

Yolaine St.Fort

THE LESSON



I woke up screaming. Oh God it was an awful dream. In my dream, my boys are headless like the ones in the story Tante Denise told me three years ago. What a horrible story, it was. It all started because of hunger. So much hunger in my sweet country. Manman says that Haiti is not sweet anymore. Manman says that Haiti has lost its sweetness over the years, that its soil scarcely produce now because its thirst for water has been replaced by a thirst for blood. She says that its soil would thrive again if the sky would rain blood—a notion that brought tears to my eyes.

As I was remembering my dream, it occurred to me that if the sky did rain blood, then my Haiti would produce. That is if Manman's theory is correct. But then, we wouldn't have the water cycle, but the blood cycle. This way, we would have all the blood that we need. We would cook with blood, bathe in a shower of blood, and quench our thirst with liters and gallons of blood. Our children would dance and shriek under bloody beads, falling from the sky. Our cheeks would be stained by blood when we weep. But most importantly, we wouldn't have the desire to shed one another's blood because we would have bloody oceans and bloody rivers and bloody springs, etc. to do with them as we please.

But *helas*, it was too late for the headless boys. My aunt told me it happened in a town, north of Port Au Prince, named Henry Christophe. Believe you me, this town was named after one of our ancestors who shed his blood to yank his people out of slavery nearly two hundred years ago.

My aunt told me that in this town, there lived two families who both own their plantations. A family of three and a family of five. The family of three fell into poverty over

the years because there wasn't much rain. Their next door neighbor had a well, which contained enough water to sustain them for a few years. So their plantation was greener than the greenest grass you ever did see (my aunt's own words). One day, TiJean, the son of the poor family, woke up by the loud gurgling in his stomach. He yawned, his head spinning. He was twelve years old, but he could pass for a non-developed nine year old. His hair was beginning to turn red, a sign of malnutrition the volunteer nurse at the local clinic warned, just a few months earlier.

So TiJean got up and ventured into a secluded corner of his backyard to wash up. He was barefoot. There was no longer any dewy grass to tickle his toes. He looked up and saw bannann trees, their broad leaves, flapping in the breeze. He saw coconut and mango and orange trees towering, teasing him with their fragrance, which the wind blew through his tiny nostrils as though to tempt him. He swallowed saliva and focused his attention on his mother who, crouching near the fire, was making some coffee. He assumed this because he could make out the shape of the *grèk*, which she used to strain the coffee. He closed his eyes to see if he could seep in its aroma, but he couldn't. He knew it was because she only used a teaspoon as opposed to the five heaps of tablespoon she used to use when their own plantation was greener than the greenest grass you ever did see.

Ti Jean spotted two servant girls picking eggs in various corners of the yard. He stared, smelling the sweet aroma of fried eggs. Suddenly, he dashed to the front of his house and climbed the wooden gate that separated his house from his wealthy neighbor's. He landed safely and smiled his proud smile. He picked up a large rock and aimed for a ripe mango *fransik*, hoping Monsieur Rubin would see him and give him a whole sack to take home. He smiled at the idea too. Sadly, the poor thing missed. He watched as the rock landed on the head of a chicken, its head spurting blood, as it squealed.

Later that day, an eyewitness said he watched with horror as Monsieur Rubin's machete was raised in the air and cut off TiJean's head. He said he stood behind the trunk of a tree, watching as the boy's head thumped on the ground, which wasted no time drinking his innocent blood. The witness said that he was too far to hear something Monsieur Rubin said to the boy before killing him. But supposedly, he was able to read his lips and make out what Monsieur Rubin told the boy as he landed the machete against his neck. "*A koz de vakabon, san sal tankou ou mwen pa menm ka domi lanuit. M ap fout trase yon ekzanp sou ou.* Because of vagabonds and lowlifes like you, I can't even sleep at night. Damn it, I'm using you as an example. That ought to teach you all a lesson."

And to make a long story short, the town mourned the death of the boy and tried to console his parents as best as they could. Some neighbors brought them strong, dark and bitter tasting coffee, saying it would prevent them from going into shock. Others brought basilik tea, sweetened with sugarcane syrup, swearing by its power to heal the worst of broken hearts. Some of the men brought plantains and yam, apologizing for the meager portions. They thought Monsieur Rubin had committed a grave crime, but because he had wealth and on occasions sold them some water, they kept their comments hush hushed—that he was a monster and the devil in disguise and a former Tonton Macoute soldier all trapped in one.

Naturally, Ti Jean's parents couldn't get over his death. They spent their days in rags and burned candles and prayed for vengeance. At last, it came to TiJean's father in a dream what he had to do. He had to kill not one of Monsieur Rubin's boys. But all three. They were triplets. They could only be told apart by their skin's hues. They had the same pointy head and eyes that were always squinting in the sun and cheeks that were plump. Medium brown was one. Light-medium brown was one. And dark medium brown was one.

So TiJean's father spent the next few weeks watching, waiting for the opportunity to come when the children would be left alone in the care of the servant girls. At last, the opportunity came when both Monsieur and Madame Rubin's Jeep disappeared down the dirt road one morning. TiJean's father's teeth gleamed for the first in a long time, matching the luster on his machete. The gate was left open.

Like a man possessed by a demon, he followed the triplet's drone in their backyard and with one swift movement of the blade, one head was down. Surprisingly, the other boys didn't even scream. They whimpered, backed away, and ended in the thickets where he proceeded to chop both of their heads. The servant girls who were doing some chores inside heard only silence. They panicked and ran barefoot in the backyard where they followed a trail of blood, their screaming echoing.

It turned out that TiJean's parents left town before Madame and Monsieur could return. And when they did return, they were soon seen with their heads shaved, mourning the death of their boys, sometimes pounding the earth until it tasted blood.

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