

LETTER FROM PORT-AU-PRINCE BY ROBERT LEE



The Eastern Airlines jet descends over the western tip of Hispaniola Island. From above, the hills of Haiti are brown and bare. Surrounded by lush Caribbean islets, this patch alone appears cursed.

An occasional road scratches its way across the blasted landscape; settlements come into view, far from water or wood. Few countries so dramatically announce their poverty.

The cabin of the aircraft is packed with "p'tit mamans," each carrying a stereo ghetto-blaster and bags crammed with clothing. Imports to Haiti are now irregular, and these treasures will be taken to the exclusive homes of Petionville, where many will be sold or traded. One has to respond to the realities of despotism: the shopping in Port-au-Prince is simply awful.

A steel band meets the incoming passengers at the airport, plays a few spiritless bars, and departs. It is a reminder of busier days. Haiti was a popular tourist centre in the 1950s, before the Duvalier rot set in. The tourist trade, what was left of it, suffered with the AIDS scare in the early 1980s. A few commercial travellers reappeared after Baby Doc fled for France two years ago, then disappeared again with the violence last November. Now, as election day neared, even the residents were fleeing Port-au-Prince by bus. Journalists enjoy the privilege of flying into places as they are being evacuated.

Isolation does not much bother Haitians. Their society has always been more than mildly xenophobic. The island was settled by French plantation owners, who were among the most barbaric in the history of the slave trade. Haitians still call all foreigners "blancs," though a smile or a scowl can dramatically alter the meaning of the word.

There is not a peaceful page in the Haitian history. Most of the

blancs were slaughtered in the slave revolt of 1804, a singularly successful black revolution which was organized by secret societies and sustained by the voodoo religion – both of which are contemporary forces in Haitian politics. The blancs came back again with Napoleon's army, which was beaten off. The US Marines managed to occupy the island from 1915 to 1934, though their influence did not extend much beyond Port-au-Prince. A succession of black dictators failed to control the countryside or the night until Papa Doc.

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The blancs were partly responsible for the private army which gave Dr. Francois Duvalier's dictatorship its unique edge of horror. In 1958, eight mercenaries, led by two maverick US lawmen, launched the Dade County Deputy Sheriff Invasion. The eight drove a commandeered truck-taxi, known as the "tap-tap," into the central Dessalines barracks. Guns blazing, they quickly seized the barracks and demanded the surrender of the presidential palace. They very nearly succeeded.

They erred in sending out a young soldier to buy cigarettes. He informed that there were only eight invaders, the barracks were stormed, and the mercenaries were killed. But Duvalier had learned the necessity of a private army. He formed the Tonton Macoutes.

The Macoutes were originally called the Volunteers for National Security, but quickly adopted the nickname, which translates as "Uncle Knapsack" – a familiar

bogeyman who roams the countryside at night, snatching errant little boys and girls and stuffing them in his bag. Their leadership was recruited from the elite of voodoo and the secret societies.

Duvalier had studied his country's folklore. He was probably a voodoo initiate, and once proclaimed himself "immaterial." He realized the superstitious fears of his people, the dread of the Macoutes, the power of voodoo. He appeared in public in the black formal dress of Baron Samedi, the god of the graveyard. His Macoutes stole the bodies of enemies before burial. He once had the head of an enemy preserved in ice on his desk, for contemplation. "There is something peculiarly Roman in the air of Haiti," Graham Greene wrote in 1971. "Roman in its cruel-

ty, in its corruption, and in its heroism."

Greene's Haiti – the country he described so precisely in *The Comedians* – is everywhere. The deserted splendour of the Trianon Hotel exists at the Olaffson, which is operated by the half-brother of Haiti's military ruler. The empty casino still operates, still in danger of one moderately lucky player breaking the bank. Beggars still crowd, deformed by elephantiasis, crippled by leprosy, disfigured by tropical tumors. Traffic still does not move at night. The extravagant characters abound.

Henri, the waiter, makes a splendid rum punch at the Hotel Splendid. He owns a shirt patterned with hot-air balloons, a magical conveyance he would one day love to see. Gerard, the manager, sips scotch from a tumbler daintily wrapped in a napkin, and philosophizes. One night a pistol was fired in the hotel driveway, not twenty yards from the open-air dining room. The report was

answered, and a brief gun battle ensued. Robert Hurst and the CTV television crew were expected to drive up at any moment. What to do? "It is best," Gerard advised, "to continue eating."

As the elections approached, information became more than a precious commodity. It became the mythical object of desire, like El Dorado or the Holy Grail. Telephones often did not work. The electoral commission had a wraith-like existence, never appearing quite where one expected. Candidates dropped in and out like guests at a tea party. The Canadian ambassador, quite wisely, retired to his residence under armed guard. The only independent observers to the election were the blanc journalists. For part of the morning, journalists and dogs were the only unarmed presence on the streets. The dogs were not frightened.

The journalists were relieved that they were not once again shot down by the soldiers and Macoutes. They responded to this largesse with bitter attacks on the electoral process, which they judged a fraud.

At the hotel, Hurst wondered – and I agreed with him – if some measure of success couldn't be granted to the fact that voters were not slaughtered at the polling booths. The lesson of Haiti, after all, is not western notions of overnight democracy. It is that terror is so easy to introduce, and so simple to maintain. And it is important to remember that the Macoutes still out-number the army at least five-to-one; anyone who thinks that they will suddenly become a benevolent sort of Tonton Kiwanis is dreaming.

The calm and circumspect Gerard was not quick to judge the election, or the blood which failed to flow. "In Haiti," he had suggested, "everything is chance – but nothing is coincidence." □

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