

Haiti

Best Nightmare on Earth



Herbert Gold

with a new afterword by the author

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With grateful friendship to Jean Weiner,
Jacques Large, Al Seitz, F. Morisseau-
Leroy, Shimon Tal, Shelagh Burns, Issa el
Saieh, and to some who cannot be named.



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PREFACE

This is an account of my times in Haiti, from the years of the early fifties when I lived there as a young student to my most recent visit in 1990 as a less-young traveler. I have changed some names and identifying details. As in the past, some of my Haitian friends will not be happy with my reporting; but they know I keep coming back because their country is still the magic island.

Haiti was the first independent black nation of modern times, winning its freedom from France with a slave revolt against Napoléon at the height of his power. Here is the first sentence of a primary school reader still in use in the 1950s:

Nos ancêtres, les Gaulois, avaient les yeux bleus et les cheveux blonds.
Our ancestors, the Gauls, had blue eyes and blond hair.

① **Île de la Tortue:** the former buccanear island where a Texas company tried to make an independent state by buying it from the Duvalier family. (I flew in with the Tortue Air Force.)

② **Port-de-Paix:** where I searched for buried pirate treasure but found only malaria.

③ **Kenscoff:** here sat the Philosophers' Circle.

④ **Croix des Missions:** a popular cockfight pit; also home of Andre Pierre, voodoo priest and painter.

⑤ **Marmalade:** the Dukes of Marmalade, given their titles by King Christophe and the Empereur Soulouque, inspired Gilbert & Sullivan. I couldn't find their descendants or pretenders to the dukedom.

⑥ **Petit Goâve:** here two the leopard pers of Oliver Coquelin roamed the Imperial Cocoyer Yacht Club and the hotel Relais de l'Empereur.

⑦ **Cabaret:** renamed Duvalierville by Papa Doc, who constructed a "model city" in his honor of what seemed to be Pepsodent toothpaste. The Minister of Tourism, taking me to picnic nearby, declared that Washington, D.C. and Brasilia, Brazil, were merely larger versions of Duvalierville.

⑧ **Forêt des Pins:** where I ran with the champion Haitian marathoners.

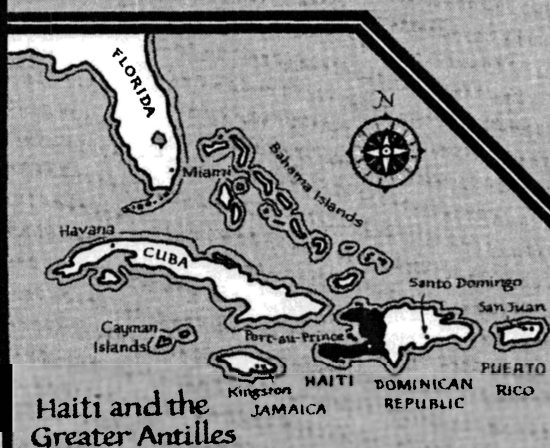
⑨ **Pétionville:** the cool and elegant mountain suburb where there are said to be several hundred millionaires.

⑩ **Jacmel:** full page advertisements in Haitian newspapers thanked me for helping to build a passable road from Port-au-Prince to Jacmel. (I had done no actual roadwork, but wrote about the pretty seaside village of Jacmel with its colonial buildings.)

⑪ **Gonâives:** where the successful revolt against the Duvaliers began; where I showed the great voodoo priest photographs of decapitated and burned bodies of "evil-doers," "magicians," and where I discussed birth control with this man who had more than fifty children but believed in "family planning." (His children were all planned.)

⑫ **Near Cap Haitien:** the French armies were defeated in the climactic Battle of Vertières. At its reenactment in 1954, 150 years later, I tried to comfort the sobbing wife of the French ambassador, who seemed to be rediscovering the loss of "our pearl of the Antilles."

⑬ **Port-au-Prince:** the antheap capital of the République, where cockcrows and voodoo drums can still be heard.



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“We are very much interested in Haiti,” said the American Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, in 1913, to the Ambassador from Haiti. “Tell me about the country and who the people are. Where is Haiti?”

“”

“Dear me, think of it! Niggers speaking French.”



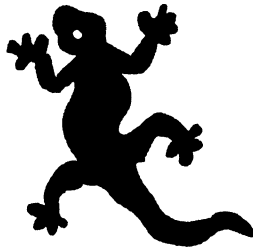
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CHAPTER ONE

1953: The Golden Age of Strange





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N PARIS I met the teasing, laughing, flirting, Haitian bride of a black American friend. The lady, a singer and dancer, was the daughter of a poor family which lived in a cinder-block house a short walk from the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. "Haiti has a National Palace?" I asked.

"It doesn't have a tin roof," she said. "My mother's house does."

And then the inexorable winding down of my G.I. Bill and Fulbright sinecures brought me back to my hometown, Cleveland, the Paris of northeastern Ohio, to await the fame and riches which would surely fall from the heavens (New York) after publication of my first novel. The novel came out; I hurried to the Post Office in the Public Square; my picture failed to appear on the new three-cent stamp.

I had a wife, two babies, no good prospects to support them. I remembered the laughing Haitian singer and dancer. I went to the library to look up scholarships and fellowships and applied for one to take me to the Université d'Haiti. In due course, I was on a ship traveling from New York to Panama, with a stop in Port-au-Prince.

Steaming south along the coast on a white Panama Lines vessel, I watched a tall, imperious Haitian, with an aquiline nose, impeccably dressed, pacing the deck. I admired his self-possession, and as a very young man enraptured by everything different from Cleveland, Ohio, I wondered about his manner of proud exasperation. A quality I had not developed and could only admire from afar was the talent for being elegantly pissed-off.

In the way of travelers, eventually we spoke, and we became friends for the next quarter of a century. As the years went by, his exasperation grew. Haiti gave him plenty to be exasperated about, although he would not leave his country except for brief visits.

This tall black man pacing the deck, Jean Weiner, was an electrical engineer. His family, from the town of Jacmel, had been in the coffee-exporting business. A certain molding of his face and the prominent nose carried on the look of one of his grandfathers, a Jew from—as his name suggested—Vienna. Later I met other good Roman Catholic or voodoo-believing Haitians with ancestors among the wandering Jews who at times had pressing reasons to make their lives in this hidden and unlikely place. Educated in Paris and the United States, an angry and generous soul, Jean was my first friend among the class of Haitians called the elite—African and French and Haitian all at once, and negotiating their lives and their history with unique charm and difficulty.

When the coastal waters began to turn tropical, Jean changed into a white linen suit and began to groan about the island where I was coming to spend the next year—the next year and, as it turned out, a part of every next day and night of my life. “Ah, Herb, go back, go home while you can!” he said, and I laughed, treating this as a joke.

In fact, Haiti was not bad to me. Haiti was mostly bad to Haitians.

The white Panama Lines ship passed the Île de la Gonâve, where uncounted people lived without electricity, machinery, or contact with the larger world of Port-au-Prince and the mainland. I had tried to prepare myself by reading everything I could find in English and French and so I said, “Oh yes, the *White King of La Gonâve*,” remembering one of the romance-drenched books. These accounts were normally illustrated with woodcuts of drum-beaters or voodoo ceremonies, all staring eyes and licking flames.

“You think you’re ready,” Jean Weiner said. “My dear friend, you are not ready.”

The bay of Port-au-Prince was like a black mirror reflecting the heat. Frantic boys in burned-out log canoes were begging for coins alongside the ship, diving into the murk and coming up gasping for more, another, *vite, à moïn, vite!* Jean extended his long arm to offer

me the entire city, spread out in a yellow-gray haze along the wide, wide bay—a low jumble of thick-walled colonial buildings and corrugated tin sheds nearby, and the smoking slum of La Saline, then the irregular slopes with spots of gardens, cloud-shrouded mountains rising into the distance above the town.

I landed with household goods for four; my family would follow by airplane when I found a house. The tropical rush, noise, heat, and harborside dust gave me a dizziness of expectation. I braced myself to sink into clamor as a team of port officials, sweating primly and stubbornly in clothes made for another climate, asked for my papers. “Passport, please!” The startled customs chief looked up, smiling, and waved me through with a welcoming largeness. He was, he declared, an immense and devoted Haitian *amateur* of my distinguished cousin’s music.

“Who?”

Victor Herbert . . . evidently a cousin of Gold Herbert.

“*Mes-z-amis!*” said Jean, shaking his head. “It’s too late now. Welcome to the Land of Unlimited Impossibility.”

Jean’s son, Ti-Jean, delivered my goods in a pickup; and I settled for a while at the Grand Hotel Oloffson, which was then a rundown gingerbread mansion, catchall home for an international collection of wildballs—drunks, criminals, the sexually obsessed, crazies, remittance folks, mistresses and gigolos and bemused adventure-seekers. Over the years it would become my favorite place in the whole wide world, even after it was cleaned up, decorated, prettified, with many of the fat scurrying rats chased from the premises.

I was supposed to give a series of lectures on literature at the Haitian-American Institute. During the first one, someone asked about the place in world literature of Jacques Roumain, Marxist poet and novelist, author of *Rulers of the Dew*, a book about the conflict over land between the rich and the peasants.

I was new to the politics of Port-au-Prince. Rashly I remarked that Jacques Roumain wasn’t the equal of Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, and this provoked a crisis in Haitian-American relations. One of my best new friends wrote a front-page editorial in the *Nouvelliste*, the oldest daily newspaper, denouncing me as a racist for not acknowledging the preeminent sublimity of the Haitian writer. Laughing, he

presented me with an advance copy, and then embraced me, saying, "This is tragic but not serious, like so much of our lives." The American and Haitian authorities jointly decided it would be prudent to cancel the rest of my lectures.

An American cultural affairs officer recommended long siestas. "Build up your strength for the evening," he crisply advised, and taught me the Creole word "bamboche," which combines the notions of dancing, drumming, drinking, flirting, and celebrating into a single concept which could be translated as . . . *bamboche*.

"Just stay, study, come to know our beautiful country," said his Haitian counterpart in the cultural affairs office of the Haitian state department. During the rest of my year and a half as a silenced lecturer, he and I exchanged formal dinners and perspectives on the great world. It was not bad work for a writer. My then-wife had a harder time, since at that time women were several centuries behind in elite society. She raged at the Haitian wife's conversation, which was mostly on the order of: "Est-ce que vous aimez le Brillo, Madame?"

It sounds no more fascinating in English. *Do you like Brillo, Madame?* The lady believed, as my wife did not, that a woman's place was to control the keys and discipline the servants.

The cultural official explained that he had the joy of a large family, sixteen children—"cinq de ma femme, onze dans le peuple." Five by my wife, eleven "in the people." He denounced my new friend Fortuné Bogat, a Haitian millionaire, and explained that Bogat had grown so rich because he was fair-skinned.

"But he's much darker than you," I said, and we argued about that.

I was receiving a lesson in the complexities of Haitian racism. Traditionally, mulatto had gotten ahead of black, but a rich black man was seen as mulatto. Therefore, obsessive eyeballing was a never-ending process. The permutations of Haitian pride seemed infinite and too subtle for American taste. The Cercle Bellevue in Bourdon, to which we were frequently invited as guests, did not offer membership to either whites or blacks. The bylaws were strict in protecting mulatto purity. A North American black visitor was called "un blanc noir"—a black white person—because only Haiti really counted. In

this feudal world, the triumphant mulattoes, along with a few proud black families, spoke French, lived luxuriously, and ruled over the millions of the poor, uneducated Creole-speakers. Of course, when they made love, joked, grew angry, or commanded servants, the elite also spoke the language of childhood, that rich and spicy Creole. The handsome and graceful Haitian air force officers who courted visiting tourist women (sometimes lined up at the bar of the Oloffson to pick this northern fruit off the tree) as children may have had *ti-moun*e ("little one") servants to tote their books to school for them. Later, the servants rode in the backseats of their cars to the tennis courts, carried their rackets, chased balls.

The complex injustice of Haitian class, money, and color distinctions gave daily experience a continual quality of incomprehensible parody. In the early fifties, under the reign of the laughing, drinking, womanizing President Paul E. Magloire (a black man ruling under the politics of *doublure*, doubling, in which black frontmen represented the mulatto power structure behind the scenes), Haitian life seemed impossible, trivial, charming, corrupt, desperate, "tragic but not serious." It was a tragedy that people could dance to.

The times were not trivial, but rather, as James Joyce said in another context, quadrivial.



MY BABY daughters from Paris and Cleveland did not have an American nursery-school rearing during our year at the little house in the Bourdon district, down a dirt road near a ravine off the Pétionville road from Port-au-Prince. Their favorite friend was a child next door whose mother came to us and said, "You like our daughter?"

"Very much." She was a lovable little girl, her hair done in braids with an assortment of ribbons.

"Please take her with you when you go. Give her a chance."

We explained that this was not possible, we could not separate her from her family, it was inconceivable to us.

"I love my daughter very much. I am willing to let her go home with you. I give my permission."

"Please," we said. "It's impossible."

"She will learn to clean your house. She is a good girl. If she does her work well, you could also send her to school."

"Please."

Our neighbor gazed at us with grief. She didn't understand how people who seemed fond of her child could be so cruel, choosing to deny her a chance in life. Puzzled, just wanting information, she asked: "You are racists, Monsieur et Madame?"



OUR FRIEND Felix Morisseau-Leroy, poet, playwright, a "master-of" from Columbia University, a laughing high-liver in the warm-hearted bohemian style, used to drop by for a chat and a rum-soda. He had, still has, the talent for pleasure in life that is also pleasure-giving for others, so he was always welcome. Personally, he wasn't always happy. Once he came breathless to our door. "Morisseau, what's wrong?"

"I had a bad dream."

This made perfect sense. Even in the golden age of the mid-fifties, politics was a bad dream, the conditions of life were bad dreams, the future was a nightmare. A person didn't have to fall asleep to see demons. But after a rum-soda, he calmed himself and benignly watched my daughters, Ann and Judy, at play with their cats. "Do they speak Creole?" he asked.

"English and French," I said.

He asked them about their cats and their chicken in Creole and they chattered back happily. My wife and I stared at each other. Our daughters had learned a language behind our backs; from their friends in the neighborhood, of course, and from the servants, who were careful to speak only French with them in our presence but used the natural language of children at other times. We used to hear Gabrielle singing traditional French children's songs to them, "Bateau" and "Rossignol," and wondered if they also knew Creole songs. Of course they did. Creole is the medium of the people's life with each other. Morisseau, who wrote poetry in Creole and adapted Greek tragedy into Creole, proved a point to us. We had better learn

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the language. Later my wife translated his Creole version of *Antigone* into English after it was performed before enthralled crowds who had never heard of Greece. ("This is a story which happened a long long time ago . . .") In his version, Tiresias was a voodoo priest and Creon a rural police chief and the tragedy became a familiar Haitian tale.



ALAICE FILS-Aimé-de-Dieu was a key member of our new family apparatus. When the children's pet chicken disappeared or expired due to excessive hugging, he found an identical new one. As the houseboy, he was supposed to perform the car washing, the garden clearing, miscellaneous errands; he was supposed to shine my shoes. Once, astonished to find him handing them to a shoeshine boy in the street, I asked what the devil he was up to. "Ce mon secreteh," he said—it was his secretary. In office for a year, he had grown to consider shoe-shining beneath him. Out of his own funds he hired one of the boys who patrolled the streets, pounding their shoeshine boxes to attract trade.

Before arriving in Haiti, I had first been a poor student, then a would-be writer, gradually working my way up to lumpen proletariat. Now, like Alaice, I had become a pioneer of the trickle-down theory. At first, my wife and I thought not to have any servants. It turned out that foreigners could not live this way. Then we thought to hire only a couple, but to pay them twice the normal rate. We found a couple who happily agreed to this plan. We were American liberals and egalitarians.

But they would not perform certain tasks, no matter what we paid them. ("C'est pas mon travail"—it's not my work.) We liked them. We negotiated. They were content to have their tasks limited to their specialties, their salaries appropriately reduced. We finished with a "staff" of four, and our friends among the Haitian elite wondered how we could manage with so few.

After intense resistance, sometimes lasting as long as two or three days, foreigners ended by accepting the system. Haitian communists have servants; I know a Maoist, educated at the Sorbonne, whose "ti-mounè"—little one—carried his briefcase for him.

One day, Ann, my eldest daughter, came running upstairs. "Daddy, somebody is talking in Alalice."

In Alalice?

She had been playing with her chicken near his room and heard a tumultuous voice coming from his mouth while he slept. I hurried downstairs. In his dream the normally shy and smiling young man was tossing—no, was being tossed—and from his mouth was pouring a stream of violent abuse of Alalice Fils-Aimé-de-Dieu, the lowest of the low, cursed on earth and in heaven. It was the hoarse and cruel voice of Ogoun Feraille, god of war. Ogoun was very angry. Alalice was possessed.

I shook him awake.

Dazed, despairing, in pain and fright, he explained that the god was punishing him for not visiting his mother, who lived in the north, near Cap Haitien, which at that time had no good road link with Port-au-Prince. I gave him some money and sent him off. I wondered if we would ever see him again.

In a few days he came trudging through the garden, dusty and weary, but with his smile returned. He had visited his mother. He had propitiated the god. Everything was okay now. How did he make peace with Ogoun? "Ti rum, ti gateau"—a little rum, a little cake, left at the altar in the "hounfor" (temple), where the family worshipped.

Alalice knew he deserved Ogoun's wrath, but the harsh god forgave him. Voodoo, which for most visitors was a weekend or festival entertainment, entered our lives in unexpected ways. It protected our house against thieves. It defined boundaries for behavior. Not only the poor believed; everyone was touched by the art, music, and practice of a view of the world coming from the ancient African spirits. When my daughters suffered rashes or bites, Alalice and Gabrielle, our cook, treated them with leaves and murmurings. Ann and Judy were soothed and calmed. We weren't sure if it was the wetted herbs or the murmurings which did this work. If there was magic here, my wife and I were in favor of it.

The writer Pierre Marcelin took me to all-night ceremonies and shrugged when I said, "This is more than an entertainment for you, isn't it?"

BEST NIGHTMARE ON EARTH

"We need another life," he said. "This life on earth has too many shadows."

"Haiti's flooded with sunlight."

"We need some shadows for our sunlight, mon cher."



PORT-AU-PRINCE, with its thick-walled colonial buildings near the harbor, climbed the hills into mist and mountains. Visitors came to photograph the gingerbread dream houses which seemed to be made of spun wood. There were also the cinder-block dwellings, and the houses—*cailles-pailles*—that were huts composed of boxes, debris, mud, straw, and tin strips. Chickens, goats, and donkeys plied the streets, as did small black creatures I first thought were smart quick dogs. They were pigs. When the sun went down, the roads cooled a bit, and then streetlamps glowed in the advanced districts where there were streetlamps, and schoolchildren marched back and forth beneath them, studying their books. Few houses had electricity. The evening came, that rapid tropical nightfall. The romantic French crepuscular twilight is brief in these latitudes. In Port-au-Prince in those days, drums pulsed a person to sleep at night. I learned to separate the sounds of voodoo drums from those of dances and partying. The smells were those of people, emulsifying vegetation, and charcoal smoke. Why was it a kind of heaven? After all these years, I'm still answering this question.

Those first weeks in Haiti marked out the elements of an inexhaustible set of interlocking puzzles: unimaginable poverty, unpredictable appeal; friendship and fear; a culture which is impenetrable and profoundly hospitable; desperation and humor; corruption in politics and generosity in friends; a collaboration and suspicion between classes unlike anyplace else. The complex strains between black and mulatto seemed more like a racial than a class separation.

In my mid-twenties in those years of the mid-fifties, I was navigating among new gods, new languages, a very old and new world of magic and love, need, celebration, and suffering, with a goofy thirst for all the experience I could drink down. At an age when other young

HERBERT GOLD

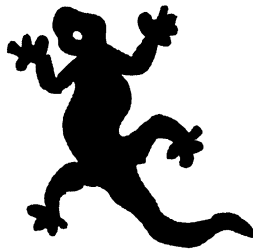
parents like my wife and me were also navigating the shoals of marriage in the fifties—"togetherness" was the American voodoo put forth in this postwar American dreamtime of prosperity and insecurity—our family was thrust onto an island of absolute strange. My wife and I went to ecstatic ceremonies instead of the movies. Our children were learning three languages, English, French, and Creole. Our friends were men and women a universe away from our mid-western rearing, our student loafing.

I didn't feel that Haitians were alien because I liked so many of them so much. How could I not? They were troubled and full of fun—just what a fellow needed. They had the gift of the Caribbean morning sun on dew, to bring all of creation into sparkle. Although my wife and I didn't know it yet, our marriage was a fragile vessel to set sail amid the persuasive, steady Haitian drumbeat of pleasure and risk.

Years later, I'm still explaining Haiti to myself. Probably I'm still explaining myself to myself, too. But as they say in that land crumpled in God's hand, beyond the mountain lies another mountain. And beyond any explanation lies another explanation.

CHAPTER TWO

Americans in the Port of Princes: The Early Fifties



**The little fellow does what he can;
the big fellow does what he wants.**

—Haitian proverb

**Every creature in the sea eats people;
it is the shark which bears the bad name.**

—Haitian proverb



Y WIFE and daughters had come out of the coolness of an airplane onto a road where donkeys plodded and peasant women, market-bound, were carrying their loads of vegetables or coffee on their heads. My wife noted that this was different from Paris and Cleveland. Ann and Judy rode with the easy curiosity of children into a new world. An airport beggar greeted us by putting out her hand, "Geev-me-fiave-cents-Meester," and then joined us in laughter because I had no hand free of babies, goods, papers. Beggars had not yet become desperate and insistent.

What nourished wayfarers was the taste for strange. The traditional joys of tropical tourism—swimming, sunning, rumming, sexing, and writing postcards home—seemed to make contact with the known world, but this Garden of Eden had fallen into deep disrepair. The Republic of Haiti, a Caribbean island nation the size of Maryland, mountainous, sea-bordered except for the frontier it shared with the Dominican Republic, was so densely populated, even then, that the visitor found it difficult to relieve himself by the side of the road without a crowd of peasants materializing out of the brush to observe his achievement. Born of a slave revolt unique in history, the chief characteristic of Haiti's career has been a nervous alternation between occasional reformers and ephemeral tyrants who have used their rank as the means to personal fortune. Freed from some of the stunting of colonialism, Haiti has given birth to many gifted and powerful individuals, but the nation has never succeeded in develop-

ing a stable government serious about educating the illiterate mass and consistent in attempting to raise the standard of living of one of the world's poorest and most long-suffering peoples.

In principle, Haiti was a black nation, French in language, Catholic in religion, democratic in government. In practice, Haiti in 1953 was a collection of 3½ million blacks ruled by a largely mulatto upper class; its business was controlled by the so-called elite and by foreigners; the people spoke Creole and, except for about 8 percent of the population, did not understand, read, or write French. The people were profoundly rooted in the celebrations of the voodoo pantheon. Defiant plantation slaves named Macandal and Boukman were among the precursors of revolution in the late eighteenth century—they were also *houngans*, voodoo priests, summoning revolt with drums and fires. They were tortured and broken by the French; they burned and tortured in return. After independence came in 1804, against a Napoléon Bonaparte at the height of his powers, Haiti adopted a model constitution—interrupted by brutal kings, emperors, and ephemeral presidents just passing through. Occasional reformers and patriots kept the ideals of justice and freedom flickering. By the 1950s, under elegantly inscribed laws, Haiti was democratic in form and a military dictatorship in fact.

Some of the first leaders of the Haitian slaves against their French masters had fought earlier at Savannah in the American Revolution. The motives for rebellion in Haiti were the misery and the sublime injustice of slavery. The genius of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the philosopher slave, and the other leaders who finally brought victory in 1804 was kindled by the same ideas of the Rights of Man that justified the turmoil in Paris and Boston.

Despite ideals shared in the declarations of independence for the United States and Haiti, official American policy, often made by slaveholders, remained deeply hostile to the new black nation. Haiti's black slave leaders, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and Christophe, and later the mulatto general Pétion, acted with skill, persistence, and a spirit of self-sacrifice, first in expelling the French, then in initiating the new state among the ashes and ruins.

Thomas Jefferson expressed the fear that Haitians might invade the United States in order to free American slaves. During the first

hundred years of Haitian independence, the United States stayed aloof from the affairs of Haiti, which was treated as an untouchable among the nations, except to warn away any Europeans who seemed to be looking for naval bases in the Caribbean. Haiti's commerce and official culture were still linked with France. The Haitian ruling class preserved sentimental ties despite the bitterness of slavery, the blood-baths of the war for freedom, the crippling ransom eventually paid for the lost plantations. The sons of rich Haitians, perhaps bearing the blood of both Norman nobility and Guinean princes in their veins, went to school at the Lycée Stanislas and the Sorbonne in Paris.

Then, in 1915, the integration of Haiti into American hemispheric affairs began with the military occupation of Haiti by American Marines. The public explanation for the occupation involved disorders in Port-au-Prince. President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, following a massacre of his political opponents in prison, had just been torn to bits by a mob in the street; presidents before him had come and gone like the wind, poisoned, blown up in their palaces, regularly subtracted from office by irregular means. The more compelling reason for the American Navy's steaming into the harbor concerned a debt which the National City Bank of New York wanted to make sure would be collected and which was, in fact, paid out of the customs receipts.

A just appraisal of the occupation, finally ended by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy, should include progress in public health, road building, fiscal organization. A medical school was developed. At the same time, the Haitian spirit was affronted by an occupying power which chose Southern Marines for duty in Haiti because "they know how to deal with darkies." The memoirs of American officers and diplomats during this period make depressing reading. The Paris-educated elite, accustomed to being the master in its own house, suffered insults; the peasantry suffered from the forced labor gangs organized by the Americans to build roads—this seemed close to the slavery which Haitians have never forgotten. Military force was a poor teacher of the democratic process.

After years of sentimental efforts to relate the Haitian to the French economy, the occupation ended with Haiti now fixed as an economic pendant to the United States. Coffee, the chief money crop, finally found its natural market.

How comfortable was Haiti in this conjunction of its destiny with a profoundly different culture? Not very.

Where was the place in Haitian life of the Americans living in Haiti? On a distant edge.

In this "tropical paradise," formerly "pearl of the Antilles," the foreign resident was as free as a person could be, almost exempt from normal laws. He was also constrained and excluded from the secret life which surrounded him.

The long shadow of the United States was a protective mantle for the American visitor. He felt it when he made a traffic error and was whistled down by a cop who then, seeing he was American, waved him on if his victim could walk away. The Haitian government charged the United Nations \$150 for a baby killed by a careless chauffeur. This may have been a fortune to the bereaved parents—to most Americans, a rather inexpensive baby. That immensely moving Haitian hospitality—almost any peasant who had it offered coffee to a stranger, and if he needed a place for the night, the peasant would put his family outdoors and give the traveler his hut—was especially tender toward Americans.

Invitations to the exclusive clubs came readily to the visitor, while *nouveaux riches* Haitians, who may have had every personal merit, were kept waiting until their children made a brilliant marriage into the right family to prove themselves with the elite. An American slid easily as a guest among elite society, there to play tennis or politics with people whose names dated back to the time of the court of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a brilliant general in 1804, later a ferocious and doomed emperor. A Haitian whose wealth was new, whose skin was dark, and whose family was unknown would be voted down by the admission committee of the Cercle Bellevue. Some upper-class Haitians had dark skins; some lower-class Haitians had light skins; the matter was complicated by history and connection. Finicky genealogists ranked ancestry from black toward increasing infusions of whiteness with such terms as *sacatra*, *griffe*, *marabou*, *mulâtre*, *quarteron*, *métif*, *mamelouc*, *quarteronné*, and finally the *sang-mêlé* who was supposed to have only a validating trace of heroic African blood. The workaday criteria for class distinction were color of skin, angle of nose, twist of hair, curl of

lip, although all were proud of their slave ancestors who united to win freedom.

Occasionally American blacks came to visit a society where racism had been eliminated. Sometimes an adventurous black businessman would bring his money for investment, as did one young man who had the idea of importing dry-cleaning equipment so that the Haitian elite would not need to air-ship their uniforms, suits, and dresses to Miami for this service.

Both black and white visitors found permutations of racism for which they were unprepared. I went sailing with the beautiful daughter of a former President who proudly informed me that there were no Negroes in her family.

"Do you mean you're descended from an infinite series of mulattos?"

"Oui."

Yet there were also traditional elite black families which jealously guarded their African purity, such as the Mars family, of which a world-renowned member was Jean Price-Mars, author of the most influential Haitian book, a work of anthropology and history called *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle—Thus Spake the Uncle*. When I came calling, invited for afternoon tea, I found a teasing old man, fond of French puns and wordplay, agreeing vigorously when I said my only recourse was to play the buffoon. He said it wasn't my fault that I hadn't learned French and Creole as a child. He was in his nineties and still had much to do, but he didn't mind taking an hour out of his day to laugh at the visiting American student.

His son, the psychiatrist Louis Mars, wrote a book, *Voodoo et Hysterie*, which argued that voodoo supported mental health by providing socially accepted expression to impulses which cause neurosis and psychosis in others. A person can legitimately change sex during possession as part of a ceremony, enacting the opposite-sex spirit which has come to inhabit his or her body. I saw shy people become bold, repressed people show anger—the warlike cries of Ogoun Feraille or the cold murderous rage of Baron Samedi. When they came out of the trance, their friends and family would bathe and soothe them, consoling them for the god's trick. Sometimes they were teased and treated as part of the comedy of voodoo, especially when a