

September 7, 1991

Alexis

As hard as I try to keep them still, my hands keep moving, sometimes to brush away the mist on the windowpane, where I can see myself reflected against the darkness of night, sometimes to reach out to grab something from my backpack, or to brush down my hair, forward, with the grain, toward the contours of my wide forehead. They are anxious, my hands. They save me and dishonor me. I fold them in my lap, fingers lacing each other in short, thick braids of brown flesh. I want to be still. If it were not for these hands of mine, I could forget, just for a moment, the chaos I have left in my wake, in a piece of island so small as to be insignificant to anyone I would encounter on this swiftly passing road. If I could forget, I could feel exhilaration with nothing to fear. For now, this road seems to be leading toward nothing. There are miles and miles of nothing before me.

My fingers unclasp themselves. There they go again, with minds of their own, reaching for pencil and paper. Tracing a line here and then one there until another landscape from memory emerges: the tall walls of the Citadel standing at the top of the mountain where my village lies cradled at its gargantuan feet. We, the descendants of those who survived the Citadel's making, who survived King Christophe's egomania at the turn of the century. And yet we revere him, our King, our Savior. Without him, we would not have had a road leading out of the mountainous wilderness to the city by the ocean, Le Cap, once named Cap Henry, for him. Without him, I would not have gone to school and learned to draw these things: outline of Ayiti chérie in the shape of a scorpion's claw; faces of those left behind: Philippe, Mamie Leila, my mother, my father, Marthes. The Citadel loomed above us all of our days, a reminder of what the muscles of men can do and what the want of power can destroy. We suffer still under the shadow of what Christophe left behind. My itching fingers

know this truth. They cannot rest for anger of what cannot be changed, what they wish they could redraw and remap. The world pilgrimages to our shores in search of the lost kingdom former slaves built from their own sweat and love of freedom. The world comes to see and delights in the colorful hues of our huts at the base of the mountain, at our strange accents pronouncing the words of its native tongues. The world gapes at us as if at curios in a shop and then turns its back on us, amused at our poverty, amused at the ancient splendour of a kingdom that failed to live up to its promise. They wash their hands of us and go back to their foreign lands with their forked tongues. We are left behind to gather up their rubbish in piles between the falling rose bricks of all that is left to mark the site of Christophe's best-known palace, Sans Souci. We gather up the rubbish and let it burn along with our dreams of never having to set eyes on a pale tourist again. But they come again and again and we are none the richer for their visits. We look down in shame at our clothing, at the torn remnants of our roads, and eventually we turn from each other, not understanding what has brought us the aching in our chests and bellies, the vacancy in our eyes.

I am far from home and I think of those I have left behind in the echoes of the past. Am I to see them again? I wonder. I try to clench the pencil tighter so that my hands will stop their broad strokes. It will take practice for them to unlearn these movements. But I will have to teach them silence. The truth is this: if I were to follow my hands, I would have to stop running. I cannot stop running. I will have to teach them to be still. But I do not know exactly why I am running, and to where, and to whom. I should be asking myself, from whom? from where? I am too tired to think. My fingers draw in answer to the chaos of my mind.

It is difficult to explain. I have found no one yet who has understood the story of my life. What it has meant to me to be born under an unforgiving sun, in a village where poverty is a way of life. I was born to parents who thought they could change the world, if not in their own time, then through me. My father owned land and hired many of the villagers for their labor; he paid them a fair wage. My mother taught drawing lessons in the harbor of our kitchen. They are modest people, my parents. Class has kept them from mixing with the villagers in ways that get closer to the bone, closer to the self. Yet, they sent me to the public school of the village so that I would be one with the people, so that my mind would be as one with the hearts of the villagers. And they allowed me a best friend I have had since the earliest days of my childhood. His

name is Philippe. Philippe is the son of no one. His father is unknown, his mother long dead. His grandmother has taken care of him through the growing-up years, his grandmother the laundry woman who washed our clothes and returned them blanched and pressed early on Sunday mornings. Our parents hardly knew each other, but Philippe and I, we are as close as brothers who have suckled milk from the same breast, who have been born from the same womb.

My parents have made sure that I have learned to read, to spell, to count, to apply my mind to all worlds of things. But I do not know how to plough the earth open, to make it yield its fruits. I am as unconnected to land as a fish in its water. I do not know where my stream lies. I am running, swimming over land and sea to find it. Yes, I will admit it: I am running away from Ayiti and all of its misery, all its broken promises and terror of a history.

You see, I was there. I am not talking out the side of my mouth. I was sheltered by my parents and the Jesuit priest, our schoolteacher Pè Joshua, with all my book learning and staying indoors. But I was there. I was there sitting in front of the local Tele at the Lotto stall when Baby Doc and his wife Michèle sped past the international reporters on their way to the airport only five years ago. *Was it possible?* I asked myself, *Could they really be leaving?* My friends and I thought it was a *truc monté*, a joke, like those shows where an unsuspecting common person is duped into believing something they know cannot be true, like those photographs in American magazines that someone has made up in a lab to sell their rag, but it was true. The next day, all the papers carried the headline: Bébé Doc ousted, gone! And the people in Port-au-Prince danced on his father's, Papa Doc's, grave, and wished him and his wife dead too. Up here, near Le Cap, there was not much we could do. But we watched and listened to the radio, and when it was clear that the Duvaliers were not returning, we turned on those who had been the instrument of their destructive powers.

Macoutes were dragged out of their cars and burned alive in the middle of the street, others were beaten, denounced, houses of the Duvalierists looted and turned inside out. I saw these things with my own two eyes. I was frozen to the stool while all this was happening, on the TV, on the streets behind me. I did not know whether to stand, whether to turn right or left. I did not know if I had the power to loot or set a building on fire. I had learned for too long how to be quiet and still against all the things that went on around us, all the invisible things

that transpired, the *teledjòl* in the street letting us know who had been imprisoned, whose limbs twisted out of shape in Duvalier's prisons.

In those days of terror, especially those before my birth, when François Duvalier reigned supreme, our own angel of death made flesh, villagers came home looking like *zonbi*, like all the lifeblood had been drained of their bodies, and we knew without knowing that something had gone terribly wrong. My mother's older brother was one of the unfortunates who came home like this one day, beaten down, feet dragging in the dust, shoeless, as if his spirit had been driven out by some force of malevolence that had caught him off-guard. The family arranged to have him sent away to Canada, to the home of some villager who had gone before and would make some room. I do not know how they got him out or what he had done to deserve to be driven out in this way. I had not yet been born.

The year was 1986 and finally, finally, it had all come to an end, the lies and the half-truths, the disappearances and the bones broken beyond repair. Bébé Doc was driving himself to the airport. Who would have believed it? He was driving himself! No chauffeur, no smoked glass. He was in plain sight, with his wife at his side smoking like a chimney. Were they afraid we would stop them? Had our fear died with their Papa Doc, the great *Baron Samedi*—the *vodou* god of death? Did they even have souls? All these thoughts traversed my mind as I watched these incredible scenes unfold. I was sixteen, seventeen, and the world of Ayiti I had known until that day was coming to an end. What would follow? What would come? What could we expect? My mother had told me that the Duvaliers were like nothing we had known before, and yet, as she looked up to the Citadel, its prow hanging over us with all its splendid grandeur, she would pause and say, "Of course, the history of these mountains paved the way." For a long time, I did not know how to take in those words. If Duvalier was the worse thing that had ever happened to us, then how could we have known what he was capable of doing? I read and read in order to understand the wisdom of my mother and of the ancestors before her. I read about Henry Christophe and the lengths he went to to secure his empire. Machiavelli was right: absolute power corrupts absolutely. So it can be, even for former slaves.

I would like to believe that things could be different in my homeland of Ayiti, but what proof do I have that anything will change? So I am running, but my hands, these narrow fingers, will not let me go freely. They drag up pieces of my memory even as I tell myself to forget family,

landscape, and everything in between. But if I were to forget, then I would not flee and perhaps I would return. Do my hands know this? I watch them making quick strokes of pencil against paper, thumbs spreading out the soot to create the illusions of shadows below the nub of a nose, the length of a jutting jaw. I refuse to see the face there and quickly blacken the whole so that the face is lost beneath thin layers of powdered lead. If I can break this connection between mind and hand entirely, I will be free.

My mother once told me that my hands move so much because they are the recorders of my every dream. When I draw, paint, attempt a hand at sculpture, what emerges is always the product of some other world where I have ventured, unconsciously, in dream. My hands remember what my waking thoughts will not.

I am fearful of my dreams.