pulled at his lips but left the rest of his face unmoved. “So I look the other way …”

The man in uniform had taken a sip of liquor and seemed to reflect for a moment.

“I’ve gotten quite attached to her,” he confided to Louis Normil, who clutched his glass tight enough to break it.

“I’ve been moved by how sweet and gentle she is. I find myself getting so impatient whenever I’m expecting her. Perhaps I’ll marry her someday. I’m not promising anything, but perhaps I’ll marry her someday.”

“I would be flattered,” he responded, unflappable.

His voice was low, almost hoarse. He lowered his eyes, afraid to give himself away, and fought off the desire to leap at the Gorilla and strangle him. His clenched jaw jutted out and he grew nauseous from the effort to remain calm. As sure as my name is Louis Normil, he thought, you will die by my hand.

“But,” the Gorilla added as if suddenly himself again, a mean and cunning rabid dog, “was it to talk about your daughter that you wanted to speak to me alone?”

“My son would like to wear the uniform,” Louis Normil replied very quickly, “and I was counting on you to recommend him to your people so he receives special consideration.”

“Now there’s a wise decision!” the Gorilla exclaimed. “I admit I was a little suspicious of him. He’s distant and avoids greeting me. I’m always wary of malcontents since there are so many around me. Our organization has set things up to satisfy everyone, but they’re insatiable. You look to me, such as I am, but I am only a cog in an immense machine. The one who gives us our orders is like God, invisible and all-powerful. We get our orders and we carry them out. That’s all. We often know nothing about the reasons for the things he asks of us and we just blindly obey. Your son holds me personally responsible and quite imprudently swells the ranks of the group of malcontents.”

“Maybe he thought you wouldn’t let him join,” Louis Normil added very quickly.

“Don’t try to play me,” the Gorilla protested. “He has reasons to be unhappy after we took his land and his sister. You were the first to be struck. Soon, all those who’ve been resisting will feel our heavy hand on their heads.”

He looked intently at Louis Normil as he spoke but was unable to decode his enigmatic face. Normil answered with aplomb:

“I know your reputation, you are feared and respected. Under your protection, my son will go far quickly.”

“Hey, hey, you’re laying it on a bit thick now, aren’t you …”

The Gorilla leaned over to him as he glanced at the uniformed men who had formed a circle around him, and whispered:

“They’re always pestering me and I can’t make them all happy at the same time. I have a tough job; that’s the price I pay for my position. Go tell them that your land still belongs to you, and you and I will figure out an arrangement. You seem reasonable and you do what you’re told. Your daughter cares about you. I like people who do what they’re told. You know what, why don’t you handle these sales for me? Rid me of these birds of prey and
you’ll get a nice cut.”

“All I want is to help,” Louis Normil affirmed, astonished by this turn of events.

“But remember, don’t double-cross me, eh, or you’ll regret it. I promised your daughter that I’d return the papers you signed, and I will keep my word. If you keep yours, everything will be fine and you’ll make good money. But the important thing is to make sure these people leave me alone.”

“You mean you’re authorizing me to sell these properties on your behalf and mine?”

“That’s exactly right. I would never dream of giving away free land to these vultures and ending up looking like a Simple Simon.”

“I understand,” Louis Normil said and got up to leave.

Seeing this, the Gorilla hung on to him and insisted that he eat with him. When he was able to free himself two hours later, he felt so weak and in such pain that he dragged his feet all the way home. With a bitter taste in his mouth, he went up to his room and got in bed, refusing all food, and buried his face in the sheets as he brooded over his conversation with the Gorilla. He couldn’t help being haunted by obscene images of this runt fornicating with his daughter, and he was filled with cold rage. He kept furtively looking over at Rose, listening to her conversation with rapt and morbid attention as if hoping that she’d suddenly shout that she had played a dirty trick on the Gorilla, that he had never touched her. He let her kiss his forehead and watched her leave for her date and waited up for her late into the night, listening, agitated and appalled.

Nevertheless, as soon as the next day, under the authority granted by a powerful figure, he began advertising and selling the properties. Stone-faced and resolute, he avoided M. Zura and set up a meeting with the potential buyers, all of them Blackshirts, at the notary’s office selected by the Gorilla.
The next morning, a sharp altercation erupted among the uniformed men posted on the land. Their voices became violent and threatening and soon there was gunfire followed by yelling and screaming.

“The birds of prey are devouring each other!” the grandfather exclaimed. “God predicted that ambition and greed would lead to their demise and now his prophecy is coming true.”

“I want to see!” cried the invalid. “Someone take me to the window.”

Three bodies in black uniform lay on the ground, where they were being examined by other men in black with rifles on their shoulders.

“This is just the beginning,” the father sniggered.

And all of them looked at him like they didn’t recognize him.

He went up to his room and stayed there by himself, standing at the window where he kept staring at the three bodies. In the course of that night, his wife saw him suddenly sit up in bed and start struggling with some invisible being. “I’ll kill you, you bandit, I’ll kill you,” he mumbled. She put her hand on his forehead, which was burning; she made him to go back to bed with a few comforting words.

The next day, he got up very early, got dressed and went to the lawyer’s.

This time Louis Normil was the one who refused to shake the hand of the lawyer, who was smiling hypocritically. He listened as the man delivered a bogus summary of his latest efforts.

“Success is certain,” he concluded. “Your daughter has followed my advice and managed things so intelligently that I believe the matter is settled …”

“You’re lying!” Louis Normil declared in a loud voice. “And I have the authority to say this. You’re lying! You gave advice to no one. It was all settled without your help. Don’t try to play me. That’s not going to work anymore.”

The lawyer went from black to ash gray. Louis Normil thought the man was going to pass out when he lowered his head and closed his eyes. At last he was able to vent his rage at one of them. He had a sadistic desire to see this man, who had so frightened him only a few days before, tremble. A wolf among wolves, that’s what you have to become to defend yourself these days, he told himself.

“Forgive me,” the lawyer mumbled humbly.

“In any case,” Louis Normil continued in the same tone, “I’m not here to talk about my daughter but about the five hundred dollars you were paid. What are you waiting for before you give me a receipt?”

“But of course, of course, what was I thinking?”

Trembling, the lawyer looked for a piece of paper on his desk and obligingly wrote up the receipt.

“Here you are, dear friend, and I apologize for not having thought of it sooner.”

Louis Normil gave the lawyer a savage look, and left him without another word.

In the evening, he returned to Maud’s and gave her the receipt:

“You see,” he said, “I wasn’t lying to you.”

She looked at him with hooded eyes through a thick cloud of smoke from her cigarette.

“Don’t get yourself in a bind just to pay me back,” she advised with an odd smile.

“No,” he cried, “I’m telling you you’ll soon be reimbursed.”

His troubles had exhausted him and their embraces suffered. I’m the one who can’t stand marriage, she told herself, and now he’s become a regular husband! She gave him a colder and colder reception, not going out of her way as she once did to please him, and barely made an effort to persuade him to stay. This change had not escaped his notice, and he wondered about it anxiously, going so far as to accuse himself of having neglected her. He had no idea that the echoes of Rose’s ordeal had already reached her and that she was angry with him for accepting such a dishonorable situation without a fight. He should have killed him, she thought, unforgiving, he should have killed him. He confided his troubles strictly to her, told her about the Gorilla, about how they met at the restaurant.

“I’m using him to get what I want, so what do I care what other people think,” he concluded, trying to absolve
himself in her eyes.

“Are you not aware that your daughter has sold herself to this man?” she asked him bluntly.

He lurched as if she’d stabbed him.

“Don’t talk about her,” he said, choking on his words.

“Oh! So you’re aware of it but look the other away. I can’t bear the thought of it.”

“Said be quiet.”

“Who’s going to help you face the truth if not me?” she cried.

“I won’t allowances anyone, anyone to …”

“I judge you, I do,” she continued pitilessly.

“Oh, no, you can’t do that. You have no right. Do you know what it’s like to deal with them? Have you ever seen them up close? Have you heard how they talk, how they threaten?”

She shrugged.

“I’ve had to drink from this chalice to its bitter dregs,” he confided in her. “Pity me instead of pointing the finger.”

He took his hat and she went to get the car from the garage. Neither of them said a word during the entire ride. Before going their separate ways, she offered him her lips but he refused to kiss her.

“I didn’t think you ever could insult me like that,” he reproached her. “I may not be the bravest man, but I am not so lacking in character that I don’t see what’s behind your harshness. I will only return to your house to pay you back. Farewell, Maud.”

“So I tell you the truth and you hold it against me?” she asked, astonished by this almost violent reaction that had suddenly revealed another man.

“What I hold against you is that you don’t love me enough to understand me. We can’t control others, Maud. What can a father do against his own daughter?” he replied sadly. “And what can we do against the people who’ve taken our land and persecute us?”

He went home to find his wife in bed. He stood at the window for a long time, facing the sky, his eyes on the indifferent, twinkling stars so far away. And beneath the sublime majesty of that night, the weight of his misfortune, their misfortune, filled him with rebellion. “Why? Why?” he heard himself murmur just as he had when he was eight and his mother died. Maybe for too long we lived tranquil and carefree lives in the midst of others’ tears and lamentations. To accept crime even if you don’t participate in it is still criminal. In that case, I’ve been a coward and a criminal my entire life. Now I am being punished for thinking that because the flames of hell didn’t reach me, I could warm my hands over them. I looked at the others writhing and twisting their faces in pain without losing my peace of mind, and today, here I am deep in the midst of the flames along with all those I love! My entire life, all I could do was keep my head down and resign myself. And now they’ve come to teach me hatred and rebellion. Their presence is nothing but calculation on the part of fate. Their numbers are swelling and others will bear what we have borne. Misfortune has fallen upon us and will soon spread everywhere. Once all of us feel its heavy hand, maybe then we’ll understand what solidarity and courage mean. In the old days, my mother would start crying whenever my father yelled. She did nothing but tremble and weep before him. Maybe I get it from her. And me, do I know who I am? I’m fifty and still asking myself such a question. I can strut, stand up to the Gorilla, play the cynic, but I know that deep down I am dreadfully afraid. Ah! The pain of it! They forced me to kneel, held me by the hair and rubbed my face in the mud. And hatred found its way into me. I play their game. I play my role to perfection. Accolades for me! I wallow with them in immorality, without shame or remorse. And for that too, I will have to answer. But what should I do? I am alone against them all. It’s an unequal struggle.

He reached the bed and lay down carefully. When the memory of Maud suddenly came rushing back, he realized with some surprise that he had forgotten her, as if she had been submerged in his painful daydreaming. For before she came along, there had been children and this woman lying by his side.

He closed his eyes and the silence of the night immediately took hold of him. There was a slight moaning in the mother’s breath. A kind of whimper to the rhythm of a mute, irregular beat. He leaned over her and listened to her heart. Was it possible that he had been sleeping all this time next to this poor woman without suspecting she was ill! This crumbling heart accused him. He was responsible for this. He called out to her softly and she breathed a deep and painful sigh as she turned around and mechanically curled up away from him on the part of the bed that had been hers for the last six years.
The next day, upon waking, he looked at her as he had not done in a long time. In the last six years, he had only
noticed the morsels of her flesh that were still tempting, expressions and movements that would start up the machine
of memory without really moving him. And he would leave to bring to another the tenderness he didn’t offer her.
How was it that he began to detach himself from her? He had no serious grievance against her. On the contrary. Was
it, in fact, precisely because he knew she was so easygoing that he cheated on her? He had chosen her because she
was the quiet girl, distant and serene: would he now reproach her for these very qualities?
“We’ll go see Dr. Valois together,” he promised her. “You look thin and worn-out. We need to take care of you.”
She looked at him astonished.
“What’s gotten into you? Do I really look like I’m at death’s door?”
“I didn’t say that.”
“Dr. Valois examined me recently.”
“What was the matter?” he asked with real anxiety.
“Oh, I wasn’t feeling well, that’s all. Happens to everybody, doesn’t it?”
“And Dr. Valois was sure there’s nothing wrong with you?”
“Nothing physical. It’s all these worries, these awful worries eating away at me.”
He looked at her and realized she was lying. They were two steps away from each other and he could see her
nostrils quivering. She closed her eyes and he tenderly put a hand on her shoulder.
“We have to remain hopeful, Laura. We have to.”
“All I know how to do is lie to myself.”
“Without hope, what will become of us?”
“Yes,” she said, “what will become of us?”
She shook herself free and went down to the dining room. Rose was still in bed and they had breakfast without
her. Louis Normil caught Paul’s insistent gaze, full of contempt and insolence, and it made him shudder.
“How many parcels of land have you already sold for the Gorilla at a handsome profit?” the young man burst out,
the words hissing in his teeth like insults.
“Son, let’s hope I will be able to sell them,” he answered, trying to sound natural, “since at least then I’ll make
some money out of it. I just told your mother that only hope can help us. There’s a horde of vultures circling these
properties. I am simply trying not to lose everything, that’s all.”
“And in the meantime, you’re making deals with them too,” Paul continued. “One way or another, they’ll manage
to buy off each and every one of us.”
He laughed so horribly that the invalid looked at him with open-mouthed curiosity.
“You just laughed like a demon when he catches a condemned soul in his claws,” the grandfather added softly in
a voice so gentle it didn’t seem like his own.
“My father has become friends with our persecutor,” Paul cried.
Louis Normil turned pale and his shoulders sagged with utter exhaustion. The grandfather dropped his fork, his
beard trembled.
“If this is true, my son, leave my house, don’t impose your presence upon me, I’m not dead yet,” he said.
The father lowered his head in guilt.
“Paul!” the mother called out in painful reproach, and shut her eyes.
“Paul misunderstood me,” the father articulated in a soft and measured voice. “He is very young and he
misunderstood.”
At that moment, Rose bounded down the stairs and sat down in her chair. Pushing out his chair, Paul got up from
the table, his brows glowering over hardened eyes.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He watched the Gorilla for two days, walking the streets with the cold blade of his knife caressing his skin through his shirt. He walked a formidable distance in vain, watching cars, searching buildings and public places. He went home seething with rage, refused to sit at the dining room table and told his mother to get out of his room. In the evening, he got up, waited for the father to leave, and asked his mother for money. He rented a car and parked it along a dark section of the driveway to the house. As soon as he saw Rose leaving, he threw on a jacket, carefully brushed his hair and went into the street. Standing at the gate, he watched her walk away then, once she was far enough, he got in the car and started it. He had followed her from a distance for five minutes when she suddenly stopped. He braked and waited. Five more minutes went by, then ten. Suddenly he recognized the Gorilla at the wheel of his car. The door opened and closed behind Rose. For half an hour, the two cars drove a short distance through town, then along a deserted road where the houses, sunk deep at the end of long driveways, became more and more rare. The place was so dark he could barely see what was in front of him. He carefully drove down the driveway and arrived in front of the house. A bright light was shining through the window of one of the rooms framed by a wrought-iron balcony where he could make out two silhouettes in profile. The dogs began to bark furiously, breaking the silence, and the light suddenly became brighter as if another, more powerful bulb had been turned on. The two shadows vanished as if suddenly snatched by some unseen force, and shortly thereafter he saw the Gorilla at the window. Paul touched his knife through his shirt. “Blast it all,” he heard himself whisper, “if I only had a gun!” He hunched down and crept to the garden, right across from the window. He crouched and poked his head up. In the middle of the room there was a bed where Rose lay naked. Two bulbs hung bright as daylight above her. He saw her with her legs spread open, arms out in a cross, head turned to the side, motionless as a corpse, and he nearly screamed. He felt the knife, unbuttoned his shirt and held the blade between three fingers. He got up slowly, his left hand breaking a small tree branch that was in his way. He saw the man’s body slowly sit up and then start to retreat. He threw the knife, gleaming quick as lightning. He heard it hit something hard and fall below the window with a metallic sound.

“Shit! I missed him,” he said out loud.

The Gorilla had thrown himself on the ground. He saw the man crawling to the balcony and immediately bullets flew past his ears, followed by the furious barking of dogs. He fled the bushes, listening to the gunfire as it faded. Around him, nothing moved. He saw all the lights dim one by one, got back in the car and returned home, where he locked himself up in his room.

Two hours later, he heard Rose groping her way upstairs, not daring to turn on the lights.

There’s nothing left but to finish her now, he thought, picturing her again on that bed. Why all that light on her drawn and quartered body? I need to finish her off, for my sake, for her sake, for us. He sobbed, biting his pillow with all his teeth, lying in bed with his clothes on, refusing sleep.

At dawn, he left his room and cautiously went downstairs, avoiding Rose and the others. He filled up the tank, drove like mad to Carrefour and stopped in front of Anna Valois’ house.
Sitting at his desk, Louis Normil sealed the letter, telling himself: *Who would have thought I would be able to hold my own one day, howling with the wolves!* Taking his hat, he excused himself before his colleagues and went to post the letter. On the envelope he scrawled the address in misshapen letters in an unrecognizable hand.

At lunch, he hid behind a door when M. Zura came by, and left the office alone to go to a meeting he had set up with the men in black.

“Until tomorrow, then, see you at the notary’s,” he said, clinking glasses with them.

The next day, at exactly eight o’clock, a remarkably distinguished-looking mulatto received them in an air-conditioned room, furnished with clear but subtle taste. Distracted, he played with a huge signet ring on his left ring finger. Louis Normil had been sitting across from him for ten minutes and hadn’t once been able to make eye contact.

“I see,” he said, after listening to Normil, “you wish to sell land that once belonged to your father. You are currently in possession of papers that show you have the right to dispose of said property through an inter vivos transfer? Is that correct?”

“Yes. This land is situated on the Turgeau heights and is of untold value. In all, I have a dozen lots planted with fruit trees, at an estimated value of a thousand dollars each. This gentleman,” he said, indicating the Gorilla, “is the only one who didn’t balk at my asking price.”

“He’s an expert in these matters and is quite aware that you could get a lot more than that,” the notary added in a neutral tone, “but in times like these times, a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.”

The Gorilla cracked his long hairy fingers with growing impatience. He scowled at the notary and said:

“Get to it. I have no time to waste.”

“All is ready, Commandant, I’ve seen to everything in advance.”

The notary frowned slightly, put on his glasses and opened a folder.

The title of commandant, which the notary had slapped onto the little man, startled Louis Normil, who couldn’t help staring at the decorations hanging on his black shirt. The notary smiled at that and stubbornly kept his eyes down.

“And are there actually any buyers who are hesitant?” he asked without changing his expression.

The Gorilla took a wad of bills from his pocket and handed it to the notary. The latter counted them, and then held out the folder:

“Sign here, if you would, Commandant.”

The eleven other uniformed men were talking among themselves at the other end of the room.

“Gentlemen,” Louis Normil said as he got up, “I don’t mean to pressure you, but I swear you’re passing up a terrific opportunity to become property owners in one of the nicest parts of the country.”

They rushed over all at once, grumbling, put down their money and signed.

“There now, that’s done,” the notary said with a sigh of relief. “It’s all for the best. Gentlemen, you’ll come by again to pick up the deeds to your property.”

“That’s all?” the Gorilla asked, standing up abruptly.
“That’s all, Commandant,” replied the notary.

“Why not give us those papers right now?” one of the buyers asked shyly.

“Because, simply put, they are not ready,” the notary answered. “Come, come, gentlemen, let’s not be so suspicious. Look at how your own boss has every confidence in us.”

“Fall out!” cried the Gorilla, stiff as a post. The men in uniform stood at attention with their heads down. The notary then took the fat wad of bills and handed it to Louis Normil.

“Goodbye, sir, goodbye Commandant, always at your service, Commandant,” he said, carrying himself like an actor onstage.

Putting the money in his pocket, Louis Normil tried to make eye contact with the notary and saw that his amused and sardonic glance was now fixed on the Gorilla.

“Who is he?” Normil asked the Gorilla once they were outside.

“Oh! A great man, a most worthy gentleman. My father was once his servant. Now he is at my service. He has the reputation of never betraying a professional secret, and thanks to him I’ve closed quite a few deals.”

“Deals like this one?” Louis Normil asked with an innocent smile.

“Like this one,” the Gorilla answered cynically. “One has to make a living, right? But to go back to the notary, he’s a masterly fellow. Smart, very smart, and he knows where the bodies are buried. One of these days, I fear he’ll regret having been so accommodating.”

Louis Normil shuddered.

“My work here is done,” Louis Normil told himself. And, taking advantage of the general panic, he made his way through the crowd and disappeared.

The most urgent thing was to put the money in a safe place. So he went home and this time hid it in the drawer of his night table, under a stack of books. Then he went back to the office, where he found M. Zura in a state.

“Have you heard the news, Normil?” the latter asked him. “Your friend was assassinated.”

“By whom?” Louis Normil exclaimed, feigning surprise.

“By whom?” Louis Normil exclaimed, feigning surprise.

M. Zura rolled his worried eyes and lowered his voice:

“By one of his henchmen, and they’re going to execute him to set an example.”

“Such an extreme measure won’t revive our poor friend,” Louis Normil added, looking devastated.

“What a horrible misfortune! Isn’t it?” M. Zura added. “And now, they’ll be on their guard. Look at all these trucks full of armed men. They know who did it, but they still have to deploy in all their gear just to give us a good scare.”

Louis Normil looked at M. Zura’s shaking hands, took his hat, excused himself and decided to go straight to the immigration office while he was still popular there.

“It’s Monsieur Normil,” said an employee respectfully when he saw him. “Why don’t you go ahead and take care of Monsieur Normil.”

“Let’s make sure Monsieur Normil doesn’t have to wait,” another cried.

“Long live the leader of the Blackshirts!” the first employee shouted.

“Long live the leader of the Blackshirts!” the others repeated in chorus.

“Long live the leader of the Blackshirts!” Louis Normil affirmed obligingly.

What do I care! he thought, as long as I’m able to save my children, the rest doesn’t matter!

We’ll remain, the rest of us, to pay whatever it is there is to pay, he also told himself as he got the passports. I’ll stop at nothing to save Rose and Paul. He went home and found his wife in their bedroom.
“Everything is ready” he announced. “The children will leave tomorrow.”

“My God! … How did you do that?”

He opened the drawer of the night table, lifted the books and took out the money.

“This money will never pay for what we’ve lost morally,” he whispered in a choked voice. “Never, even if they were to let us live, we’ll never be the same. Do you understand?”

She closed her eyes.

“And us?” she asked. “What will happen to us?”

“Us!”

He got up from the bed where they had been sitting side by side and went to the window. He looked at the black stains of the uniforms beyond the stakes and frowned.

“Us!” he began again.

And unwilling to lie to her, he said nothing. Did she understand the meaning of his silence? She stood behind him with a hand on his shoulder:

“Have you told Rose and Paul?” she asked, to tear him from the dreadful thoughts he dared not utter.

“No. Where’s Rose?”

“She hasn’t left her room.”

“Let her rest.”

At lunch, there were only four of them sitting at the table. Rose had locked herself up in her room. No one spoke of the Gorilla’s murder. There was an unusual commotion on their property, with a significant number of uniformed men pacing around, armed to the teeth. Most of the houses in the neighborhood were sealed and silent as graves. It seemed as if their terrified inhabitants had run for cover.

I will attend the Gorilla’s funeral tomorrow, the father told himself. I will play my part to the very end, until the children leave. After that, whatever happens, happens!

The sun was setting as he left the room. He ran into Rose at the door to the living room.

“How can you ask that, Papa? I’m going out, that’s all.”

“Come, I need to talk to you.”

“Tomorrow, Papa, I have to go.”

“I have to talk to you,” he bellowed with such authority that she was dumbstruck and turned around.

“I’ll come to your room, go,” he added more softly.

She looked at him in fear, saw the time on her watch, then ran past him and made for the street.

“Rose!” he yelled.

He saw light in Paul’s room and went up. He opened the door quietly. The young man was sitting with his eyes on the ground, his arms on his chest, somber and stern.

“Get out of here, Papa, get out,” he said quietly.

“I have to talk to you.”

“We have nothing to say to each other.”

“Here is your passport and Rose’s and the money for your studies. More than you’ll need, a lot more because you’ll have to attend to your sister’s health. I have reserved seats on a plane for tomorrow. That’s what I had to say to you, my son.”

He hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly to the door.

“Papa!”

“Yes, son,” he replied without turning around.

He felt two shivering, ice-cold hands grasping him from behind, moving up over his face.

“Papa, Papa!” he heard again.

And the hands wandered madly over his face, seeking the embrace that would halt them. So he held these hands in his and stood there without moving, his son’s icy hands in his. Against his own weakened body, he felt the twitching of his son’s, robust and powerful.
“Calm down,” he advised, “you have to stay calm.”

He freed himself and led Paul to the bed, where he made him lie down. Lifting his son’s feet onto the bed, he looked at him pensively, then abruptly left the room. Tears were streaming down his cheeks, which he wiped with the back of his hand. Walking by the grandfather’s closed door, he heard the invalid whispering. He went to his room, got undressed and lay in bed next to his wife.

“Rose went out?” she asked him.

“Yes,” the father said.

“I’m going to use this time to pack her bags.”

He held her back by grabbing her hand.

“Wait until I’ve spoken to her, Laura. Wait until she comes back,” he said.

He kept his anguish to himself, counting the minutes until he suddenly sank into a deep sleep, his wife’s hand in his.
Paul stayed up waiting for Rose to return. Eyes fixed on his watch as it marked ten o’clock, he was startled when he heard the stairs creak. There she is! he told himself and held his breath. Fifteen minutes went by and he didn’t move. Finally he got up, left his room and put his ear to Rose’s door. He heard nothing. He knocked and no one answered. “Hell and damnation!” he whispered, “but I really did hear steps on the stairs!” He steadied his nerves and broke down the door with a firm right shoulder. Two bullets sounded not too far from the house, then two more.

“They’re shooting!” the mother screamed from her room.

The father appeared, haggard, supporting the mother who was about to faint. She pointed at the grandfather’s room.

“See if they’re here,” she said, her face deathly pale. “Make sure they’re not both outside.”

Paul opened the door, saw there was no one there, and rushed downstairs.

“No, not you, not you!” the mother screamed.

And she fell to her knees, arms folded on her chest screaming: “My God! Have mercy on us!”

Paul had already reached the yard, followed by the father, who was nervously pulling up his oversized pajamas.

Two bodies lay against the wall where they had probably been thrown, the child’s head resting at the grandfather’s feet, facing the house.

Paul bent over the bodies, looked across the property and hollered:

“Murderers! Murderers!”

Teeth clenched, he waited, but nothing stirred. So he put the invalid’s body in his father’s arms and lifted the grandfather onto his back.
Rose walked into the bright living room without a sound. Around the sofa, she could make out her father, her mother and her brother looking at two bodies lying beside each other. No one looked up when she came in and she didn’t say a word. The church bell tolled twelve times as she counted patiently, heels together, motionless, as if struck dead. In vain she waited for somebody to make a move, to know what to do, to know whether to speak, cry or scream, whether to clutch at the bodies and call out to them. Her legs were wobbly and she took a few steps back, moving with difficulty, like an automaton, as she slowly made her way upstairs. She recognized Paul’s footsteps behind her and went into her room, leaving the door open. He closed it behind them. They looked at each other in silence. Then Rose lifted her hand and stroked his face. He felt as if she were fighting off some sort of terrible exhaustion and that at any moment she would collapse before him, flimsy and disjointed like a puppet.

He watched her stagger.

For a brief instant, he could see the student who had fallen asleep beside him on the bench in the public square. He thought: Worn out, they’ve worn her out as well. He rushed and caught her on his shoulder. Then he put her in bed and sat by her side to wait for her to wake up. Dawn came and only then did he learn that Rose was dead.
MADNESS

There is no better role to play in the presence of the great than that of the fool. For a long time there was an official jester to the king, but there has never been an official wise man to the king. Me, I’m the fool of Bertin and many others, perhaps yours at this moment, or perhaps you are mine; a man who would be wise would have no fool, so anyone who has a fool is not wise; if he’s not wise he’s a fool, and perhaps, though he be king, his fool’s fool.

DIDEROT
It was as if suddenly the earth, ravished and devastated by a horrifying cataclysm, had opened up to swallow us. People were running, shrieking. I leaped to open the door and, falling to my knees, looked outside. A taunting patch of tropical indigo sky caught my eye—an indigo stretched with water to the infinite horizon by the enormous brush of a tireless, austere and silent painter. Sky of Haiti, sky beyond compare, a custom-made frame for the giant mapou trees, for the unrelenting verdure of a landscape coddled by eternal spring. Bullets whistling by my ears quickly made me duck and close the door. Silence and trouble! Fearful silence. Deadly silence. Were they, like me, listening to their hearts leaping in their throats? The silence weighed like bricks upon us and we no longer dared move, lying low in terror, in our common terror where we clutched each other, invisibly, as if we were at the bottom of an airless pit. A stagnant agglomeration of cowards and curs! If only I could shake off my terror. I am going to shake off this repulsive terror of mine. They will see me show myself, a harmless poet and a dreamer, alone, in all the glory of our forebears, and offer my serene brow to their bullets. Lies. After many twists and turns, the poem crosses my field of thought and stops there as if to fool me about who I am. I am afraid. I’m stunned by the hammering of their boots. There they are walking past my house! I locked the front door and barricaded it with the old dresser rotting with wood lice, the four wicker chairs, the little pitch-pine table and the trunk where I keep my books and scraps of paper. I do all this, and yet by way of a peculiar doubling, I calmly go where I hear screaming, where I am certain the devils are committing murder. I avoid danger as I accuse myself of cowardice, loathing my own reactions. In the trunk, there are a few poems, unpublished, as are all of my poems about devils and hell. Enough of them there to get me pumped full of lead without anyone hesitating. No one until now has managed to describe them as well as I have, so intuitively. Before I even saw them, I pictured them bootied, armed, dressed in resplendent red and black uniforms decorated with gold buttons. I understood the symbolic shorthand: incandescent flames burning at the bottom of an abyss out of which the damned, in a supreme and vile temptation, would see a rain of gold. Red, black, gold! Flames, abyss, ambition! No use trying. I can’t write. I will try to preserve in my memory this poem that keeps worrying at me.

Red, black, gold!
Flames, abyss, ambition!
Captivating colors of damnation …

By the glory of our forebears, I’m going to do it, kick the door open and walk up to them. Dessalines! Pétion! Toussaint! Christophe! I call on all our indomitable heroes for help. On God Himself! Yes, God! Why not! I unhook the crucifix, piously, I who had forgotten all about it for so long, since the day poetry replaced everything for me, since the day I tried, shut away in my Haitian Parnassus, to create my own god, a truly Haitian god, half-white, half-black, a blend of Christ and Legba in whom I took refuge, wings dangling, eyes closed to better carve my way through an entanglement of traps, reversals, life’s one hundred thousand humiliations; to hack a path to freedom with an imaginary machete through the thicket of campeachy mahogany, and oak, and climb the unreachable hill of dreams. I must no longer dream. I must face danger. With what weapons? I put the crucifix on the floor, pointing its face at the front door. I, who haven’t believed in miracles in so long, here I am, today, awaiting one from God. My poem in the French manner has suddenly left me. Sad and nostalgic Creole stanzas have replaced it, and two astonishingly violent verses spring out of my mouth. Trembling, I yell them out, lying on the ground, hands lifting the crucifix. Then I put it back down, piously kissing its feet.

My black mother, before you died you told me:
“Serve the family loas and pray God you’ll never be in anyone’s debt.”

But I despised the loas and avoided the thought of God. I was hungry too often, and a man praying on an empty stomach is spitting in his own face.

I feel weaker before the devils who have invaded our little town, more inclined to seek divine protection. You can stifle hunger! but the devils …

I pull the trunk toward me and open it. Beneath the dusty layer of books and papers, I find a pile of sacred objects for a voodoo shrine: marassas dishes, candles dressed in the seven colors of the rainbow, little pitchers stuffed with dried leaves meant for protection, the miraculous amulets I wore on a red string around my neck as a child. My black mother, who didn’t know how to read and who sold trinkets at the market, slaved away to make a scholar of
her son. I left Creole and voodoo behind by going to school, and she, who was never able to say a French word to me, would beam when she heard me recite lessons she did not understand.

What are the good French sisters at the Sainte-Marie-de-Dieu school doing right now? Or the good French brothers at Saint-Valentin High School? They are on their knees, interceding with God on behalf of the cursed town, beseeching Him to vanquish the devils, to slay and crush them. And what if evil were to triumph over good yet again? Might as well wheedle the \textit{loas} and have them on my side as well.

I take out the things from the trunk with ceremonial respect and pour water on the ground, offering drink to the gods of Guinea; then, I fill the \textit{marassas} dishes with cane syrup and surround them with amulets and pitchers. I have nothing else to offer them, neither liquor nor candy, and in my generosity risk croaking from hunger while I wait for the devils to depart. Having pleased the \textit{loas}, I lie sated on the floor, hands behind my neck. A thin trickle of light comes through a hole in the boards and I jump up and paste my eye to it. I would have preferred the whistling of bullets to this all-pervading silent torpor. From this observation post I have a wonderful view of Cécile’s tall house, the white railing of her balcony, her potted carnations, her lace curtains. I seek in vain for signs of life there. Where is she? What is she doing? What has happened to her parents? Their devious maid, Marcia, a pretty black girl, used to smile at me and shout:

“Lost your mind, heh! crazy mulatto, lost your mind …”

But the only woman I ever had eyes for was her mistress. And she knew it. What did I care about the insults of a poor, ignorant black girl mad with scorn to the point of throwing stones at me and making the kids of the Grand-rue chase after me!

I was biting my nails, bemoaning the fact I had not sought the object of my desire sooner, when I heard a man cry out. He was doubled over and running away as fast as possible, straight in the direction of my house. I saw Cécile’s window open slightly. In the time I lost looking for her silhouette the man fell, riddled with bullets. Two tiny devils, their weapons slapping their backsides like tails, leaned over the body and smashed its face in with their red boots.

Cécile’s window was closed again. I plugged up the wall with a piece of soap and took off my sweat-soaked shirt. On the ground, the crucifix gleamed in the half light. I stretched out on the floor again. I am on the floor with all of them now. On the floor with Jesus. On the floor with the \textit{loas}, for it is said that the spirit of the gods of Africa descends upon the offerings for nourishment. On the floor, like a pariah. I burned my last mat to get rid of the bedbugs busy eating me alive at night. Before being reduced to this, I knocked on every door: Mme Fanfreluche’s door, and M. Potentat’s, both with businesses on the Grand-rue, both passing for rich people around here. I knocked on every door, repeating myself like a parrot in a voice growing weaker and weaker from rising hunger:

“Please give me some work.”

They would whisper something to each other that I could not hear and would put a twenty-centime coin in my hand for an errand I had agreed to run. But what can a man do with a Haitian coin of twenty centimes?

I am thirsty! My water pitcher is half-empty I will need to ration myself. Ah, if only I had enough courage to go cross the yard to get some coal and the little stove and make a bit of coffee! Thank God for the day my mother had the good idea to buy me this chamber pot.

Here I am alone as I have never been. Alone with my memories, my regrets, my remorse. Why remorse? Is it always there? After my mother’s death, I reproached myself for cutting short my mourning, though I had shut myself in for a month, even refusing to see the good Dr. Chanel. The doctor was the only one, apart from Father Angelo and Brother Justinien, who made sure I did not die of hunger. But, like the Haitian saying goes, the good ones don’t last. And it is true that death always picks off the best. Dr. Chanel is dead. So is Brother Justinien. As for Father Angelo, just as good but now old, he can barely walk and, cassock or no, he does seem to live by begging just like me. For there is more than one way to beg.

To witness a man murdered makes you heavy with remorse. The body in front of my door is beginning to mean something to me. He haunts me. Was he running to me? Now I am standing in front of the wall, scratching away the soap to open up the hole again. Who is he? His clotted blood has stained his yellow shirt with large blackish blotches: the blood that gushed out red has become black. Black like the devils’ uniforms. Are devils black or white? Who am I, I who was born of a father mulatto enough to pass for white? Saffron skin, mahogany skin, sapodilla skin? No, rotten coconut skin.

“The color of farts,” as my mother used to say, “all mulattoes of your kind are the color of farts.”

This irresolute color with which I have trouble identifying makes whites lump me with blacks and blacks reject me as white. The mixed-blood race! Birds forever without branches, but of late especially unwanted.

When did I really begin to feel ill at ease? And for whose sin am I paying? They haven’t taken a good look at me,
they haven’t seen my troubles, for the love of God!

The bloodbath that my friend Jacques, a poet like me, has predicted will come to pass. Although I still devour whatever palliatives life offers to help pass the time, it comforts me to think that if they should suddenly force open the door and step over the body of Christ to kill me, I would still know how to die bravely. That last jolt of pride, the guilty pleasure of a malcontent. Is death near? I have been letting myself sink into my past with too much complacency not to be frightened by it. It’s fishy. This brew of memories is unhealthy. Malcontent! An arresting word. An arrogant malcontent, like all artists.

Arrogant malcontents! …

I don’t want to write. At least, not as I have before. I feel as if I am coming out of my apathy and becoming self-aware. Cornered, hounded like an animal, I take stock of my powers in silence and in fear, and plunge to the very bottom of my being. To find what there? Ah! Lord have mercy! Spare me from clutching at nothing yet again. Look at my buddies. Poets like me. Their empty gizzards stuffed with crooked rhymes, just like me. Poetry! The endemic illness of young malcontents, desperately embracing beauty, hog-tied to the tempting rhymes of a loaned-out language, tossed about between Creole and French like those rowboats over there on the sea I can hear but not see crashing from my shack. My senses grow sharp in this silence intermittently punctuated by cries or the whistling of bullets. I no longer need to look in order to see: the sea is raging. Raging against the devils, against our resignation, against our cowardice, against us. I listen to it holler, scold, protest, refute. Furious, her waves lift abandoned sailboats and make them clatter like teeth. Silver and pink fish jump high in the air and cast stunned looks at the shore; gaunt dogs pace along the beach, nosy, searching through trash and bodies. Closer by, multihued birds shake off the rain, gliding indifferently, wings fixed between heaven and earth. Between squalor and splendor. They whistle and sing cheerful sunny songs, the strident songs of island birds; and their unbridled effervescence, wafting on the warm noon breeze, that Haitian noon usually suffused with the smell of dishes spiced with garlic and hot pepper, accentuates our torment, poor prisoners that we are. We are indeed prisoners. Brave is he who ventures out. Even the beggars have deserted the streets. They have probably dug themselves in somewhere in the mountains. Let’s hope hunger doesn’t turn them into snitches and drive them to make a pact with the devils, those who just yesterday were praying at the gates of the church, arms outstretched in a cross. The church too has closed its doors and, since morning, the bells have been quiet. Is Father Angelo afraid? Is Cécile afraid? Let me put my thoughts in order, let me draw a battle plan, and I will fly to your rescue … Where have I read this? …

My shack is in a back alley that opens on the Grand-rue. A nameless back alley in the slums where near-beggars of my kind live here and there. It is near the Grand-rue and is even more despised for it. A disgraceful appendix of that main street with its heap of self-styled aristocrats, baptized by high society, as they say. Shopkeepers, businessmen, exploiters, thieves in the guise of respectable citizens, bursting with every sort of prejudice, living like pashas in this provincial small town, which, due to the terrible roads that link it to Port-au-Prince, seems forever separated from the rest of the world.

This Haitian province sung over and over in my French rhymes, province that I love because my mother and I grew up here, suffered and slaved here, I will free you from the devils’ claws!

The past is forever vomiting up regrets. Life is like a heavy cart slowly, implacably grooving a path straight ahead of itself. I turned my head to look back and was seized by discouragement. Why didn’t I keep begging for work? Why didn’t I have the courage to declare my love to Cécile? I ran away from responsibilities out of fear of the future and now I may no longer have a future. I am alone, shut up like a rat in his hole, I am gnawing at my solitude with every last tooth. Look at my buddies. André, Jacques, Simon! Malnourished poets like me. Hunted by the devils like me.

I heard gunshots and then furious running. And this time I jumped to the barricade to unblock the door. I opened it wide and the fugitive saw it and flew into my house like the wind: it was André. We put back the barricade before embracing.

“What were you doing outside?”
“Looking for Jacques.”
“Where is he?”
“Left two hours ago. He jumped out the window and I haven’t seen him since.”
“The devils might have caught him.”
“Don’t say that.”
“Did he not also predict in one of his poems that the time of the devils would come?”
“My God!” André says, putting his hands together. And he kneels to recite a prayer.

The devils opening the gates of Hell
Will escape by the thousands
Black, red, sparkling with weapons and gold …

a voice outside recites. We listen carefully attentive and curious.

Nature herself would if she could
Hide in a shroud of mourning
Death glides to our door without warning …

“Jacques!” André hollers. He rushes to the door and I block his way. “No, André.”

“Jacques!”

I put my hand over his mouth, grab his shoulder and push him against the wall. “Look, I say.”

The devils, a dozen of them, escort Jacques, who walks slowly and indifferently among them, declaiming his poems.

“Do you see them?”

“Who?”

“The devils. They are all around your brother. Circling around him. Pushing him ahead.”

“Where?”

“There, at the corner of Grand-rue.”

“So he might get killed?”

“Something strange is going on.”

“What?”

“Devils though they are, it looks like they sense they are in the presence of a greater force, something that seems to overpower them.”

“I see Jacques!” André cries out. “People are cheering him on!”

“Those are the devils!”

“They’re going to kill him, René, they’re going to kill him,” André sobs.

“Do you see them?”

“No. But I am sure they’re going to kill him.”

I run to get a bottle of clairin that I had completely forgotten about, since no Haitian poet can drink and toast unless he is in good company. I pour two glasses and lift mine:

“To the defeat of the devils,” I cry out.

“Shhh!” André motions to me.

I point to the crucifix lying on the floor and abruptly pour the clairin down my throat. It sets my stomach ablaze like a torch.

“May God and the loas protect us,” André says. I’m completely euphoric. André’s presence and the heat of the clairin spreading in my organs lift my courage and I feel capable of confronting a whole army of devils. In the blink of an eye, a crackle of bullets destroys my vague attempt at audacity.

“They killed him,” I say to André.

“Why did you say that?”

“Didn’t you hear the sound of the firing squad?”

“No.”

“You’ve always been a bit hard of hearing. Listen to the bullets! …”

“They killed him!”
“Alas!”
“Let me leave. Let me go get his body.”
“So you too can get killed!”
I force him to drink his *clairin*, helping him hold the glass to his lips wet with tears.
“He was only twenty” he laments.
“Drink, drink.”
Night falls. I look around through the wall. Nothing moves. Dimming its lights, the sun dyes the clouds orange and shrimp pink. And the clouds deserting the sky gather voluptuously around the sun, which suddenly abandons them and disappears behind the sea.

We slept only an hour or two on the floor. At dawn, I was already flat against the wall, drinking up the least signs of life from the town like a starving man. Nothing stirred. All around, immutable nature seemed to mock our anguish. I listened to the nightingales modulating their clever trills. They were singing perched on a palm tree. While the fronds of the palm tree swayed in the breeze outside, in my room I was suffocating from the heat. Oh! To be able to just get out and run with open arms to the beach, fill my lungs with air, throw myself in the salty water, dive in without taking a breath, to drown! …

“Is there no one in the streets?” André asks me.
“No. Not a breath of life. It’s a siege. Either we turn ourselves in or we die.”
“Do we have what we need to make some coffee?”
“The coal and the gas stove are at the other end of the yard. There are two of us now. One of us will keep a lookout and the other will go get them.”
“What if they catch us?”
“We’ll be careful. Stop shaking. You’ve already crossed yourself a hundred times since you’ve been here. There’s no more time for prayers, only action.”

His face is drenched in sweat. He is as thin as I am, and he looks so much like me we could be brothers.
“That body has started to stink,” he says. “It’s making me sick. Why don’t they pick it up?”
“Do you know him?”
“Who?”
“The dead man.”
“It’s probably Saindor, he runs the bodega by the sea.”
“That’s what I thought.”
“I owed him five *piastres.*”
“And I ten.”
“Poor guy!”
“Yes.”
“They murdered him right under your very eyes?”
“Just about.”
“He screamed before he died.”
“Shrieked.”
André sticks two fingers into his stomach and a terrible belching pours out of him. He suddenly hiccups. He must be starving.

I watch Cécile’s house through the hole. I see her behind her curtains. She’s looking at my house. Is she worried about me? I quickly tie a handkerchief to a wooden ruler and slip it through the hole. I wave the handkerchief. Cécile’s window opens a little and she leans her head out to make herself visible and then disappears. I quickly withdraw my white flag and start pacing around the room, anxiously.

“Who were you making signs to?”
“To Cécile.”
“You’re still thinking about her?”
“I love her.”
“But she will never love you. She’s rich and you are poor. People like that, they’re snobs.”
“She did accept my poem.”
“She was laughing.”
“What does that prove?”
“She was making fun of you.”
He swallows more clairin and slams his glass on the table.
“It’s them, they’re the ones responsible for this. They made a big bonfire where every piece of kindling was soaked with hatred. They lit the fire and fanned it.”
“So write a poem about hatred.”
“Jesus preached love.”
“Then write a poem about love.”
I push him to the table blocking the door and give him paper and pencil. He begins to cry quietly, head in his arms.
“I can’t, I can’t write, there’s too much hate all around me.”
“Write, God damn it! Destroy hatred and sow love with your poems.”
“Don’t you remember, René? The market women who went down the hills at dawn, baskets on their heads! We would wait for them on the road to lift their skirts. And their endless chatter. And the rhythm of their rumps! The smell of the donkeys loaded with produce. The fragrance of the mangoes, quenepas drying under the quenepa trees that reminded us of Madame Fanfreluche’s imported plums, which Brother Justinien made us try one Christmas! Dawn to dusk, all the smells of the day! There isn’t a single scent, not even the smell of the fresh catch struggling in the fishermen’s nets, that I don’t miss right now! …”
He gets up and walks to the wall.
“Oh! The smell of the sea! Put your nose against the hole in the wall. Can you smell it? … To live here, locked up, waiting for death … This torment reminds me of something. We were once locked up somewhere, but where? …”
“Keep quiet!”
“Let me get out of here.”
“No.”
“I want to go.”
He starts trying to unblock the door and I grab him roughly.
“You’ve got to settle down,” I tell him.
He sits on the floor and starts crying again. There’s a large purple scar on his black forehead. He scratches it absentmindedly and wipes the blood that comes out with his shirtsleeve.
Is his presence going to complicate things for me? In any case, as I push up against his weakness, I feel like I’m going toe-to-toe with someone, like I’m being brave, not merely moldering away in resignation. Having to protect this being from himself increases my own instinct for self-preservation tenfold. Alone, I would have succumbed and resigned myself. Depressed and starving I would have welcomed death with open arms, with joy Only rebellion can nourish courage. Why did he start talking to me about Cécile? I want to live just to prove to him that she loves me too. I don’t want anyone’s pity. Once I free the town, Cécile will give me her hand. My name will ring out to the four corners of the earth. Have you heard of René? The great René who defeated the devils? Have you read his poems? I will beat the devils. What is courage if not a mixture of rage and despair? My stomach is growling from hunger and, at the same time, anger. I can feel it fermenting in my gut, this anger. When it reaches my heart, I’ll see red and I will cut the throats of those within my grasp in cold blood. Look out, devils, lest my anger explode. They are like walking arsenals. A veritable jumble of rifles, revolvers, bayonets, spurs, brass knuckles, studded whips, machetes, coco-macaques and stiff cowhide whips. Imported weapons, local weapons, nothing is enough for them as they prepare for a victory already theirs.
Tonight, I will act alone. I will get André drunk and leave the house to haul the water and the coal. Once I’ve had a nice cup of coffee, I’ll feel better. Coffee appeases hunger and stimulates the nerves. I don’t want to fall asleep. Eating so little since my mother’s death has depressed me enough. Poor black woman who died, as she used to say,
of raising her mulatto of a son like a prince! My palms are softer than the petals of wild orchids.

“Don’t touch that pot,” she would protest whenever I wanted to help. “I’ll wash it myself; leave that broom alone, you’ll get calluses. I’m not slaving away so you can end up a servant boy.”

She died the year I came home triumphantly to give her news of my successful completion of the exams for the second baccalaureate. “I can die now,” she had said. And die she did, too soon. I had learned to count on her and not on myself. What I knew was how to read the classics and to speak French like a Parisian.

“Good diction, very good diction,” Brother Justinien would say, rubbing his hands together.

I was already writing poems and reciting those by French authors and sometimes my own, but I didn’t know how to do anything else. “Lazybones!” they cried after me in the street. Lazy? I sometimes spent whole nights with my notebook, writing, crossing out, ripping it up to start again, over and over. Lazy? My mother left me her shack, the furniture now blocking the door, the furniture now blocking the door, and her loas! Lazybones! I tutored a few students that Brother Justinien sent me, but nobody thanked me because I stank of clairin.

“Stop drinking, don’t drink anymore,” the good Dr. Chanel kept repeating to me. “You’ll ruin your health and your reputation.”

Why do they rebuke me for my one vice? If I’m doing my job properly, if I am conscientious in teaching their sons, stubborn asses interested in nothing, then why are they meddling in my private life? If I drink, it’s my business. Ah, I remember my first spree at Saindor’s, who had his place on the shore, before the devils murdered him. May he rest in peace! I was hunting a poem that was torturing me sadistically as it fled. I saw it run, turn around, thumb its nose at me, stroke my cheek, lean on my shoulder, look me seriously in the eye and burst out laughing. So I drank. I began drinking because of this poem I never wrote. I staggered down the Grand-rue in front of Cécile’s door, staggered before her maid Marcia, who laughed and got the kids to throw rocks at me. I never raised my eyes to see Cécile. My heart quickened with loud beating. I know how to be prudent. That prefect who sent me speeches to correct for a few piastres but still called me a loser in public, I will take his name to my grave. To my grave, the name of a certain popular writer who returned my poems with a slight look of distaste, telling me: “Poets are all the rage now, so keep writing, my dear, if you like.”

But I was soft and they knew it. They went at me ruthlessly. I have since witnessed the undeserved triumph of the grandiose and the mediocre. Machete in hand, I will climb the hill of dreams on my own. I will hew my way through the undergrowth of tangled creepers. Alone at the broken ground for the edifice that my hands would have been the first to trace, I will lift my face to the rising dawn, machete in my fist, soaked with sweat and blood …

I am getting used to this terrible silence reigning over our town. A town mired in terror! We have become the half-dead residents of a dead town. I am taking on the foul stench of the corpse outside. André snores, lying stretched out on the floor beside the crucifix. He has taken off his shirt and his prominent ribs stab at his skin. He looks so much like me we could be brothers. The room stinks. The chamber pot is full to the brim. I am suffocating. What are they waiting for to bury the dead? Where is the prefect? Where is the commandant in charge of the town’s security? Where is M. Potentat? Where is the mayor? Where are the police? Where are they all? Ah! Ah! Ah! So they too are afraid? Well, we’re no more cowards than they are, André and I. At least they have weapons, but us? Where are the church bells? I want to hear them ring. Poor Father Angelo! Your priests will be more useless than ever. We must fight the devils with equal force. This is none of your business. How is it our business, mine, André’s, Jacques’ and Simon’s? Unknown and malnourished poets. Poor unarmed poets abandoned to the cruelty of the devils. What was I doing the night before they came? I can’t remember. Something in the air must have announced this invasion. Something we didn’t know how to interpret. Perhaps the danger hovered over our carefree heads for a long time. What are we guilty of? What are we paying for? If Jesus was put to death, it’s because he offered something more. Where did I read that? What more have we said or done than the others? In history, details are always meaningful. Are we going to enter history? Once upon a time, voices would often rise out of the depths of my conscience that I would silence with blows of rhyme. Details. Yes, meaningful. What did these voices say? Did they reproach me for my indifference toward the rituals of my ancestors? Did they accuse me of laziness, treason, cowardice? Here I am, my nails scratching the varnish off my Latin education, clinging to the bosom of the superstitious terrors of my childhood. How much less dangerous it is to serve God! He has the patience of a forsaken lover, hanging around in case love rekindles to hold out his hand and forgive. Exacting loas! Insatiable loas of my ancestors! …

I went to open the trunk and I saw a rat lapping up the syrup in the dishes. I banished him with a kick and started laughing and screaming:

“Jesus, Son of God made man, lift up your hand over this town and cast out these devils.”
I’m delirious. It’s the hunger. The tension, too. When’s the last time I have either eaten or slept? And yet, I poured the syrup into the marassas dishes again and stopped up the rat hole.

André is asleep on his side now. He grunts and I go past him furtively I miss solitude. Decency is only necessary in the presence of a third party. And I don’t feel like being decent at such a time as this. Here I am looking through the hole studying the dead body again.

My eyes left him only when I saw Cécile’s curtains move. I wrote a poem in my head about her black eyes, her black hair, her brown plum-colored skin, and I told myself: “It’s true that she is beautiful and rich and will never be mine.” Nonsense! Fame awaits me. Wealth awaits me. I snuggle lovingly in the arms of sweet hope.

“Madame Magistral, may I speak to your daughter Cécile?”

“Cécile,” Mme Magistral will say, paying me no mind, “some beggar is asking for you. It’s that little mulatto, Angélie the trinket-peddler’s boy.”

And Cécile will appear, haughty, shouting in Creole:

“What do you want? Are you running an errand for Madame Fanfreluche?”

And I will run away, head down, Marcia scolding me.

Will they have the nerve to humiliate me, to keep being smug after everything we’ve suffered together? I’d rather the devils kill everyone. Let this town disappear! Let it be annihilated …

They’ve started again with the firing squad. It’s happening near the church. I wake up André. Now we’re both flat against the wall, looking through the hole.

“Beggars,” André whispers to me. “Never have I seen so many of them.”

“But those are peasants.”

“Oh!” says André.

The bullets crackle. A little girl runs from one house to the next. I see her fall. André doesn’t. It’s strange he didn’t see her fall. The sound of the bullets is terrifying. They whistle with a treacherously inconspicuous sound, a sound like nothing else in the world. Their whistling echoes in the distance for a long time, patiently, annihilating all other sounds, even the hoarse martial blast of the lambi calling the peasants together for a coumble, even the rumbling of the rada drums calling hounsis to the voodoo ceremony. Everything is drowning in a sea of blood. I would like to stare in the devils’ faces as they kill. From a distance, they all look the same in their uniforms. Neither black, nor white, nor yellow. Colorless! Like crime. Colorless! Like injustice and cruelty. You see nothing of them under their uniforms. Headless bodies. Faceless heads in golden helmets. Would I have the courage to stare at them even from behind the walls of my shack? They are anonymous, like stupidity and meanness. Their ugliness overwhelms me, demoralizes me. The way the surface of the face and its features decompose beneath the weight of sadistic cruelty—this is what I call ugliness. They enjoy killing too much. There are hundreds of bodies in front of the church. I hear another blast of bullets. These shots, I only understand this now, are their language, their voice. Here’s one of them now at the end of the street. I clutch at the wall and look at him. He’s just across from us. His face is cast in some kind of metal, like a blinding mirror in the sun. I close my eyes, suddenly feeling weak.

“What’s wrong?” André asks.

“Did you see?”

“Who?”

“The devil there, at the corner of Grand-rue.”

He throws himself on the floor and curls up trembling behind the trunk, hands clasped together.

No point talking to him. He only knows how to tremble and pray. His presence weighs on me. It seems to me that if I were by myself I’d be able to think of a solution more easily. His terror is contaminating me. I make vain efforts to turn inward, to focus. As in a dream, I feel like I am running after something that escapes me just as I think I am about to catch it in my hands. Oh! My God, the ugliness of that face! Could I ever forget it?

“Stop mumbling prayers,” I shout to André impatiently. “You’re not letting me think.”

“Hush! Lower your voice,” he begs.

I’m hunting down an idea. Surely it concerns the devils. To defeat them, but how? Fight them, but how? I’ve got it. I’m going to kill one of them, just one, I will slip on his uniform and then I will wedge myself among their ranks and keep my head down. An exterminating angel striking at hell’s minions with my blade! I will free the town from the devils’ clutches. God has designated me for this role. I will fulfill my destiny only when I obey Him. Each of us has a role to fulfill down here, otherwise how can we justify having been created? But one must not play dumb and
blind, but obey. As for me, I have ears to hear with and eyes to see with, and I have heard and I have seen. What I
experience cannot be merely personal. Will the others shirk responsibility? Are they going to close their eyes and
ears like André? Until this very minute, I thought that the corpse was the source of the turmoil within me. But I see
the light now. I feel lifted by an unexplainable force that paradoxically inclines me to great humility. I feel like a
child who, one fine day, finally receives a long-coveted toy.

The body is teeming with ants, its eyes slowly disappearing into two deep orbits traced by the ravages of the
merciless insects. I will stoically bear witness to its slow and irreversible decomposition.

Original sin is like a tattoo, we are cursed from the beginning. Where did I read that? Is this fair? If the devils
have made ours their town of choice, it can only be because of original sin. What are we guilty of? Let each of us
cry out: “Mea culpa, mea culpa,” and the devils will disappear. God has unleashed the devils upon us to punish us.
Otherwise, how can we explain their power? God is tired of us. God spits in our face.

God tortures us so that the punishment will bear fruit once and for all. Who has not felt the icy finger of remorse
weighing on his heart at least once? Hedonists, exploiters, frauds, spies, torturers, all kneel and cry out: “Mea
culpa!” “It seems begging has become a profession,” was your response to the one who implored and held out his
hand to you. “Leave me alone, lazybones,” you cried to the cripple.

And in your moneyed homes, you amassed expensive knickknacks from France or the United States, collected
jewelry and baubles to adorn your wives so they could strut past the beggars while holding their noses.

What am I guilty of? Me?

Well before the devils came, I felt I was being spied on, as if a mysterious presence was watching my every
move, sniggering whenever it heard me recite my verses. And yet, I am just a minuscule creature! To you, I am
nothing but a wisp of straw. I am nothing but a poor ox resigned to the stake, pulling his rope out of habit, docile,
with no great desire to leave the meager pasture where it is attached. A Haitian ox, born in poverty, used to his
poverty, lowing in the sun, his empty gut growling. But so be it, whether or not you’re an ox at the stake, each and
every one of us needs to account for himself. Life is nothing but a usurious loan, and we still have to pay back the
interest someday. We’ve abused the terms of the loan and the devils’ judgment day is here. Purification through the
flames of hell here and now, and the triumph of truth afterward. We will confess our crimes in public this time,
shouting: “Mea culpa!”

The devils speak. Listen to their bullets. Our overgrown gutters are red with blood. Cursed be the towns where
poverty becomes a stone-faced routine. Where it no longer arouses pity.

It is said that the innocent will pay for the guilty. Oh! Yes, wait a minute, my God, after all, nothing has been
bestowed upon me since my birth save the blessed love of my mother. Contempt, humiliation, cheap shots have been
my lot. Of course the crippled beggars are in worse shape than I am. Thanks to my good black mother, I have a
shack for shelter and some ordinary furniture. All of them naked like veritable zombies, gaunt, skeletal; they must be
dying of hunger somewhere in the hills, the crippled beggars. But the devils’ bullets muffle their voices …

What am I guilty of? I keep asking myself but there is no answer. And yet incomprehensible remorse pricks at my
heart. I try to exonerate myself in my own eyes as best as I can. I am guilty: of accepting injustice without protest, of
wallowing in opprobrium and immorality and behaving like Pontius Pilate, offering smiles for the well-heeled to
flatter them, groveling like a dog, tail between my legs, to make myself small in the presence of power, guilty of
trembling before the district commandant, of indifferently witnessing Saindor’s murder, guilty of secretly rejoicing
over his death because I owed him ten piastres. What else could I do? My God! It’s hard to know, hard to
understand, hard to decide. Poverty has annihilated me. I saw M. Potentat and his red carpets, yellow carpets, white
carpet. I saw all of his wealth and I looked the other way in order to accept the alms he gave me in exchange for
running an errand. His wealth goes back as far as yesterday. How has he been able to accumulate so much in so little
time in such a poor country? I don’t want to think about it. Not yet. Even my thoughts make me shiver. M. Potentat
has scads of spies at his disposal and they could be roaming, invisible, around my house. But no, I am forgetting the
devils. The devils have driven away M. Potentat and his henchmen. They are not afraid of anything, the devils! They
are not afraid of anyone. So then why are they armed to the hilt? …

I knew my father by sight and reputation.

“Look,” my mother said to me one day, pointing out a man as light-skinned as a white man with a soft felt hat on
his head, beautiful polished shoes, and, on his arm, a beautiful lady who looked like she could be Mme
Fanfreluche’s sister. “That’s your father.”

A great landowner, who also had buildings on the Grand-rue, he wouldn’t give me an inch of thread for a pair of
pants. My mother had been brought to him when she was fifteen by some of the farmers who had settled on his lands
and who wished to get in his good graces. These farmers happened to be my mother’s own parents. Poverty forces poor blacks togrovel like dogs before the rich. They offered him their only daughter as a house slave, making her a “restez-avec-monsieur”¹¹ in exchange for a plot of land to cultivate. One night, the “monsieur” jumped on the little house slave and raped her.

But in reality that’s nothing. There’s worse. The crippled beggars dug into the mountains somewhere, with neither food nor water, nor voodoo drums nor dancing, nor clairin nor tafia.¹² They’re extraordinary, Haiti’s blacks. Even when they’ve been reduced to their last extremity they cling to life like a cherished possession. The moment the devils leave town and someone beats the drum and distributes tafia, you will see them come down, thinner than living skeletons, whirling, drunk, lopsided, possessed, resurrected, transformed. Cocobés,¹³ famine-crazed, flea-ridden, they ward off danger as best they can: with visits to the voracious hounigans¹⁴ who extort every last coin they’ve harvested in the course of a long day of going up and down begging, with prayers to every saint in heaven, with simples¹⁵ and charms to protect them from evil spirits. Now go and try to get them to come out of the woods where they’ve hidden. The devils are there to settle their devil business; no one will get mixed up with this and pay for all the broken eggs. The beggars were the first to vanish from circulation. The devils would be clever indeed if they ever managed to smoke them out.

André, beside me, has a pitiful expression. He’s just discovered the marassas dishes and knows why the bottle of syrup is empty. But he doesn’t dare say anything. He too has his own loas and will not judge me. He is a mystic who lives in communion with a whole mass of things he sees in his dreams and even in broad day, their meaning depending on how he interprets each symbol. For now, despite his hunger, he cautiously keeps quiet in the presence of the gods of Guinea because it is said that they are greedy when it comes to offerings and libations.

“Why all this?” he asks me. “You don’t even believe in it. You have always boasted of being tough, one of those who turn neither to prayer nor to loas. Without faith what can this accomplish? Why did you lay Christ down on the floor? What do you expect from him, you who don’t believe in miracles?”

His pure and beautiful face makes me forget the ugliness of the devils. And also, he heals me from my fear.

“Put the Christ back where your mother left it and put the dishes back in the trunk. It’s bad luck to invoke God and the loas without believing in them. I drank religion with my mother’s milk. I grew up with a shrine of saints and loas in our bedroom. The fear of displeasing them is rooted in me. None of this could ever be uprooted by books. You play tough, but me, I remain humbly prostrate before their power.”

“I’m afraid as well …”

“Fear is not enough.”

“God welcomes lost sheep back into the fold.”

“The loas are the gods of the blacks of Africa. God is universal. The loas are taking revenge because the blacks were deserted and enslaved and persecuted, and so voodoo will someday rally them together. But you are not a black man.”

“Am I a white man?”

“No. You’re not a white man either.”

“If you have no idea who I am, leave me alone and listen. The gods are here to teach us to depend on our own strength. The God who created me will give me the courage to defeat the devils. God has done His godly duty by putting us on this earth. He expects us to raise ourselves up to Him through sheer will. You’re right, I panicked for a minute. I am going to put the Christ back in its place and the dishes in the trunk.”

He’s afraid. He’s struggling between the horror of seeing me mock these pious relics in his presence and the desire to keep them within reach so he can take comfort from them once in a while.

“I won’t stop you from praying anymore,” I promise him.

“Who could stop me from praying?” he replies.

The sound of footsteps interrupts us. No, it’s something else. We throw ourselves against the wall. A few small, clumsily thrown stones fall to the pavement. One of them reaches the door. It’s Cécile! We see her behind the window she has cracked open. She quickly opens it, raises her arm and with all her might throws one last stone, a larger one that falls before our eyes right outside the wall against which we have flattened ourselves. It is wrapped up in something and there’s string around it.

“A message from Cécile!” I exclaim.

“What message?”
“There’s a piece of paper wrapped around the stone.”
“You are not going out!”
“I’ll have to anyway to get the water and the coal.”
“I am hungry” he confesses.
“So you see. Wait a little, until tonight.”
I’m upset with myself for having wasted the water and syrup on libations. I feel weak and starved. We each take a sip of clairin from the bottle and cough.
“This stuff scorches my guts,” André says quietly.
I go back to the wall to feast my eyes on the stone, harbinger of happiness. Nothing could stop me. I would snatch it from the very jaws of the devils if I had to. Cécile must see it from her window as well.
“Plug up the hole,” André tells me. “It stinks more and more outside.”
He angrily chases off a rat that jumped down from the roof to rummage for something to eat.
“What are you looking for?”
“Some cardboard to cover the chamber pot.”
He urinates holding his nose, then puts the cardboard on the pot.
“I’m hungry,” he says again.
“There’s syrup in the marassas dishes.”
“Are you crazy?”
The silence is strangling us. I even miss the whistling of bullets. Something terrible is coming, I am sure of it. Nothing moves, not even the leaves. The heat of a Haitian midsummer sets sky and earth ablaze. The road stretches out, lonesome and red right up to the church where the bodies have been piled. How can they kill as the sun is setting? How can they kill as the sun rises? Everything is so beautiful at all hours of the day and night! For the moment, the sea embraces the sky right where the sun has sunk dressed in saffron and crimson. An entire section of the sky has been set ablaze. Flames leak through the clouds and light them on fire. The sun is a centaur with a blazing mane. I am mounting the sun. I am clinging to two monstrous waves that have miraculously retained their immaculate color. I catch two clouds as they pass, thin as ribbons and red as bloodstains. I am standing atop the sun, in the midst of white waves, my muscles taut, head wreathed by the emerging stars, like a god on a chariot dripping with light.
“Plug the hole back up,” André tells me.
I am as startled as if something had bitten me; I’m panting, drunk on sun and clairin. I plug up the hole and go to bed next to him on the floor.
I am suffocating. I am thirsty and hungry. Oh God, let night come!

I’ve had three swigs of clairin one after the other and André has hung the jug around my neck, behind my back.
We cautiously took down the barricade and I pushed the door open. I threw myself to the ground and crawled up to the corpse with my eyes closed, holding my breath. I picked up the stone and I slipped it into my pocket. Then I went back to the yard and ran to the faucet, grabbed the coal basket, put the filled jug and the stove in it, and then ran back, this time dashing all the way back to the front door. In my slow and jerky dash, the water spilled on the coal. I was sweating profusely. As I passed the dead body, rats came at me as if they wanted to make up for not having noticed me the first time around. I had to put down my basket to get rid of them. Their onslaught forced me to linger and look at the body. In the darkness, it seemed to me to have shrunk, more like the remains of a dog than of a man. Teeth jutted sharply from his lips, which had been gnawed by rats and ants. I hurried back. Trembling, André was waiting for me by the door he had cautiously closed. Together we rebuilt the barricade and filled the stove with coal. We had to search for a long time before we found the matches and the coffee, which I had inadvertently put back in the trunk with the dishes.
“Leave the trunk open,” André said.
He has been scratching the enormous scar, disfiguring his forehead enough to draw blood.
“Dr. Prémature didn’t sew you up properly,” I told him.
“You think so?”
“Well, long live the good Dr. Chanel! Unfortunately, he’s dead.”
“Maybe it’s the heat. Give me some clairin to clean it.”
I give him the clairin and search my pocket for the stone.
“The letter! It’s disappeared.”
“The rats must have eaten it.”
I lowered my head, perplexed, turning the stone between my fingers again and again.
“Why did the rats eat it? Why?”
“Because you’re just unlucky, that’s all. Come on! It’ll be all right. I’ll stand by you. We’ve been friends from childhood. We scribbled our first verses together. I’ll stand by you.”
As I light the fire, he kneels before the crucifix and slowly recites the Pater Noster. I set the water to boil and slowly pour coffee into the bag.
“No point making coffee,” André tells me. “I could never drink it black.”
“Take some syrup from the dishes.”
“Don’t tempt me, don’t ever tempt me,” he suddenly yells.
His own voice frightens him so much that he throws himself to his knees, grabs the jug and sprinkles the trunk and the dishes with a ritual gesture.
“I may be thirsty,” he tells me, “but so are the loas.”
He takes a drink and holds out the jug to me.
Sitting, hands crossed on lifted knees, he chants a voodoo song in a plaintive voice. He swings back and forth to the rhythm of the song, and little by little his eyes close. He slides onto his back and falls asleep. I stay near him, lying on the floor, waiting up like a guard dog. Oh, how I’d like to sleep! To sleep!
Commandant Cravache, what are you doing at this hour? Leave the prisoners alone, and come out and confront the devils. Commandant Cravache, face the devils! You who twice beat us up for public drunkenness and incitement when we recited Massillon Coicou’s “L’Alarme” in unison.16 Oh! Oh! Oh! …

Do you hear the cry that resounded: To arms!
Horror still! Blood still! Tears still! These mournful echoes, it is not the cannon
Of Crête-à-Pierrot that thunders its fury
To defend or avenge the rights of the Country …

Oh! Oh! Oh! He doesn’t seem to like Massillon Coicou much, our Commandant Cravache. He grabbed me by the collar, kicked my backside twice, and, calling me crazy, hit me over the head with his coco-macaque
“Brotherhood of mad poets,” he called us.

And he also hit André, Jacques and Simon. Over the head. Always over the head. He has a bit of nasal twang, Commandant Cravache, and seems to me—as Simon put it—just a tad effeminate. He strikes and stares at his victim with a funny expression. He strikes and after each blow leans in to sniff the blood. He strikes and caresses the gaping wounds with an almost religious gesture. The good Dr. Chanel sewed back my ear and my left temple, but he’s dead, the good Dr. Chanel. In the meantime, I would like to know what they are waiting for to clean up the town. Club in his fist, revolver on his hip, rifle on his shoulder, why doesn’t he confront the devils, fucking Commandant Cravache! I am going to lodge a complaint against Commandant Cravache, who is responsible for the security of this district and who has evaded his responsibility. Unless they’re in cahoots, the devils and him. People in uniform always have each other’s backs. If that’s true, then we are lost, utterly lost. Because he will recognize me disguised in the ranks of the devils and will finger me and the devils will murder me and I will die like an animal and my body will join the others on the pavement. And that I don’t want. God chose me to liberate the town. Am I going to shrink from this undertaking? My skull hurts. Bones are cracking in my head. It starts in the nape, right below the occiput, and pulls at my temple. My ears are ringing. “You’re burned out!” the good Dr. Chanel would diagnose. It’s true that my head has been working nonstop. And then, this disappointment. I have the stone in my hand. I bring it to my lips. Cécile! Cécile! Your black eyes! Your black hair! Your plum-brown skin! There’s a jazz session in my stomach: cymbals, drums, bamboo trumpets, trombones, flutes, clarinets, saxophones, maracas, all mingled in an uproar. Am I hungry? It seems to me that I will never be able to be hungry or sleepy. I am slipping in and out of consciousness. And when I move my head, I hear bones cracking inside.
“You drink too much,” good Dr. Chanel used to say. “You’ll drown your talent in alcohol.”

Another ignoramus—after all, Baudelaire drank and Villon drank before him and Rimbaud drank too.17 The taste
of it returns as I keep thinking about it, and I look for the bottle near André, who’s snoring away, just to get a mouthful, no more than a mouthful.

I feel sure someone just knocked cautiously on the door. I wake up André. He opens his red eyes and fish mouth.

“Someone knocked,” I say.
“Don’t open it,” he begs.
“Wait!”

I run to the wall but can’t see a thing through the hole. It’s dark as the devil’s lair.

“You must have been dreaming,” André whispers.
“I wasn’t sleeping.”

This time we both distinctly hear three little knocks. A voice whispers:

“René! René!”

“It’s Jacques! He’s not dead,” I say to André, shaking him. We clear the door and Jacques comes in.

“Oh!” he cries, seeing André, “I was sure I’d find you here.”

“Oh, little buddy! My little buddy! I thought you were dead,” André says, hugging him.

“Dead! Me! And why?”

“The devils!”
“What devils!”

“Why, the ones escorting you. René saw you going with them. You seemed so proud, so brave! You were reciting your poems and you were walking among them paying them no mind.”

“That’s right. I remember now. They said to me … You know what they said to me: Jacques, you’re a genius. We’ll leave you alone because you’re a genius.”

He straightens his back and grabs the bottle of clairin.

“You pranksters! You guys are hiding out so you could drink without me.”

“We’re hiding because of the devils, you know that. We’re no geniuses, so they might kill us.”

“Anyway, I don’t want to see them again,” he says. “They’re awful, horrible …”

He shudders.

“Sit down,” I say to him.

“He looks so tired,” André says to me.

“Yes, he is as skinny as we are.”

“I’ve forgotten to eat,” Jacques admits.

“Alas, there’s nothing here.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter.”

“You didn’t see Simon?” André asks.

“The devils may have murdered him,” I say.

“I left him two days ago, no three … Ah, I don’t remember.”

“Let him be,” André tells me, “he seems exhausted.”

“Did you see the corpse?” I ask him.

“What corpse?”

“The one in the street, in front of the door.”

“Yes, that’s a dog.”

“But no, that’s Saindor, the one who runs the place by the sea.”

“It was dark,” he says. “I thought it was a dog.”

“The devils killed him right in front of René,” André says.

“And the other bodies? Did you see them?”

“Where?”

“By the church.”
“Yes. Piles. Hundreds of bodies. I saw them, I saw them …”

All of a sudden he starts to shriek, and I throw myself on top of him to keep his mouth shut. I put all my weight against his back, my left arm around his chest and my right hand muzzling him to the point of smothering him.

“Are you trying to draw them here?”

André was trembling so much that he staggered when he got up and would’ve fallen if he hadn’t held on to the table.

“Give him some clairin” I say to André.

“No,” he replied, “alcohol excites him. Let him go. You’re choking him. Let him go,” he cried violently. “Come, little brother, you have nothing to fear. Look, the barricade is solid and no one can come in if we don’t open that door.”

I free him. He gasps.

“It’s your fault,” he tells us, “scaring me with all your talk of devils. You know very well that I’m a bundle of nerves.”

“My mother told me she saw one,” André says. “She was going to early mass and she got the time wrong. Some sort of naked giant blocked her path, telling her: ‘Beware if you know who I am.’ She passed out on the road to church and that’s where she was found at dawn.”

“The devils are in uniform,” I say to him.

“There are all kinds of devils,” André replies. “I dreamed about one. He was white with red horns and tail. He was gesticulating in a funny way and threatening me with his pitchfork. After class, I told Brother Justinien about my dream and he said to me:

’Do you have a voodoo shrine at home?’

‘Yes,’ I said to him.

‘Destroy it,’ he advised me, ‘or the devils will take hold of you.’

‘I went eight days without being able to sleep. My mother was already dead and it was to me, as the oldest, that she had entrusted her loas. I wasn’t doing anything wrong by giving them food and drink even if Jacques and I were hungry. And it seemed to me that Brother Justinien didn’t understand anything since he was French.’

“There you go!” Jacques protests. “So you want to hear me scream again.”

“Don’t scream, I’m begging you, you’re going to sit down in that corner like a good boy and keep quiet. There you are, some paper and a pencil, write us a nice poem.”

“That’s it, I’ll write a poem about the devils. Unfortunately, I didn’t look at them. I did see a horde of strange people in the street who cheered as I went by but I couldn’t tell whether or not they were devils. I should have thought to take a good look when one of them called me a genius.”

“Write about something else,” I recommend paternally. “Forget the devils. You’re safe here.”

He sniffs around, glances around for a chair, and seeing that they are barricading the door, sits on the floor and, eyes raised, absorbs himself in the composition of a poem.

André and I should be careful not to show our terror in his presence. He is frail and sickly. He had a nervous breakdown when he was fifteen and his mother, beating herself up for neglecting the loas, paid a houngan to treat him. She ruined herself. She died of consumption. She spit up every last drop of blood in her body. And the houngan was there by her bedside to accuse her mercilessly of treason and indifference toward the loas.

This recollection makes me uneasy.

What’s the use of religion if it oppresses instead of consoling? If it offers despair instead of relief? If it takes away instead of preserving? André is kneeling in prayer. Where does his mysticism come from? I saw my mother serving her loas constantly and I coldly received the sacred legacy from her hands. I pray to the loas and invoke them with the conviction of an actor in a play.

“Hamming it up!” Simon once said to me, “you’re no more a believer than I am. You can’t reinvent yourself. We are both impervious to the notion of religion.”

He’s wrong. I love Jesus, not as wonder-worker, not as Son of the Holy Spirit, but as man, because he preached love and compassion. Is that incompatible with religion? André prays. He prays furiously. But something tells me that I am closer to God than he is. God is tired of prayers. God is tired of recriminations. God is tired of requests. God is tired of our resignation. Who knows if He didn’t open the gates of our town to the devils in order to make us
come out of ourselves. The Grand-rue and its smugness! Mme Fanfreluche and her jewels! Mme Fanfreluche and her high heels, making her entrance at high mass, haughty and disdainful. Magistral’s widow and her daughter Cécile! Cécile! Cécile! As far as you’re concerned, I give you the benefit of the doubt. You received my poem with laughter, but in the depths of your eyes there was something like sunshine. And those who have a little sunshine deep inside them can’t be completely lost. I hold onto an imperishable memory of you. It was on Christmas Eve, at Brother Justinien’s. The tree was shining with multicolored lights. We sang “Silent Night” and “O Christmas Tree.” Brother Justinien said:

“Everyone take one little bundle. They’re from Father Christmas.”

We rushed at the bundles. I undid mine and was appalled: there were just a dozen marbles, but you, you were holding a beautiful pocketknife that I had so often admired at Mme Fanfreluche’s store. You looked at me and said:

“Take the knife too. I’m a girl. I don’t need a knife.”

And I took it. I was twelve and you ten …

Would you love me if I were famous? Would you love me if I defeated the devils?

André keeps praying and Jacques keeps writing. Peace be upon my poor head. I say peace be upon this poor head split by migraine. André may be convinced that the devils have not yet pushed in this door thanks to his prayers. But I know very well that its pathetic appearance is what protects us. Never will the devils guess that here lives someone whose mind is ceaselessly at work contemplating their ruin. My poverty is my protection because a discreet and humble beggar has a better chance to pass unnoticed than a cheerful-looking rich man.

My eye pasted to the hole, I let my gaze wander outside. It goes from the corpse now teeming with worms to the corpses stacked in front of the church. I am gliding like the birds between splendor and squalor. I see part of the horizon where a sliver of sky and sea meet as though only for my sake. From evening to morning, I see them change according to the slow and indefatigable course of the sun. Its distilled heat now marks noon. A shadow moves behind Cécile’s window and I see Mme Magistral. She’s looking at my house and seems to be talking to someone I can’t make out. I can see this so clearly that I am afraid someone from outside might see my glowing eyes. All the same, I remain there, my eyes glued to that window where perhaps Cécile is also standing. What is her mother doing? Has she caught on to our game? The window opens wide and Cécile appears in a blue nightgown, her long black hair flowing over her shoulders. Close the window, careless girl! Even if you are worried about me, close it or the devils will see you! It’s over. She’s vanished. The window is closed …

“I’m hungry,” André says.

“Me too,” Jacques says.

“Unfortunately, there’s no sugar for the coffee,” I reply.

“Give me the bottle of clairin” André says.

He drinks and spits. I drink too but don’t spit.

“Give Jacques the jug,” I say to André.

Jacques takes it and drinks.

“I want to drink clairin too,” he says.

“It’ll make you agitated,” André says.

“Yes, but I won’t feel hungry anymore. When I drink, I go crazy and when I’m crazy, I’m not hungry.”

André furiously scratches his scar and passes the bottle to Jacques.

“Shit!” he exclaims, “it’s like fire.”

He starts writing again. He suddenly seems very far away from us, as if in one leap he had jumped the fence into an invisible world. Ecstatic, he stays at one corner of the room and writes. How can he write without looking at his hands? His lips are moving slowly. He’s fallen into the snare and can’t get out. He can’t run anymore to escape the rhymes. His legs have been maimed. The mechanism of the snare has been triggered and has sheared off his legs to the thighs. A thousand, ten thousand, a million poets with empty bellies have been snared by the rhyme traps sown on the road. A hard rocky road, full of ruts and ditches, that we keep ascending, exhausted and worn-out, a road that wears holes into our beggarly shoes, but a road we cannot resist. The Road of Haiti framed here and there with green hope, red victory, white purity and yellow saffron. Rainbow colors wafting indifferently above the rocky road designed by the profaning hands of men. Nature, forever merry, giving birth without pangs amid the joyful polychromatic foliage, giant butterflies whirling madly around it. Merry, merry, making merry! And here we are, locked up, sweating the last bit of moisture out of our bodies, starving. All because of the devils. It’s high time for
me to take action. André and Jacques are in my way. I need to be alone to think. Jacques’ blind gaze and his hand running over paper distract my thought from its objective. André’s dazed inaction gets on my nerves. He is always sitting, arms dangling, mouth gaping, unless he’s clasping his hands and mumbling prayers. I am alone. More alone than before. No matter how much I focus, I can’t recover my train of thought. And yet I had come up with a plan to defeat the devils. I’m trying to find it. Trying to find it. I’m turning in circles. I am stuck on the wrong trail. Still trying to find it. Suffocating. As though a leaden hand is keeping my head in a sea of tar. I’m struggling. It’s dark, dark. I can’t see a thing in front of me. Wrestling with truth. It’s luminous but I don’t understand it. Empty! Empty! I am going to sink. I’m wallowing in unspeakable darkness. The glimmer returns. I reach for it. It slips away. Ah! My head is going to explode. My heart is going to give out! …

I would sometimes go to the market on Saturdays with my black mother. She would make me sit beside the goods tray and I would help her set up the cheap cloth swatches, the Creole hoop earrings, the lace trim that I was learning to measure by the ell, the silver medals, and the calico scarves. She was proud of her big goods tray that she carried on her head as night fell. Around us, the servants and the beggar-cripples came and went, as did the beggar-thieves whom we watched out of the corner of our eye. Mama would say to me:

“Don’t let them leave your sight, they’re more cunning than cats.” But all I could pay attention to was Alcindor, an old drunk who would roll on the ground and get up again in a moldy old frock coat—a gift from the prefect—white with dust, and do a banda dance.18 His toothless mouth tied in a grin to his ears, he would sway his hips and we would clap to the rhythm to get him going. Bam bidim, bam bidim, bam bidim … bap! At noon, we would buy our meal from my mother’s cousin Justina, Aunt Justina as I called her, but whom others including my mother called strictly Mme Macius after her marriage in deference to the new wedding band on her finger.

When did I leave the common people behind? When we walked by, people used to say to my mother:

“How’s your mulatto boy Sister Angélie?” And my mother would reply:

“Praise God, he’s growing, my sister; he’s growing, my brother.”

“Oh, cousin!” Aunt Justina would cry out, squatting before her huge pot, “he’ll be a man soon!”

“God is good!” my mother would be quick to say, warding off bad luck.

For she feared the evil eye would fall on her mulatto boy like the plague. And especially because he was different from all the black boys. When did I abandon the people? She had hung around my neck the scapular medal Father Angelo had offered me at first communion. And the scapular hung near a large evil-eye bead on a red string that she wouldn’t have taken off me for anything in the world. I wore the scapular on the outside and the evil-eye bead underneath, and I could feel it bounce against my navel with every step. When did I lose my evil-eye bead? It was no ordinary evil-eye bead. Gromalin, the houngan my mother visited once in a while to make sure things went well for her, had endowed it with the miraculous power to keep all evil spirits away from me. When did I get rid of my evil-eye bead?

I grew up listening to the French writers talking in the books Brother Justinien lent me.

“You are very bright, René,” he would say to me. “I will keep pushing you in your studies.”

But he was seventy-three and died a short time before my mother did. And I cried, for I have a tender soul and all poets are tender-souled, sensitive types. I am talking about the true poets, not the false ones who write because it’s fashionable, to get attention. I wrote verse in French about Christophe, Dessalines, Toussaint and Pétion. I am clinging to the colonial legacy like a louse. Why not? Dessalines thought he had uprooted it when he yelled:

“Off with their heads, burn down their houses!”

His Declaration of Independence, did his secretary Boisrond-Tonnerre19 write it in Creole? What about Toussaint? What language did he learn to parry wits with Bonaparte?

“Do you want a séche?”20 our French friend Simon said recently offering me a cigarette.

I stared at him without understanding …

I can see the town’s houses dancing. They’re going around my shack. As they file past, I hear good Dr. Chanel’s piano and then Mme Fanfreluche’s radio. A Mozart concerto rises up from the former, a popular merengue from the latter. Mozart breaks the spell of the drum over me. Who taught me to love Mozart? One day, I had opened the door to Dr. Chanel’s living room without knocking and he caught me standing very still, listening, arms crossed, serious and attentive. He said to me:

“Now, that’s what we call music, my son. Mozart alone is an angel among spirits.”

I felt the notes penetrate my flesh, mingle with my blood. I understood only later that on this day I had
encountered something universal, out of the depths of a shared humanity, something that legitimately belonged to me as well, for the ties between it and myself had already been established. Mozart, the German, was my brother, beyond blood and distance, beyond centuries. A hyphen between races, as with Villon, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud. Mozart’s biography, which Dr. Chanel had me read, gave me ambitions,

“I will write,” I exclaimed, “poems that will shake the world.”

And thereafter, I discovered that such a task demanded one’s blood, drop by drop. I opened my veins and vainly dipped my quill in blood. Accursed poet! A poet on layaway! A French-minted black poet! Where is your tongue? Give me the clairin! I got drunk night and day to forget. Like Villon, like Baudelaire, like Rimbaud …

“Brotherhood of mad poets!” Commandant Cravache sniggers.

Hearing that we’re crazy, again and again, will make us so. In any case, he’s tried everything he can to make that happen, our Commandant Cravache. How many times must we get our heads bashed in? How many months in jail? And why, oh gods? Who are they trying to frighten by attacking us, hunting us down, persecuting us, beating us up?

I don’t like this silence. It’s been weighing on our heads for too long. A terrible explosion will make everything disappear. The blast will come suddenly, lifting the houses and transforming them into torches, reducing human beings to dust. It’s coming. It’s coming. The wait is so awful! No respite from it, neither in oneself nor others. To know, to feel the creeping danger. Am I hungry? I don’t have time to think about it. I have to implement a battle plan.

“I’m hungry,” André says.
“Drink a little damn”
“It makes me feel like vomiting.”
“Bugger me!”

“You’re imitating Simon,” Jacques says to me, having stopped writing.
“No. I’ve seen it in books. I can’t imitate Simon, white as he is.”
“Do you think he’s a great poet?” André asks me.
“What the fuck would a great French poet be doing in this mud-hole?” I replied, imitating Simon.
“You’re imitating Simon,” Jacques repeated.
“No. Whites in general call our country a mudhole. And so, imitor patrem. Have you forgotten that my father spoke French like a Parisian?”
“You’ll never admit it, but you’re imitating Simon.”

Simon the bohemian. Filthy and flea-ridden like us. A bearded giant who lives off his “regular girl,” as he calls her. His regular girl is Germaine, a plump black woman, all dimples and more jealous than a wildcat.

“You’ll never believe me, old man,” Simon once told me, “but I wound up on the Haitian shore, coughed up from the cargo hold of an American ship.”

He’s been happily warming himself in the heat of our sun for the past six years, sick one day out of three. Puking his guts out from spicy food and booze, and vowing that these white pinkish innards of his will either get used to this or kill him …

I hear the bells toll … dong … dong … dong …

“Do you hear the bells, André?”
“The bells!”
“Listen!”
“I don’t hear anything.”
“You’ve always been hard of hearing. Jacques! Jacques!”
“What?”
“Do you hear the bells?”

He pricks up his ears attentively. His young, angelic face, black and beautiful, is lifted toward the ceiling, disfigured by fear.

The room smells disgusting. Or is it the corpse?
“Did you hear it?”
“Yes,” he answers.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” André sighs.

“Leave God and the saints in peace.”

“You can’t stop me from praying,” he protests.

“Let him pray,” Jacques says softly.

It is high time to begin preparations for the struggle. Alone. I am going to do it all alone. What can I hope for from these two? They really seem to be dying. They’re my buddies, I pity them. But this is no time for pity. I have to act.

The corpse is starting to scare me. It’s disintegrating there before my eyes as a reminder of what awaits me. I don’t dare unplug the hole. Dong … dong … dong … The bell keeps tolling in its mournful reverberation. Could that be Father Angelo burying the dead under the very noses of the devils? Bravo, Father Angelo! There’s a real man under that cassock of yours. I immediately get up. Now I am resolved. I am going to leave and rouse the town. As cowardly as they may be, they will have to come out of their lairs to listen to me. I am waiting for Jacques and André to fall asleep to open the door. Perhaps I’ll die. But no matter! First I will alert Commandant Cravache. He’ll have to prove his courage, justify his epaulettes and medals, and outdo himself, for fear of an official report. I will also notify the mayor, that fat bastard who does nothing but fuck Laurette, the prostitute on rue des Saints. Like it or not, he’ll also answer the call and for once work to save our town, along with the prefect and Dr. Prémature, who carry weapons as well. They seem harmless and absolutely hopeless next to the devils. All the same, I am secretly convinced that, once the fight begins, the devils will find in them the most terrible of adversaries. Unless, of course, they panic and run first. You never know what to expect from these monkeys. In any case, it falls to me to set an example, to make them come out of their torpor. I will have weapons of my own. Molotov cocktails that I will light but not throw at the devils. Who knows how they will react to fire? I am going to try to communicate with Cécile before throwing myself into this adventure—a dangerous one, I have no illusions about that. Though in my weakened state I’ve been rambling, frolicking in the past, I still feel that I am in possession of all my faculties. My black mother didn’t nurse me for two years for nothing. I am filled with no less courage and fervor than Samson leading his Israelite brethren. From the beginning, I’ve known that once my plan was ripe I would not back out. Only a Haitian, however well intentioned and determined, is unable to consider death without thinking for days about what could have been, what should have been and what will never be. A hairsbreadth away from death, I will dream of a final spasm on top of a juicy black woman’s soft round belly. I will close my eyes with Cécile’s braids flowing over my face. And death will be nothing but a game for me. I think of her black eyes, her black hair, her plum-brown skin, as I rip open my mother’s old pillow for cotton.

“What are you doing?” André asks me.

“Nothing. Sleep, sleep.”

Jacques snores quietly on his side, head in his poems.

I am watching André out of the corner of my eye. As soon as I catch him closing his eyes, I rummage in the trunk and find six empty bottles. I squat and start stuffing them with cotton, my back turned to my friends. I wet the cotton with alcohol and stick the matchbox in my pocket. That’s it! I’m ready. Where is the army of devils right now? That’s what I am trying to find out as I look outside through the hole. The bells toll. Dong! Dong! Dong! And nothing else save a terrible humming, as if thousands of insects were flying around me. But there’s not a single insect. Not even a mosquito. Nothing. Maybe it’s just the screaming silence that a human ear can make out only when everything is quiet. In any case something mysterious is happening in the room: two stars fly out of my eyes dancing and then flee through the keyhole. I run to the door and see two eyes staring at me from outside. Someone is there, I’m sure of it. Putting a finger to my lips, I wake up André:

“There is someone behind the door,” I say to him.

He quietly leaps onto his knees and clasps his trembling hands together.

“Don’t move,” he says to me.

There is a knock at the door.

Jacques wakes up and I put a hand over his mouth.

“The devils?” he whispers to me.

“Hush! Quiet!” André tells him.

And he pulls Jacques toward him and puts an arm around his neck.
We stay there like that, all three of us mute, pouring sweat. I hear bullets whistling, brushing against the roof of the house. The front door is riddled with them. A lightning bolt explodes in the sky and sets off a downpour over the sheet metal. Water seeps through the roof. A hail of metallic balls bounce at regular intervals, sounding just like bullets. A powerful blast dispenses the trees. I hear them run and shriek. I rush to the wall and glue my eye to the hole. The trees lie on the ground. The sky has opened. Gigantic black clouds wrestle each other furiously. Fireworks explode, throwing up dazzling arabesques here and there. The crowd is hanging from the clouds. It is weeping, its tears streaming down on the road. The corpse is floating in a lake. It’s at eye level now.

I am unsteady on my legs. Bones crackle in my head and two more stars come out of my eyes and stay there whirling round the room with no intention of leaving …

“What’s going on?” André asks me.

“Nothing. It’s the rain. I swear, go back to sleep.”

“You haven’t seen them?” Jacques asks me.

“Who?”

“The devils.”

“No. Lie down and go to sleep.”

“I need to be alone …”

At the age of twelve I became very sick. And my black mother Angélie, who believed as much in the loas as she did in God, as much in the houngan as in the doctor, got all mixed up in her panic and called the priest, the doctor and the houngan at the same time. Dr. Chanel was such a crafty old peasant that he energetically shook Gromalin’s hand, saying to him:

“We’ll save him, my colleague.”

But Father Angelo absolutely refused to shake the hand of the voodoo priest.

“Angélie, my daughter,” he reproached my mother, “why have you called me to your house to see a houngan?”

But she was weeping at my bedside.

“Ah, my father,” she wailed, “you come from a white country where people are good to each other. Here, in Haiti, the devils are everywhere. They take the shape of honest people. They greet you and say, ‘So long, my friend, good health to you and yours, sister’; they look at you with innocent eyes and settle the score with you in an underhanded way. As for me, I am sure my little René doesn’t have a natural illness, an illness that good Dr. Chanel can cure. Only the houngan can fight the spirits of the dead that some of my neighbors have set upon my child.”

“Angélie! Angélie!” Father Angelo protested. “Voodoo is making you lose your head! You have nothing but good neighbors! Good people who have known you since childhood and who have never hurt a fly. Don’t you know it is wrong to be on terms with the devil?”

“Evil exists, my father, evil exists. I am afraid of them, I am afraid of them all, even of my cousin Madame Macius.”

“Justina!” the priest cried out. “But you are crazy, my poor Angélie. Never accuse your fellow man if you don’t want God to judge you harshly, and follow Dr. Chamel’s advice if you want to save your child.”

But my poor black mother, who could neither read nor write and who piously served her loas, also followed the advice of Gromalin. She bought the medicine prescribed by the doctor and, secretly, received a simple from the houngan, which she put under my pillow and for which he asked a lot more than the disciple of Asclepius who had actually saved my life. For my mother, my recovery was a miracle and she dedicated me to the Holy Virgin Mary whose colors I then wore exclusively. When did I stop wearing these colors?

Memories come and go in my exploding head. My dear black mama!

“No more red beans and potatoes for him,” cried Dr. Chanel, pinching her ear. “He’s growing. He needs meat and vegetables.”

“Look at me, Doctor,” she laughed. “Look at what beans and potatoes did for me.”

“That’s right,” Dr. Chanel said, “and you should lose some weight! You look just like a fat potato covered in black beans.”

“Lose weight!” my mother cried out. “You want people to pity me and laugh! Leave my fat alone. No such thing as a skinny black woman that’s beautiful.”

Her fat killed her. “It’s her heart!” Dr. Chanel diagnosed when he rushed to her bedside. I was twenty and was...
ashamed of my tears.

Oh dear black Mama! The weight of your head dead in my hands! Your stiff heavy body that Simon, André, and Jacques, who was only fifteen, helped me lift into the coffin. They all loved you, my good black mother! We were never hungry as long as you lived. When André and Jacques’ mother coughed up blood and died, you said to me:

“Have them come over from time to time and I’ll put a full pot of cornmeal and beans on the stove.”

Your death made four orphans in place of one.

I sold your trinket tray for peanuts to cousin Justina who now looks down her nose at me under the pretext that I am nothing but a “tafiateur” an alcoholic and a disgrace to your name …

I lean over Jacques and then André. Their eyes are wide open. They aren’t going back to sleep. I put the bottles in a safe place in a corner of the room and cover them with a rag.

Jacques suddenly sits up. He gathers up his poems, looks for a blank sheet of paper, and starts writing again.

“It’s dark,” I say to him, “you won’t be able to write.”

“I write with my hand and my heart, not with my eyes,” he replies. “I’ve written twenty poems since I’ve been here.”

“You should sleep a bit.”

“I’m hungry! Give me a little clairin”

“There’s a full bottle in the trunk. Take it.”

“Where is the other one?” André asks me.

“Is it empty?”

“You drank the rest?”

“Yes.”

“Well! …”

“What’s in that trunk?” Jacques asks.

“His mother’s shrine,” André answers.

“There’s syrup in the dishes!” Jacques cries out.

“It’s an offering to the loas. Don’t touch it.”

“I’m so hungry!”

“Don’t touch it,” André says again.

Jacques takes a bottle of clairin, opens it and gives it to me.

“Help yourself, René.”

I drink and they help themselves in turn.

“It’s not that good, clairin, when you have nothing else in your stomach,” Jacques notes.

He sits down and writes. In the dark, his young bony face appears a shade of ash gray. We’re looking good, the three of us. Filthy, sweaty, stinking. What could the time be? Is Jacques going to spend the night writing? He’s collapsing from fatigue now, pencil clenched in his hand. André looks more and more dazed. Clairin always turned him into an idiot. He’s sitting there, arms dangling, looking at me. Why he is staring so hard at me?

“René,” he says with a pasty mouth, “we used to be happy before.”

“Before what?”

“Before they came here. We were happy but we didn’t know it.”

“It’s always like that.”

“What’s always like that?”

“You don’t realize you’re happy until you aren’t happy anymore.”

“Yes. And the unhappiness of the present makes you miss the past no matter how miserable it was. What I really miss is childhood. A child always lives in complete ignorance of misfortune. He feels protected by God, by nature, by all those who surround him. He trusts …”

“Yes. Trust! Faith! You lose them when you grow up.”

“I still have them.”
“No. Deep down, you don’t. And that’s why you’re afraid. These dishes full of syrup that could save our lives, and you don’t dare touch them because you’re afraid. Jacques is getting weak. Let’s give him a little syrup.”

“I can’t, I would never dare.”

“You’d rather see us croak of hunger. How many days have we eaten nothing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Light the stove. I’m going to make some coffee and we’ll use some of the syrup to sweeten it.”

“No. I won’t touch it.”

Our discussion has woken up Jacques. He complains quietly and calls out to me in a weak voice.

“René!”

“What do you want?”

“You’ve seen them?”

“Who?”

“The devils?”

“Let’s not talk about them anymore. Sleep.”

“I’m afraid!”

“Close your eyes. You’ll fall asleep again.”

“I hear steps!”

He gets up in a single bound and runs to the wall where he flattens his arms in a cross like a great butterfly pinned by the wings.

“They’re coming!” he tells us.

He lets out a hideous scream and turns to us:

“Their faces! Their faces! René! Ah! My God …”

“Calm him down,” I say to André. “He doesn’t see anything. He’s delirious from hunger. Calm him, for God’s sake! I have to do everything around here. Oh bugger me, try a little harder! Keep him next to you. Come on! A little courage. Help me a little, just a little bit. Here, take this spoon and give him a little syrup.”

He refuses to obey and vehemently shakes his head. I dip the spoon into the dishes and make Jacques drink some syrup. Then I run to the wall.

They are here indeed. Myriads. They have invaded Grand-rue. All the houses are lit up. Movement behind Cécile’s curtains. Their helmets glowing. Red boots kicking up dust on the road. They’ve set ladders against the balconies and are climbing up. The hour of battle tolls. I can’t back out anymore.

“What’s going on?” André asks me.

“They’re here!”

“Ah!”

He’s trembling, his teeth knocking together.

“I want to get out of here,” Jacques yells.

He frees himself from André’s grip and twists and twitches as if he were possessed.

“It’s the syrup,” André says, frightened.

Jacques suddenly vomits and hits his head against the floor.

“I want to get out of here. I want to get out of here,” he begs.

Red! Black! Gold! Are they going to climb up Cécile’s balcony? Flames rise up several houses away from hers. Immense flames crackling up and falling down in sparks. The cries and screams begin again. Jacques is still writhing at my feet, hitting his head against the floor. I see Marcia, Cécile’s maid, come out. She runs to the side street and then throws herself to the ground and crawls. Is she going to crawl to my house with a note from Cécile? I just lost sight of her. Cécile is calling me to her rescue! That must be it.

I’m waiting, all my senses wide awake. Dawn has drunk up the night in one gulp and the sun is pointing its head, very slowly, very discreetly, as it turns its eyes toward the burning house. The devils are scurrying back down the ladders, fleeing at the sight of it now. Ah! Ah! Ah!

“They’re backing off! They’re backing off!”
Cowering Jacques suddenly goes slack.
“I feel sick,” he says in a weak voice.
“It’s the syrup,” André repeats.
“Let’s give him a sip of damn”
We lift his head and pour some clairin in his mouth.
“I’m feeling better,” he says.

I return to the wall. The trees are standing again. The lake with the corpse swimming in it has disappeared. All that’s left is a little smoke coming from the house next to Cécile’s.
“What are they doing?” André asks me.

“Who?”
“The devils.”
“They’ve disappeared. Everything is calm. Too calm even. They went to dig themselves in somewhere but they’ll be back, that’s for sure. Their attack is always unexpected.”

“We’re going to stay locked up?” Jacques asks.
“We have no choice. The streets are deserted. Listen to how quiet it is! … In any case, last night I discovered their weakness: they are afraid of the sun. The execution in broad daylight was just a ruse. They will only attack us at night.”

“I always knew it,” André says. “My mother used to say devils only leave hell at night.”

We hear a knock at the door, startling all three of us at the same time.
“God almighty God almighty God!” a voice thunders, “are you going to open this door or not?”

“It’s Simon,” Jacques exclaims.
We pull away the barricade and Simon enters.
“Hell and damnation!” he yells. “What were you waiting for to open the door, you bloody bastards?”
He slaps us heartily on the back, practically toppling us over. Tall and bearded, he fills up the entire room.
“So, you’ve locked yourselves up to drink without me? You abandoned your buddy Simon in the claws of his black vampire woman?”

He hugs us and helps put back the barricade. He gets tangled up in the furniture like a disjointed marionette.
“All right, wise guys! Where’s the bottle?”

“You’ve managed to make it here in one piece?” Jacques asks.
“It took some doing my friend, let me tell you. I basically ran here from home.”

“Shh!” André motions cautiously.

“You’re right. They’ll track us down. Bugger me!”
He grabs the bottle again and drinks.
“Jungle-juice,” he says, “but it lights a fire in your ass.”

Jacques wrings his hands and plugs his ears.
“Shh!” I whisper. “He’s just had an episode. We need to take it easy with him.”
He looks at Jacques and says:
“Son, you look as sick as a dog. You got to eat, I’ve said so before.”

“We got no grub.”

“You’re imitating Simon,” Jacques pronounces with conviction.

“Leave me alone, you,” I cry impatiently.

“What’s going on?” Simon asks.
“He thinks I imitate you when I speak.”

“Bah!” says Simon. “So you got no dough, eh?”
He rummages in his pocket and pulls out a gourde.
“I swiped it from Germaine before I ran off! Bitch. She doesn’t often leave money lying around.”
“What’s happening now?” André asks him.

“Oh, it’s dead calm. Torrential rain, a fire, that was plenty. You saw it from here?”

“What?”

“The fire.”

“Don’t talk about it, or else Jacques will …”

“He was that scared?”

“But we were all scared,” André confesses, “weren’t you?”

“I saw plenty worse during the war in 1940. It’s easier to go up a ladder to rescue a little girl from a burning house than it is to deal with German bombs, I can tell you that much.”

“You rescued a little girl?” Jacques asks, lifting himself on an elbow, eyes shining with curiosity.

“They lost their heads and were all climbing at once. So, I screamed, ‘You bunch of morons, can’t you see the ladder’s about to collapse?’ And they jumped to the ground. The little girl, the Bérenger girl, you know her? She was on the balcony, crying and holding out her arms, and her parents, who were at a party at Madame Fanfreluche’s, were running like mad, their fat bellies bouncing up and down. So, I climbed up and got their daughter down for them …”

“I’m feeling sick,” Jacques suddenly says.

His black face has turned ashen.

“He’s sick again,” André says, panicking.

“You probably gave him too much to drink,” Simon declares, “and what’s more, it stinks in here. What’s in the chamber pot?”

“What you generally find in a chamber pot,” I reply.

“Well, it really stinks. Let’s open the doors and tidy up a little.”

“What if they come!” André exclaims fearfully.

“Who?” Simon asks.

“No, don’t open, don’t open anything,” Jacques begs.

And he crawls up to Simon and grabs his feet.

“What’s the matter?” Simon asks.

“He’s afraid,” André answers, “and so am I. René’s the only brave one. He even made Jacques drink the syrup.”

“What is he talking about?” Simon asks me.

“He’s reproaching me for not having respected the syrup left as an offering to the loas”

“What rubbish! My poor André! You who’ve read so many books!”

“What do books have to do with the gods of black folk?”

He shivers, his teeth chattering.

“So, are we going to open these doors or not?”

“No, no,” Jacques implores.

He clasps both of Simon’s feet, lifts his head and collapses.

“For the love of God!” Simon cries out. “Now he’s passed out.”

He picks up Jacques and slowly rolls him on his back.

“He needs air. Let’s get some fresh air in the house while he’s out of it.”

“No,” André begs in turn, “I’m cold. Jacques hasn’t lost consciousness. He’s sleeping. I know him. He’s my brother, isn’t he?”

“Ah, well then, deal with this yourself. What are the three of you plotting? No politics for us, that was our vow and we should respect it … Lordy! Either you look like a bunch of conspirators or I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

He grabs the bottle of clairin and sucks down several gulps one after the other.

“Brrr … I saw them disembark. They’re inspecting the area. Would you believe me if I told you that it’s not worth getting your knickers in a twist?”
“So why are they here?” André asks.
“To occupy themselves. Fuck them, I say.”
“They probably won’t go after whites,” I say.
“Fuck them, I say,” Simon repeats.
“Shh!” André hisses.
“What’s the point of burying oneself alive? If they’ve decided to fuck with us, they’ll fuck with us.”
“Not if they think we don’t exist,” I say.
“Chickens!” Simon explodes.
“No, careful,” says André. “You can’t be too careful with them.”
“Well then,” Simon cuts in, “enough about them … I wrote a poem, a masterpiece. About Haiti the beautiful, the pure and warm, about its drums and black women, its body and soul. I’ve fallen in love with this island. In love, love, you hear me?”
“Shh! …” says André.
“Haiti, Haiti!” Simon hums, paying André no mind. “I’ll never set foot in France again and if they have another rotten war, I won’t wear the uniform a second time to help them win.”
“A uniform!” I say. “What was that like?”
“I was eighteen years old in 1940. They took me from my mother and sent me to the front. They froze my toes, messed up my legs, split open my head till I was cracked. They can have their next rotten war without me. Me, I’m just a poet! A neglected poet. I have no desire to kill or to be killed. I want to drink, I want to write, and I want to make love with the women of Haiti.”
“Leave my country alone,” I say to him.
“What’s the matter with you?”
“You don’t love it.”
“I tell you I do love it.”
“If you loved it, you would help us deliver it from the devils.”
“What devils?”
“You see! You haven’t even noticed. What have you been doing all this time?”
“I just told you. I wrote a masterpiece about Haiti.”
“Leave my country alone, since you don’t even realize it’s in danger. Have you really seen nothing, heard nothing?”
“Yes, of course. When I saw this wretched detachment arrive from Port-au-Prince, I told myself, ‘Something’s up.’ But even though they patrol the streets armed to the teeth, they don’t seem to go after anyone.”
“We’re not speaking the same language,” I said to him. “I’m talking to you about the devils and you start talking about something else.”
“Why are you trembling all of a sudden?”
“Me, trembling! Now you’re completely crazy, my poor Simon! It’s just that I thought of you as a brother but instead discover you’re a white man living in a black country.”
“Don’t start on this absurd issue of skin color and race. I am your brother, heart and soul. You know that.”
“So, have you seen the devils, yes or no?”
“Wait. Let me think about it over a drink. Brr … Bugger me, now I’m just about drunk. Damn Haitian tafia! … I did think I heard a strange noise the other night. It was dark and Germaine was lying next to me. I heard a crackle of sparks. I got up and opened the door. A rain of stars was falling from the sky onto the roof of the house. Real fireworks, something fantastic, my friend, something that only a poet’s trained eye could catch. I’d been drinking a bit so I thought it was a hallucination. I went back to bed and the next day, I got sick. A horse fever with diarrhea and the shakes. Germaine mentioned the devils that morning. I remember now. She had locked me up, accusing Old Tulia of giving me the evil eye. Me, I kept writing despite the fever, I didn’t care. ‘This neighborhood is full of devils,’ she insisted, ‘I know what’s wrong with you.’ She always knew what was wrong with me and she always took good care of me. I spent the day swallowing her herbal teas and soups. ‘Something bad is in the air,’ she kept saying. But I kept writing, paying no attention to her or anyone else. You know how you get when a poem is
They’ve been here for days!” André sighs.

“Who?” Simon asks.

“The devils.”

“Yes … the devils,” Simon acquiesces, conciliatory.

“Isn’t it because of them that you ran all the way here?” I said to him.

“Yes, now that you mention it, why did I run?” Simon replies. “I must have been scared without knowing it.”

“You always know it when you’re afraid,” André says.

His teeth chatter.

“So you’ve seen them?” Simon asks.

“Who?”

“The devils?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“They have horns and tails?”

“No. Boots, weapons, helmets.”

“Apart from that they’re naked?”

“No, they’re wearing uniforms.”

“My God!” he says. “It all reminds me of the horrors I saw at the front. I was just a kid and my mother was crying and my teeth were chattering like André’s, and each time I heard a bomb go off I would pass out. But I would get up, run like everyone else, shoot at the enemy with my eyes closed, and throw myself on the ground with my hands over my ears. I had shrapnel in my skull and they thought I was dead. I spent eight days under the snow. But I’m a tough bastard and only lost four of my toes.”

“We’re familiar with you and your toes,” said André.

“You were really lucky” I told him.

“Lucky!”

“Because you didn’t die.”

“Yes, but my mother, she died of it. When I left the hospital where I had been taken, I looked for her everywhere. I roused our whole neighborhood and they locked me up in an asylum. But I wasn’t crazy, I kept telling them. One day, the head doctor came to see me because I was giving the orderlies a hard time, making a devil of a racket. He said: ‘What do you want, son?’ And I ripped the pen and paper from his hands. ‘From now on, you will give him what he needs to write,’ he told the orderlies. ‘I think I’ve figured out how we can get him to behave.’ But one day I had enough and ran away. I hid out nearby and then jumped on a passing truck. ‘So, pal,’ the driver told me, ‘cutting school, are we?’ I gave him such a wild look that he kept quiet. I went straight to a publisher and left him my poems. More than a hundred. Everything I had written in the asylum. I begged, slept outside on public benches. I was cold. I was hungry. But I patiently awaited wealth and glory. This time the publisher greeted me laughing.

‘Good sir, this is the tale of a madman you’ve got here … The public will have no use for your ravings … ’ But all I had done was to faithfully record what I lived through during their rotten war.”

“Vulgarians love to talk about what’s realistic and what’s not,” I said, “as if it’s so easy to tell true from false.”

“I feel sick,” André whispers.

“No. One is enough. Bugger me!” Simon protests. “Have a little courage. We’ll be able to get out of here soon. We’ll go to the shore, to Saindor’s …”

“He’s dead,” I say.

“Dead!” Simon cries out.

“They killed him,” André says.

“When?”

“Didn’t you see his body in the street? Right in front of the door.”

“When did this happen?”

“A few days ago.”
“Bugger me! If I didn’t know you, I’d say you were crazy.”

“Unfortunately we are,” I reply.

“You’re making me fucking nauseous with your devil stories,” Simon screams. “I’m already drunk as a skunk, and you’re fucking making me nauseous with your devil stories!”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” André sighs. “They’re going to hear him.”

“Shit! I’m drunk as a skunk! When I’m drunk, there’s nothing to do, you know, I have to scream.”

And he screams.

“The devils will hear you,” André whispers in a weak voice.

“Let them come,” Simon roars.

he recites with sweeping gestures, getting his arms tangled in the barricade.

“Don’t know if you noticed,” he says, suddenly calm again, “but I just butchered Prévert.”

“In two places,” André answers.

“What is he doing against the wall?” Simon asks André.

“He’s spying on Cécile,” André answers.

“Clever man!” Simon exclaims. “She’s beautiful, eh? She inspired one of my poems. Listen:

Young goddess of bronze and amber
Black woman of sun, adorned in tender grace.”

“Leave Cécile out of it,” I say.

“Jealous?”

“Leave her alone. That’s all. Sleep.”

They both yawn and Simon stretches, touching the ceiling. They lie down on the ground and yawn again. Finally I’ll be alone! I am waiting for them to start snoring before returning to my post. Cécile’s light is on. There are figures coming and going behind the curtains. Young goddess of bronze and amber, as Simon said. She’s mine. He’s wasting his time. I hated him during that moment when I heard him speak of her beauty.

Nothing must distract me from my goal. I know they’ll come back. I need silence and solitude. I won’t open up to Simon anymore. He wouldn’t understand. He’s made me waste enough time. My battle plan is perfect. I am ready for the great offensive. They’ll be back, I can feel it. They must be there, lying low somewhere waiting for a signal, some order coming from I don’t know where but which they will know how to interpret. A few lights tremble in the distance and the vague silhouette of the Grand-rue emerges as an extension of these lights. Grand-rue, dear to my heart, lined with beautiful multistory houses crowned with hat-shaped gables! Tall houses with wraparound balconies and white brick verandas! Grand-rue’s business district, and high-society Grand-rue where my love lives. I have kept the stone that was wrapped with her billet-doux, as a charm. I press the stone against my lips while watching for her behind her window. The guys are sleeping and snoring. I can think a little now. I like neither the color of the sky, nor this split lip smiling between the clouds trying to pass for the moon. The air smells of hypocrisy and treason. There are no more dead in front of the church since Father Angelo buried them, but there will be others tomorrow, alas! If we remain barricaded in our houses there will be fresh ones each time God makes the sun rise, until the complete annihilation of the town. Am I the only one to conceive of a battle plan? How can we join forces? How can we establish contact with others who like me are organizing the Resistance? Simon fought his war. He may curse it now, but he’s done it and he can live at peace with himself. What’s going on right now is none of his business. I’ve hurt him, insulted him for nothing. He’s right to feel detached from it. I will ask for his forgiveness. The grave responsibility that falls to me, and which I will proudly assume with courage, weighs heavily on my shoulders. I can always daydream, happily wallow in the past, spy on Cécile’s graceful and comforting silhouette, but I can’t escape from the noose slowly tightening round my neck. I will never sleep another night even if I were to live a hundred years. Am I hungry? I’ve gotten used to sleeplessness and hunger. Everything leaves me indifferent, except struggle and love. For one follows from the other. I will have Cécile’s love if I defeat the devils. The corpse shrinks day by day, hour by hour. The worms are finishing their work. No one to remove it from sight. Father Angelo himself has forgotten to inspect this alley. Our back alley where only the near-beggars live! My shack! Flattened at the feet of Grand-rue’s tall houses! My shack crawling like an earthworm beneath Cécile’s flowered
balcony! My darling black mother, you earned it with the sweat of your brow and it means something to me. Had you told me: eat and drink, I would have eaten and drunk. I've lost my good angel since your death, since the mysterious disappearance of my evil-eye bead, since I starved the loas with which you entrusted me in my apathy, since I stopped kneeling before the crucifix, since I stopped prostrating myself before the holy tabernacle! I tried in vain to remain the trusting and pious child I had been. I kept my fists closed tight around my treasures. One day, I looked in my hands and they were empty. Whose fault, Mama? After your death, life jumped on my back and rode me like a horse. I galloped under the whip through deserted fields, through merciless cities, panting, sweating, feet bruised, nostrils dilated. The commandant raised his bludgeon and beat me. He raised his feet and trampled me. He spit in my face, called me a mulatto bastard, me, your son. He is black like you, my black mother, but he took me for the real thing, an eighteen-karat mulatto, as they call them around here, one of those beautiful, pretentious men, their heads covered with smooth hair and filled with prejudice. Is it for my chicken-shit color that they persecute me? Is it because of this rotten coconut color that I can’t go left or right? Simon says one has to forget this absurd issue of skin color and race. If that’s right, then why did the commandant call me a mulatto bastard? Setting aside the question of color, since as far as whites are concerned I'm a black man, why did the commandant think calling me a mulatto would be an insult? Do I call him black? This label, for it is used as a label, singles me out, makes me feel uneasy in my own skin, like a transplanted animal that’s forgotten its native country. Are the devils also versed in discrimination? Against whom do they bear a grudge? Did they attack us only to side with some of us against the others? Or are they trying once and for all to drown that old quarrel in a general bloodbath? No matter how diabolical, their intervention would then have a salutary result. In that case, why did they spare Jacques? Why did they spare Simon? Representatives of the two extremes of which I am a product. I am cunning. I’m a clever man, as Simon says. And André and Jacques will be my shields in case of extreme emergency. I will keep them near me with jealous care. I’m not that desperate. I will take action without committing suicide. Now I’ve caught the thread of my thought firmly. There, standing before the wall, my eye to the hole, I understand that neither food nor sleep is necessary for a man to behave like a man …

“It smells like a prison around here,” Simon wakes up and exclaims.
“Maybe it’s the chamber pot,” André answers, rubbing his eyes.
“Prison! It was so filthy!” Simon says again. “I would rather deal with an army of devils than go back there.”
“Don’t talk about them,” André advises quietly.
“About whom?”
“The devils,” André answers.
“But where are they? Your devils. You haven’t told me yet.”
“Don’t joke about them,” I caution him.
“We’re old friends, aren’t we, René? I’m not used to holding back anything from you. So! These devils of yours, me, I don’t believe in them. I’m an atheist, don’t forget that. And an atheist accepts neither the idea of God nor the devil.”
“This is not the best time for blasphemy,” André whimpers. “We’re already in debt to the loas since René touched the syrup, so don’t force God to turn from us as well.”
He traces a large cross on his chest and sniffs.
“I am not trying to hurt anyone,” Simon says. “To each his convictions. But that syrup, if you would permit me, I’ll lap it up in front of you without leaving a drop.”
“Don’t touch it,” André yells.
“Pass me the bottle of clairin and calm down. I will drink it only if you permit me to do so. And, one way or another, you will. Me, I don’t know how to live without eating and I’ll be hungry soon enough.”
“You’re drinking all the clairin” André protests.
“Say what you will, but this is the good life,” says Simon, lying down on the floor. “Even if it stinks, this is the good life. Too bad it smells a bit like jail. The bastards! They almost had our hides! Things like that could make you go crazy. Do you remember how they woke us up with kicks one day and told us we were going to be executed? And that other time when they amused themselves by slapping us and making us crawl naked on all fours like dogs. No doubt about it, they persecute poets here. Even French poets. They have no regard for foreign nationals. It’s our ambassadors’ fault; they land on this island like Robinson Crusoe … Do you remember what the commandant said to me when I protested and threatened to invoke my flag? He said, ‘Shut your dirty trap, white trash, or I’ll make you swallow your teeth along with your tongue.’ No respect for me, a French citizen marooned here of my own
accord, who boasts and sings Haiti’s praises in poems that may be published one day throughout the four corners of
the world … As a matter of fact, we never did recover from the commandant’s blows. But probably the most vicious
were the ones who were helping him. Never seen anything more diabolical than the expression on their faces!”

“Be quiet!” André yells.

“Why? We are locked up. No one can hear us. This is stupid! … Poor Jacques getting hit in the head by one of
them! Bap and bap and bap until his nose and eyes were bloody. What’s wrong, René? I’ve never seen such a grin
on your face! Why are you looking at me like that? You’re scaring me. You look like a wild beast. Get a hold of
yourself, my friend!”

“I don’t like to hear you lie,” I whispered furiously “You’re talking about things I don’t remember. If Jacques had
indeed been hit in the head, how could I ever forget that?”

“I don’t remember much either anymore,” André admitted sadly, voluptuously scratching the scar on his
forehead.

“What scheme are you two hatching? Or are you trying to make me think I’ve gone completely nuts? You, André!
Where did you get that scar?”

“I don’t know, I don’t really know … I fell, I think, when I was little, just like that …”

“Like that, really!”

“And anyway, leave us alone,” I shouted.

“I have the right to talk about it, hell and damnation!” he shoots back. “I’ve had my fair share of beatings and
getting slapped around, just like you. No point blubbering. They won’t come looking for us where we are. And
anyway, were we arrested for a political reason? We weren’t, were we? So then? We’re not doing anything wrong.
We are locking ourselves up to get drunk and that can’t bother anyone, not even the devils you pretend you’ve seen
… Oh! Oh! Oh! You bunch of pranksters! …”

“Don’t laugh at them,” I say to him.

“Gosh! You’re looking dangerous there. Thin as a rail but standing on his spurs like a fighting cock. Say, old
friend, you’re not going to beat up a poor drunk white guy, are you, your poor drunk white buddy?”

“Don’t talk about them or you’ll draw them out.”

“About whom must I no longer speak?”

“The devils.”

“But I wasn’t talking about them,” he protests. “I don’t believe in them, I tell you.”

“You get everything mixed up and you don’t understand a thing,” André tells him. “Take René’s advice. In
reality, you’re just a white man and our country’s mysteries are beyond you. Take René’s advice. He’s the boss.”

“The boss of what?”

“The boss!” André adds without any further explanation.

“Shit then,” Simon exclaims. “Me, I can’t keep up with you anymore.”

“That’s because you are just a white man,” André answers.

“Oh! Really now,” he protests. “Fuck off with your white man bullshit. Aren’t the four of us brothers who go way
back, yes or no?”

“Yes,” I reply, “but there are things in our country you will never understand.”

“What, for example? That I’m forbidden to drink your syrup even if I am croaking of hunger, because you’ve
supposedly already offered it to your loas? Hold on! Watch this! I am going to swallow your syrup, you watch me ...
”

“No!” André shouts.

“I am a white man,” Simon yells, “and I’m hungry.”

He leans over the trunk and grabs the dishes.

“Double dishes of baked clay!” he says with admiration. “Joined like Siamese twins! Bugger me! They’re full of
syrup! I could never swallow that much! Nothing can make a man as sick as sugar after alcohol. I’m going to barf
and I don’t like barfing … Him, why is he sleeping like that? Hey, Jacques! Wake up, sonny. He’s still as a dead
man. Anyway, here’s your syrup. Looking at it makes me nauseous. Dear loas, I return to you what’s yours. Ah!
Ah! Ah! Bugger me! I like clairin better. Why is he sleeping like that? Hey! Wake up …”
I see him suddenly put the dishes down on the trunk and lean over Jacques. He finds his heart and puts his ear to it. He looks so funny in that posture that I burst out laughing.

“He’s dead,” he tells us and gets up staggering, goes toward André and puts an arm around his neck.

“He’s dead,” he says again.

“You’re mad,” André says coldly.

“He’s dead, I tell you!” he yells.

And he begins sobbing noisily, like a big child, fists in his eyes.

Pain suddenly hit me, sinking into my skull like a knife and swelling in my brain. A thousand red-hot needles pierced my right temple and a gong resounded in the distance, mournful and deafening.

“The signal,” I cried out.

“What signal?” Simon asked.

I threw myself on the wall, trembling, barely able to stand on my legs. The gong resounded a second time, then a third. I saw a multitude of devils coming out of the ground. They were naked this time and all black with red horns and tails. They were moving in rhythm as if to the beat of some strange, stylized voodoo dance. I saw one of them climb a beam up to Cécile’s balcony with the agility of a monkey. He broke open the door to the living room and came out carrying her under his arm like a small package. He jumped over the balcony and let himself slide to the ground, where he put her down. He tore off her clothes, leaving her naked. I seized my weapons. I shoved five bottles into my pockets, struck a match and lit the sixth.

“What are you doing?” I heard Simon say as in a dream.

I looked at him calmly. At the approach of danger I was swept with confused happiness, almost incomprehensibly so. I removed the barricade, opened the door and went out in the street. The light blinded me. Eyes closed, I threw the bottle against the pavement with all my strength. I heard the bottle smash. The ground gave way under my feet. And at once the drums began to roll, conch shells roared, flutes and bamboo trumpets wept. Their mingled sound, distant at first, swelled and echoed. The mountains leaned on each other’s shoulders, their blue-green bodies encircling and slowly, inexorably approaching the city. Everything started to go topsy-turvy: trees, houses, streets. Everything got mixed up, clustered, stuck together in a single bubbling cauldron of scarlet lava full of townspeople struggling and screaming. I recognized my mother, Father Angelo, Dr. Chanel, Saindor, cousin Justina, Simon’s black woman Germaine, Mme Fanfreluche, and I threw myself down screaming and began rolling on the ground. Simon sprang up and lay on top of me, holding me tight:

“It’s out of grief,” he said. “He’s gone mad over Jacques’ death.”

“Our Father who art in heaven,” André began to recite, “thy will be done …”
A crowd gathers around us. Simon, astride my legs, holds me firmly by the shoulders, while André, kneeling, watches me with his arms crossed. Leaning over me, Simon says to me in hushed tones:

“God almighty God almighty God!” he says. “What possessed you to start screaming like that? What with the men on patrol from Port-au-Prince, what’s going to come down on us now? Calm down, old friend! You’re about to faint, that’s what brought you to this, grief too, and all that clairin. Get a grip! You’re going to need your wits about you. Reach out to your loas, call on your God, but let’s get out of this mess.”

**The Priest (clearing a path for himself in the crowd with great difficulty):** Excuse me, excuse me, please. I know these boys, excuse me, please. I know these boys, excuse me, please. I know these boys, excuse me, please.

**Someone in the Crowd:** Let Father Angelo through!

**One of the People:** He is possessed by his loas, that’s all. Father Angelo can’t help him.

**Someone:** He’s going to exorcise him! It’s a simple case of demonic possession. Looks like they’d locked themselves in for eight days. Ugh, that dead dog over there stinks!

**Someone:** Look! Father Angelo can’t control him either. He’s rabid. He’s going to smash his own head open. Oh, here come the police!

**The Commandant:** What’s going on? I heard screaming all the way from the prison. What’s going on? Where are the witnesses? *The crowd backs away.*

**The Commandant:** Nobody move! *The crowd freezes.*

**The Commandant:** Step aside, step aside but don’t go anywhere. Make room for the police. Hey, get back here! Stand right there. I’ve got a bullet for the first one who tries to run. Make way for the police, make way! Father Angelo, get up! And you too, white man! *He leans down and sniffs at a broken bottle.*

**The Commandant:** Molotov cocktails! Adjutant, notify the patrol! I’ve uncovered a plot! Nobody move, God damn it! Father Angelo, get up! You too, white trash!

**M. Potentat (to an unsavory individual listening to him a little too closely, an obvious spy):** Here comes the patrol.

**My God! Just my luck getting mixed up with this crowd. My, they reek, these beggars. And this dead dog crawling with worms is making me sick! And now I may get caught up in this damn plot nonsense.**

**The Individual:** You seem a bit nervous, Monsieur Potentat!

**M. Potentat:** Me? Nervous? And, pray tell, why should I be nervous?

**The Individual:** Stay where you are, Monsieur Potentat! This is a serious matter.

**M. Potentat:** What insolence! Don’t you dare take that tone with me or you’ll regret it!

**The Individual:** Me, I’ve got nothing to lose: no house, no wealth. So I can take this all the way.

**M. Potentat:** Oh, come now! Take it easy. There, take this money and keep your mouth shut.

**A One-Armed Beggar:** There goes my day! Why are they asking me to stick around? I’m just a wretch begging on the roads.

**A One-Legged Beggar:** We should have stayed on the church porch.

**A Beggar (with both legs amputated, crawling):** Excuse me, good people, excuse me. You others, why don’t you crawl and get out of this crowd here?

**A Blind Beggar:** And get myself crushed? No thank you.

**The Commandant:** You beggars over there, settle down and stay right where you are. Hey you there, creepy-crawly!

**Not another move or I shoot!**

**Someone (standing in his way):** Will you stop, beggar? Or you’ll make cripples of all of us!

**Patrol Member:** Well, Commandant, have you laid hands on the conspirators?
THE COMMANDANT (strutting): I’ve been watching this shack for eight days.

PATROL MEMBER: Who lives here?

MARCIA: The man on the ground does. The one who’s possessed. He hasn’t opened his door in eight days.


MARCIA: No, no, I didn’t say anything. I don’t know anything.

THE COMMANDANT: Take her into custody!

MARCIA: No, no, no, I didn’t say anything. I don’t know anything. Help! Mademoiselle Cécile, they’re arresting me! Let me go, I haven’t done anything. Let me go!

CÉCILE: She’s my maid, Commandant, and I can vouch for her.

PATROL MEMBER: Take her into custody too.

CÉCILE: Father, say something!

THE PRIEST: Commandant, consider what you’re about to do! Mademoiselle Magistral is a young woman from a respectable family; her father was one of the most notable figures in the province.

THE COMMANDANT: Father, time is of the essence. We are faced with a plot against the security of the State. Public order has been compromised. We must question the witnesses. Where is the prefect? Where is the mayor?

SOMEONE: Nobody knows.

A BEGGAR (to another): They must be hiding somewhere.

PATROL MEMBER: Someone go get the prefect and the mayor. Commandant, why don’t you dispatch your warrant officer. He knows their habits better than we do.

THE COMMANDANT: Make it happen, Adjutant.

THE ADJUTANT: Yes, Commandant, sir.

CÉCILE: Father, I want nothing to do with the police. Father!

THE PRIEST: You must bow before the holy will of God, my daughter, and wait for the prefect to come. He alone will be able to help you.

PATROL MEMBER (to another in a low voice): She’s fine-looking! I’ll take real good care of her in prison.

THE COMMANDANT: Go on! Move along! Let the prisoners through. He fires two shots in the air and the crowd immediately disperses, running.

SIMON (to me): Get up, old friend. They’re taking us to prison.

PATROL MEMBER (jamming a few kicks into my ribs): Get up, mulatto bastard!

SIMON (to me): Try to get up. Hold on to your old buddy.

PATROL MEMBER (pushing André and hitting him in the face): Didn’t you hear me? You, let’s go, start walking!

CÉCILE: Somebody tell my mother. She’s sick in bed. Somebody tell her. Somebody take care of her. Father Angelo, I leave her in your hands.

THE PRIEST: You can count on me, my child. Courage! You too, my little ones. (Blessing them) Go in peace!

SIMON: Oh, Father! spare us your blessings and instead tell them to give us food and drink before the interrogation. Look at them, Father. These two can barely stand. They’ve had nothing but clairin for eight days.

THE PRIEST: Why?

SIMON: They didn’t dare come out on account of the devils.

THE PRIEST: What devils?

SIMON: The ones that have invaded the town.

THE PRIEST: Here comes Dr. Prémature! Doctor! You must intervene. According to what Simon tells me, we’re dealing with a rather peculiar kind of collective madness. These poor boys had shut themselves inside because of devils that they claim invaded the town.

THE DOCTOR: Is it to chase away devils that they smashed this bottle in the middle of the street?
PATROL MEMBER (entering the shack): Commandant! Come see! There’s another one in the house and it looks like he’s dead.

THE PRIEST: Lord! Have mercy on their souls.

THE COMMANDANT: Bring the prisoners inside the premises. Sorry, Father, but let the police do their job. Doctor, come inside to make your official report.

THE DOCTOR: Open the door. It’s suffocating in here … He’s dead, Commandant, been dead for several hours.

PATROL MEMBER: Handcuff and then search them!

PATROL MEMBER: Come on! Hold out your mitts. You over there, what’s in your pockets? What do you have here? Bottles! Bottles stuffed with cotton and alcohol! So, you were plotting, huh? You wanted to commit arson? You wanted our hides, huh? I asked you a question, scumbag. I’ll make you talk, I will!

CÉCILE: Father! Someone go to my mother. I beg you.

THE PRIEST: Doctor! These men have had nothing but clairin for eight days. Look at them. Ask that they be fed or else they’ll die from the beatings. Farewell, Cécile, I am going to your mother’s bedside.

THE DOCTOR (to me): What possessed you to get mixed up in a political matter? We help you out, we give you charity, we look after you, and this is how you thank us.

ME: ? …

THE DOCTOR: Do you want to eat something?

ME: ! …

CÉCILE: This one is sick, too! Oh, my God! Doctor, do something.

THE DOCTOR (to André, whose legs are wobbling): You want to eat something?

ANDRÉ: I’m hungry.

DOCTOR: Commandant! I have observed these men. They appear to be in such bad shape that I wouldn’t be surprised if they lost consciousness during questioning. Let’s feed them so that they’ll be able to talk.

M. POTENTAT: I must protest against such leniency. These people are despicable subversives.

UNSAVORY INDIVIDUAL (whom M. Potentat cannot shake off): I suggest the Commandant conduct a general search of all the houses on Grand-rue.

M. POTENTAT: Dr. Prémature is too soft on these traitors.

PATROL MEMBER: Unconscious or not, I’ll loosen their tongues. I promise you that much.

THE COMMANDANT: Quiet, people! … It might be better to listen to the doctor’s advice. Otherwise, they’ll be useless.

PATROL MEMBER: Commandant Cravache, these men are political prisoners. They must be treated as such. If they lose consciousness during questioning, we have the means to revive them.

MARCIA (in tears): I want to go. I haven’t done anything. All I did was throw stones at the dead dog. I just kept an eye on the mulatto from a distance because he’s always talking to himself and gets all strange when he looks at our house. I even suspected that he wanted to climb the balcony to rob us at night. He was always watching the balcony out of the corner of his eye. I swear I’m telling the truth.

SIMON: Be quiet, bitch.

MARCIA: You won’t stop me from talking, you crazy old white man. Everybody here knows you’re crazy. And the dead one was crazy too. Everybody knows that.

CÉCILE: Quiet, Marcia!

PATROL MEMBER: All right, stop your sniveling!

MARCIA: Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

THE DOCTOR: What is that stench?

PATROL MEMBER: A chamber pot.

THE COMMANDANT: You found nothing else?

PATROL MEMBER: Yes. Papers and a trunk full of all sorts of stuff.
THE COMMANDANT: Weapons?

PATROL MEMBER: No, Commandant. Personal effects. Marassas dishes with syrup, dressed candles, bags. Let’s leave this stuff alone. This one’s dead, this one possessed, another lost his marbles, the fourth an idiot—all proof that these loas are dangerous.

THE COMMANDANT: Close the trunk! … You, the white guy, you don’t look so bad to me. Take care of the dead body, before I tickle your fat gut with my club.

SIMON (taking Jacques’ body in his arms): Don’t count on my gut, Commandant. It’s full of gas and alcohol and will explode in your face if you touch it.

CÉCILE: Don’t provoke them, I beg you.

SIMON (quietly to Cécile): Keeping quiet won’t prevent anything. Might as well insult them.

CÉCILE: No. I beg you. They’re terrifying.

THE COMMANDANT: Gather the evidence. No, no, leave the trunk where it is. Just bring the papers from the floor and the bottles. The curious crowd has reappeared, lingering near the front door, at a sufficiently respectable distance from the shack.

SOMEONE: We shouldn’t have come back. That was careless.

ANOTHER: No. Look, they arrested the offenders and the witnesses.

ANOTHER: You never know with them. Once they start making arrests, they seem to go mad.

ANOTHER: Oh! A dead body! They killed someone. Look!

A LADY (sighing): Poor Cécile got dragged into a really nasty mess.

A YOUNG GIRL (to another): Do you really think she was plotting with them? I never would have thought Cécile capable of that.

MME. FANFRELUCHE: I found her to be very strange lately. Gaunt, anxious and strange. She’s not all that beautiful anymore, that’s the truth.

AN OLD MAN: What rubbish, Madame Fanfreluche! That girl is beautiful and you are jealous, admit it. You just want the prefect to notice you, but he only has eyes for her.

MME. FANFRELUCHE: What insolence! How dare you speak to me?

THE OLD MAN: Rubbish, Madame Fanfreluche! Your tone is old-fashioned. Times have changed and now it’s your turn, mulattoes, to lower your heads. Maybe there’s truth to the gossip going around, that you’ve dropped your color prejudice lately, for the color of gold makes you forget about the color of skin. Amazing how gold blinds! Look at the prefect! Is he handsome? Light-skinned? Answer me that much, Madame Fanfreluche!

MME. FANFRELUCHE: You old ape!

THE OLD MAN: An old ape in whose face you once spit for daring to propose to you twenty years ago, and who now insults you in his turn.

MME. FANFRELUCHE: I’m going to lodge a complaint and have you flogged.

THE OLD MAN: By whom, Madame? By a black man or a mulatto? Since you’re dancing in both circles quite nicely. But despite your little schemes, you and your kind will pay for your stupid prejudice. The punishment has begun already, or are you blind? Maybe I’ll die soon, but the ants, as the peasants like to say, will bring me news of this world.

MME. FANFRELUCHE: Stop insulting me or I will denounce you as a traitor to the nation.

THE OLD MAN: Who knows! They might be crazy enough to believe you. In any case, stop jangling your bracelets in my ears. It’s annoying.

A LADY: There’s Madame Fanfreluche crying out of indignation! What a ridiculous woman! As usual, Old Mathurin shut her up good, and there she is sniffing like a little girl.

PATROL MEMBER: Quiet over there or I’ll break it up. Doctor, stop feeling sorry for the prisoners. This is a serious matter.

THE DOCTOR: I am not feeling sorry for them, chief. They’re guilty, so punish them. My suggestions were only meant to make your job easier.
CÉCILE: Doctor, I beg you, look in my pocket—you will find the key to my house. Go see to my mother. Father Angelo probably couldn’t get in and she’s all by herself.

THE DOCTOR: Me, look in your pocket! Certainly not! I can get inside your house without your key. All right, duty calls. Farewell, gentlemen, and long live law and order!

THE COMMANDANT: We’ll be calling on your services again, Doctor.

THE DOCTOR: I’m at your disposal, Commandant.

PATROL MEMBER: Get the prisoners out. Let’s go!

SOMEONE IN THE CROWD: My God, Magistral’s daughter in handcuffs! If the father were still alive, he’d get himself killed in front of her.

SOMEONE: And the poor mother with heart trouble! Who will dare go to their house if not Father Angelo?

MMF FANFRELUCHE: She’s alone and the house is locked. It’s dangerous to go see her. One always risks getting caught when going inside a suspect’s house.

A YOUNG LADY: Look at the one walking next to Cécile. Look at his eyes and his smile.

ANOTHER YOUNG LADY: Why is he smiling?

MMF FANFRELUCHE: But he’s a madman! He’s the son of the trinket vendor, Angélie. You didn’t recognize him? Come on, they’re not serious! They’re arresting madmen!

THE ADJUTANT (returning): Commandant! Commandant, sir! I was unable to find either the prefect or the mayor. I looked for them everywhere. Even Laurette has no idea where they are. Here comes Saindor. He claims he saw them driving to Port-au-Prince at full speed.

SAINDOR: Yes, Lieutenant, they left a while ago and they must be far away by now … Hey! If you guys get arrested, who’s going to pay me? You owe me five piastres, and you ten, and you, Simon, a lot more than that. Hey! I want to get paid, you hear? Find a way! Mademoiselle Cécile! My God! What are you doing with these bums? If your poor father, who I knew so well, saw you in handcuffs! And your mother? She will die of it. The prefect could help you but you’ve been stubborn and pushed him away. He was telling me about it just last night and even got drunk to drown his despair. The prefect and the mayor, hah, they must be far away by now.

THE COMMANDANT: We’ll manage without them. Always have to manage without them whenever there’s work to be done or things get dangerous. This is a police matter. And the police will act.

CÉCILE: My God!

ME: Don’t be afraid. I’ll save you a second time.

THE ADJUTANT (to me): Hey you, what’s in your hand?

PATROL MEMBER: Open your hand. Right, there’s something in his fist. Open your hand, mulatto bastard! A possessed man with a stone in hand, not a good idea. Drop it, you son of a bitch.

ME: No.

THE COMMANDANT (slapping me): Drop it.

CÉCILE: For pity’s sake, throw it away.

THE COMMANDANT: Let’s go! Keep moving. The rest of you, make way! Clear out.

ME (to Cécile): It was from you.

CÉCILE: What?

ME: The stone.

CÉCILE: What do you mean?

ME: There was a letter wrapped around it.

CÉCILE: What letter?

ME: The one you threw to me from your window. I saw the stone fall and I went to get it. But alas, the letter was gone.

CÉCILE: Oh!
ME: Thank you all the same.
CÉCILE: I still have your poem. I find it very beautiful. I also write poems, I’d like to show them to you.
ME: You’ll read mine and I’ll read yours.
CÉCILE: There’s the prison!
ME: Don’t be afraid. I’m with you.
PATROL MEMBER: Take the girls this way.
ME: If they question you, just say: René is guilty. He made weapons and conspired against the security of the State. He alone is guilty.
CÉCILE: Is that true?
ME: Yes.
CÉCILE: You sound like a sensible man.
ME: Do you think I’m crazy like everyone else does?
CÉCILE: I don’t know. That’s what I’ve heard, but I don’t know anymore. I’ve known you since you were little and I feel as if I’m seeing you for the first time. Your eyes, your smile, they’re not the same.
ME: That’s because you never looked at me before today. In your eyes I was just a beggar. Misfortune has brought us together.
CÉCILE: I hate the prefect, I hate the commandant, I hate them all. They disgust me and I’d like to see them dead.
ME: Don’t forget, Cécile, I’m the guilty one, I’m guilty, you have to say that.
THE COMMANDANT: Stop whispering, you two! Separate them. And bring me the girls.
ME: Farewell, Cécile.
CÉCILE: Farewell, René.
SIMON (to André): Stand up straight, old man. I’m scared too, and your brother’s body is heavy, but I’m holding up well enough.
ANDRÉ: I’ve never been in very good health. Our mother died of consumption. And recently I’ve been spitting up a little blood, too.
SIMON: Bugger me! Look! There’s Germaine! She’ll stop at nothing to get us out. I know her. She’ll sleep with the entire patrol if it will help. A good black woman, yeah. She’s waving to us. It’s good to see her.
PATROL MEMBER (hitting Simon in the back): Shut your hole, white trash, and put down the body.
They dug a hole and dumped Jacques’ body. I was standing between Simon and André. All of us shuddered at the thud of the body in the ditch. Sweat dripping in our eyes, teeth knocking together from faintness and terror. They herded us with their rifle butts into a room where they lined us up faces against the wall. I heard Marcia crying; Cécile’s silence seemed brave and dignified. The commandant asked for coffee, ordered that we be locked up, and left the room followed by the others. We were separated from the women and thrown in a cell.
“Shit!” Simon said. “Our goose is cooked.”
“I’m hungry,” André mumbled.
“How can you be hungry at a time like this?” I asked.
“I’m hungry,” he repeated.
Almost all at once we sank into a deep sleep. At dawn, they woke us with kicks and we found ourselves in a room with the commandant and three men from the patrol sitting at a table. Two rickety green wooden benches leaned against the wall, and there were torture instruments on the table in front of the policemen.
Looking worried and important, the commandant started handling the objects laid out before him with ostentatious reserve.
“I have pointed out the serious charges against the defendants. They have criminal records and left prison barely three months ago. I’ve been kind, indulgent, and today I regret it.”
“What were they guilty of?” one of the three men asked.
“They were inciting a mob, shouting: ‘To arms!’”
“You pardoned them?” the same man exclaimed. “And you dare admit as much!”

“It would appear that these words are from a poem by Massillon Coicou,” the commandant admitted sheepishly.

“Who is this Massillon Coicou?” the man asked. “Is he still in prison?”

“He’s dead,” the commandant answered. “At least, that’s what they’ve told me.”

“Do you hear the cry that resounded: ‘To arms!’” André said suddenly in deep, low voice.

“Silence!” the commandant shouted, “or I’ll break your neck … That verse, we checked it out and it really is from the poet Massillon Coicou. I thought a good beating and six months of detention would be enough punishment.”

“They’re making an ass out of you, Commandant,” one of the three men sniggered. “All one has to do is look in their eyes to see that they’re making an ass of you. That verse by Massillon Coicou, they’re using it to express their own feelings.”

“They’ll live to regret it, I swear,” the commandant hastened to assert.

“I find your zeal to be somewhat tepid,” added the one who had spoken first. “Don’t forget, we were ordered to suspect our own shadow and spare no one … Why don’t you begin the interrogation, Commandant Cravache?”

“You, white man, come forward,” the commandant said.

“Last name, first name, address and occupation,” one of the patrol members recited slowly while dipping a quill in an inkstand.

“Simon de la Pétaudière, French poet, residing in this province, cohabiting with Germaine, merchant on rue Chochotte.”

“Spare us the details,” one of the men pronounced slowly, “and go put yourself against the wall, arms crossed, feet together.”

“Next! Last name, first name, address and occupation?”

“André, son of Julie, poet, born and residing in this town, rue du Diable-Vauvert.”

“Speak up, imbecile!”

“Rue du Diable-Vauvert.”

“Have you heard of it, Commandant Cravache, Devil ‘Green Calf’ Street?”24

“No, but we’ll find it. They’re always holed up in ridiculous places, the swine.”

“Next! Hurry up. Last name, first name, address and occupation?”

“René, son of Angélie, malnourished poet.”

“Spare us your tales of malnutrition and just answer the questions.”

“René, son of Angélie, born in and residing in this town, rue de l’Enfer.”25

“Quite a brotherhood,” the commandant declared in annoyance. “All obsessed with the same fixed idea: speak French, write verse.”

“Rue de l’Enfer! Rue de l’Enfer! The streets of this town have ridiculous names!” exclaimed the patrol member who was writing everything down. “No wonder they shelter so many subversives.”

“Bring in the girls,” the commandant then ordered.

The adjutant entered, roughly pushing Marcia and Cécile before him.

“Here they are, Commandant.”

“You, the maid, come over here.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

“Tell us your name.”

“Yes, sir. It’s Marcia, sir.”

“Marcia what?”

“Marcia Nanpétrin, yes, sir.”

“Where do you live?”

“At Madame Magistral’s, sir. Since I was ten.”

“How old are you now?”

“Twenty, sir.”
“Do you have parents?”
“Yes, sir, in the mountains, far away. Up in the coffee farms.”
“You were the first to hear the bottle crash. Tell us what happened?”
“Here is what happened, Commandant! I was leaving Madame Magistral’s house when I saw the door of the shack open—it had been closed for eight days. The mulatto came out, eyes closed and hand lifted high. He walked like a blind man, hesitating, and then he threw the bottle under the balcony. I saw flames running along the ground and then the mulatto threw himself on the ground screaming and the black guy and the white guy came out of the shack, and the white guy stamped out the flames and lay down on the mulatto and starting saying something in his ear.”
“That’s it?”
“That’s it, yes, sir. I swear on my mother’s life.”
“Fine, go stand by the wall and wait.”
“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”
“Come forward, you. Last name, first name, address and occupation.”
“Cécile Magistral, born and residing in this town, teacher at the Holy Sisters School.”
“What do you know about this twisted plot against the security of the State?”
“I don’t know anything about it, Monsieur.”
“Talk or you’ll regret it.”
“I have nothing to say.”
Two men came down from the platform on which the table stood and loomed before Cécile.
“Talk,” one of them said.
“I swear I don’t know anything.”
“You want a beating? Huh!”
One of them tore off her blouse and grabbed a bundle of leather straps that lay on the table.
“She doesn’t know anything, she doesn’t know anything,” Simon yelled.
“Tell them, Cécile,” I begged. “Tell them what you know.”
“I don’t know anything,” Cécile said.
“Fine. I am going to loosen your tongue. You’ll see.”
He shoved her to her knees and struck her. The straps marked her flesh with long red streaks.
“No! No!” I couldn’t stop yelling.
“Let him kill me,” Cécile shouted to me.
“No! No!”
“I won’t be able to live after all of this. Let them kill me!”
Two patrol members had to hold me back. I had rushed at them like a lion. They twisted my arms and I fell to my knees.
“Cécile, think of your mother,” I begged again, “tell them what you know.”
“I don’t want to live anymore, I don’t want to live anymore,” she sobbed.
“You bastards,” Simon shouted.
And he leaped on one of the men and hit him in the head with his handcuffed fists.
“Shoot him,” ordered the patrol member who had remained at the table with the commandant.
“I am French, I invoke my flag,” Simon protested.
“We shit on your flag,” one of the men answered. “You struck law enforcement personnel.”
“My embassy will be notified. You’ll have to answer for my death.”
“You were conspiring against the security of the State.”
“You’re lying There was never a conspiracy.”
“And the petrol bombs? Where did they come from?”
“They’re no more threatening than firecrackers, they’re stuffed with rotting cotton and clairin. I demand to be
transferred to Port-au-Prince and allowed to contact my lawyer.”

“Hah! Hah! Hah!” one of the patrol members sniggered. “He thinks we have time to waste. How many days did you stay locked up in the shack with the conspirators?”

“I repeat, there was never any conspiracy,” Simon roared.

“Let him be,” said the commandant, who seemed preoccupied by an inconvenient thought. “Let’s take care of these two first.”

“Come with me,” said one of the men. “See these goodies? They will make you as soft as a woman’s hand.”

And, tearing off our shirts, he burst into hideous, demonic laughter.

“Look at that, thin as a rail. You won’t be able to make it through an hour of torture. Commandant Cravache, give me the studded whip.”

“I’m the only guilty one,” I cried. “I made the weapons myself while they were both sleeping.”

“Who were you trying to set on fire?”

“The devils,” I responded.

“What devils?”

“The ones who invaded the town.”

“He’s a mad fool,” Simon yelled. “Don’t you understand that?”

“I wonder which one of you is best at playing the fool?” the commandant replied.

He came down off the platform, grabbed some kind of pliers off the table and dangled them before me:

“I will tear out your flesh, I will flay you like a hog, but you will talk.”

“I’m the only guilty one,” I repeated.

“Who were you after?”

“The devils.”

The commandant smashed my face with the pliers and blood ran down my cheek.

“You’ve already been beaten with a stick, right? That can be tiring for the person doing it, but this”—holding the pliers under my nose—“is a game that can last for hours. It is reserved exclusively for little plotters such as yourself. Tie him to a chair!”

Two men rushed over, grabbed me and bound me to a chair. The commandant held out the pliers to the patrol member who was still smiling in his seat, saying to him:

“Go ahead, Sataneau, do the honors.”

And the man took the pliers and came toward me. He was very small with a somewhat elongated head and slanting eyes framed by large pointed eyebrows. He smiled and his lips revealed brilliant white, pointed teeth. The face of the man leaning over me suddenly blurred, melting before my very eyes into a blinding metallic plate.

I bowed my head, and with my mouth contorted and eyes closed, cried out:

“The devils! They are here. The devils! …”

I knocked over the chair and fell at their feet, screaming and twisting despite being tied up.

“What the fuck is this nonsense about devils?” the commandant asked in a worried voice.

“He sees them all the time,” Simon replied. “He claims they’re hiding somewhere in town.”

The man was standing, pliers in hand, watching me twist at his feet.

“There is something unnatural about all this,” he said. “Let’s exterminate them and be done with it.”

*The devils opening the gates of hell*

*Will escape by the thousands*

*Black, red, sparkling with weapons and gold*

*To sow death and gladden Lucifer …*

André began to recite. His voice seemed to come from another world. I was twisting and foaming at the mouth, pricking up my ears to hear what was being said.

“What’s that idiot saying?” the commandant asked.

“He’s talking about devils too,” one of the patrol members replied, visibly disconcerted.
“René described them to us,” Simon said in a declamatory tone. “He has seen them every God-given day.”
“I’ve seen them too,” André said softly.
“You, idiot, you’ve supposedly seen them too?”
“I’ve seen them.”
“When?”
“Every evening for eight days.”
“And who are they after?” the man with the pliers asked.
“I don’t know.”
“Who are they after?” the man with the pliers snapped, leaning over me.
“Untie me! Untie me!” I begged him, writhing. “They’ll be back!”
“Untie him,” ordered the man with the pliers. “And have Dr. Prémature come.”
“Will do, chief,” the corporal answered.
And he ran to the exit.

“He’s pretending to be a madman,” the agitated commandant said nervously, “but I have learned that you can’t be too careful even with real madmen. Admit this is an act. Admit that you’re not crazy,” he grunted, hitting me on the head.

“I am not crazy,” I said, “I have seen the devils. And they’ll be back. They are armed. They don’t have faces and they wear red boots. Black and red, in golden helmets, that’s what they look like. I tell you: when the devils return none of us will escape.”

“He seems sincere,” muttered one of the patrol members.

“And he doesn’t seem to be crazy at all,” the commandant answered. “In fact, he’s admitted he wasn’t.”

“I saw them,” I slowly enunciated. “Black and red, in golden helmets. They move without noise but in the midnight silence you can make out the pounding of their boots and the sound of their voices. Their voices are like hissing bullets. They kill too, and the spilled blood disappears with the rising sun. At the stroke of midnight, prick up your ears, if you’re not scared.”

“Were dead bodies found in the street these last eight days?” asked the man with the pliers, who was growing concerned.

“Dead dogs,” the commandant answered, “and three children on the outskirts of town.”
Dr. Prémature came in with the corporal, trembling.

“Commandant,” said the corporal, twisting his hands, “the women on rue des Saints, led by Germaine, are inciting the crowd with their tales.”

“Two merchants were found dead along the trail to the coffee farms and people claim they’ve seen great black and red shapes running in the woods.”

“Mercy, Holy Virgin!” Marcia moaned. “They’re on their way to my house.”

“They’re there!” I exclaimed in an implacable voice. “I see them!”

And getting up, I slowly walked to the door, looking straight ahead, my hands contorted. The doctor watched me in silence, hands in his coat pockets. He turned to the commandant and said quietly:

“Commandant Cravache, these men are not in full possession of their faculties. Torturing them will be a complete waste of time.”

“Are you sure they’re crazy?” the commandant whispered. “In these godforsaken parts, everyone is called crazy by someone else. Do you take full responsibility for this diagnosis?”

“Look for yourself!” the doctor said.
André had gotten on Simon’s back, and Simon was prancing around with a beatific smile, winking at the man with the pliers. I scanned the surroundings from the doorway, my hand over my eyes. The glint in my fixed, haggard eyes must have been unbearable because the commandant walked up beside me and searched the horizon. Then, he roughly pulled André off Simon’s back. Raising his hand, he touched the scar on his forehead and said to him:

“Where did you get this?”
“I fell when I was little, like so,” André replied.
The commandant stared wildly at Dr. Prémature, leaned over and whispered to him:

“Dr. Prémature, three girls died this month from complications as the result of an abortion. I have received a number of complaints from their parents accusing you of rape and homicide. Either these men are in their right minds or I’ll bring your case to justice …”

“Did I ever say they were crazy?” the doctor exclaimed, becoming pale. “I was merely giving an initial diagnosis. I will have to examine the prisoners more carefully to make a definitive determination.”

“My advice to you is not to make a mountain out of a molehill or I will have no choice but to relieve you of your weapon.”

“They are not crazy!” the doctor exclaimed. “Just now I caught a glint of malice in that one’s eye. I’m certain they’re not insane.”

He was pointing a finger at me.

“You’re making me waste my time, Commandant Cravache, and I don’t much like it!” the man with the pliers suddenly roared. “You write to Port-au-Prince asking for reinforcements under the pretext that there’s a conspiracy. You tell us you found the plotters and then you turn over three loons and two sniveling females.”

“The commandant is new here,” Marcia intervened inopportunely. “I told him they were crazy but he didn’t want to believe me. Everyone in these parts knows they’re crazy. Even the children.”

“Quiet!” the commandant advised fiercely.

“Yes, sir, I’ll keep quiet, yes. Thank you, sir.”

The commandant was still looking at Dr. Prémature. He abruptly turned toward the man with the pliers and spoke with his eyes fixed on the doctor:

“Dr. Prémature,” he said, “have you observed the prisoners sufficiently to offer a diagnosis?”

“Yes,” the doctor answered.

“Are they insane?”

“No,” answered the doctor.

“Have them executed to set an example,” the man with the pliers concluded. “I’m in charge of deciding the prisoners’ fate, and I declare these men traitors to their country. Execute them and don’t waste time. You, Corporal, cuff them.”

“No!” Cécile cried.

“You others, the women, get the fuck out of here,” the man with the pliers added.

“Commandant,” Marcia said, “not to bother you either, sir, but last night, several men came into our cell and raped us.”

“Forget whatever you’ve seen or heard and anything that’s happened to you in this prison, unless you want me to rip out your tongue,” the commandant replied coldly.

“Yes, Commandant, thank you, Commandant.”

“I want to die, I want to die,” Cécile sobbed.

She was slowly getting dressed and weeping as she looked at me. I smiled at her so peacefully so serenely that she thought I was mad. André seemed to be asleep. Simon looked at the doctor with hatred, spit at his feet and shouted:

“Oh bugger me, just get it over with, get it over with.”

Am I hungry? Am I thirsty? I asked myself. Nothing seemed important. Not love. Not even death. They pushed us outside and we staggered to the place of execution.

“Oh Christ!” I cried. “Since they’re going to tie us to a post like they nailed you to the cross and cover our bodies with wounds, let our deaths mean something and don’t let our names become lost in oblivion.”

And it was then that the sky slowly opened up, and I saw angels in song descend on gleaming wings and take us away in their arms …
NOTES

All notes are the author’s unless otherwise indicated. Marie Vieux-Chauvet writes in an elegant literary French, which she interrupts with colloquialisms, creolisms, and even English in an effort to create specific voices. The creolisms— that is, the use of Creole words such as morne or combite in French texts—are an homage to the indigéniste (nationalist) Haitian literary tradition and a departure from bovarysme, the imitation of French styles practiced by the earliest, generally mulatto, Haitian writers. At times she uses the creolisms as if they were idioms. For example, her peasants refer to themselves as nègres, a Creole word related to the Spanish word negro but which primarily means “men” or “people” and only secondarily means “black men” (nègre blanc is how one says “white man” in Creole).

LOVE

1. Tonton Mathurin: Tontón is a Creole world for uncle (trans.).
2. houpland: tunic with a long skirt (trans).
3. griffe: dark-skinned mixed-race person.
4. grimelle: mixed-race person with light skin and nappy hair.
5. clairin: alcohol made with sugarcane; similar to rum but less refined (trans).
6. has: voodoo gods.
7. petit-blanc: a white Creole too poor to own a large plantation.
8. “you found yourself a woman, business is good!”: In the original, Mme Potiron uses Creole, “oil joindre femme affaire ou bon!” (trans.).
9. grumpy owls: frisés, which the author footnotes as “owls, female” (trans.).
10. halforts: handmade shoulder bags woven from fan palm fiber (trans.).
11. black hill folk: In the original, the author uses a creolism, “les nègres des mornes,” without italics. Alomes is Creole for “mountains” and, by extension, the hill country (trans.).
12. rastaquouères: flashy foreigners, slick upstarts (trans.).
13. cat’s-tongue tea: a calming herbal tea brewed from borage (trans).
14. old Grandet: In Balzac’s Eugénie Grandet, the miserly father of the heroine (trans).
15. Antiphelix Milk: skin lotion used to fade freckles, but used here as a skin lightener (trans.).
16. Messalina’s ardor: the Roman empress Messalina, c. 22-48, wife of Claudius and a reputed nymphomaniac (trans.).
17. President Leconte: General Cincinnatus Leconte, president of Haiti from 1911 to 1912 (trans).
18. “little soldiers”: Petits soldats was the name given to the members of the lower class who made up the Haitian police of the time.
22. Vilbrun Guillaume Sam: Leader of the revolt that brought President Leconte to power, Sam served as president of Haiti briefly in 1915, before his execution of political prisoners led to his murder by an angry mob, which precipitated the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 (trans).
23. President Dartiguenave’s government: Philippe Sudré Dartiguenave, president of Haiti from 1915 to 1922 (trans).
Salammbô: priestess of ancient Carthage, the title character of an 1862 novel by Gustave Flaubert (trans).

Emma Bovary: central character in Gustave Flaubert’s 1856 novel Madame Bovary, whose intensely romantic notions lead to her adultery and suicide (trans).

poisoned rat: Haitian expression meaning miserable and burning up inside.

ANGER

2. loas: See note 6 on p. 375.
3. fifty gourdes: One gourde = $0.20, according to the author; this was true when Haitian currency was pegged to the U.S. dollar (1913-89) (trans.).
4. Armand Duval: In La Dame aux camélias, the 1848 novel (later adapted into a play) by Alexandre Dumas fils, Duval is the penniless lover of the dying heroine (trans).
5. merengue: Haitian national dance.
6. clairin: See note 5 on p. 375.
7. tafia: cheap rum distilled from molasses and refuse sugar (trans.).
8. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani: according to Mark 15:34, Jesus Christ’s words on the cross, meaning “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (trans).
9. Simple Simon: “Gros-Jean comme devan”: an old expression referring to Gros Jean, a dumb sucker forever tricked and abused, featured in La Fontaine’s fables and in Rabelais.

MADNESS

1. Diderot: from Diderot’s satirical philosophical dialogue Rameau’s Nephew, written in 1762, in which the title character argues that there is no such thing as virtue (trans.).
2. Dessalines! Pétion! Toussaint! Christophe!: heroes of Haiti independence. Jean-Jacques Dessalines (c. 1758-1806) was one of the leaders of the 1791 slave revolt; he became emperor of Haiti in 1804, but was assassinated in a coup by Pétion and Christophe. Alexandre Sabès Pétion (1770-1818) was the mulatto son of a wealthy French colonist, who served as president of an independent republic in southern Haiti from 1807 to 1818. Toussaint Louverture (c. 1743-1803) was a former slave who led the 1791 rebellion and became the effective ruler of Haiti by 1797; when Napoleon Bonaparte sent an expedition to reconquer Haiti, Toussaint was arrested, and he died in a French prison. Henri Christophe (1767-1820) was a former slave and one of Toussaint’s lieutenants; after the assassination of Dessalines he became president of northern Haiti in 1807 and king in 1811 (trans.).
3. Legba: the preeminent god in voodoo practice; the father of all the gods.
4. marassas dishes: double clay vessels used during voodoo ceremonies or in household shrines. Marassas is the Creole word for twins, who are believed to have special powers in voodoo practice (trans.).
5. piastre: one gourde (see note 3 on p. 377) (trans.).
6. studded whips: Both lanières ferrées (studded whips) and rigoises (stiff cowhide whips) were used on slaves in Haiti; the latter are also still used on restaveks or unpaid child servants (trans.).
7. coco-macaques: peasant clubs or bludgeons (trans.).
8. lambi: conch shell used as a horn.
9. coumbite: collective farm work.
10. hounsis: voodoo dancers.
11. “restez-avec-monsieur”: Here Chauvet gives the etymology of the Haitian Creole word for an unpaid and illiterate child servant, the reste-avec or restavek. As Chauvet points out, reste-avec is short for “restez-avec-monsieur”—“Stay with the gentleman” (trans.).
13. Cocobés: Creole word for cripples (trans.).
14. houngans: male voodoo high priests (trans.).
15. simples: A simple is a plant or other substance having one “simple” remedial virtue (trans.).
16. Massillon Coicou’s “L’Alerme” in unison: Haitian poet (1867-1908) executed by President Pierre Nord Alexis. The poem refers to the siege of the fort of Crête-à-Pierrot (1802), a major battle of the Haitian Revolution in which Dessalines’ 1,300 men were surrounded by Leclerc’s 18,000 French colonial troops; the rebels ultimately broke through enemy lines and escaped the fortress largely intact (trans.).
17. Baudelaire … Rimbaud drank too: Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), French Symbolist poet associated with decadence, author of Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil); François Villon (b. 1431), French lyric poet whose rowdy and sometimes criminal life included time in prison; and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91), French Symbolist poet who sought mystic revelation through a “derangement of all the senses” (trans.).
18. banda dance: suggestive Haitian dance, associated with voodoo ritual; also known as the “guède” dance; possibly related to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century colonial zarabanda or sarabande, banned in Spain in 1583 for its obscenity (trans.).
20. sèche: French slang for cigarette (trans.).
21. “Bugger me!”: This conversation is part of a larger discussion about francophonie. René’s conclusion is that a poet who writes in a loan-language is a loan-poet (poet on layaway). His exclamation “bougre de bougre” highlights the historicity of language. “Bougre” is a seventh-century term that is short for the Latin word for Bulgarian, a term that first meant heretic, then sodomite and then dummy. A few lines down, when René asks “What the fuck would a great French poet be doing in this mudhole?” the French word used for mudhole is bled, a slang word coined by the French military in Algeria, which in turn comes from a local Arabic word (blad) for town (trans.).
22. imitor patrem: Latin for “I imitate my father,” a sarcastic allusion to Catholic catechism (trans.).
23. This is no call: A butchered quotation from “La crosse en l’air” (1936), by the French poet Jacques Prévert (1900-77):

Rassurez-vous braves gens
ce n’est pas un appel à la révolte
cest un évêque qui est saoul et qui met sa crosse en l’air
comme ça … en titubant …

There is no call for alarm
this is no call for rebellion
just a drunk bishop waving his white cross in the air
like so … staggering about …
24. “Green Calf” Street: Vauvert and veau vert (green calf) are homophones in French (trans.).
25. rue de l’Enfer: Hell Street (trans.).
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARIE VIEUX-CHAUVET (1916–73), a seminal voice of post-occupation Haiti, was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Her novels include *Fille d’Haïti, La Danse sur le volcan, Fonds des nègres*, and *Les Rapaces*. 
ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

Rose-Myriam Rejouis and Val Vinokur (assistant professors of literary studies at Eugene Lang College / the New School) have translated two novels by Patrick Chamoiseau, Solibo Magnificent and Texaco, the latter of which won the American Translators Association Galantière Prize for Best Book in 1998. Their translation of Love, Anger, Madness was supported by a Simon Guggenheim Fellowship.
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