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Haiti, 1965 - A Novel

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HAITI, 1965

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Fabienne Sylvia Josaphat

2014

To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Fabienne Sylvia Josaphat, and entitled Haiti, 1965, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Debra Dean

Bruce Harvey

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 20, 2014

The thesis of Fabienne Sylvia Josaphat is approved.

Dean Kenneth G. Furton
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Florida International University, 2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HAITI, 1965

by

Fabienne Sylvia Josaphat

Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

HAITI, 1965 is a historical novel set in Haiti where a struggling taxi driver, Raymond L'Eveill , struggles to provide for his family under the rule of the infamous dictator Fran ois Duvalier Sr.

Raymond's brother Nicolas, a professor and attorney, lives a more luxurious lifestyle, and both brothers are at odds over finances. When Nicolas decides to write a book about the crimes committed by the government, the inevitable happens. The brutal Tonton Macoutes militia raid his home and find notes that are as evidence enough to send him to Haiti's most notorious gulag of the era, Fort Dimanche, It will be up to Raymond to save his brother. He will have to use his resources and street smarts to get himself arrested, infiltrate the dungeons of Fort Dimanche to find Nicolas, and plan a near-impossible escape.

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PROLOGUE

*“My dead sleep in this earth; this soil is tainted red
with the blood of generations of men who carry my name;
I am the direct descendant, twice over, of the very man who founded this
nation. Therefore, I have decided to stay here, and possibly, to die here.”*

Jacques Stephen Alexis, author (1922-1961)

Excerpt from his letter to François Duvalier, June 2nd, 1960

Port-au-Prince – 1965

CHAPTER ONE

Raymond counted his money quickly, licking his oily thumb to separate the crinkled gourdes. Some of the numbers were undecipherable, the edges ripped or the corners smudged away with time and friction.

“Fifty,” he muttered, shaking his head. It was hardly enough to cover his rent.

He shuffled the money with a heavy sigh, his fingers rubbing against the printed portrait of François Duvalier. Even on paper, the president’s eyes seemed accusing, spying on him through thick, rimmed glasses. Raymond piled the bills into a thin stack, and stuffed them in his back pocket before turning up the volume of the ebullient *konpa* music blaring from his radio. If he was going to wait for his fare to return, he was going to need the company of Radio Lakay.

He adjusted his visor, and stared at the photograph of the two children tucked halfway underneath the flap. A small boy with a round head and a little girl with red bows in her hair flashed bone-white teeth, smiling, their faces black as onyx stones. Enos was his father's replica, his skin always glistening in the blaze of summer. Adeline, however, was more her mother's child, with brown, bony cheekbones, and a spear for a tongue. Raymond smiled. Just this morning, as he dropped her off at school, she reminded him not to bother picking them up. “We can walk home,” she said, squeezing her brother’s hand.

They could. He knew that. Yet, he wanted to provide this little bit for his children: the gift of transportation, something he’d never had in his childhood. Raymond

himself had walked for miles to school in his bad shoes when he and his brother Nicolas were younger, stepping over gravel and stones in the harsh country terrains. Now that he lived in the city and was a father, he wanted to afford his offspring the luxury of a car. Even if “luxury” was this old beat-up Datsun taxicab he was sitting in, with a red ribbon tied to the rearview mirror, signaling he was still on duty. He smoothed a dog-ear wrinkle from the photograph with his blackened fingernail. No, fifty gourdes were not enough to sustain his family these days. He would need twice as much for that, and still, once they were all fed, there would be nothing left for their tuition, and his rent that was past due.

“Pitit se richès malere!”

Raymond jumped, startled by the voice behind him. He looked out his window. Faton, his friend, had snuck up to the driver's door and was now looking at him, a boyish grin on his face. He was mischievous that way, from the time he'd started out as a cabbie under Raymond's guidance.

“It's true,” Faton continued, pointing at the photograph. “Children are the wealth of the poor.”

He should have known Faton was near. Everyone knew the stench of leather and dye was the definite sign of Faton's proximity. Ever since he'd quit driving taxis and started a job at the new tanneries, he carried the smell of decomposed cowhide wherever he went. Raymond leaned back.

“It's just the lime they use in the plant,” Faton joked as Raymond covered his mouth. “Not that big of a deal.” Faton's smile revealed a gap between his two front teeth.

“Not to you, maybe,” Raymond uttered against his fingers.

Faton lowered his voice in a whisper. “Hey, we all need to make a living. Taxi cabs don’t pay enough, so I transport hide. I know it smells, but it’s honest work, and there are perks. Whatever keeps the Devil off my back.”

Laughter cascaded out of him and Raymond managed a smile. By “Devil,” Faton meant Duvalier, or Papa Doc. Haitians could not speak openly about or against their leader without consequences of torture, imprisonment, and certain, violent death. Instead of referring to him by name, many used code words like “Baron Samedi,” the Vaudou guardian of cemeteries. After all, the dictator was notorious for dressing like Baron Samedi, in a black suit and matching hat, and his black-rimmed glasses and sinister laugh added an extra touch of macabre to his dangerous persona. Others, like Faton, referred to him as the “Devil.”

Even joking about Duvalier was dangerous. His informants were everywhere. All it took was a phone call, and something said in jest was denounced as an affront to the Republic. But Faton still trusted his friend Raymond, and Raymond trusted him.

“You didn't smell the funk coming a mile away?” Faton snickered.

“I'll get used to it.” Raymond dropped his hand.

“You'll have to if you come apply for the job,” Faton replied, tapping Raymond on the shoulder. “The pay is good, I keep telling you. One thousand gourdes a month, steady. No more scouring the slums for customers, no more waiting at the wharf for tourists. You know those cruise ships are docking with empty cabins, these days.”

Raymond nodded. It was true that tourists these days were too afraid of the Nightmare Republic.

A thousand gourdes, Faton said. That sounded ideal. Raymond hadn't made that much money in a long time. Two years ago, after the Barbot Affair that had threatened to overthrow Duvalier, curfews had been frequently imposed in Port-au-Prince. For that reason also, customers were few. And then, there were the tap-taps, increasing competition in the transport industry, offering more room in their colorful converted pick-up truck beds.

"I know," Raymond nodded. "I know."

Every time they saw each other here, in the narrow arteries of Cité Simone's slum village, their conversation wound up around the common themes of family and money. It was what people talked about. Survival. Raymond never found it appropriate to discuss those matters so casually in the public eye, where anyone might overhear. In fact, he knew tallying his money while seated at the wheel of his car was also a mistake. Cité Simone, a poor shantytown a few miles away from the cruise port and tourist bevvvy of the Place du Bicentenaire, was a dwelling for poverty and desperation. Reports of muggings grew customary.

"Just say the word when you're ready," Faton said, adjusting his gold chain around his neck. "I'll put in a word with the boss. It's the least I can do. I owe you, you know?"

Raymond was the one who'd gotten Faton started driving taxis in Port-au-Prince. Thankfully, Faton's thick black afro could not fit through the Datsun's half-open window. Raymond wondered whether he himself now smelled of hide, and how hard it would be to wash off, especially when water had become a luxury for his family.

Faton withdrew, grabbed a plastic comb from his back pocket and ran it through his hair, checking his reflection in Raymond's back window. Then, he gave Raymond a closer look. "You know, I don't understand you sometimes. You're barely making a living now that these curfews are in place. Why are you still doing this?"

"I drive taxis. That's what I know."

"We can all learn something new, if we have to. I did. What are you doing here, anyways?"

"Waiting for my customer to finish a visit."

Faton nodded. It wasn't surprising he himself was in the area. He lived one block west of Chez Madame Fils. He was in the habit of grabbing dinner right before going home in the evening.

Raymond let his eyes wander to the pretty women in floral dresses clinging to the balcony of Chez Madame Fils, directly across from him. The beautiful prostitutes blew kisses and waved at the men walking by. They usually came out at night for tourists. That was how it worked, until the foreigners stopped coming. Now, they were bored and entertained each other by shouting insults back at the outraged mothers rushing by. Chez Madame Fils Snack Bar and Disco served hot lunches during the day, but at night, Madame Fils turned on the music, broke the seals off the rum bottles, and men like Raymond's customer steadily trickled in. Raymond sometimes bought sandwiches from them, keeping away from the women. Today, he sat in his car, waiting. *Any moment now*, he hoped. He could drive the man home and pocket a few more gourdes.