

Souke

By

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Johnny wouldn't call today a successful school day as he walked home from school rubbing his bottom. It stung from his spanking this afternoon when he answered a question incorrectly. His green corduroy pants didn't provide much padding from the paddle. It was obvious that someone put Madame Pierre in a cranky mood and his bottom, with three other classmates' bottoms, had to pay for it. It was instantly deemed a bad day when Madame Pierre walked in with her nose scrunched up as if she smelled something foul. Next time, he would be sure to know that 1804 was the year Haiti gained its independence, not the year his mother was born. And for Michele, she was sure to remember that L'Ouverture was the one that led it. They were eight years old, what did Madame Pierre expect from them? he thought, squinting his eyes from the sun rays.

The thickness of the heat in the air made an even stronger aroma of cooked rice, bean sauce, and seasoned chicken with a tint of parsley and spices cooked to perfection, a collaboration from many houses. The busyness of the streets filled with walking people, bikes, and cars that kept his eyes darting and small sand storms that kept his little feet dancing. He usually walked home with his mother. She wasn't scared of the streets for she had such a powerful demand with traffic that generated a speed; a speed that would get them home quicker. If they were walking together, he would have been home by now.

When Johnny went to turn the corner, he saw two lifeless bodies with dried blood framing them. The blood also covered their torsos and faces. He nearly screamed. People seemed to be unaware of their bodies as they pushed by him. He decided to muffle in his scream, he wouldn't want whoever did this to them to answer to his scream and do the same to him. He quietly walked passed the bodies, keeping one eye on them. He feared they would suddenly come to life and jump up at him. This wasn't the first time he had seen dead bodies; he just

wished this was finally his last time. He was too young to be exposed to such atrocities every day. How could he celebrate life when he was constantly presented with the vicious ending of one? he thought. His pace hurried when the bodies were out of sight, but he couldn't shake off the morbid feeling that accompanied him.

He made it home, immediately he threw his books on the ground and went under the bed that he shared with his mother. Sometimes, his father was home during the night time and all three of them would share. Of course, no matter the third party, Johnny was always closest to his mother where her heartbeat rhythmically beats, soothing him to sleep.

He waited for the soft steps of his mother's. When they didn't come, he began to cry. The bad men were going to get to him before his mother, he thought. He curled his body, burying his head between his knees. He felt the chills creep up his small spine.

He remembered when he was younger; his haven of choice was the closet until one of his friends said that the boogie boogie-man lived there. He didn't like the closet much. It was too dark and it usually made him more paranoid. His father didn't approve of his tendency to be scared easily. To his father, it was pathetic. His son should be outside playing a manly game of futbol with the tough boys, not running away from his own shadow. Often times, he blamed Johnny's mother for babying him. He shunned the way she cradled him in her arms as if he was a newborn.

"The boy is grown, Misa. Put him down, please," the father would say.

"Let him be, Marc," Misa would reply.

"You're making him weak," he growled.

"I'm making him strong with my love. A mother's love cannot make someone weak."

Misa entered the small house. She immediately noticed the scattered books as she heard faint sniffles coming from under the bed. Johnny was home. She placed the basket filled with fresh fruits and vegetables on the ground where she stood. She wondered how long he had been under there and what could have caused this sudden refuge.

She lifted her brown skirt just above her ankles in order to face the occupant underneath the bed. A shaken small body, curled up like a fetus, laid in front of her. She reached out and touched his knee softly. He flinched.

“Johnny, *Cherie*, come out from under there,” Misa requested.

“No, Mammy. It’s not safe.”

“Safe? You’re scared of your own house?” she asked.

“Outside of it,” he whispered, careful not to let his voice fall upon the wrong ears.

Misa grew worried. She hated seeing her son like this. She hated seeing him so captivated with fear that it crippled him. He spent most of his day fearful rather than playful. This wasn’t the life she wanted for her baby.

“What happened, Johnny?”

“I saw it again, Mammy,” Johnny choked, fighting back tears.

“What did you see, *Cherie*?” She held in her breath, preparing herself for the worst.

“Dead bodies, two of ‘em,” he informed her, his voice revealing a tint of weariness.

Sadly, this was a relief for Misa. Her son was spared from seeing demons and ghosts. At least the dead bodies were physical things of this Earth, but no such thing a young boy should be exposed to.

“At least there were two, that way they could go to heaven together,” Misa attempted.

“They were bloody, Mammy. They can’t go to heaven bloody.”

“Of course they can, the bloodier the better. Jesus was bloody before he went to heaven.”

Johnny pondered on her last words. It was comforting for a fleeting moment, but realization struck him. His brows furrowed.

“Do I have to be bloody?” he asked.

“You don’t have to be anything, Johnny,” she assured him, “Just my little boy.”

“Am I gonna die, Mammy?” he wondered.

“Only really old people die and when I do, I’ll take you to heaven with me, *Cherie*,” Misa promised. She reached out and pulled Johnny in her arms. She kissed him on the forehead. His limp body sat on her lap.

“You promise, Mammy?” he inquired, resting his small head on her bosoms.

“I promise, *Cherie*.”

His mother’s last words were all he needed to hear. He rested a while, hearing her heartbeat; so steady, so soft. She began to tenderly rub his back. She loved her child. He was a miracle, after two miscarriages, Johnny was the one to come out strong, kicking and screaming. It was the best night of her life. God still performed miracles and one was given to her.

“Johnny, *Cherie*, I need to go get water now, okay.” She rubbed his head. She could already sense a sleepy boy.

“Can I go with you, Mammy?” he asked, his droopy eyelids fighting him.

“You better sleep, Johnny. You had a long day. It won’t take long.”

Misa gently placed Johnny on the bed. She kissed him on the forehead, admiring his long lashes and big dark eyes. He looked like her father. She missed him so much.

“I love you, Johnny,” she said.

“I love you too, Mammy,” Johnny replied.

Misa grabbed the silver bucket and placed it on her head before she went outside. Johnny turned his body around to face the window where he could see his mother depart. Johnny watched the grace she carried as she walked on mountainous rocks that surrounded their house. Her brown skirt danced with the wind, moving furiously around her ankles. Suddenly, the slapping of her skirt stilled. The earth stood still for a blinking moment. His mother looked like a still image before the ground shook, pelting her to the rocky ground.

The earthquake was powerful and merciless. Johnny had no time to recollect his thoughts on his fallen mother. The earthquake played with him, bounced him around then tossed him. His body slammed against objects, his mouth filled with an irony taste, his world was spinning, and it was crumbling before him. He didn't know how long it lasted, but when it stopped, he hit the ground and rubble covered him. It wasn't too long before his conscious fell into darkness.

Johnny woke. His head throbbed and his body ached. He couldn't get up from under the rubble. It weighed too much compared to his small body; it limited his breath. His house no longer existed for he was lying outside, covered in ashes. He searched his surroundings, nothing but rubble and ashes, brokenness and darkness. And something that made his empty stomach churn. A foot buried in rocks.

"Mammy!" he cried. His hoarse throat made his cry sound more like a whisper. Tears ran down his face. He tried to free himself, maybe she was still alive, he thought. The rubble on him proved to be too strong, he couldn't move. He was devastated. Tears were his only refuge.

Strangely, he heard someone whispering behind him. Johnny tried to turn his neck to see the source of such happy tunes, but any movement ringed pain. The whispering approached closer and closer. It was strange that the whisper approached closer and not the sound of footsteps. Johnny became paranoid, his eyes moved vigorously. From the corner of his eye, a

man appeared. He sat near Johnny, grunting while he took his seat. He was neither white nor black, but old with a full beard and golden eyes. He wore frayed light brown slacks and a thin white shirt.

“*Bonjour*,” The Man said, smiling at Johnny.

A nonresponsive Johnny simply looked at a man who couldn’t be a native Haitian. Johnny had no strength to speak nor did he care to talk to his this strange man.

“Ah, would you like something to drink?” The Man asked, grabbing a canteen from behind him. Johnny nodded. The Man gave him some water. Johnny appreciated the refreshing drink, despite the taste of blood that followed after.

Johnny looked at his mother’s foot. Tears began to fall. She was supposed to take him to heaven with her. He didn’t want to be alive without his mother, he thought.

“Why the tears, Johnny?” The Man asked, putting away the canteen.

“Mammy,” Johnny replied, oblivious with the usage of his name from a stranger. His tears blurred his vision.

“Oh, she’ll be alright,” The Man said.

“I want my Mammy.” Johnny cried loudly, his cry similar to screams. The Man watched as he cried. A flicker of sadness came across his face, but soon vanished. He sat silently, while Johnny cried himself to sleep.

Johnny awoke again. The Man still sat by his side.

“You’re awake, Johnny! I was starting to think I needed to leave,” The Man said, giving Johnny another drink of water.

Johnny looked aloof.

“Would you like to hear a story?” The Man asked.

“I want my Mammy, mister,” Johnny replied.

“Just let me tell you this story at least once. I tell it to everyone I meet. It’s very good,”

The Man pleaded.

Johnny wandered if he’d ever see his Mammy again, if he would ever experience her warmth, her touch, and heartbeat.

“There was a man. He was Haitian, Johnny. How marvelous,” The Man began. “This man had dreams, big dreams. They were dreams this big.” The Man stretched out his arms.

“Oh, I forgot to mention that he was born and lived in Haiti. You know you could be Haitian and not live in Haiti? This is why I’m clarifying.”

“Mister, can I have some more water?” Johnny asked, the story meaning nothing to him.

“Of course, my apologies,” The Man said, giving Johnny some water.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Now where was I? Ah, yes. This man had four kids. Can you believe it? Four! And they lived in the villages of Haiti. The kids were so young. The oldest was five.”

“Mister...”

“The man was a hard worker!” The Man exclaimed, appearing to be oblivious to Johnny’s plea.

“He worked for the government. A village native like him working for the government, can you believe that? But he didn’t want to stay there for too long. It’s not like he wanted to be president or anything. But I say, if he stayed longer, he could have been president,” The Man continued.

“What is your name, Mister?” Johnny interrupted.

“My name?”



“Yes, your name.”

“I’m sorry, that was terribly rude of me. I’m Gabriel.”

“Gabriel, what is this story you tell me?” Johnny asked.

“Ah, you see, you have to wait until the end to find out.”

“How long is it?”

“Oh, it’s not too long.” Gabriel assured.

“Why are you telling me this story?”

“Well,” Gabriel looked around, “what else is there to do?”

“But who are you?” Johnny wondered.

“I’m Gabriel, remember!”

“Yes, I know your name, Mister, but why have you come?”

“I have come to tell you this story!” Gabriel laughed, “Are you done with the questions?”

“Where do you come from?”

“I’m from around here.”

“I’ve never seen you before,” Johnny said.

“I’ve never seen you before too,” Gabriel replied, “I never mind meeting new people.”

“Can I have some more water?” Johnny asked, all of the wondering and the questioning that formed in his head about this man made his head pound.

“Sure, you can, Johnny,” Gabriel said, giving Johnny some water once more.

“Thank you.”

“Okay, now, back to the story. This man...oh my, I never told you his name too! His name was Antoine. Antoine had a best friend and they used to go to the airport together, where they would lie on the ground and watch the airplanes take off. Boy, they enjoyed the majestic

metal flying in the air to travel the world, some went to America, or Canada, or France. But you see, Antoine wanted to go to America with his four kids. He wanted to go so badly, he dreamt about it.”

Johnny knew he urinated where he lay because his bladder didn’t feel full, other than that, he couldn’t feel his legs. The pressure of the rubble reminded him of its strength whenever he tried to move. He wondered why this man hadn’t given it a try to free him.

“Mister...”

“One moment, I’m getting to the good part. One day, an American organization came to Haiti to bring refugees to America. At this time, violence was everywhere in this beautiful country, can you believe it? Well anyways, Antoine hurried over and went through the interview process. By the way, it lasted for almost a year. But patience brings a man far, Johnny. Antoine and his kids were granted to live an opportunistic life in America! Oh he was so happy, even if it meant traveling alone, anything for his children. A good man isn’t he?”

“Mister, Gabriel, can you help me out?” Johnny asked.

“Oh, can you hold a little longer? I was getting to my favorite part. You see, Antoine went from dreaming about airplanes to being on one! Him and his kids made it safely to America and lived a good life and Johnny...”

“Yes, Gabriel?”

“You said you wanted to get out?”

“Yes, Mister.”

“Well, wave your hand, rescue is on the way.”

Johnny looked around and saw a group of people searching the rubble with a flashlight, most of them wore a red cross. He waved his hand, screaming for their attention.

“Oh and by the way,” Gabriel said, “America is waiting for you, Antoine.”

The group of people flashed their light at Johnny’s hand and then towards his face, they immediately ran to him. Instantly, together, they peeled the rubble off of him and one of the women held him tight, wrapping him in a blanket. Someone shoved water in his face. Johnny looked around for Gabriel and couldn’t find him. There were no signs of a man that was neither black nor white, full beard with golden eyes. Somehow, he vanished.

Johnny pointed at his mother’s foot. One of the ladies saw it too and immediately appointed people to Misa. After multiple rocks flung in the air, the facial expression on one of their faces proved to Johnny that he had indeed lost his mother. He wanted to cry again, but he heard Gabriel’s whistling. He looked around again; still there was no sight of him, no footsteps. *America is waiting for you, Antoine.* It never occurred to Johnny that his legal name was John Antoine.

Johnny laid his head on the shoulders of the woman who carried him, and in the midst of the ashy fog, in the distance, Johnny saw his mother and Gabriel. They waved happily at him. Misa wore the brown skirt that danced around her ankles with her floral top, Gabriel wore a white robe and leather sandals, and both had a radiant light framing them. His mother blew him a kiss.

Quickly, they vanished.

