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THE BEGGARS OF JACMEL

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"Haiti cherie, pi bel pé, passé ou nan poin"

"Haiti cherie, most beautiful country, beyond compare"

--Othello Bayard

When I was a child in the 1950s, I had a doll that came from Haiti. It was a representation of a Haitian peasant woman with brightly colored dress, bandanna, and beaded necklace, and it had been hand sewn. It had been brought to me as a special gift by a friend of my grandmother's. I kept it on a special shelf for dolls that were very beautiful, and mostly foreign. I was not allowed to touch any of these dolls.

I loved the Haitian doll but I was afraid of it too. I had heard the word "voodoo," although I did not know what it meant. In the night, by the pink nightlight, I thought that the doll stared at me with its perpetually open eyes, that it moved of its own accord when I was not looking. This, and the slides Michael had brought back from his trip two years earlier, were all I knew of Haiti before we went there in December 1984.

In the airport at Port-au-Prince, in the waiting room to Passport Control, new color television is perched above the passport officer's glass booth. Advertisements for Jordache jeans, rent-a-cars, hotels, pictures taken by poolsides, seascape scenes pass above our heads. The smell of perfume, aftershave lotion, and powder drift through the air. It is warm in the room, and as time passes it becomes warmer.

There is a faded color photograph of Baby Doc and Mrs. Baby Doc on the wall, and the airport floor is dusty. All around us we hear the sing-song of Creole, a music for us without meaning. It is so warm now that we smell the other human bodies around us, other human creatures pressing close without meaning to. Another Jordache ad appears

above our heads.

In the airport at Miami, we had stood behind a woman who had tried to board the plane without showing a boarding pass. She had been called back, and after a short discussion, been motioned to walk down the bent hallway to the plane. Instead, she had turned around, gone back into the lounge, picked up a shopping bag, and gone through the line again. This time the crisply turned-out stewardess had ignored her.

But nothing like this happened on the line to Passport Control in the airport at Port-au-Prince.

Outside the airport, the sun is setting over the mountains ahead of us: a tropical sunset, a slow red fade over a street scene of small buses and pickup trucks painted in circus colors and designs, blue and white circles with splashes of light yellows and reds and name signs like "Dieu Puissant," and "Christ Li Roi." And over everything, the exhaust of the ancient cars and trucks, exhaust rising up like a mist over the ill-paved roads and the crowds of people on both sides.

It is good to reach the hotel above the city, an old mansion surrounded in darkness by trees. Inside the iron gates and up the wide stairs, we wait by the ancient desk, in faded light. Was there a room? We had sent the taxi driver away. Yes, there was a room, at the end of another staircase. And at the top of the staircase, murals, huge murals black and white, figures against a background, figures filled with motion, passionate in the dim electric light. They make the only noise in the hotel, Hotel Santos.

Which is comfortable, very comfortable. In the small dining room we eat a green soup, a stew, rice, and a raisin custard better than any custard we have ever eaten. We talk with an American woman who has lived in Africa and now works for CARE and

we also talk with an American man who teaches English at an international school.

"I can't think about much of what I see," he says. "Beggars, cripples. I can't do anything about it."

The woman says she would rather be in Africa. She does not explain why.

It is time to get away from the world of good food and television sets. We walk down the hill to the main part of the city. The streets are lined with villas, and the scent of flowers is everywhere. A car brushes my purse and the right side of my body.

"Watch out for the manholes."

Michael is right: trenches a foot wide are everywhere underfoot, reaching deep into the earth. There are people on the streets, but few, and they leave us undisturbed.

On flat land again, we come to a main street with restaurants, cinemas, closed shops.

People call out: do you want a guide? Let me be your friend, I can show you everything.

We come to an amphitheater lit by soft pink fluorescent bulbs of the kind I have not seen since childhood drives along the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn. There are young men reading by this outdoor light, and some of them walk up and down declaiming to themselves, books in their hands. They are the students of the university in Port-au-Prince, and they have no lights in their rooms.

We rest for a while but then move on, past the Presidential Palace, which is on a deserted street, and continue down toward Rue Dessalines. Here only the main part of the street is lit, and the sidewalks are covered overhead, dark. A few cars, a few open

restaurants and bars, and very few people. Rue Dessalines itself is wider and trafficked by tap-taps. Women stand in the shadows, showing us no sign of interest. People sleep lying down on the corners. They sleep next to the wares they sell by day.

Midway down Dessalines we turn off, onto a darkened side street, dirt underfoot. A man approaches, asks to guide us. We say, politely, no, and he walks away, equally politely. There are a few kerosene lanterns now, otherwise darkness, and the smell of urine, shit, and bad water. A fire burns in a trash can. I walk through puddles with my hiking boots, trying to avoid them, but there are too many. In the darkness I can make out the shapes of people standing, people sleeping by the buildings, lying together for warmth. At the end of the street we see the shantytown before us, roofs going farther on in the darkness.

Who are we to be here? It is too dark for anyone to see us, but, if they did, what would they think? I think of a moment some years earlier, on an Amtrak train between Wilmington and Baltimore, looking out the window at the wide blue waters of the Chesapeake Bay and feeling for the first time what it is like to have no home.

I can go no further. We walk quickly back to the lights of Rue Dessalines and take the first taxi. Michael, with the habits of years of Third World travel as a poor student, haggles over the fare. There are no other taxis on Dessalines.

"Don't," I say, "I'll pay the fare."

Later, in the hotel room, I am quiet.

"Are you all right?" he asks. "You seem distressed."

In the night, there are many sounds, and roosters begin to crow long before dawn.

The next morning, we were going to take a bus to go north. We walked the last half mile or so to the bus station so that not all of our travel of the day would be in vehicles. By daylight the city did not seem menacing. It had familiar signposts of shops, children carrying schoolbooks, street vendors, but all closer together, in greater numbers. Then there were the women washing clothes in a river underneath a bridge, and a man selling dirty bottles filled with psychedelic-colored liquids on the other side of the bridge.

People looked at us with amazement and sympathy, pointing to the packs on our backs. How painful it must be to carry something on your back rather than on your head! How peculiar!

The bus station turned out to be a parking lot filled with brightly painted buses. Men approached us asking where we wanted to go, motioned us toward a large, almost filled bus with people crammed into it as I had crammed clothes into my pack two days before. We passed it by and boarded a twenty-person van, crawled into seats in the back, and waited.

Vendors passed the window. Did we want cookies by Shabisco? Did we want Chiclets? Did we want Coca Cola? Seven Up? Knives? Bread? The slightest eye contact provoked sets of hands coming through the window.

In the front of the bus a radio was turned up to full volume, Haitian melodies with a slight rock beat. An hour passed. Two hours passed. People boarded. More people boarded. Seats were pulled out into the aisles and the rows become walls of people. An old woman in the back three times repulsed people who sat next to her, hurling vehement Creole through the air. As the van filled and overfilled, first one person, then many shouted at the ticket seller to stop selling tickets. No effect. A young woman climbed

over people to get to the back, almost sat on the lap of the old woman, who then drove to drive her away by standing up. The people in the next row began to argue with the old woman. The young woman climbed back toward the front and tried to sit in the aisle. Those nearest shouted at them both.

The bus lurched forward into the street but immediately turned into the gas station next to the bus station. The driver got out and began to change a flat tire. In front of us a baby, a little girl about a year or less in a pink calico dress and braids, was passed out the window by her mother to a friend outside. The friend fondled the child, tossed her up in the air and walked around to the other side of the bus to show her off. At that moment the bus moved forward. The entire back of the bus made a sound like "Psssst," and the baby was passed through the window on the other side and handed through the rows of people to her mother.

This was like being on the New York subway at rush hour, except that the next stop was more than three hours away. I closed my eyes. We were off.

At Cormier Plage Hotel, ten miles outside Cap Haitien, we entered a world of elegance and ease.

On the first day we had walked past the waiters, maids, and gardeners, who were congregated outside on the lawn and passed into the space of the hotel proper—an outdoor covered bar and restaurant surrounded by small two-story buildings, all directly on the beach.

Here, too, there were crowds of people, but all at one's elbow to take away one's plate, or to put a mat on a beach chair, or to bring the nightly incense burner to ward off mosquitoes. The quiet was broken only by the sounds of cooking and cleaning, or by the

wind from the sea that would come into the room at night through the high windows.

In the mornings we breakfasted in a small outdoor covered space near the breakfast kitchen facing the sea. We would watch the macaw, an overly large red and green parrot, climb up one of the poles that supported the roof. A real parrot nestled under the macaw's wing, noodling its head gently. The tide would be low then, coming quietly closer and closer. Scrambled eggs and toasted French bread and pineapple slices and mangoes, and some kind of jam of unknown and delectable fruit appeared on the table. The coffee was espresso, brought from France.

It did not take long to get used to. It seemed obvious that, at the first drop of rain, someone would come and furl up the hammock; and oblivious that at noon someone would bring us menus on the beach so that we could order lunch. Twice we played tennis—more precisely, volleyed back and forth—and inevitably someone would appear to pick up the lost balls, and we would tip him a small amount. The gardeners—nine of them—spent the day pruning and tending the walks and bushes, and in the mornings three or four men would clear the beach of debris and then sweep the sand as if it had been a carpet.

There were very few other people. Some Italian men left the day after we arrived; an American couple with a private plane stayed one night on their way to Jamaica. A French couple in their fifties and their daughter stayed the longest. He was a distinguished type, a bit portly and greying. She had long hair, also grey, which she would twist around her fingers while she sat at breakfast. The parrot would sit on her

shoulder while she fed it table scraps. Their daughter, also long-haired, a very young and beautiful version of her mother, would sit alone by the sea. One morning the daughter came out first and ordered their table moved down to the sea. It seemed to us that she did not want to be near us, or perhaps near anyone.

Otherwise, there were the inhabitants of Cormier Plage: twenty-six kitchen and hotel staff and the nine gardeners. One of the maids told Michael that the monthly wage was \$60, which did not sound bad to us compared to the mean per capita income in Haiti of \$120. She also told him that most people had families in Cap Haitien, whom they would see on weekends. The hotel itself was owned by the sister of the owner of the Hotel Mont Joli, a nearby resort listed in our guidebook as Class A. She had been in Haiti 12 years. When Michael asked the maid if she liked working at Cormier Plage, she shrugged and replied, "It's a job."

The owner of Cormier Plage—I thought of her as *la patronne*—was a woman of middle years, large, and with a face that had been patrician once. We would see her at meals with the scuba diving instructor, Jacques, who wore a T-shirt that said, simply, "The Last Buccaneer."

Jacques had long blond hair and was somewhere between 40 and 60. Each morning we would ask him if he could take us in the motorboat resting in the sea to our next destination, the fishing village of Labadie around the other side of the cove. He would point to the waves, shrug, and shake his head. "Too rough, too rough today."

The second evening as we were sitting in the bar before dinner, I saw a child, a boy of perhaps two, with blond hair. It was clear he belonged to *la patronne*. He did not seem to belong to Jacques. This was all as mysterious as how the hotel kept going with

so few guests. We calculated that *la patronne* was barely making enough to pay the staff, let alone the food, water, and, presumably, taxes. Yet there was no sign of unease anywhere.

On the last day we said goodbye to Jacques and asked if the hotel was always so empty.

"Oh no," he smiled. "I have many reservations. Tomorrow we are all full."

The road we walked on to get to Labadie, a fishing village Michael had visited on his previous trip, reminded me of California, of Carmel and Big Sur. The same smells of trees and moist soil, the same mellow warmth of the sun on one's face, and a rough dirt trail, a winding switchback, giving us occasional glimpses of the sea far below.

Here and there a man, using an ancient axe to cut a few pieces of wood; another man with a torn shirt walking to town; a "For Sale" sign on a tree, with a telephone number in Cap Haitien.

We were alone for fifteen, twenty minutes. A young boy or man, it was hard to tell which, insisted on walking us over the mountain and helping us rent a boat. His name, which was African, was unpronounceable for us.

"Do you have children?" he asked after a few paces. And then, incredulous, "No children? Not possible!"

From the top of the mountain we saw, on a peninsula rimmed with white sand beaches, a half-finished resort of a dozen or more large buildings. The site was perfect. Anywhere else the resort would have been bustling with tourists paying a hundred or two per day.

"What happened?" I wanted to know. "No money?"

"No money," he replied tersely.

At the foot of the hill, we came to a very small hotel with no one on the terrace. Two young men helped us into the rowboat, taking my pack from me with courteous gestures. As we went through the waves, we asked about the Americans Michael had met on his first visit to Labadie a year earlier.

Were there Americans in Labadie?

Yes, there was a good American who had befriended Labadie.

Were Joe and Sarah, the couple from Connecticut, still there?

No, they had gone away with a bad Haitian person.

What about Jack?

Jack's name produced a silence that contained some kind of rage.

Jack wasn't there now.

Would Jack be back soon?

Oh, yes.

When would he be back?

He had gone away.

Had any of the people from Labadie gone to America in boats?

No, absolutely none of the people from Labadie had gone to America in boats.

We rode the last part of the trip in silence.

They took us up to a beach, the second beach of the village. It was dusk now. As soon as we debarked, a woman came up to us and took us to a house on the beach. It was as if it had all been arranged. A main room with a table fronted on the sea, a double bed

hid itself behind curtains, and there was a toilet and an outdoor shower behind the bedroom.

"It's the house of the American couple," Michael whispered. "They house they lived in."

We agreed on a price for the house and the food with dinner and breakfast. We offered to pay the men for the boat but they said no: "when you return." In an instant, a large, authoritative man appeared carrying a wrench.

"Welcome to Labadie," he said. "I will fix the shower."

We shook hands and introduced ourselves. He was Gerrard Al Major, the chief of the village.

"Ah, Jack," he said in answer to a query. His face wrinkled. "He and his wife had troubles. She rented a house, he stayed in his house, then they left."

"Very bad," I said, relieved to hear so ordinary a story.

"Not good," he corrected me.

He left then. We opened the bottle of rum we had bought in Cap Haitien and sat with the doors open. There were three of them, with heavy bolts that would have seemed more appropriate to a fortress and sat smoking cigarettes. The sun was setting over the sea ahead. People passed by. To the left, children playing; two dogs came up, both whining for food, one blind in one eye.

With the last bit of light, we decided to walk through the village. Without fear, I followed Michael out of the house and up the trails through the village. All was quiet and peaceful. Thatched-roofed cottages, small, were filled with people, and the people, mostly men, sat in the dirt street. We came to one crowd of men and stopped. They

formed a circle around us, asked for a cigarette, asked us who we were and why we were there. One man pointed to Michael's electronic watch.

"That's just like mine," he said, holding his up proudly.

And so it was.

As they compared prices, it became clear that we had found the local numbers Racket: the lottery. We bought a ticket after an argument with the numbers runner, who was afraid we might win and did not want to sell us the ticket.

We walked on a bit further but now it was dark and all we could see were the faces of people close by in the light of the many kerosene lamps that were appearing all over the village.

I do not remember clearly the walk back to the house. A meal of Creole fish in tomato sauce, rice and beans, and fried plantain slices was on the table. After one experimental taste, I devoured the plantains, which were like the french fries I had eaten in France, only better. Off in the kitchen we could hear the woman and her children washing dishes and laughing in Creole. Finished, we closed the three doors and bolted them. The wind came through the open part of the houses above the doors, and we read for a while by the kerosene lamp.

It is always hard for me to go to strange places, because I always think I will have to live there, because once when I was very young this did actually happen. I cannot stay in a strange place without thinking, where is the theater, do I speak the language well enough, what part of the city should I try and live in.

And so in Labadie that first evening, I tried to imagine what my life there would be like.

And this was impossible. In the end I sank into the bed with the thin blankets, too thin against the cold, and woke often in the night to the sound of the wind, a strange and terrifying sound, yet not unfamiliar.

In my memory the next three days in Labadie fall together. Images and conversations I remember, and, behind them, the rhythm of the life of the village. Labadie is a fishing village, which is a rarity in Haiti. I had read that the people who were brought to Haiti by the French in slaves ships in the seventeenth century came from parts of Africa that were far from the sea, and they were afraid of boats. If Haitians could fish, they would be less hungry. We saw no hungry people in in the days we spent in Labadie.

Mornings: the day begins at dawn. Lying in bed, we hear voices, footsteps, the crowing of roosters as the light begins to fill the cool and windswept room. Breakfast then: scrambled eggs, mangoes, unidentifiable and delicious fruit juice, tasteless bread and good coffee. Through the open doors we see the boats go out to sea, the children play and the women endlessly braid and rebraid one another's hair. The dogs, too, both of them, one blind in one eye and lame, and the other healthy and frisky. They come with the house. We feed them the bread we do not eat, and it is always the lame dog who gets the food, even when we throw it to the healthy one.

Afternoons: quiet, listening to the lapping of the sea as the waves approach the house yet never reach it. Reading books and drinking beer, walking along the shore, and talking to people. We do not notice the time passing.

Evenings: dinners of broiled lobster and Creole rice, followed by coffee and the Bringing-in of the kerosene lantern. Outside, the village is illuminated with dots of

kerosene lamps in the growing darkness. There is no electricity in Labadie.

And the village itself? The first day as we are sitting over coffee, our guide of the to-us-unpronounceable African name and one of the men who had been in the rowboat stop by, enter, and make themselves at home. Is this a Haitian custom, to intrude? The conversation is filled with questions. When will we return? Where do we live? Will we tell our friends about Labadie? Why did we come? They tell us there is no one now at the hotel across the cove, at Belli Beach, there is no work anywhere. Many of the men of Labadie work in Cap Haitien and return for the weekend. And Jean Claude of Cormier Plage, they say, does not want people to come to Labadie.

It is not clear what they want, and conversation becomes uneasy. They ask us what Christmas is like in America, and we tell them it is a great family feast and people give each other presents.

"Yes," they say, "the rich give presents."

And later: "Will you send us a present from America?"

After an hour and some cigarettes they go away. In the afternoon we walk along the shore, up into the mountain. It is clear when we start, but after a quarter hour or so it begins to rain. We take shelter under the thatched roof of a hut. Inside, a baby coos. Does it know what awaits it, in Labadie, in Haiti?

We walk on. An old man—the first old man we have seen—confronts us on the path. Thin, he points to his mouth, and to his stomach. We give him some small change.

Later, on the way back, he points out with great pride his grandchild, half-naked. There are few old people in Labadie.

On the way back, we decide we want beer and Coca Cola. In front of one of the few real houses (not huts) there is an ice chest. A woman appears and apologizes because the ice is melted and the drinks are not cold. We tell her this is not important. She disappears to get change. There is never any change in Haiti, even for the smallest note, without a waiting period.

This is the house of Al Major who is head of the village. Al Major is a Tonton Macoute, a member of Duvalier's self-financed police force. Tonton Macoutes are expected to live from the forced contributions of the villages they rule. He owns the beer chest as well as the house we rent and the three cottages next door.

Another day we walk through the entire village in the early afternoon. We hire our self-appointed guide. At first he refuses, sullen, but then relents. As we began to walk through the village I feel a now-familiar sensation of dread. There is no way to go unnoticed as a *blanc*, a white, no way to sit back and play the observer behind my dark glasses.

We pass by thatched huts, close together, along the narrow path. Half-clad children, men in torn and dirty clothing, women sitting by the wares of food spread out on the warm earth. We see a row of objects sticking up out of the ground with unfamiliar symbols. This is the cemetery. We pass men making nets for fishing; this is a special and valued craft, and these men are richer than many others in Labadie. Everywhere people, and especially children. I try to imagine a life without health care, untattered clothes, warm showers, books, electricity. I sense that everyone knows everyone else in this village. I see joking and irritation and business of many kinds being transacted. We

see a one-room building with a crowd of teenage boys playing some kind of game: this is the schoolroom during school term, but now it is vacation. We see the Catholic church, large and bare except for the painting in the nave over the altar, a huge Haitian primitive narrating Scripture and on the left-hand side a teacher and the words: "human rights." At the end of the village is the spring from which the village gets its water, pure mountain clear. Our guide tells us that the American ambassador gave money for the pipes that bring the water down the mountain, that he met Al Major and was so impressed he gave his own money. It comes as a surprise to us that there is also a small Protestant church, that the village is divided between the two Christian faiths.

On the way back, we stop at a hut for a Coca Cola to get in out of a passing shower. Through the narrow door opening at the other side of the hut, about three feet from the wooden chair in which I am sitting, I see four young woman, girls really, braid one another's hair in the midday sun, which has abruptly returned. Next to them I see a woman washing clothes in a large tub, her skirt pulled up around her knees. A child plays next to her. The women beats the clothes in the soapy water, then pulls out a piece, wrings it out, and puts it on a nearby line. The child, about two, puts its hand in the water while she is hanging up the clothes, and happily eats a soap bubble. The woman does not see this, and if the other women notice, it does not seem important, for they say nothing. In the next room, where the dusty bottles of Coca Cola are stored on crates, a radio plays a slow Christmas carol in a Creole band rendition, overlaid with a woman's voice advertising a woman's magazine and then describing the Christmas party plans of Baby Doc and Mrs. Baby Doc.

Two friends of our guide approach at the entrance of the hut and say something

which I cannot understand.

"*Le blanc ne parle pas Creole*," he answers. Again the muscles around his eyes and lips go tight.

In the evening, the last evening, we have three more encounters with the people of Labadie.

The first is with Philogene. We had met Philogene on our walk through the village. He sells T-shirts which say "Labadie Beach." He guesses our sizes correctly, and we each buy a T-shirt, Michael a yellow one, and I a red one.

Philogene is the historian of Labadie. He has written a history of the village in French, which he wants me to translate into English. I tell him there are Americans in Port-au-Prince who might be willing to do this, and I give him the name of a school where some Americans teach. Although he goes to Port-au-Prince every now and then, he says, he does not seem interested in my suggestion. Will we send him an English grammar book? There are no English grammar books in Cap Haitien. They cost too much money.

He works for the priest, who lives in Cap Haitien but comes to Labadie every Sunday for Mass. Money is not important. Philogene has learned this from the priest. He himself could make money, but what use is that for the soul? He has many books in his house: do we want to see them?

The second encounter is with Al Major, Captain Gerrard Al Major, whom we visit to arrange our return the next morning. Al Major's house is comfortable. Knick-knacks, clocks, dolls, old radios bedeck the living room, lit with kerosene lanterns, where we drink the beer he offers us.

As the chief of the village, he has a thousand souls in his care. He has gotten the money for the spring from the Canadian ambassador and is trying now to get the generator for the village going again. We discuss the price of houses in America, and he is shocked by the prices. He understands, at least in theory, why people have fewer or (like us) no children in America.

"The people at La Citadelle," he says angrily, "with their hands out, their hands always out for money, they make a bad impression. We should do like this to them."

And he draws his forefinger quickly across his neck.

Al Major gives us his card. Will we tell people in America about Labadie? In this village you can sleep with your doors open. Nothing will happen. There are very few places left where this is true.

"We are not happy here," he pauses "but we are not unhappy either."

The third encounter is with a young man we have never seen before. He is, by his own words, the town drunk. He is a fisherman, he makes enough to live, but he ends up giving most of his money away to relatives. He drinks, he smokes—why not?

He wants to go to America, but--.

He looks quietly out into the dark night of the sea.

After he leaves, I ask Michael why his hair was partly blond.

"From the sun?"

"No, it is protein deficiency which turns the hair of so young a person white."

In the morning, in the grey dawn, we prepare to leave with all the rituals begun in other travels in the Third World. Passports? Money? Clothes? Books? We once left our passports and money under a hotel room outside Oaxaca, Mexico, drove off in the

rental car, and came back to find the gates locked. After two hours waiting ("They will come back soon," said the neighbors), Michael climbed the gate and retrieved the passports.

As we are completing the rituals, the woman who cooked our meals arrives and demands more money. The seven dollars per day on which we had agreed was only for the food, she says, not for her labor. As we are giving her more money, our guide's friend appears. Can we leave him a newspaper in English? Michael goes to give him a D.C. underground newspaper with a lead article condemning South African labor policy. I say very fast, in English, might that not be considered subversive in this country? Our guide's friend disappears. In the end I leave him a copy of short stories by Guy de Maupassant, at least as subversive but ancient.

Outside, Captain Gerrard Al Major is already in the rowboat, as are the children, young men and women and empty Coca Cola bottles. We are the last to scramble over the side of the boat, throwing our packs in ahead of us. The motor reminds me of the one my father and I used to use when we fished clams in Long Island Sound in 1952, only this one is not so modern. The first turn of the rope produces nothing; several turns later the motor sputters. Al Major, formal and solemn today as he presides over his tribe, puts on his sunglasses and gives precise orders to the boatmen in Creole.

As we near the shore, Al Major slowly and calmly puts on his socks and shoes. I am delighted. Surely this means that the boat will pull all the way up onto the shore, and we won't have to jump out, shoes and socks in hand, hoping our jeans won't unroll themselves before we get out of the water. But no: three yards from shore, everyone starts crawling out of the boat.

As I look back, wading through the water, I see two men holding a step ladder as the boat reaches close to the sand. Al Major steps carefully down and jumps onto dry land.

As we wait for the jeep that will take us back to Cap Haitien, one of the men tells us that he is one of Al Major's sons. He stays in Labadie, he says, because there is no theft and because at night the wind comes through your house. He does not ever again want to sleep without the sound of the wind coming through his house at night.

The wind, of which I had been so much afraid.

At the airport outside Cap Haitien, we sit watching the fields and the distant mountains, on one of which sits La Citadelle, a fortress built in the last century by the mad king Henri Christophe. From where we are it is a tiny speck in the distance, much like a child's toy castle. One of the first cab drivers we had in Port-au-Prince told us that when an overseer at La Citadelle had complained to Christophe that he couldn't do the work he was supposed to do with eight men, Christophe answered, fine, you can do it with four.

"Many men died for La Citadelle," the cab driver had said solemnly.

From time to time the inevitable chicken wanders past, and, behind us, out of view, some men are talking. The sun is strong, and the winds blow the heat in our faces.

There is nothing to do except wait. At the Hotel Bennett Plaza in town, we had been told that the plane would leave at one and we should be here at twelve-thirty. At twelve-thirty, a man with a clipboard wearing a torn white shirt told us that the plane was

late and would arrive at two. Peering at the piece of paper on his clipboard he looked at us with suspicion when we said we had a reservation. In the end we pointed to the strange, unpronounceable Alsatian name on the list, Michael's name. He smiled graciously and seemed unconvinced.

In the Hotel Bennett Plaza an American man in his forties, rather scruffy and speaking good Creole had gotten his reservation confirmed in a tenth of the time it had taken the clerk to confirm ours. We had seen him later at the airport while we were struggling with the clipboard official. The American was being driven off in an old large American car, and he waved at us and shouted to Monsieur Clipboard, "Give them first class."

At about three the American appeared again with his friend from the car, also an American, with white hair. This second American looked tired, as if he had been tired for many decades. They stood and we continued to sit, each of us surveying the other with unveiled curiosity.

It turned out that they had been on a yacht we had seen that morning off the coast of Coco Beach by the ruined resort. The old American had lived here on and off for thirty years. He was a civil engineer.

"My wife doesn't like Haiti," he said, and laughed. "She's in Paris just now. When she lived here she had 'I hate Haiti' days."

They had lived, he said, in many places: Beirut, Saudi Arabia, Athens. He would park her in the capital of whatever country, and go off to build a port or something somewhere else, in the hinterlands.

"I used to own Coco Beach, you know." He nodded at us as if we did know.

"Yes, I took my wife there for her honeymoon. We had to walk the last three miles through sludge. For years afterward when we quarreled I used to threaten her with another honeymoon."

He laughed again, rather kindly.

"I was going to build cottages on the beach, eight or nine of them."

He fell silent. "But I was just a little fish, you see. Just a little fish."

We asked him why the resort we had seen on our way to Labadie had never been finished.

"Well, that's an interesting question. We went out there yesterday, Herbert and me. It's unbelievable, really unbelievable. Stainless steel refrigerators still in cartons, rotting away. Three hundred half-finished units."

"And no water," his friend broke in.

"Yes, no provision anywhere for water. When they were building it, they carried water over the hill. Every day they carried water in. And there were never any plans for water. Herbert thinks it was a scam. After all, how can you have a hotel with three hundred units and not make provision for water?"

He and Herbert then began to talk, mostly to each other, about the new Club Med and what fun it would be to buy the Queen Elizabeth and park it in front of the Club Med.

"It's a great idea," Herbert said, "but the insurance is out of sight. You have to pay a base rate and then, beyond that, a fixed fee per guest."

He did not seem to be joking. It did not seem possible that he could be serious, and yet he did not seem to be joking. He owned a restaurant in Pétionville, he said, in the wealthy section of Port-au-Prince, and told me the name as if it should mean something

to us.

"I think that's listed in South America Handbook," I said, meaning to be complimentary.

"If it's not, it should be," he snapped.

We asked the old man then about the Americans who had been in Labadie the year before and what had happened to them, the couple from Connecticut who had gone off with the "bad Haitian person" and Jack whose wife had left him.

He laughed again. Jack hadn't been married at all, he had been living with a Swedish girl and they had broken up. Jack had gone back to the states and found a wife in Texas. He had gone back to Cap Haitien with the wife and had a farewell party. Quite probably Norman would never return to Labadie. If we wanted his address to write the house sometime?

And the young couple from Connecticut, they weren't married either. They had adopted a Haitian child and taken it back with them last summer.

"I'm worried about them," the old man said. "They should have been back by now. I hope they didn't split up." He seemed genuinely unhappy at the prospect.

"This country, this country." He sighed. "You know, the new road from Port-au-Prince, they won't maintain it. They don't understand that you have to maintain it. It was all built with foreign aid money and now they curse the foreign aid. 'What good is it,' they say, 'the road isn't any good any more.' When can anyone do in a country like this?"

I had been feeling uneasy about the plane, and old man must have sensed this, because he said, apparently out of nowhere, "Don't be afraid about the plane. This has always been one of the safest airlines in the world. Never on time, but safe. In the old

days they used military planes. Those were the only planes they had and Papa Doc told them that if any of them crashed a plane and didn't get killed, they had better run, not walk, away from it. So if the plane took off and didn't sound quite right, why they'd just turn right around and come back." He chuckled. "In those days you never knew when the plane might come. We'd wait at home until we heard one approaching and then we'd jump in the car and come out here." He paused a minute. "Sometimes it was just a plane passing over."

After a while the plane did come. Afraid of not getting on, we hurried across the runway without saying goodbye. It was not until we were more than halfway over the mountains that I realized I should have asked the old man about the hotel at Cormier Plage and whether *la patronne* really was the sister of the owner of Mont Joli and what the story was about the child. But I had not asked him, and it was too late forever.

As we retrieved our baggage at the airport in Port-au-Prince, Herbert offered us a lift in his truck, driven by "the boys" 'who had come to meet him. We were only going down the road to the main airport where we would rent a car, but we took him up on the offer anyway rather than walk the half-mile and face the pleas of the taxi drivers and the tap-taps.

I rode in the passenger compartment and Michael rode with Herbert in the back. After we said goodbye to him, in the middle of the din of the porters and the taxi drivers and the passengers of a just-arrived plane, I asked Michael what, if anything, Herbert had said to him.

"He's leaving Haiti," Michael answered.

"What?" It was hard to hear among the "Madame, do you need a taxi, let me be

your friend, I know good hotel."

"He's leaving Haiti. He's fed up."

We were trying to go through the door to where the rent-a-car salesmen were waiting, but were prevented from doing so by a policeman who insisted that the rent-a-car salesmen were really at the other end of the terminal.

"Where's he going?"

"The Tatra mountains of Poland. He's Polish by birth and went there last summer and liked it. He's going to build a ski resort."

There was no doubt in my mind that in five or six years we would read in the Sunday travel section about an American-owned resort in the Tatra mountains of Poland.

"Did he say anything else?"

We were now returning from the main terminal, where there were no rent-a-car salesmen, to wrangle with the policeman again.

"No. Oh, yes. He said we'd like Jacmel. He said he owns the cliffs in front of Jacmel and would like to sell them, but he can't find anyone to sell them to."

I do not want to write about what happened on the road to Kenscoff, it was that unpleasant.

From Petionville we found the right road by feel since our map ended at the northernmost part of the city, but it was called the "Rue de Kenscoff" and so was clearly the road we wanted. It climbed quickly through forests. We stopped once, at about sunset, and looked back into a wide and deep Caribbean valley, green with trees of the many different kinds of bananas. One thatched hut lay directly below.

As it got darker, the road became steeper, and fences on both sides of the road protected the villas from our view. There were people also, on both sides, carrying things on their heads, walking down toward Petionville. We gave them the usual "Bonsoir," but they did not seem friendly.

Kenscoff, the South America Handbook told us, was a beautiful mountain resort town with two hotels, Deauville, and Florville. By the time we were almost there, we were both tired. The road narrowed and came to a fork at a little town. Kerosene lanterns hung inside small shops with few wares. There were no other white people, no other cars, and no hotels. We took one road off the fork, and soon came to a blockade. As we stopped the car, five or six young men ran up to the car, their hands coming through the open window.

"Kenscoff? Kenscoff?" we said.

Yes, this was Kenscoff.

I did not remember the name of the hotels.

There was, it appeared, no overhead light in the rental car. For a moment neither of us could find a lighter or a match to read the guidebook.

"Hotel Deauflor," I shouted to the crowd outside. "Who knows where Hotel Deauflor is?"

We picked the youngest and littlest of the group, and it was difficult to keep the others out. They were not asking, they were ordering us to let them in the car. For ten minutes we drove around the town until I found my lighter and realized I had given the wrong hotel name.

We let him out at the fork and repeated the process of the siege. This time the

guide

was a bit older, fifteen maybe, and spoke English. Was there a hotel? Yes, there was a hotel. A good hotel? Yes, beautiful hotel. Where was it? Outside of town. Was it marked?

Yes, very well marked.

He directed us up a dirt road. Within ten minutes there were no houses and no people anywhere. He told us then to turn off that road onto a smaller one, rockier, and to cross a decayed bridge. And then to stop.

There were still no lights.

He and Michael got out of the car. He called to someone, and the two of them began to argue.

There was no hotel. He had lied. He could come back with us or walk into town, whichever he wanted. He continued to call to someone out there in the darkness. I shouted to Michael to get in the car and leave him there. In the end all three of us drove back to Kenscoff.

At the fork, we let him out. Michael got out and gave him a dollar, which was several times the size of our usual tip. He protested that a dollar was not enough, that he had shown us all around the town. Behind Michael, I saw a man with a large bunch of bananas on his head and over his shoulder a very ancient rifle. I could see that Michael had his back to this man. I called out that there was a man with a gun. Michael didn't believe me, but he gave the guide another dollar, got into the car and drove off. This was the first gun we had seen anywhere in Haiti, except for the pistols which the occasional police carried.

We had a long argument on the way back to Pétionville over whether that had really been dangerous or not. While we were arguing, the headlights of the car shone on crowds of women walking downhill in the darkness, vessels on their heads. If they were walking from the Market at Jacmel in the other direction, they would have been walking for five or six hours; if they were walking to Port-au-Prince for the next day's market, they had another two or three hours to go. They were silent, hundreds of them, and without the headlights a car—and there were few cars by now—they walked in the darkness of a moonless night.

We both must have been frightened because when we got back to Pétionville, neither of us remembered that we had a map of Port-au-Prince with the best hotels marked. By chance we found the Hotel Montana and within an hour we were seated at a window table drinking rum punches and eating filet mignons and watching the color TV behind the bar.

For a few hours at least, I had had enough of the real Haiti.

Herbert had said we would like Jacmel, and the books described it as a pleasant tourist town, listing six or seven good bourgeois hotels.

At the entrance to the town there was a police checkpoint—the first one we had encountered—with a guard who checked our passports and demanded to know how long we would be and where we would stay. Ahead, we could see, the town was dust, all dirt roads and New Orleans style houses with latticed balconies, very old, on which the paint and dust had long since reached a mutual peace.

As soon as we passed the police checkpoint, two little boys, no more than six or seven, began to run alongside the car. Then one ran in front to slow us down. It took several blocks before they got tired. We followed signs for the "Hotel Craft," which was in South America Handbook. The signs took us down a maze of turning streets. It all had the feeling of a ghost town.

This was not quite what we had expected. There was something menacing about the little boys, something of death in the dirt roads and the sight of people doing nothing. And there were no other tourists anywhere.

We had an introduction from someone we knew in Washington to a mutual friend who worked for an international aid group and, without discussing why, we decided to find him before we did anything else. The address we had turned out to be a large old house off the main square. At the entrance, several people assured us that Charlie was indeed there. All we had to do was to come upstairs. Upstairs some people told us, yes, he would be out in a minute. Other people looked confused. We asked to see the chief of administration and were admitted to a small inner office. A friendly American rose to greet us, Midwestern by the accent and demeanor. There was an automatic coffeepot and an electronic typewriter.

We shook hands. But he wasn't Charlie. Charlie had gotten married and gone to Upper Volta two months earlier. This fellow was his replacement. He didn't have any French or Creole and had been here about two months. He hadn't really been outside Jacmel except to go about the countryside a bit. He sounded already a bit discouraged. He had been in Ecuador before and found Haiti very different, very frustrating. We talked politics a bit with him in a guarded way. It seemed to me that one of the two

women in the outer office was listening closely.

We went then to the Hotel Craft, which was on the main square of Jacmel. This was a nineteenth century French square criss-crossed by paths and cheered with flowers and whitewashed buildings. The food at Hotel Craft was good, real Creole chicken and fish, both with imagination. We ate some kind of white beans with the rice and a kind of banana which was new to us for dessert. There was even real espresso to finish—the first espresso since we had left Cormier Plage—and the good coffee, the waiter told us, was of Jacmel.

I looked up for a minute, without my dark glasses. My eyes met the eyes of an old man with one leg wearing a dark blue shirt. He was about twenty feet away, sitting on the edge of the square. He held out his hand.

We had come to Jacmel to buy paintings, either at the artist's cooperative or at one of the three galleries. The three galleries were closed, but the cooperative was open. It was a hole in the wall on the road leading out of town to the east, a room about ten feet by six feet, and all three of the walls covered with paintings from ceiling to floor. A man was painting by the light that came in from the afternoon street, and another man, his friend, was pensively smoking a cigar, observing.

We looked at the paintings a long time. It was difficult to appreciate them, crowded together as they were, difficult to imagine them on our living room wall or on the wall of my study. They were none of them great paintings but most of them good, in the same styles we had seen in the paintings that our friend in Washington had brought back from Jacmel. In these paintings, there is no perspective: the eyes moves directly from a bright colored field with faceless figures and symmetrical huts to a sea filled with

identical sailboats. There were some imitation Rousseaus also, and some that were a bit pointillistic.

The bargaining for the paintings went on for a long time, and we changed our minds several times about which ones we wanted. In the middle, a small child ran in, followed by its mother, who picked it up, laughed with it as if it had done something terribly clever in running away.

We all smiled.

I am no bargainer, so I picked out two I liked and accepted the price. One, by "Franz Joseph," had a well-defined style, an aggressiveness in its lines that contrasted nicely with the pastoral poses and colors.

The painter smiled with delight when I said those were the two I wanted. "Franz Joseph, c'est moi," he said, and offered me his chair.

He took down the paintings, one by one, from the walls, and removed the nails which held the canvasses to their cardboard backings. One by one, he put them on the dirty floor and rolled them up inside each other. In the end he had no change for the American money we gave him, and at his insistence we took instead a small Franz Joseph similar to the other one and also charming.

It occurred to me that he would never see these paintings again. Surely that must be painful for an artist. Would he think of these paintings now and then, in the years and decades to come? Would they stay with him or would some different, perhaps unrealized version of them stay with him thanks to traitor Memory?

On the way back to the hotel, the guide we had picked up, Emmanuel, smallest and youngest of the boys who had besieged us as we had come out of lunch at the Hotel

Kraft, explained to us that we should not pay in American money as we had just done, because it was worth more on the black market. This was kind, and he told us also he had a bicycle he had bought for fifteen dollars and was a student in the fifth form. We thanked him as we said goodbye and he did not ask us for anything beyond what we gave him.

Midway through the afternoon the town of Jacmel, I decided midway through the afternoon, would be a pleasant town, had it not been so poor. The houses are, as I have said, nineteenth century New Orleans style, and the streets are narrow but not oppressively so. The houses are painted yellow or white, and in the southern sun they meld into the dust below, reflecting a cheerful, if faded, gleam.

But too many doors are shuttered in Jacmel, signs of a lost prosperity: an art gallery, a coffee factory, several hotels.

Walking through the streets at dusk, we saw a group of men playing backgammon on a corner. Children played games to the smell of an open sewer. The shops—tiny rooms lit by kerosene lanterns and open to the street—stored collections of soda bottles containing liquids of strange colors, very small tinned goods, boxes of flour and other grains. There is an iron market in Jacmel, as there is in Port-au-Prince and in Cap Haitien, but smaller.

We saw very few old people in Jacmel.

I wanted to buy a pair of gold hoop earrings, the most common kind of jewelry in Haiti, and we asked Emmanuel to take us somewhere where I could buy these. He led us down the quiet streets until we came to two men sitting at a table in front of a darkened shop. It appeared to be a shoe repair shop of a primitive kind, at least the metal tools

reminded me of those I had seen in the shoe repair shops of my childhood, although there were no shoes anywhere to be seen.

One of the men opened a small drawer in the table and took out two pairs of earrings, one gold and one silver. The gold ones did not look like real gold, as the men said they were, and the catch was faulty. I wondered if they had been stolen, and I felt uneasy about buying them. The price was, of course, too high. I lied, and said that I had changed my mind. They were clearly angry, but there was nothing they could do.

We went next to a man named Charles, mulatto, perhaps fifty. He had a genteel air, like the town itself, but with his light skin and European features he seemed like an odd-shaped shell cast up on a foreign shore. He had earrings to sell, he said, and motioned us further, down another street, to another shop with a small glass case in front, a locked glass case containing two necklaces and four pairs of earrings.

Charles knew how to sell, how to make the tourist comfortable. Scattering some English phrases among his good French, he laughed with his lips. It was impossible to sense what he was thinking. His clothes were threadbare and had never been good; his mouth opened to reveal a few remaining teeth, yellow like the paint on the houses of Jacmel. He was, I thought, what the body comes to in a warm climate, without money, without doctors, without dentists, and seeing this was all the more terrifying to me for his European features and his European accent.

This time at the shop with the locked glass case there was no bargaining, no room for it, because Charlie would get his cut. We bought a silver necklace that looked real, and he wished us "Bonsoir," and, eternal optimist, "till the next time."

We went back to the hotel dining room and drank a beer. I looked up and saw a

mirror . Three old Creole crones in the back room playing cards very slowly by kerosene lantern, and with great enjoyment. Two were in bathrobes and one was in a long dress with long beads. They were like the books I had seen earlier by the staircase in the Hotel Kraft, a stack of children's primers in French from the 1930s, and like the calendar on the second floor landing which stopped eight years earlier at November 1975.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night in the Hotel Kraft, although I felt it to be safe. At about four in the morning I woke up to the sound of children's voices. They were singing joyous songs in Creole, their fresh young voices loud and strong. Hymns They kept on singing until after six in the morning.

But what did they find to sing about in the town of Jacmel?

There was also a young Swiss couple staying at the Hotel Kraft, and we became acquainted with them in the easy noncommittal way we had gotten to know other couples in other holiday towns in other countries. He was an engineer and she was a typesetter. They had quit their jobs and were going to travel until the money they had saved for the past two years ran out. They had just come from Santo Domingo, where some of their clothes and money had been stolen by the inevitable guide, who had apparently paid off the local police.

In Port-au-Prince they had stayed downtown on Rue Dessalines—"very crazy," he said—and then gone also to Hotel Santos. They liked the Hotel Kraft and it seemed to me they were afraid to return to Port-au-Prince without a confirmed reservation at Santos. His English was good, but she spoke only bad German and Swiss German and did not understand much English. By the second day she would speak German to me and I had

remembered enough to answer, and so we were able to converse after a fashion.

She thought the Haitians were very lazy. Their guide in Jacmel, she said, could get a job in Port-au-Prince if he would leave his widowed mother and sister in Jacmel. Why shouldn't he? After all, it was only a two and a half hour tap-tap ride, and he could come home every weekend. Why, her father in Switzerland had had to do that when they were little, all five of them; sometimes life was hard and you did what you had to do. And the begging! "Give me money, give me money." Why should she? These people didn't do anything, they just wanted the money she had worked hard for two years to save up.

But, then, the whole world outside Switzerland was strange. In Puerto Rico they had visited a friend of Jost's, a Swiss engineer who had married a Puerto Rican woman. Everyone owned cars there—one, two, three cars per family. And the cars rusted in the hot climate, and people left them on the street and in the fields to rust. And Jost's friend, whose job was to lay pipelines, had to get these cars removed before he could do his job. And the wife, she was unbelievably lazy. All day long, she did nothing except watch television. And the children had video games and cried for more video games. They had stayed five days with these people and not once had the wife cooked for them. She was too busy, she had to do the wash, meaning put it into the machine and push a button, not hang it up on the line to dry, like at home. When she herself had guests, she did not treat them that way. Her guests did not eat in restaurants or do their own wash, never.

I said nothing since I felt sure she would not have listened to anything I had to say.

The four of us agreed to drive outside Jacmel to a private beach where Michael

and Jost could go skindiving. This was the last afternoon at Hotel Kraft.

Before we drove to the beach, we decided to drive by one of the galleries that had been closed. Emmanuel had told us that when the Peugeot was in the garage, the owner was at home. This time, unlike the three other times we had walked by the house, the Peugeot was there.

It was a house on a side street, not really New Orleans style, but just an old-fashioned house, painted blue. We rang the bell to the side of the screen door and a middle-aged American man appeared. At once he excused himself.

"I must attend to my radio," he said in a manner that struck me as rather fussy. "I'm having it repaired in the backyard. You don't know anything about radios, do you?"

While he was gone, we looked about the living room and parlor. It was like being in a museum of great Haitian art. There was nothing we saw—not one of the many paintings or sculptures hung everywhere—that we did not want to buy. All of it was better than anything we had seen.

When he returned, he seemed magnificently uninterested in making a sale.

"Well, you see"—and he gestured in a helpless way at one of the walls—I have everything from souvenirs to museum pieces. I've just come back, in fact, from doing an exhibit at the Smithsonian. Where are you from?"

We asked about various paintings, and he rattled off the names of artists unknown to us in a tone that told us we should know who they were. In answer to our questions about how much this or that cost, he would reply vaguely, "Well, that one goes for about three hundred, I think."

He had many old paintings, some from the nineteenth century. There were

surrealistic visions of the monsters of the soul, imitations of European landscape styles that had a somber tinge, and various kinds of abstracts. He knew many of the painters personally. One, he said, had just died in a hospital in Port-au-Prince. A great pity, because he would have done even greater things. Terribly self-destructive, he was. Another one had gone downhill after failing to take his advice. "He needed a different line, you know, but he didn't listen."

We followed behind him. When we told him we had bought from the artist's cooperative, it was clear he relegated us to the class of souvenir-seekers.

We went through the entire house with him. Upstairs the four bedrooms and even the bath were display cases for art. He asked me what I did, and when I told him, he echoed that he had sold to many other people in government, NASA, NIH, and so on.

After about half an hour of this, we decided on a sculpture, a mahogany angel which reminded us both of some of the work of Käthe Kollwitz.

"I believe Nieman Marcus got about four hundred fifty for the ones I sold them," he said pensively. As he packed the angel into its wooden case, he admonished us not to let "the boys" carry it.

"You know," he said with a great calm, "I only get about two cents an hour for selling these things."

Disappointment hung on him like sweat as he disappeared into the back garden to take the pulse of the radio repair.

As we were counting the bills for him, the radio-fixer emerged from the back garden.

He turned out to be from Washington, like us, and was a teacher. Although his

wife lived in Chicago and he had come to the gallery to buy something for her coffee table, he stiffened when we told him the name of the upper middle class suburb where we lived. As with the dealer himself, we felt we had done something wrong without quite knowing what it had been.

As we left, the smell of good Creole cooking was coming out of the kitchen where "the boy" had been working since we came. The teacher shook hands with us, but when the dealer, after a moment of hesitation, offered his, I did not take it. I was angry with myself for several hours because I let my dislike of him keep me from buying the paintings I had wanted.

In the morning, as we got into the car with the Swiss couple to go back to Port-au-Prince, one of the beggars on the square—an old woman, lame, came over to the car.

Michael rolled the window down partway and reached for his wallet. Before he had gotten it out, three, four, ten beggars from the square had reached the car. The old man with the blue shirt pushed the old woman out of the way and got the first bill. A one-legged man got the second. Michael shouted into the sea of hands fighting with each other: "This is for the old woman."

I saw Emmanuel standing by the car. He said, "Give the money to me. I will give it to the old woman."

"He won't do it," said the Swiss woman beside me.

"Yes, he will," I said to her, not even remembering that Emmanuel owned a bicycle and that his mother had enough money to pay the school fees.

He did, and we drove off. I did not look back as the car roared down the dirt street and out of the square of Jacmel.

In the end, only images remain.

The image of a Haitian woman at a roadside market on the way to Jacmel, wearing a traditional brightly colored African dress and kerchief about her head, selling something that looked like tobacco but wasn't while, with the car windows closed, we listened to a Saint-Saens melody on the radio.

The image of a little girl in the Iron Market of Port-au-Prince, a little girl no bigger than two feet high, smiling, who came running up to me as I sat in a chair, exhausted, while Michael continued to bargain. The little girl held out two small empty scraps of paper for me to buy. I looked up, my eyes met her mother's, and we laughed at the same moment.

The image of a young man who worked at Hotel Santos saying to Michael with pride, "Oh, you are an engineer. When I was at the university, I myself learned sewing, I made shirts."

And pointing to the one he had on, to make sure we understood.

When we got to the airport at Miami, we all had to take an escalator. All around us people bristled as they approached the moving stairs. Some walked up to it like conquerors, putting a foot forward, and then stumbling down a step or two. Others stood paralyzed. Several women in narrow high heels fell, and some of them giggled.

These were the elite of Haiti, and it took me a moment to realize that they had never seen an escalator before.

When we got home, I looked at myself in the mirror, at my skin and hair and teeth. It seemed to me that I too must be infirm or diseased, like the rest of humanity. I

took a very long shower, as if I was trying to wash away a memory or two. As if they do not always seem to wash themselves away and return when they will.

I put the paintings first in the bedroom and then in my study. I looked at them for a long time. It soothed me to look at them. In the paintings, the people have no features, and they wear untattered clothes of bright oranges and yellows and reds, happy colors. It seemed to me that for their makers too these paintings must be an escape, a vision of harmony and comfort, like the songs of Pharaoh Sanders in the 1970s, or the poems of Henry Vaughan in England in after the Civil War 1640: denial as an act of raw courage.

In the cathedral of Cap Haitien, in the nave to the left of the altar, I had seen a woman praying to a medieval and very European Jesus. The cathedral was large and bare, with wooden benches, and the sun through the frosted glass windows gave the light of the Caribbean summer. She was praying to Jesus by singing to him, stretching out her hands before her to move him to pity. She was an old woman by Haitian standards, somewhere between thirty and forty, and had a slight cough. It was impossible not to wonder what she was praying for, and impossible not to be moved by the prayer.

And after having watched her sing to Jesus for a few minutes, it all seemed completely natural. After all, if God is real, why not sing to him? Is that not more pleasing, more satisfying, than lighting a candle?

January 31, 1985