

The Haitian Story Project

A short story by Patrick Mackeown

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Chapter 1

“Are you still there, Antonia?” a distant male voice asked over the telephone.

Antonia didn't reply. She was numb.

“Antonia!” the voice urged. “Antonia, answer me. Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you,” she said slowly. “You still haven't told me. Is my husband dead?”

“We've had no news,” the deep, sonorous voice replied. “All we know is that several days ago Nick and one of our own freelancers went to speak to one of the rebel commanders, who is at the head of a crime family in Gonaives, sixty miles north of our Haitian capital, and we haven't heard from either of them since.”

“What's being done to find them?” the trembling thirty year-old Londoner asked unsteadily.

“Well, kind of nothing. I mean, nobody's out searching for them,” her foreign contact admitted. “To all intents and purposes there's a civil war going on here, Antonia. If they don't return we'll be forced to assume that they got caught up in the fighting. It's too dangerous to go anywhere at the moment. I know that your instinct will be to call the honorary consul in Dominica, the Brazilian head of the UN mission on the ground here in Haiti or the Haitian interior minister. In fact, you might want to call all three, but remember, it won't make any difference. The fact is, nobody, no matter who you call, is going to go into rebel-held territory to look for your husband. It's simply too dangerous. Nick knew the risks when he came out here.”

Antonia's tongue felt as though it had stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her slender hands were shaking.

“When,” she said and cleared her throat. “When exactly did he go missing?”

“I'm pretty certain they left Port-au-Prince six days ago,” her contact guessed.

“They've been incommunicado for six days and nobody has even so much as lifted a finger to find out whether they're alive or dead!” she screamed. “I'm coming out there.”

“I wouldn't advise that,” the man at the other end of Antonia's phone line advised. “Antonia, don't come out here. It isn't...”

The tall and determined Englishwoman had already put the telephone receiver down before her contact had finished speaking. Without hesitation she threw her passport, some clothes and her wallet into a hold-all bag, crossed her patio and fired up her red, hatch-backed car. Antonia didn't employ any of her usual caution while reversing the few yards from her gleaming white garage door to the road. And as she sped away backwards from the crescent of modern, red-brick houses, which made up her secure world, the frantic would-be-rescuer spun and stalled. Seconds later, with a nasty squeal of rubber on tarmac, she shot forward from the tip of her secluded street into a stream of oncoming traffic.

Chapter 2

As a newcomer, the first thing that Antonia noticed from her aeroplane window about the Caribbean island of Hispaniola was the extraordinary contrast between the Haitian and Dominican landscapes. The larger part of the island below to her right was flush with green vegetation. The left-hand side was mostly an exhausted grey desert. As the plane drew closer to its destination, its anxious passenger could see that scattered along the bleached rocky mountainsides, individual trees stood isolated and exposed. They waited to be uprooted, stripped and burned. This was her first visit to the ruined paradise island. But the Caribbean treasure which had once been the exalted French slave colony of Saint Dominique, was no longer the

beautiful, wealthy haven that it had once been. Today, the opposite was true. The land had been defoliated. She knew from Nick's accounts, that no matter how degraded the flora had become, in this place its people fared immeasurably worse.

Moments later, as their local island pilot was thanking his guests for their custom in a bouncing, sun-kissed, tropical lilt, she and her fellow passengers disembarked. Along with eight Europeans from a UN fact finding mission, Antonia huddled below the empty aircraft, shielding her eyes from the ferocious glare of the noonday, Antilles' sun. Then her small gathering made its way timidly across the landing strip towards the first of a series of white, low-level buildings which made up the diminutive Toussaint L'Ouverture International Airport. In the arrivals terminal Antonia was met by a sign which read:

"We are sorry to welcome you in such uncomfortable circumstances, but we are working hard to improve this."

From its discoloured and chipped appearance the notice gave everyone the distinct impression that it had been there for quite some time. Its sturdy wall-bolts made Antonia feel sure that should she ever return to the place, it would still be there to greet her when she did. Through a blistering heat haze, the din of overhead jet engines and a cacophony of shouting porters, Antonia jostled her way towards the crowded terminal's customs barriers. Beyond those, barricaded outside the airport's flimsy buildings, yet still fighting to be first to reach the passengers, a sea of dark masculine faces, gap-toothed and weathered, shouted at the Europeans, "Bonjour blanc! Me, I carry you luggage. Give me money! Hey money? I hungry, no eat! Give me one dollar!"

The Englishwoman could see no prospect of how she or her fellow travellers might ever make their way through such an aggressive looking swarm of people. And indeed, some of the foreigners ahead of her, who were having their luggage ripped from their hands by gangs of unofficial porters, were discovering that they couldn't. Transfixed, she stared as two of these self-appointed baggage handlers, who were fighting over a large, red suitcase, ripped their prize apart and then proceeded to hurl its contents and unlimited quantities of invective at one another.

"Antonia? Antonia Barker?" a young man's voice called out from between the customs checkpoint and the agitated mob outside the terminal building.

Although she had been expecting the honorary British consul in Haiti to meet her there, she was still a little surprised when, with no difficulty, Jean Christophe managed to pick her out amid the confusion.

"How do I contact the rebel commander who last had contact with my husband?" Antonia panted, hoisting her shoulder-bag onto her back and lurching between two fat American missionaries in garish Hawaiian, sleeveless shirts.

Antonia's guide led her through an unobtrusive side exit, away from the crowd and outside to a dust-covered, white four-wheel-drive jeep.

"You personally? You don't! Your husband had safe passage between our capital city and the rebel territory in Gonaives," the voluntary diplomat informed her. "Of course, in your own country you have organised crime. Organised crime is something that happens everywhere, all over the world, that is, except in Haiti. In Haiti we have disorganised crime instead. I'm afraid, it's just something you're going to have to get used to. If you really want to find out what happened to him I suggest you start at the radio station where he worked when he arrived. Hold on," he added, shoving their vehicle into gear. Seconds later having churned up a cloud of dust, the diplomat surged forward tipping his passenger backwards in her seat. "I have to apologise in advance for my speed," the Haitian said. "But the airport road we're on now is one of the most dangerous roads in our city. We can't afford to dawdle here."

As he spoke a number of gaudily painted open-backed vans, stuffed with smiling passengers holding fruit and live chickens, drew up beside his window. Including their own, there were now

three cars travelling abreast in the road, leaving no space on the opposite side of the road for oncoming traffic. A battered white car with a smashed windshield, which was approaching them at high speed, swerved, slid off the road throwing a huge cloud of dirt into the air and then skidded back onto the hard surface seconds later and continued its journey as though nothing had happened.

“Look out!” Antonia screamed as an oncoming lorry careered towards them in the centre of the road.

“Don’t worry,” her driver reassured her. “He knows that we’re here.”

“Which side of the road is he supposed to be on?” the terrified passenger squealed.

“In Haiti you can drive on any side,” Jean Christophe assured her. “But you must make sure there’s nobody else on it first. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Did you know?” her driver said. “One of our greatest killers is Port-Au-Prince’s lack of sanitation facilities. A recent UNICEF report shows only a third of the population of this side of the island has access to adequate sanitation. Just look around. You can see what I’m talking about.”

With his foot pressing the jeep’s accelerator pedal hard against the floor, Jean sped past endless festering piles of domestic rubbish, stacked as high as the rudimentary slum-dwellings which bordered them on all sides. Between the houses and the road mosquitoes swarmed around foul smelling pools of green scum. Flyblown carcasses of feral dogs with their snarling muzzles locked open in the burning sun and their scorched tongues flopping uselessly in the dust, lay scattered here and there. Over the dead animals listless dark-skinned children shuffled. With no sign of excitement, they reacted instinctively to the white foreigner in her speeding car with upraised hands and wide, hollow and starving eyes. Antonia pressed her arm against her face in an effort both to evade the merciless stench and simultaneously ease her gagging reflex.

And now, seconds later, they swung past splendid rows of orchids in every imaginable colour. In this comparative garden of Eden there were no putrid heaps. In a wide, steeply sloping, treeless street called Rue Delmas, overlooking the horseshoe shaped inlet of Port-Au-Prince Bay, the diplomat pulled into a concreted yard guarded by two huge iron gates. Ahead of them lay a long, split-level house painted aqua and salmon. The dwelling was almost buried behind creeping flowers of many kinds.

“Wait here,” he instructed his passenger, while checking over his shoulder to see if the gates were being closed behind them. “Don’t get out. Just wait here.”

Seconds later Antonia’s guide returned accompanied by a short, stout, black woman with plaited hair. She looked older than thirty, perhaps even forty, but Antonia couldn’t tell exactly what age she was. The woman wore a full white robe and held a bottle full of a clear liquid mixed with whole orange chilli peppers in her right hand.

“Antonia, this is Manbo Boukman,” the driver explained. “She’s one of the priestesses of our local religion and she’s going to look after you during your stay in Haiti. You can climb out of the car now.”

The diplomat led the way up a short and steep spiral of red-tiled steps. In front of and above them, a trellis ran the full length of the house, separated from the pastel painted walls all the way around by a narrow patio, and upon it grew sweet-smelling blossoms brown in colour with livid yellow spots. A small, tattered wooden sign above the door read Radio Free Haiti.

Neither Jean nor Manbo Boukman offered to help Antonia with her case as she struggled up the steps behind them. When Antonia reached the others the woman priestess was shaking sweet smelling water at her feet.

“We must bless you,” she said, holding a small, greyish, rough fabric bag with an aromatic, herbaceous odour in Antonia’s face with an outstretched, fleshy arm. “First hang this gris-gris around your neck. It wards off evil and brings good luck. Do you know why you have come?”

Antonia looked surprised. She wasn’t sure if the question was real or a part of Manbo Boukman’s blessing. She frowned.

“Why I’ve come?” she echoed.

“Now, like I’m doing, you must throw water on the ground so that the Vodou Gede spirits can save you,” the Haitian woman instructed. “Open your eyes.” Antonia didn’t understand.

“My eyes are open,” she replied.

From the bottle she held, Manbo Boukman poured a generous helping of clear spirit onto her ample palm and rubbed it into her face. Taking more she flicked open her robe to reveal her nakedness and rubbed a further generous helping between her sturdy legs.

“You see?” she cried triumphantly. “I am with the Gede spirits. Haitian people live in families. Our spirits live in families, too. It’s our lwa or spirits who look after the people. You see? To see you have first to open your eyes!”

The Englishwoman didn’t respond. She simply stared at her hostess’ disordered clothing and said nothing. The priestess poured more spirit into her palm and placed her bottle at her feet.

With her empty hand she drew Antonia close, raising the liquid into the air and then smothering her visitor’s face. Antonia cried out. From the savage pain it seemed as though an entire pack of the devil’s hell hounds had seized her face and was trying to rip it from her skull.

“It’s burning me!” she shrieked, sinking into a stooping crouch and thrashing this way and that. “Get it off me! Get it off!”

“Do you know why you have come?” the Vodou priestess repeated in a loud accusing voice.

Antonia rubbed her smarting eyes.

“To find my husband?” she pleaded.

“To look,” Manbo Boukman corrected. “You’ve come to look. Nothing is what it seems in Haiti. But to be able to look in Haiti you have to open your eyes. I know where your husband is.”

The Englishwoman suddenly straightened. Her face no longer hurt.

“You do?” she croaked, clearing her throat. She spoke up. “You do?”

The Haitian priestess laughed.

“Everybody knows. It’s not just me. The most important family, at the moment, in Gonaives, where your husband went, is the Clavette family. I say at the moment, because it’s important. Things change quickly in Haiti. Families rise and fall. Here we have militias or factions. In your country or Scotland, you’d probably recognise the name ‘clan’. You could say that Felipe Clavette leads the most influential clan in Haiti, for now. It was he who invited your husband to Gonaives. It’s no secret. Any person in the street can tell you that.”

“We must contact them and ask them to send him back,” Antonia asserted. “Why hasn’t anybody done this already?”

“The religious leaders, we hougans, hounsi and manbos are the only ones who can pass freely in and out of Gonaives. At times like these, during the fighting, it’s too dangerous to go there without the protection of the spirits. That’s why the honorary consul brought you to me. Come with me. I’ll show you how we prepare ourselves for such a journey. First you must make an offering of food to the spirits and ask for guidance. I’ll show you. Come, follow me.”

Behind the building and therefore hidden from the main approach to the house, a smooth, grassy path led beyond a row of papaya, cashew and mango trees some way into the distance. Antonia hesitated, rooted to the spot. The evening’s awe inspiring sunset framed the mouth of Port-Au-Prince Bay below them in a kaleidoscope of fiery colours.

“Come!” Manbo Boukman insisted.

Part of the way along the path another track crossed their route from east to west. Two strangers, one male and the other female, moving without haste, approached them on Antonia’s left. Both of the newcomers nursed a burning candle. Manbo Boukman stepped forward. She greeted the first, a tall dark-skinned man, dressed in a sombre top hat and tails, who, in spite of the failing daylight, was wearing sun glasses. Instantly the pair then began an elaborate hand shaking ritual which lasted several seconds.

“Ayi bobo,” the priestess exclaimed.

“Ayi bobo”, the immaculately dressed stranger replied, placing his hand flat on the centre of his chest.

Within minutes it had become clear to Antonia that a number of extensive gardens had merged to create a large tropical space. Beneath dangling avocados, bread fruit and pineapple palms she turned, marvelling at such an oasis of nature’s bounty placed in the centre of so much appalling deprivation. She didn’t have long to ponder, however. The area in which she stood filled rapidly with strangers. Each visitor bore an additional candle in one hand and a miniature, wooden coffin in the other. All were black-skinned and all dressed in the same flowing, white robes. Three huge men, each considerably taller than six feet, formed a semi-circle. Before him, each man had placed a conical drum.

Antonia had already guessed that she had been summoned to witness some form of local tradition. Since she knew that Manbo Boukman was a Vodou priestess it hadn’t been difficult for her to deduce the religious nature of the unfolding ceremony, but she was not aware of its significance. Beneath two giant, gnarled, looming, slate-grey Mapou trees, which sheltered a large and ancient wooden cross, Manbo Boukman pulled Antonia to her side.

“The Gede family of spirits lives inside these sacred trees,” she explained. “To bring them out we must sing to them. Listen.” In short rhyming lines of verse, mesmerising in its gentle harmony, the candle-lit, white-robed chorus sang:

“Yanvalou tou le sen, yanvalou tou le mo,
Hounsi yo segwelo.”

Now it was time for the drums to hammer out a fast and penetrating conga drum rhythm. Each rapid, hollow, sonic boom was followed by a faint tinny echo among the overhanging Mapou branches, and instantly succeeded by the next thump, in an incessant and hypnotic pounding. Manbo Boukman pulled Antonia into the centre of the ecstatic gathering. Gesturing wildly to the drummers, she whipped their hectic beat into a frenzy.

“Baron Samdi here,” she shouted, pulling Antonia towards the man dressed in a top hat, tails and sun glasses, “he has just spoken to your husband.”

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Mutilation Murders

The torso of a black child has been discovered in London's Kensington Gardens. Detective Chief Inspector Hawthorne and his men quickly discover that the boy was a victim of a ritualistic killing. At Heathrow airport a second child, Jubulani, and his mother disembark from their plane. On his arrival in London Jubulani is kidnapped. A Ju Ju witchdoctor in South London is preparing the new child, Jubulani, to be sacrificed. Hawthorne is racing against time to save the boy.

Midwinter's Children

Georg, a nine-year-old street child, has been captured by human traffickers from Moscow and is about to be sold to a child pornography ring in Amsterdam. Detective Chief Inspector Hawthorne, from Suffolk CID, is on the case...

The Black Daimler

Nexus, a London-based Chinese dissident, learns that his friend was found with an axe embedded in his head. As more of his politically active associates die, he becomes involved in a frantic struggle to understand and defeat the threat to himself and his organisation.

The Expendability Doctrine

Oil tycoon Keith Connors is found dead in the garden of his villa; undoubtedly the work of a pro. His ex-wife flees to Libya, where she is linked to the brutal murder of the White House Trade Representative. In his investigations, Inspector Hawthorne discovers a sinister web of treachery and greed in the international oil business.

The Devil's Brothers

Catherine Bronston, a fifteen-year-old girl, is snatched outside her local swimming pool. The kidnappers, ruthless Albanian mafiosi, issue a ransom demand containing dismembered body parts. Catherine's father fears that the ongoing police investigation could reduce the possibility of her being found alive.

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