

“Ghosts by Daylight,” excerpted from
Farewell, Fred Voodoo

By Amy Wilentz

Si syel-la te tombe, yo ta ramase zetwal
 If the sky fell, they'd scoop up the stars

I'm standing in the rubble one day taking a call from L.A. I'd been having lunch at Presse Café up in Pétionville with Lorraine Mangones, the daughter of the legendary Haitian architect. We were talking about the millions of designs being proposed for new shelters for the internally displaced earthquake homeless, and Lorraine—who takes after her acerbic father when describing the Haitian landscape—was on the attack. We were laughing about a particularly ridiculous shelter concept, made of tires, when my cell phone rang. It was a friend calling from outside a courtroom back in Los Angeles.

I left Lorraine and went outside into the dust and chaos of Pétionville, which hadn't been as hard-hit as downtown but was still strewn with debris and involved in the disaster. And I'm listening to Los Angeles on my cell phone as I stand in the shattered remains. Cars are picking their way down the street. It's so hot out. Lorraine is waiting for me inside where there are fans going. The preliminary hearing in the courtroom in L.A. is for a murder case; in July 2009, my friends' daughter was murdered in one of those killings that has a right to be called senseless and pointless. A perfect, lovely girl, and a brutal criminal, out on the street, violating the terms of his parole. Now her parents and all my other friends and my husband are at the hearing, listening to the evidence. The voice at my ear was telling me all of this while I was standing in the wreckage that killed who knew how many thousands of people. And all that mattered to me right then was that girl and what had happened to her. Amid all this death, the one death.

She was on my mind a lot when I went about town, both before the phone call and certainly after. I felt guilty about it, about focusing on her,

when there was so much horror around me. I thought about the old journalists' equation, that one American death equals one hundred European deaths equals one thousand Latin American deaths equals ten thousand Asian deaths equals one hundred thousand African deaths.

Then one morning, I went out to find my old friend Milfort Bruno, who had helped me get around during my first wild days in Haiti so many years ago, as Duvalier was falling. Milfort was wearing a jaunty hat and sitting on a balustrade at the Hotel Oloffson, hoping I would come by. He didn't look jaunty, in spite of the hat. He gave me a personal tour that, by showing me what he was experiencing, helped me understand better what I was feeling.

Milfort was born in Port-au-Prince in a courtyard near the Iron Market, and he worked for Carnival Cruise Lines as a young man, doing night cleaning on a ship; he got \$135 every two weeks, but then the cruise ships stopped using him. "Otherwise, now I would be rich," he says.

One day, when he was twelve years old, he found a lost *blan* wandering downtown, and he helped the man get back to his hotel. This hotel turned out to be the Oloffson, a place Milfort had never seen before although it was less than three miles from his birthplace. There at the hotel Milfort discovered a treasure trove of white men. He started working there as a guide immediately and attached himself to the hotel so successfully that—although he did his brief stint at sea—he was back at the Oloffson more than twenty years later when I showed up to become one of the *blan* in his long ledger.

The day I found Milfort in his hat, he and I left the Oloffson and drove over to his house, not far away, in Carrefour Feuilles, a *quartier populaire*. Milfort had had two grown daughters and one grown son, Harry. Harry was always the big problem in Milfort's life.

Harry has been mentally incapacitated since he was run over by a car at the age of four. The story is like a rich fable from de Maupassant or even Hugo: One day, the darling boy was given a bit of change by his adoring father. It was too little to buy anything, even a piece of gum, but the coins were shiny and the boy knew nothing of the value of money, so he ran out in his little shorts to buy himself a piece of candy, like a big kid. Out came a beautiful new car from nowhere, as the boy, coins clutched in his hand, skittered off from the curb. The car smashed him, catching him in the axel mechanism and dragging him down the street. The boy was so small the driver didn't even know he'd hit someone, and the whole neighborhood was screaming at him from ledges and windows and doors, "Stop, stop!"

And the driver stopped. He was a wealthy, light-colored young man, Milfort says. Horrified at what had happened, he took Milfort's boy and Milfort to the hospital. Although Harry's chest was half-crushed, doctors who looked

at the boy back then said he'd be fine. The man with the car gave Milfort a thousand dollars; even now, Milfort remembers how sorry the man was. And Harry *was* fine, except for the fact that invisible trauma to his brain had caused severe cerebral injuries, and he never recovered from his untreated cranial wounds. A later *eskran*, or scan, showed irredeemable damage. Otherwise, the child was in perfect health.

Now twenty-four years old, Harry sits out in a rocking chair in a little cement courtyard behind a locked gate all day long, wearing a pair of yellow shorts, when Milfort can convince him to wear anything at all. He's sedated by pills prescribed by a doctor Milfort calls the *sikat*, or psychiatrist. Milfort keeps Harry at home because otherwise he'd be out in the street in a minute, and lost perhaps forever. Also, the boy's condition shames him.

Milfort told me then that one of his daughters had died in the earthquake. He looked down at his old hands, and I remembered that this daughter in particular had been his great support, his right-hand girl. She was the one who took care of Harry while Milfort and the other daughter tried to make some money every day. (Milfort's wife had died many years earlier of a lupus-like disease.) And I realized, suddenly (though you'd imagine I would have realized it already), that the way I'd been thinking of my friends' lost daughter, the way I'd been obsessing over her fate, going through all kinds of possibilities for rescue that one shouldn't ever have to consider, was the way each Haitian who had lost someone in the earthquake was thinking about that person, or those people. Every time I thought of this girl as I went about my business in Haiti, my heart began to pound with anger and loss, and the terrible frustration of impotence, the feeling that I was somehow responsible, that I would have saved her if I could. And now, watching Milfort rock Harry's chair as Harry looked off into the blank nowhere into which his sister had disappeared, I saw that the people around me were feeling these same things, too.

But I had moments in Haiti of emotional retreat, as well. While it was happening I didn't even recognize it. After and before this moment at Milfort's, I'd wandered through the wreckage of this city I'd lived in for two years and visited for twenty, moving through the destruction with a hard heart, a very hard heart. I felt sometimes that I was inured to Haiti—I'd grown a shell against it; it could no longer touch me—hunger, tragedy, disease, waste, ruin. Nothing. It was a survival instinct, I suppose. It was the way some Haitians faced Haiti, too, I knew. Just keep moving. Don't react.

One day, right after the quake, I'd gone looking for Edgard Jean-Louis, an old voodoo priest and a maker of bright voodoo flags, an artist. The photojournalist Maggie Steber was with me. We finally found Edgard, sitting

on a white plastic chair with a few members of his family. Behind them was their ruined house. Behind that was the ruined voodoo temple he had shared with other priests; it had partially collapsed in the earthquake and then it had been burned, mysteriously. Behind Edgard's personal wreckage was the whole neighborhood of Belair—where so many years ago, before Aristide was first elected, I had hidden in the alleyways with fleeing demonstrators as the Haitian Army tried to hunt them down—now crushed and heaving under the mountains of debris. Nothing came to me, nothing occurred to me to feel. I simply thought: Where is everything? It was as if the whole city had become a lost memory, like a sudden onslaught of dementia.

Edgard I hadn't seen in a few years, but he was an imposing, statue-like old man with a white halo of hair and a face, on this day, like a mask of tragedy. Maggie, who is notoriously susceptible to emotion—it's true—knelt down in front of Edgard, took both his hands in hers, and began to cry. All that she'd seen in my company, over the past few days, and over the past many years, rose up inside her before this man who looked like a god of Africa, this person we'd known for so long. Everything he meant to her, everything Haiti meant to her, she was feeling and releasing as she held on to his hands, her face wet with tears, him smiling now—while I stood off to the side, mentally tapping my foot at the display of emotion, willing us on to whatever would be the next thing that we would see.

And I was also wondering: What can Edgard make of this? I was, as I have so often been, embarrassed by the sentimentality and muddleheadedness of my race, of us in Haiti. But to diagnose the scene properly: this was my friend Maggie feeling real emotions about a specific person and the earthquake. And this was me, not feeling that—this was me amid all the death.

Try walking through the concentration camps of the Balkans, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, the excavated mass graves of El Mozote, downtown Dresden, the outer circles of Hiroshima. That's what it was like in Port-au-Prince in those days. To me no emotion seemed proper. I couldn't find one or feel one that was fitting, that was up to the level of what I was seeing. There was a disconnect between eyes and heart. To Maggie, waves of sadness and tears, with some joy at human survival, some laughter over visible human frailties, felt appropriate. I walked around with flat affect, I think it's called. I could feel that, a flatline. Here's this leg sticking out of that pancaked school; here's that bloated hand under the motorcycle repair shop, the former motorcycle repair shop. Walking on, walking on. Here's the palace where I interviewed Aristide, and Prosper Avril, and Henri Namphy, and René Préval—figures from history, and the building's crushed. Walking on. Here are the survivors in their camps, their hungry babies, here's little McKenly Gédéon

without his hands. I've achieved precisely nothing for him, with my froth of activity and carrying him to and fro, from doctor to doctor. Walking on.

At night, lying on my mattress under the stars next to the pool at the Aloft, I can hear the wailing and praying of survivors. The ground lifts and rocks beneath us in huge cracking aftershocks. I'm thinking about mosquitoes and reaching for my pile of nighttime survival items, next to the mattress: bug juice, a flashlight, Valium, a bottle of rum. I sit up and reslather the bug juice. Other journalists and relief workers are lying under sheets along the driveway, one next to another like corpses under the light of the stars. I lie back down and the scenes from the day shift through my mind: Edgard; the stray limbs; spaghetti meals; McKenly's stumps; the camp on the soccer field; a young girl crying inconsolably about something, something she wouldn't say, not looking at me; and the rickety Madame Couplet in her housedress telling her old stories under the remaining fluorescent bulb at the half-fallen-down Park Hotel.

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