

The Guard

The child named Bibou, second of three, woke him up, touching his shoulder once, then twice, then backing away to stand in the doorway.

"Papa, Maman says there is smoke across the valley and filling the air."

Jean-Philippe rolled from his bed of woven canvas strips. He reached over to pull his olive jacket from the peg on the wall near the door of the guard post, and slipped it over his undershirt as he stepped into the clear morning air. From here, his place of work at the crest of a high ridge on the Haitian-Dominican border, he surveyed what had also become his home over the last five years. His wife was busy scooping water from the two small tubs that sat on the far side of the guardhouse, near the covered area that served as a kitchen.

To Jean-Philippe, the guardhouse was home. Certainly, it was more than a man and his family needed in this part of the country he often told his wife, and much preferable to the life they had lived in Cap-Haitien after they had married. The post was built semi-advantageously, with a view of the narrow dirt road that rose from the valley where the small town of Desmoulins stood invisible below, appearing as if from nowhere between the limestone bluffs and scabble that dominated so much of the land. The air was decidedly more temperate at this altitude, though Jean-Philippe often found himself sweating easily after ten minutes of patrolling the perimeter he was assigned. Behind the shack and about 10 meters along the ridge stood a single tree that had survived the foraging for wood and at whose base they had buried their youngest child, Titide, less than a year past.

As was his custom upon waking, Jean-Philippe walked to the eastern side of the wooden building, and leaned against the mud and sticks of the wall, bleached into a crumbling white cake by countless morning suns. He looked toward the sun, down and across the sloping hills, all the more different than his beloved Haiti for their greenery and tree-lined ridges, and into the Dominican Republic.

Jean-Philippe had inspected the Dominican border only once, traveling for three hours down the hill towards Quanaminthe, the point of crossing into the Dominican town of Dajabon, occasionally grabbing on to outcroppings of rock or mangled roots to steady himself. To his surprise, he had found the border towns to be a hub of activity, with signs both in Creyol and Spanish, and the noise of the place rang in his ears like the surf he listened to as a young boy on Saturdays when he escaped the confines of Cap-Haitien with friends and explored the rocky shoreline of Haiti's northern coast.

He realized that the route from his guard post to Quanaminthe was seldom if at all used; the people had to come from somewhere, and he observed that most arrived from the mountains many kilometers north of where he was stationed, using the main road from Fort-Liberte. This fact did not diminish the importance of his post, for as far as he was concerned most people were a nuisance, and the lack of popularity of his road afforded him the comfort and peace of his life with his family.

He had lingered on in Quanaminthe only an hour or so. He saluted and called out a greeting to the Dominicans who sat in the shade of their well-bunkered, sandbagged post on the other side of the river, situated next to a yellow and red painted gate barely wide enough for a car to pass through. They ignored him, and he realized that his coat, with its identifying insignia of a government official, was hanging limply over his arm.

That trip to the border had been two years earlier. He made more frequent visits to Desmoulins, where every three months he collected his salary from the provincial official that passed through, and chatted with the townspeople about current events. Occasionally when they needed supplies, his wife made the journey, bringing back a small sack of rice, and less-desired vegetables, her shoulders and neck muscles twisted strong by the weight upon them.

He thought the smoke was coming from Fort-Liberte, or perhaps from down along the coast, maybe even Cap-Haitien. He was unsure. There was too much of it, casting an angry gray pallor just above the horizon. In places the smoke curled upon itself and drifted lazily towards the clouds. He was annoyed at the way it disrupted the colors of the sky to which he was accustomed.

Late in the afternoon the *chimeres* arrived to the guard post. Their arrival was preceded by the sound of their arguing with each other, accents slurred by city living, rising from the road below the guardhouse, amplified as the words bounced across the boulders.

They were three, with two propping up a fourth between them.

The largest of them, a young man in sunglasses that seemed too dark and too expensive compared to the rest of his clothes, slowed for a moment upon seeing the guardhouse, motioning for his companions to stop with a small movement of his hand.

"You border guard?" the man called out with the sharpness of a city dweller. It was not so much a question, and though Jean-Philippe could not see the man's eyes behind the sunglasses, he guessed they did not stray far from the rifle he held at an angle across his waist.

Jean-Philippe was unsure how to respond. Officially, the military had been disbanded years ago, after the Americans had helped the President stand again on his feet. He had come here to his post when an

old friend of his father's, with a place in the low levels of the Cap-Haitien municipality, told the family that the government was looking for a young man to define and uphold the nation's integrity. The choice for Jean-Philippe, to abandon city life for a rugged existence in the isolated mountains, was balanced by its offer of protection from life's arbitrariness in the city and his recent marriage. Two childhood friends had been killed that year by the random hand of violence that wandered freely about Cap-Haitien's streets, and he was beginning to feel the pull of that romantic, yet corrosive struggle against life authority. In truth, he had not thought overlong on the offer before accepting the position.

"Yes, this is a guard post," Jean-Philippe said finally, noting that the men all carried weapons of their own, small pistols tucked into their waistbands, and careful not to move his hands, "but to reach the border is a walk longer than a morning from here."

The men all stared at him, until one of the others snorted "He a fucking joke, that what. *C'est une frontiere que n'est meme pas une frontiere.*"

Jean-Philippe did not reply, and instead looked at the one whose weight was being supported by the others. He was quite young, and seemed only semi-conscious. The boy's head hung limply to one side. His bright yellow Adidas shirt was stained with a patch of blood, the rusted crimson patch as large as his Jean-Philippe's hand, falling from the shoulder towards the center of his chest.

The large man seemed to remember the boy and said to the others without turning, "We stay here tonight. Put him down." He motioned toward the tree. "*La.* Over there."

The men shuffled with the weight of the boy, and dropped him heavily beneath the tree. Jean-Philippe noticed that they were careful to place their own belongings at a distance from where they left him.

They slept through the hottest part of the day, and then sat together for warmth as the sun dropped, next to a small fire made from precious branches that Jean-Philippe's wife had gathered over the past month. Jean-Philippe stood with his rifle in his usual position at sunset, near the single tree, shifting his gaze every fifteen minutes or so. The men, once they had grown comfortable with the idea of approaching darkness in unfamiliar surroundings, let their attention wander, except for the large man, who seemed intent on Jean-Philippe's actions.

Finally, he spoke. "How you guard a border that keep changing? No trees is Haiti. Where they trees is them Spanish. Look," said the man, grabbing one of the yet unused sticks from the ground and throwing it at his companion's feet, "I change the border. You in Dominican now." They all began to laugh. Jean-Philippe looked past their heads at the falling sun. The smoke that covered the horizon in the morning somehow remained even now, like the suggestion of a kiss blown in the air.

The large man noticed the smoke as well and removed his sunglasses. "They burning everything. All the land is burning, you see? All that will be left is carbon that everyone make from what is burned.

"This is what is coming, guard man. Everything you see now will be black and burnt, and they gonna sell it all, burnt like it is, and what is not burned by the grace of the Almighty will be what's left for us, to start again."

"For a long time now, for many people in this area," said Jean-Philippe, "there has been nothing left to burn. Nothing grows because there is nothing to hold the soil when the rains come in the mountains."

The large man stood and moved close to Jean-Philippe. "You think you king here? Away and above the rest of us? We *chimères*, and we seen how it is there, where the smoke comes from. What you think you king of, my friend?"

Jean-Philippe remained silent, unwilling to look into those eyes, red and filmy like the beginning of a scab.

"I tell you something," the large man said, "even when you think things changing, they don't change. But you best know how to change yourself, guard-man. Some things, many things, are bigger than you ever be." The others laughed as the big man motioned to his crotch.

The injured boy did not live through the night. The *chimères* prepared to leave in the early morning, silent and in foul moods, with the thought of the day's journey ahead. The large man came up next to Jean-Philippe as he stood watching the unheralded first moments after the dawn, and put on his sunglasses.

"You bury him," the large man said.

"You will not help."

The man said nothing.

"What is his name?"

"His name?"

"For the grave marker."

"You call him whatever you want, guard-man. It does not matter." He walked around the building and motioned for his companions to gather their things. The dead boy lay on his back where they had laid him the night before, partially upon Titide's grave. One of the boy's legs was bent stiffly and his heels were together, forming a tilting "v".

The men began walking down the hill toward the border, and were nearly out of sight when the large man turned around, lifting his sunglasses to his forehead, and called back to Jean-Philippe.

"Why you need a name when you dead?"

Jean-Philippe stared at the dead boy's face throughout the morning.

"He is the same as Titide now, Maman?" asked Bibou, looking at the body from the doorway of the guardhouse.

"He is nothing like your brother, Bibou."

"Be quiet," said Jean-Philippe, "the boy is Haitian, that is enough."

"I do not recognize a single thing about his face." Jean-Philippe was surprised by the sharpness of his wife's voice as she came to look at the boy. "You say he is Haitian. I do not know what he is or what that means."

Jean-Philippe walked over to the tree and looked at the footprints covering his son's grave, the dirt scabbled by the hard rubber soles of the men's boots. The few sticks that served as both headstone and marker for Titide had been pushed askew, and now hung as if looking for support from the ground below.

It took him the rest of the day to bury the boy, and the exertion wearied him tremendously. The *chimeres* returned at night in his dreams as he slept. They stood in a group, leaned on each other and mocked him with silent laughter, startling his eyes open in the darkness. The dreams continued for the rest of the week.

"Each time they seem more pale," he told his wife. "As if their bones cover their flesh." He did not tell her the things the *chimeres* spoke in his dreams, or of how they spent time shooting at each other, amused as the wounds appeared one by one on their bodies.

Jean-Philippe had known fear before, but this crept into his bed with him. The *chimeres* began to follow him during the day, looking over his shoulder as he scrubbed the aging rifle he had received during his formal training. Sometimes he heard them singing, particularly when he caught himself staring at the earth at the base of the tree where Titide was buried.

A week after Bibou had told him of the smoke, a young man arrived on a motorbike on the path from Desmoulins. He said he was an official of *l'ambassade americaine*. He treated him like an equal, saluting as he approached, and paused until Jean-Philippe nodded that he could come forward and talk.

The man stayed the night, sometimes writing in a small book as he spoke. He asked about many things, strange and often irrelevant, and from the dirt on his clothes it was clear that he had been traveling for some time. The children giggled at the man's Creyol, which sometimes turned words into other words unintended. It sounded like a corruption of the way the Dominicans spoke near the border, in Quaniminthe, but its lack of grammatical correctness prevented the tone of superiority that the Dominicans took with him. Jean-Philippe had to hold back from smiling on occasion.

The man's speech was often interrupted by static coming from a radio attached to his belt. He continued talking while lowering the volume with his fingers, which played with the radio's knobs as if they were prayer beads. Jean-Philippe found his eyes following the movements of the man's fingers and had to force himself more than once to listen to the man's words.

It became clear to Jean-Philippe as they spoke into the darker hours that the world was a much larger place than he had imagined. The man spoke of the government, and violence and unrest in small towns, as well as about things that Jean-Philippe didn't know of. The man's earnestness drew Jean-Phillip in, and he watched as the edges of his face shifted in the firelight.

They carefully watched him eat a meal of rice and pigeon peas flavored with parsley, salt and bits of a small onion.

"I hope you have understood what I said," said the man the next morning as he tied his sleeping roll on to the motorbike and checked the fluid levels in the motor. "I won't say I know the future, but I think things have begun that will not account for one man. " He waved at Bibou and Marie as he started the engine and rode out of sight.

"This man, he is proud of what he does," Jean-Philippe said to his wife, as they lay together that night, unable to sleep.

"He is a believer," she replied. "One who thinks he can bend the world to his own will."

Jean-Philippe thought of his father and mother. It had been long since he had last seen them. Your life was something you earned. Earned by believing, resisting, and fighting for your own soul. Slightly ashamed, Jean-Philippe thought of how Titide had not fought for life, and had died slowly. The boy had not responded to the ministrations of his wife, or of the remedies given by the healer in Desmoulins. Near the end, Jean-Philippe had turned his back on his second son and waited. Death had come quietly in the mountain air, and he buried Titide quickly beneath the tree, relieved. He found himself wondering how it was possible that he and his father, who had spoken so infrequently to him as a boy, and who had watched him leave Cap-Haitien without so much as a deep breath, had turned out so much alike.

He was shaken by what had passed with the *chimeres*, and now more so by the words of the American. What could they possibly know? What did they know of Haiti, a land that gave so little? What did they know of permanence?

"I too am proud of myself," he said to his wife after a long silence, but he was not sure if she was asleep.

In the morning he gathered the little money they had and walked to where his wife sat shredding parsley with her fingers.

"Go to Quanamithe and try to cross into Dajabon. We will need food for maybe one week. I will come to help you." He put the money into her hand.

"But the child—"

"Take them with you," he replied curtly.

"What if they have closed the border?"

"There are many places to cross," he said impatiently, knowing this to be both truth and a lie. "Ask. Someone will show you. The children are useful for this. People will want to take care."

He knew, however, that if the Dominicans had closed the border it was already too late. She knew as well.

"And what will you do, without us?"

A man stands only on his own feet, not the feet of others, he thought. He looked over at Marie and Bibou, smiling at each other as they drew faces and animals in the dirt. How easy. How easy life was, when the smiles of your children reflected your smile, and gifted you something of yourself. When children could give you the confidence of past generations and future generations.

"This will end soon," he said to his wife, thinking of the first time they met in Cap-Haitien, when the outline of her hipbones peeked from above the wrap of her skirt as she walked down the street, looking for sweet basil and onions for the evening meal. Even then she had stood up to him, challenging his advances, making him feel undeserving in one moment, and welcome the next.

Jean-Philippe picked up his rifle, aware of his wife's eyes on him as he buttoned the jacket of his uniform. He walked over to the door of the guard post, turned to face Haiti, straightened, with a slight bend in the knees, and allowed one hand to cross into a comfortable position in the small of his back.

Soon after, he felt his wife and children start their walk down the hill towards Quanamithe. Something sounded in the valley below his post. He prayed that the border was open. He did not watch them go.