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Author(s): Mayra Montero and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

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## CORINNE, AMIABLE GIRL

By Mayra Montero

"Do you know how many gourdes that can cost you?"

Apollinaire Sanglier lowered his eyes and discovered a small army of minute snails advancing on the earthen floor. They were fleeing the fields, the dizzying sun devastating the pasturelands, and the persecution of the birds. Papa Lhomond, also noticing the forward march, picked up a few at random and put them into his mouth.

"Many gourdes," he announced as he chewed the mass of blackened shells. "If you have dollars, so much the better. But you won't have them. This is more than you can pay."

The *houngan* kept his gaze fixed on his cauldrons and on the rag warriors guarding the altars. He sucked with his tongue the remnants of mollusks lodged between his teeth and bent down to the floor to pick up more snails.

"There are few of us left, very few who know how to work the living dead. No one wants to get sucked into these dealings anymore. Least of all if we're dealing with a white woman."

"She's not white," Apollinaire lit up. "Corinne is mulatta."

"So much the worse," the *houngan* said. "Mulattas are tough to handle, tougher than black women, which is saying a lot."

Apollinaire shrunk like a shamed creature and the other one rose to his feet.

"How much money do you have, finally?"

"I had saved a few dollars to leave for Santo Domingo. My mother's going to put up whatever else is needed."

"A hundred to begin with. When is she getting married?"

"At the end of the month. Next Sunday."

"The same day as the elections? There'll be plenty of shooting that day. Bad for you. Good for the work."

The *houngan* left the hut, and Apollinaire was inwardly grateful for the mark of trust implicit in his being allowed to remain alone in the temple. The air inside smelled of rancid fat and fermented tobacco, and he lay on his back, looking at the palm-thatched roof and listening to the dull sizzle of the insects getting scalded in the fields. Then his eyes dimmed and he tried to drive away all hurtful memories of Corinne. He no longer wanted to think of her, he wouldn't even try to see her until she returned from the blue well of the deceased, clean and submissive like God intended, with the pale gaze of those who never think, without that scowl of disgust she gave him every time he came near. Later they would go very far away, to the smoky coasts of La Cahouane and their children would be born there, broad in the beam and light-skinned like their mother.

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“She will never raise her voice at you and will always give birth in silence.”

His stepfather, Faustine Dondon, had said that on the very same day in which the family had gathered together to decide what to do with their misguided son, wallowing in the despair of his love like a victim of a blood spell. Apollinaire no longer ate, he spent night after night staggering through the bars in the harbour, and towards six in the morning, when his mother set out looking for him, he was to be found crouching on a pool of vomit, his arms bearing the scratches of his own fury, the face swollen with tears, and crying in a woeful moan, like that of a badly-wounded wild boar, which made the early vendors in the marketplace die laughing.

“Corinne’s mother,” his stepfather liked to stress, “sells fruit in the morning and squeezes it at night, at One-Arm-Tancredi’s. She was always a whore, and his daughter will end up the same way.”

Apollinaire had never felt such fury. His mother, meanwhile, looked at him as she used to look at hens sick with pip, with a look between commiseration and stubbornness which heralded fast and pitiless cures. Finally, when his stepfather ran out of arguments, Eloïse Sanglier took in some air, stretched her bony hand, and grabbed his ear.

“Listen to me well, Apollinaire, my little son: you’re spending the dollars for your voyage, your life’s savings, in drinking bouts. That mulatta is getting married at the end of the month and I say to you, why don’t you go to Papa Lhomond so he can bind her to you?”

“Papa Florvil already bound her,” Apollinaire sighed. “They gave it to her to drink, but it didn’t take.”

“Remember she is the daughter of a priest,” her stepfather muttered. “She has to be worked differently. Let them bring her down among the death, and then you can take her away.”

Following this, the old man bent over Apollinaire and whispered what he considered to be two great advantages of the business: once the girl returned from he-knew-where, she would never raise her voice, and were she to give birth twenty times, twenty times would she give birth in silence.

“And what is even better,” he added with a slight smile, “only then will you be sure that she will not become such a whore as her mother.”

Shortly after this conversation, and after a clandestine meeting between Eloïse Sanglier and Papa Lhomond, Apollinaire sailed to the Isle of Gonaïves, to meet for the first time with that ageless man with hardened face and teeth like a horse, whose skin was of such a gray color that it seemed kneaded in solid smoke. The *houngan* went straight to the point: if he agreed to do this work, it was because Eloïse, his favorite god-daughter, had asked for it. But he would have to move heaven and earth in L’Artibonite and that cost dough. Besides, he would have to place some people near the girl. He was ready to travel to Gonaïves on the eve of the wedding. But he expected Apollinaire to collaborate in everything necessary.

“You know that if we don’t arrive in time she will die entirely?”

"My stepfather mentioned something about that."

"And you know that if she dies then I won't be able to return your money?"

"I know," Apollinaire admitted.

"If the family realizes it, or if they get it into their heads to call a doctor, she could also die."

"Her mother doesn't have a cent."

"And the boyfriend, are you sure he won't call a doctor?"

It was a detail Apollinaire had not counted on. The truth was that he had never taken that emaciated guy who had gotten himself engaged to Corinne too seriously. He didn't feel jealousy or envy or any desire to beat Dessalines Corail to a pulp. He felt absolutely nothing. His thoughts were too occupied with the woman for him to concern himself with the man taking her away from him.

"Maybe the boyfriend will call the doctor," Papa Lhomond repeated.

"The boyfriend will be away all day," Apollinaire assured him. "He works for a politician and will come to get married in the afternoon, after people have voted."

"Well, by the afternoon she'll be quite stiff," Papa Lhomond said sententiously, and immediately returned to devouring his snails.

Apollinaire, his gaze fixed on the sweltering surface that was the fields, now thought of what his life would have been like if Corinne had loved him like he loved her. There would have been no need for him to cross the Saint Marc channel to visit this remote *hounfort* in order to force her into being an amiable girl. She would perhaps have given birth to his children screaming and swearing like all other women. But what did that matter. What did it matter that the mother spent her nights whoring at One-Arm-Tancrède's, since after all the daughter took after her father. Didn't Corinne have the same yellow eyes and the same disposition to communicate with the mute the Dutch priest had had? If she had loved him, he told himself as he watched another gray column of snails ascend the wall, he wouldn't have minded supporting them both. The mother too, so she wouldn't be rolling about in bed with just anyone for a couple of gourdes at the Salon Francais. But Corinne had never loved him, and moreover, had chosen to marry one of the mutes that the priest had taught to speak by signs. That's how she communicated with Dessalines Corail, by means of a game of hands that made everyone who saw them walk by laugh. Maybe that's why he didn't worry about pushing the rival away, because he believed deep down that that man would never have the courage to snatch her away; because he knew that Dessalines would never be capable of whispering into Corinne's soft ear one single phrase to warm her soul, nor a torrid word that would make her willingly surrender.

The snails stopped, and he picked one of them to put into his mouth. He was sure he was not going to like it but he had to discover what strange pleasure Papa Lhomond derived from the chewing of those bugs, enough to eat them by the fistful, cutting his lips with the soil-encrusted edges of the shells. What he had forgotten to ask the *houngan*, he told himself as he was overcome by retching, was if it was true that the skin of women brought back grew hard with the years, like that of a brown pig. He didn't even want to think whether what old people whispered was true, that with time the living dead fell into the habit of devouring vermin they found on the fields.

Faustine Dondon, his stepfather, had told him of the case of a French woman abducted by a slaughterer from Hinche who used to breakfast on a half-stunned *cul-rouge* spider her husband brought to her before he awoke her.

Apollinaire Sanglier spat out a gray slime that tasted at once putrid and bitter. He had made up his mind, there was no other way. Papa Lhomond, by this time, would already be spurring on his contacts, unearthing bones, searching in solitude for the infallible substances used only for works such as these. Corinne, many miles away, could not imagine the stiff price she was going to pay for her disdain. And Dessalines Corail, absorbed as he was in politics, wouldn't be able to anticipate what was cooking either.

He dusted off his clothes and left the hut. The heat outside was so intense that he felt an impulse to return to the altars to shelter in the shadow of the sawdust warriors guarding the virgins with the greedy look of those who would like to split their legs open once and for all. But he understood that it was time to set out on the long road home, await the emissary Papa Lhomond would send to pick up the dollars, and not go anywhere near the places where he could run into the woman or her boyfriend.

"Let no one see you prowling around her, let no one know that you know she's going to get married."

To spare Apollinaire greater sorrows, it was decided that his stepfather, Faustine Dondon, would accompany the *houngan* in the difficult task of finishing off the work.

"If you accompany me," Papa Lhomond meditated, "you run the risk of being turned off by her later. You'll wait until we bring her to you. When you see her again, she will be clean and ready for you to take away."

Once back in Gonaïves, he asked himself uneasily what it was that had changed in the city. He had been away only a couple of nights, but when the packet-boat in which he made the return trip slowed down and started to enter the harbor, it seemed as if he had been away many years. The usual mild breezes that traversed the gulf of Gonaïves at that time of the year now dispersed into hot gusts that eddied when they reached the coast, choking the air moving inland. Maybe everything was the same as ever, he thought as he wiped away the dollops of sweat, maybe the strangeness was only inside his own brain. But later, when he set foot on shore and started to walk towards his house, the impression that something horrible had occurred or was about to occur assaulted him again. His mother, Eloïse Sanglier, received him with great coldness:

"On Sunday afternoon a man from Gros-Morne will come to take you both straight into Port-au-Prince. From there you will travel by boat to Jérémie. At Jérémie you yourself will have to find someone to take you down to La Cahouane."

Apollinaire remained silent. Then he snapped his tongue as if he had remembered something unpleasant.

"Papa Lhomond will send an old man from the isle for the money."

"The old man already came," his mother said. "I already gave it to him."

He looked at her in surprise and seemed about to ask her something, but Eloïse cut him short with a movement of her hand.

"That is not to be discussed with anyone. Do you understand me, my son?"

Apollinaire did not reply. He changed his clothes and set out as usual for his job at the Mariani Brothers' shop. He scrubbed the floors, emptied the garbage cans, and noon surprised him preparing the two-pound bags of black beans which would be sold at a reduced price all day Saturday. Antoine Mariani, his boss, alarmed his patrons every so often with hints that maybe he wouldn't be able to open the shop the following week.

"There'll be shooting on Sunday," he told them. "Who knows if we will have to spend Monday under our beds."

The customers that had a few extra gourdes on them reacted by buying an additional tin of crackers and a few more pounds of rice. Those who had brought just enough looked at the shopkeeper, perplexed, and left without a word. Apollinaire trembled from head to toe when he thought that Corinne could appear at any moment and that with the same dusty hands with which he was separating the black beans he would have to sell her what he always sold her: ten of sugar and one of okra. Corinne, however, did not show up that day, and it was her boyfriend, Dessalines Corail, who came to the store for the provisions the girl had sent him for. Apollinaire, busy as he was slicing pumpkins in half, was unaware of his arrival until one of the Mariani brothers tapped him on the shoulder.

"Leave that and go cut a pair of herrings for the mute."

Apollinaire turned slowly. He knew that the mute could not be other than Corinne's boyfriend, and when his eyes met Dessalines's somber eyes, an incipient fury, a mixture of terror and pity, got stuck in his throat. The mute handed him a piece of stained paper where the order was written.

"I don't understand the handwriting," grunted Apollinaire.

"How could you understand it," they roared from the back room, "if you can barely read."

Apollinaire went on cutting the herring, and Antoine Mariani approached to read the list.

"Give him rice and beans. Five of each. And ten of corn meal."

Then he addressed the mute.

"You've been distributing leaflets, haven't you?"

Dessalines denied it with his head.

"The nuns distribute leaflets," Apollinaire intervened in a biting tone.

"No one asked you," Antoine scolded him, and immediately insisted with Dessalines: "But you are working for that politician, Latortue, your mother-in-law told me."

The mute assented.

"Watch that you don't get your throat slashed before you get married. Mind you, there's more than one around with his eye on Corinne."

Apollinaire shuddered and dropped a whole scoopful of black beans on the floor. Dessalines remained very serious, grabbed his packages, and left the store with the same look of anguish with which he had arrived.

At dawn on Friday, two sharp knocks, like two stone blows, awakened Apollinaire Sanglier. Eloïse rushed to open the door, and from his cot he heard the whispers and

the prattle of steps which stopped next to the little flowered curtain that led to his room.

"Apollinaire," his mother said, "get up and come look after Papa Lhomond."

He dressed in a hurry and when he came out he found Faustine Dondon, his stepfather, speaking with the *houngan* in a low voice.

"From this moment on," Papa Lhomond told him as soon as he saw him appear, "you don't know me, you don't greet me, you haven't seen me even if you're looking at me."

Eloïse served everyone coffee, and Apollinaire discovered on her face a vital and ardent look, an expression made iridescent by the light and which in any other person would probably have terrorized him. A bit later he left for work, leaving Papa Lhomond and his stepfather sitting around the table, exchanging small packages wrapped in newspaper and tied with shoelaces. That day Corinne didn't come to buy anything either, and when Apollinaire returned home in the evening his mother awaited him with the table set and a luxurious dinner: stewed meat and green plantains. Only then did he understand that this was farewell.

"You have been left without a cent," Eloïse Sanglier said. "And you owe me a great deal of money. As soon as you get to La Cahouane, you should set up as a charcoal-maker and try to save a bit."

Apollinaire moved his head with a vague gesture and remained staring at the curdled sauce of the stew reaching the chipped borders of his plate.

"To think that my grandchildren," he heard his mother say, "will also be the grandchildren of a priest."

"A priest of the kind that is allowed to marry," he replied, "not the other kind."

"So what?" jumped Eloïse. "What good did it do Corinne's mother to have him marry her, if when he left he didn't leave her a cent?"

"Corinne has yellow eyes thanks to him," Apollinaire dared add.

"Thanks to cat's claws, you mean. The mother always carried them on her so that her creature wouldn't lack grip."

"She won't lack anything," Apollinaire promised and ate his banquet in silence.

When he got to the store the following day, he found a long line of early-risers awaiting the special sale on black beans.

"She died last night," he heard a woman who was speaking to all. "The doctor says that it was her heart, but she had had some fevers before. Her mother believes that the veins in her head burst."

He stood watching the woman, not daring to ask her anything. A doctor, he thought, and that very instant he heard Antoine Mariani call him to start serving the customers. If only he could have let Papa Lhomond know . . . But the *houngan* had warned him: "You don't know me. You have not seen me even if you're looking at me." People snatched the two-pound bags from his hands and he felt a cold sweat running down his face. They had called the doctor. Surely they had given her some potion to drink. Or in the worst of cases, they had opened her belly after death to see what had made her sick.

"She was going to get married tomorrow," he heard his boss say. "Poor mute, the girl had grown into such a beauty."

No one felt too sorry for Corinne. It's just that in Haiti no one feels pity for the dead, but rather for those who remain alive. Had the doctor killed her? The mute had had to call him, no wonder the mute had given him an evil look. The mute suspected something.

At noon he left the store dragging his feet. He didn't feel like returning home, but he felt the need to tell his mother, since he couldn't tell Papa Lhomond, everything he had heard. They had called the doctor, the thought hammered in his head, a doctor that surely had felt Corinne's soft gut; one of these quacks who had perhaps ruined the work with his scalpels and potions. When he got home, his mother was waiting for him, still dressed in her mourning clothes: a gray shift with a high collar, laced black shoes, and brown stockings bunched at the ankles. Attached to her kinky hair, she wore an old-fashioned straw hat.

"I come from your future wife's wake," she announced with a convulsed voice.

"The doctor went to see her," Apollinaire broke down.

"Papa Lhomond already told me," she said. "But don't worry, I don't think he did any harm."

Eloïse Sanglier went to the stove and returned a few minutes later with a steaming earthen bowl which she handed to her son. He started to sip the fish soup and she to tell him what she had seen at the wake. No one in the neighborhood liked Corinne's mother very much. But in a critical moment like this, those trifles were overlooked. Not only had many neighbors stopped by to keep her company, but One-Arm-Tancrède, her boss in whoredom, appeared with two bottles of spirits to serve with the coffee.

"Your stepfather, Faustine Dondon, came by to express his sympathy. You should have seen how he embraced her . . . I am sure that one good day he will go around to the Salon Francais to finish comforting her."

Apollinaire smiled. He smiled for the first time in many days. It was true that Corinne's mother still had good solid flesh to paw. Warm and hard flesh made of the darkest molasses which drove the sailors from the islands mad. He knew because he had tasted it. At One-Arm-Tacrède's, for two miserly gourdes.

"In any case," Eloïse sighed fanning her bosom, "they'll bury her this afternoon, between five and six."

When he returned to work, Apollinaire found the Mariani brothers hammering a sheet of metal over the doors of the shop.

"There are many macoutes around. Things are going to get the color of stinging ants."

Apollinaire breathed a sigh of relief. He wouldn't have to listen to any more comments about Corinne's death. He helped his bosses seal all the doors and while he did so he saw a group of strangers armed with machetes go by.

"They are not strangers," Antoine Mariani whispered. "They're *macoutes*, crawling out of who knows where like cockroaches."

The people that normally roamed through Gonaïves on Saturday afternoons seemed to have vanished. Except for those men, the streets were emptying, and when

Apollinaire started walking in the direction of the harbour, he felt again that tug of wind, as if the November breeze, held stagnant and putrid somewhere, had finally staggered down, freeing itself at last from the fiery gales that had confined it.

"You're not working today?"

It was the voice of his stepfather, Faustine Dondon, and at the very instant he turned to look at him, the distant sound of gunshots reached his ears.

"The Marianis closed up. It seems they're already shooting."

"Plenty of shooting," the old man told him. "People working at polling stations got beaten up."

"But the mute must have been spared," muttered Apollinaire, thinking that at that hour Dessalines Corail would not be distributing leaflets or pasting campaign posters. He would be with the deceased, bestowing his last kisses on her, attempting his last words in that damned hand language to which she would no longer reply.

"Have you seen Papa Lhomond?" he asked his stepfather.

"He'll be doing his job," the other replied drily.

They returned to the house together and Apollinaire, following his mother's advice, lay down to sleep.

"Remember that you will spend the night traveling. Even if you make good time, you will not reach La Cahouane until tomorrow afternoon."

He agreed it would be best. If he managed to sleep he wouldn't have to feel distressed later, between five and six, knowing that Corinne was being imprisoned under the first blows of that detested earth. Neither would he see his stepfather, Faustine Dondon, leave accompanied by the *houngan* from the isle of Gonaïves, together on their mission to conclude the most ferocious part of the work. When he woke up everything would be ready: his girl freshly bathed, domesticated and hidden in some spot in the forest, and the man from Gros-Morne waiting with his lights turned off and the engine running to take them to Port-au-Prince.

"You have to get up, Apollinaire. You have to come see."

He rubbed his eyes and felt his back being shaken again.

"Wake up, my son."

He calculated that he had slept but a short while, but he noticed, as he sat up, that it was night-time.

"Papa Lhomond and your godfather want to speak to you."

Eloïse Sanglier's disjointed face filled him with apprehension. He recalled immediately that he had dreamt of the coffin. The Mariani brothers were hammering a sheet of metal over the wooden lid while he begged them not to do it. At that very instant a group of crazed men appeared, dressed only in their [leather relic bags], brandishing their rusty machetes in the air. Apollinaire recognized at once the rag warriors he had seen guarding the altars in the *houngfort* on the isle; warriors in love with their virgins; venomous warriors reddened with fury, like the assholes of certain spiders.

"Did they bring her already?"

"I told you to get up," Eloïse Sanglier insisted energetically.

His stepfather, Faustin Dondon, and the *houngan* were leaning listlessly on the stools. They were both sweating and panting as if they had just finished a long race. Apollinaire squared himself before Papa Lhomond.

"Was she dead?"

The *houngan* lifted his eyes as if surprised to see him. Then he lifted his hand to his chest.

"I don't know. We weren't able to reach the cemetery."

"We almost got killed," stammered Faustine Dondon, and he spat against the wall.

"Who wouldn't let you near?"

"There's plenty of shooting outside," Papa Lhomond said. "There are macoutes everywhere."

"But you're a *houngan*. Tell them you're going to the cemetery."

"They won't listen to anyone," Faustine Dondon cried out. "The streets are filled with corpses. I had never seen so many corpses together."

Apollinaire closed his fists.

"Corinne can die."

The others did not reply and diverted their eyes. Faustine Dondon stared stubbornly at the floor and the *houngan* lifted one hand and called Eloïse.

"Why don't you warm a bit of coffee for us?"

Apollinaire recalled the noises in his dream, the hammering of the Marianis against the background of the panting noises of a thousand warriors. Then he let out a huge sigh and buttoned his shirt.

"I'm going to the cemetery."

"You won't get there," his stepfather said.

"And even if you get there," Papa Lhomond chimed in, "what will you do there alone?"

He seemed to hesitate.

"I will look for her. Come with me.

"Impossible," the *houngan* said. "There's too much shooting."

"Let him go out," Eloïse Sanglier intervened. "I want to see him go out."

Apollinaire couldn't quite understand whether his mother was challenging him. He went out onto the street and when the door closed behind him, he realized that the evening was cool and that the usual November breezes danced with their accustomed lightness amidst the trees. The streets of the city looked like the streets of a ghost town. No dogs could be seen, none of the beggars that usually sheltered under the eaves, none of the rats habitually zigzagging across from one sewer to the other. From time to time detonations and screams could be heard coming from a spot near the harbor, but he felt no fear. Instead he felt anguish. The anguish of having to traverse half the city knowing that at that hour no one could indicate to him where Corinne's grave was.

He stopped in front of the Mariani's shop and tried to get oriented from the smells in the air. Smoke from old tires floated above the square, and counting on that being the shortest route to the cemetery, he decided to make his way across through the bonfires. Behind the church, next to the garbage cans of the cabinet-maker's shop, he sighted the first corpses. Their faces were covered with sawdust and the spilled shavings had stuck to their shoes. Apollinaire slowed down. He noticed the half-severed necks and arms and concluded they had been killed by machete blows. He

started to run and felt that his mouth, his own mouth already tasted of blood; he spat without stopping and his spit stuck to his arm and trickled down leaving a trace of water, as one of the Gonaïves-Isle snails would have left. When he turned the corner, without having the time to avoid it, he found himself facing a mob that was suddenly upon him, dragging him along little by little. Some men were sobbing loudly, their faces covered with blood and their clothes torn, and in the midst of the exasperated torrent, he seemed to catch a glimpse of the face of Dessalines Corail. It was only for an instant and he lost him immediately in the roar of the stampede and the dense clouds of smoke.

“Dessalines! Dessalines Corail!”

A woman stopped next to him and without uttering a word pushed him towards a hiding place where three other men, squatting and numb, awaited them. It was evident that she had mistaken him for someone else, and when she was able to see Apollinaire’s face all she could manage was to burst into tears and squat with the others, her hands on her temples, her gaze truncated.

“Dessalines! Dessalines Corail!”

He dove again into the crowd and traversed the street scrutinizing each face, avoiding the flying stones, flaying himself alive against the walls.

“Dessalines!”

The mute looked at him without seeing him.

“Dessalines, accompany me to the cemetery.”

The other one tried to move on. He himself looked like one of those who had been brought back: very rigid arms, a fixed stare, the convulsive grin of the mouth, the bitter grin of all the creatures that like to eat vermin.

“You know where she is buried. You have to come with me.”

He grabbed him by the arm, making an effort to drag him away, but the multitude didn’t help. Then he noticed that his hands were drenched in a hot tar. He let go of Dessalines Corail; the mute was soaked in blood. The wound, an enormous slanting slash, seemed to run across his chest into his gut. Apollinaire remained paralyzed, watching that shadow wobble and finally disappeared under the horrifying wave.

“Dessalines!”

He knew it was hopeless. The mute could not hear him and, contrary to Corinne, he would never be able to speak that living language with his hands. He continued sneaking through like a shadow, he crossed the line of men firing and saw the others, the strangers armed with machetes butchering already exhausted bodies, remote and sweet like burst fruit. No one seemed aware of his presence, no one seemed to look at him, or maybe he really wasn’t there. He wasn’t in the city, he wasn’t amidst the shooting and the fires. He, Apollinaire Sanglier, no longer existed, except in the tormented dreams of that woman who awaited him with bated breath and with her precious minutes counted.

“I am looking for a corpse.”

The man dozing inside the wooden porter’s lodge opened his eyelids slightly and looked at him with no interest.

“The body of Corinne, a girl they buried today. Do you know where her grave is?”

"Go away. This isn't the time."

Apollinaire made a gesture to keep going, but the man, behind him, called him with an energetic voice and showed him his gun.

"You're leaving right now."

Apollinaire looked at him with crazed eyes. Then he retraced his steps.

"There's a woman alive beneath the earth, under here."

"Such is life," the other one replied sarcastically. "See how many dead ones we have on the street and all of them have remained above ground."

He gestured with the weapon again, urging him to beat it.

"Go home, that is, if you don't get shot before you get there."

Apollinaire left, deranged, crying with his mouth open. He walked for a long time by the gray fence of the cemetery, smelling a putrid air that reminded him, suddenly, of the sad bitterness of the chewed-up shells. He returned to his house near dawn, avoiding the soldiers piling up bodies on tarpaulin-covered trucks. His mother was bustling around in the kitchen and Faustine Dondon, sitting at the table, was cleaning his nails with the tip of a knife.

"Where is Papa Lhomond?"

"Resting," Eloïse Sanglier replied calmly.

"They wouldn't let me enter the cemetery."

The mother didn't bat an eyelash. She placed the large jar of coffee on the table and wrenched the knife from Faustine Dondon's hand to cut a piece of cassava. She then looked at his son from head to toe.

"Papa Lhomond and your stepfather will return there tonight."

Only then did Apollinaire remember that his clothes were stained with blood and that the cuts and scratches were stinging his face brutally.

"You think that they will get there in time?"

Faustine Dondon and Eloïse Sanglier exchanged long sagacious glances. Finally they smiled.

"Can you find a *cul-rouge* spider?" his stepfather asked.

"Of course I can," retorted Apollinaire.

"Then go find it. She'll come out hungry."

*Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert*