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MISSIVE FROM A CALIFORNIA HAITIAN LIVING WITH A FRENCHMAN

I married my colonizer. Guess that makes me a traitor of sorts. I broach the subject with my friend, Jeannie, who is Jewish and married a German. It is time to heal, I think, she says.

The French caused so much trouble in Haiti, first by raping their slave women, then treating the resulting children honorably—passing on the family name, the right to inherit, and sending them off to France for expensive educations. Today, those half-blood children still think they're better than their darker brothers and sisters. 200 years later, they still don't mix, dance, kiss or make love together. But who am I to speak? I'm one of those half-blood descendants, and I married a white man, ancestor of the rapist.

It's time to heal, I tell myself, when I notice the worst characteristics of the French embraced by mulatto culture. We have taken on their arrogance, even though we own the dubious and oft-heard distinction of *poorest in the western hemisphere*. We have their haughtiness, which celebrates education above all, even as we engage in benign neglect of our literacy rate. We take pride in our sophistication, while steps away from our mansions, neighbors live in shacks without running water and electricity. Even though I prefer the lilting, lyrical charm of our island accent, and find it disingenuous when Haitians try to "sound" French, after 15 years of living with a Frenchman and attendant new relations, I sometimes find myself using French expressions I wouldn't begin to know how to say the Haitian way.

“Haitians speak excellent French,” I hear my husband say to French people, who ask about the difference. I ask him what he means by that; he says Haitian French is closest to the form and structure of the way the language is spoken in France. I get the feeling that’s supposed to be a compliment.

It’s time to laugh, I tell myself.

We kicked the French out of Haiti and look what it got us. When I visit other islands in the Caribbean, I want to cry because, for all their problems, many have escalators in airports, elevators in tall buildings, paved roads with working traffic signals and phone systems, that while not perfect, do not make cell phones the equivalent of the second coming, as in Haiti. But look at what we reaped from independence. We retained our intrinsic exotic African flavor more than any other island; our Haiti *chérie* is enveloped in a shroud of mystery, magic and charisma like no other place on earth; we are the biggest producers of Black intuitive art in the world; our people embrace the spirit of God in so many faceted ways, like Ezili, Bawon Samdi, Kouzin Zaka, Gran Bwa, La Siren, and the list goes on... If God equals love, and God equals power, then love and power permeate Haiti in multiples. Some claim they can almost touch that potent mix, even as they step off the plane—it’s that thick.

Some say Haiti is cursed. We can talk about Haiti’s political tribulations and hell-spun problems until the skinny Haitian cows come home, but we retain our African beauty, the lyricism of our market women and secret magnetism that makes *feeling* people fall in love with the island again and again. Martinique and Guadeloupe may have other attributes, but Haiti has the spirit.

Did we pay too high a price for independence? You decide, I can’t.

We kicked your ass before and I can do it again, I remind my husband when his French arrogance surpasses even my father’s own inherited haughtiness. And we laugh because he knows it’s true.