

There was a light breeze this morning of June two thousand and twelve. I felt so good in my home located in *Terrier Rouge County*, in the northeastern part of Haiti, which, by a stroke of good fortune, enjoys a nice and dry climate almost all year around. Is it because that patch of Haitian land takes the shape of a tabletop?

I imagine that, because of its geographical configuration, it opens up to the wind coming from all corners of the universe, which makes it so much enjoyable to live in.

That particular day, I had just finished having coffee with Marie-Jo, my wife, and my children: Jolene, a six-year-old girl, Victor, an eight-year-old boy and Coleen, a ten-year-old girl.

I vaguely listened to the *children's discussion*, who usually seized the family gathering opportunities to practice—if I may say so—their “gift of diction”. As usual, I got a kick out of their easiness to go from one topic to another. I said to myself that we, adults, should have retained this verbal cheerfulness, this lightness, this freeing of thought, instead of getting clung to logical and rigid reasoning which doesn't always turn fruitful and which often leaves us with a bitter taste in our mouth.

Marie-Jo, having carried these children in her bosom for nine months each, then breast-fed them, spent long hours with them, while I had

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devoted myself defending my clients at the courthouses, throughout the Northern legal system of Haiti, seemed to understand better our children's *eloquence* and to take a great interest in it.

She intervened, occasionally, to correct a bad use of language, to settle an *unresolved disagreement* or to cover the *budding orators* with motherly kisses.

Everything seemed to get well, as it had occurred in the house for more than ten years. Nothing presaged bad news, the news of an acute colic suffered by Theodore Merlin.

"Cousin," said his wife Amelia in tears, "Theo suffers from stomachache.

"Mama Hermione and I have given him herbal teas which usually turned effective against this kind of ailment, but, for some unexplained reason, they haven't worked today."

She took a pause to collect her thoughts and overcome her extreme emotion.

Amelia counts among my *favorite* cousins. We grew up together, and, as long as I can remember, she has always been generous, helpful and *prudish*.

We used to believe that she would remain unattached all her life; fortunately, she had met the man of her heart and married him at once.

She has taken the habit of calling me "cousin", as her own cheerful way of designating me as her "favorite" relative.

Voodoo within the limits of the law

By the way, she had the good luck to set her cap at Theodore Merlin, a true gentleman. He showed everybody kindness which remained inalterable even in his moments of great adversity. Yet, he didn't lack the sense of humor; above all, in the company of his close friends and relatives, for whom he had great respect.

As a certified agronomist, he had never stopped enlarging his knowledge in the field of agriculture and had often made farming the main topic of his conversation, to the delight of all of us.

Almost daily, he stopped by my house for a chat. I got used to his regular visits, not only because of his wisdom, but also because of his ability to find the right word for cheering me up (regardless).

However, the reason for my attachment to that tall, broad-shouldered, strong, noble and outspoken man came above all from the fact that he made my cousin Amelia happy, by marrying her and being the father of her four wonderful children: Martha, Raoul, Lolita and Benjamin.

On Sundays, our families gathered in the backyard of my home, in the shade of a big tree called *Mabi* by the locals, which spread its long branches like harmless and protective tentacles, so much so that it gradually took the shape of a true hut. We had planned to put a wall around it to make it a permanent place of family entertainment.

This idea, actually, came from Theo, an inventive and artistic mind, with respect to ideas related to plants.

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“Lilly” I said that day, “Theo may suffer from a case of minor ailment: an indigestion, a bloated stomach (as we usually say)—what else?”

Amelia calmed down. She has always trusted my optimism.

Usually, when an apparently bad situation upsets her, she will come to me, “the cousin”, for a word of encouragement and for a happy conclusion of the situation. Therefore, she had no reason, that day, to cast any doubt about that note of hope I had just brought up to appease her worry.

Indeed, we believed all—including Theo himself—that his discomfort had to come from minor ailments suffered by the human body throughout space and time. We don’t die from a mild colic; otherwise, the hominids would vanish, and humanity would belong to history.

My family and I decided to go and bring that good man the sympathy of our presence. On the way, we stopped, here and there, for a chat with neighbors; for, Theo’s ailment, I repeat, caused no real concern among us. As would say a lawyer, “What’s the hurry?”

Again, I had it into my head that his malaise had to come from a colic triggered by natural recipes on which our cousin by marriage had often *experimented*. One little mistake, an unfortunate combination of ingredients could cause wrong reactions to the human body. I had in mind cases of fatal indigestion following a light meal or even a drink or two.

Voodoo within the limits of the law

Amelia had gone ahead, we would join her shortly after. She had to attend some chores, mainly to check on the house apparent cleanliness.

It always upsets her to see things lying about on the floor, on the table, everywhere. Her house has always been *immaculate*; the furniture, dusted and perfectly set; the dishes, done and ready for use.

Furthermore, whatever the nature of her relationship with a visitor, she intends to always offer him or her the image of a wished, a sought for, an indubitable ambiance of a clean house. “It’s a sign of welcome to and respect for others,” she likes saying.

We saw many friends and relatives when we reached the Merlins’ home; one of whom was Lorraine Zamora who could have been my wife, if circumstances permitted.

Additionally, because of her mother’s constant interference in our romance, I did not believe that we would have found happiness together.

More than ever, she was glowing with charm and beauty.

I also spotted Saul Merlin, Theo’s first cousin.

He owned a grocery store located on *Bernard Street*, which he had, not long time before, almost closed down. He used to ask his cousin for helping him meet his monthly obligations; but, since a certain time, almost all of a sudden, his business started flourishing, so much so that he had enough funds to renovate the place.

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From that point on, the grocery store counted among the most modernized and attended commercial store in the whole *Terrier Rouge County*.

Not only it became the meeting place for the locals in need of an appetizing meal, but also for truck drivers, travelers and tourists stopping there to enjoy the house specialties.

One of them consisted in a plain milk-based beverage. However, Saul, whose culinary skills astonished everybody, made this simple drink very succulent.

He added to it a series of ingredients and spices of which he only had the secret.

To be specific, Saul and his employees knew more than anyone else did how to prepare vanilla shake, iced chocolate, and *akasan*—to say the least.

I speak from experience, for I used to go to *St. Peter Grocery* to take delight of these exquisite gastronomic recipes.

How could people explain this change for the better, as far as Saul was concerned? Nobody had the answer. Anyway, we all felt happy about the positive turnaround he had experienced. We said that luck had smiled on someone of our acquaintance, who had waited for a push from destiny.

At the Merlins' home, we also met a number of people vaguely known to me.

They came all as Theo's *close or distant relatives*.

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Because of his kind-heartedness, that man took everybody for a member of his “family” which got bigger with time and which included all those he had kept contact with: cousins, friends, friends of friends...

People knew him throughout the country, from the North to the South, from the East to the West.

His abundant and diversified correspondence bore witness to his notoriety.

That day, he lay down on the sofa. From time to time, his face showed signs of pains he had tried to hide. I had the impression that his condition presented some seriousness and that he had contracted a disease of unknown etiology.

I walked to him and shook his hand. “How do you feel, old fellow?” I inquired.

He made a vague gesture of the hands before answering, “Not too bad, except that I have a strong stomachache.”

“What did you eat?”

“Almost nothing,” he answered while pulling a face.

His eyes rolled upward in an effort to recall what he had done until then.

Finally, he added, “to be precise, soon after I got up this morning, I savored two *Jean-Marie* mangoes Saul had brought me.

“That’s all.”

“Oh, I see.”

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“What is it, Maître Ellis?”

He frowned.

Seemingly, he became aware of a reality of which he had already had an intuition.

I blamed myself for arousing his suspicion (maybe unnecessarily).

The time called for no mind confusion; so, I rushed to clarify my thought to avoid any misinterpretation. “Nothing of importance,” I replied; “except that you may suffer from a case of gastritis. As far as I am concerned, I cannot eat certain fruits, such as mangoes, on an empty stomach.”

“Well, Maître Ellis, it’s the first time such discomfort has happened to me; I have used to eating mangoes for breakfast.

“I have often gone to the garden with empty stomach, just to have a feast of mangoes and other succulent fruits. I have always believed in the beneficial effects of such diet. Apparently, after listening to you, I’ve been mistaken.”

“Things have changed, old fellow. You should mind what you put in your stomach.

“Don’t forget, your body represents your temple, you must take good care of it, as you’ve been doing.”