

THE STATUS OF ORPHANS**a novel by****ALEXANDRA MARSHALL****ACHILLE**

A fly landed on the lip of the pitcher. At her breakfast table on the porch of her guesthouse in Port-au-Prince, Ivy noticed the way the sun sharpened the contrast while paradoxically distorting black and white into iridescence. She ran her fingers over the tablecloth's cross-stitched design: a farmer, a donkey, a woman carrying a basket of produce on her head, a red-roofed house, a rooster, a spiky palm tree, hibiscus. The cloth was permanently marked by old stains, but this intricate effort to bring a square of cotton fabric to life was rendered with brightly colored threads, in stitched x's, as if with hundreds of kisses.

The proprietor placed a fragrant bowl of coffee before her, and as the glossy tinned milk infiltrated it, she smelled the comfort of those weekday

mornings during middle school, after her parents had left for work, when Rosita made her the Salvadoran version. She closed her eyes and saw the beloved face of the woman who was herself almost still a girl then. Raymond didn't interrupt to ask "*Ça va?*" in case his guest's closed eyes meant she was saying grace.

During this first night of re-adapting to the piercing treble of round-the-clock roosters against the pulsing bass of competing radios, her sleep was shallow. When she checked into the guesthouse, Raymond had cautioned her to keep her window shut against the dusk to dawn malarial mosquitoes that bred in the city's ruined foundations, but the ceiling fan wasn't up to the challenge. The faint pressure of a morning shower compensated, and though her still damp hair rested heavily on her shoulders it was already retracting into curls as it dried. She took another sip of her coffee and acknowledged to herself that she was feeling her age: neither young nor old.

Now Raymond placed before her a slice of pineapple that was so golden it looked manufactured. She smiled and this time he asked, "*Ça va?*" but kept moving, leaving his foreign guest to the apparent ease of her solitude.

Her introduction to Haiti had been with a group of public health volunteers responding to the medical crisis after the earthquake that killed two hundred thousand. This time, two years later, she had come alone, her

suitcase filled with donated packets of rehydration salts, the only defense for most Haitians against the cholera epidemic that, in these two years since the earthquake, had taken ten thousand more. The story was that, after one hundred years, cholera was reintroduced in Haiti by U.N. forces providing disaster relief. But the U.N.'s continuing failure to take responsibility was the headline.

In this context she considered her own good fortune in having gone back to school for the masters in public health that gave her, beyond the credential, a means of engagement that she hadn't felt since her early career as a protest singer. Her hit song, "Tinted Windows," exposed the atrocities in El Salvador that Rosita suffered, and she considered this return to Haiti a continuation of that original commitment.

But her immediate focus was the tiny yellow bird that flew from the rafters to land on the railing, where it approached an almost invisible speck of bread, and ate it.

The man at the next table was seated just outside her peripheral vision. He'd watched her cross the porch and thought her slender enough to be a dancer, like him, until she sat in a heap, all angles, like a marionette. He

inquired, "Just arrived?" Her skin was the bright white of coconut flesh.

"Last night."

"Bienvenue."

"Mèsi," she answered in Kreyòl.

"Raymond's my uncle," he said to claim a local identity, "so I'm just being friendly."

"Me too, then." She turned in her chair and extended her hand as she said, "Ivy Ames."

"Achille Lamartine," he replied, "A-*she*-le, not A-*kill*-ees." He lifted his sunglasses to ride his forehead like headlights. Matter-of-factly, he added, "We don't see many, if any, tourists here these days. So what brings you to Haiti?"

"I came here after the earthquake as a *bénévole*." She preferred the French word for volunteer for its implication of goodness.

To see what she'd say he asked, "Red Cross or the United Nations?"

"Neither!"

"Good answer." So she knew the Red Cross used the funds it raised for Haiti to pay off its 9/11 deficit, and that, now two years later, the U.N. still refused to acknowledge - to pay for - the Nepalese forces who brought the cholera epidemic to Haiti.

She removed her own sunglasses, squinting against the glare. "And you?"

“I’m from here, but I grew up in Newark and live in New York.”

“Me too,” she said, “and to answer your question about why I’m here, I’m writing an article about the present situation.”

“Another ‘human interest’ piece about how we’re so resilient? Well, the ‘situation’ is as bad as it looks, and because it’s Haiti, it can only get worse. But in case you’re reporting your findings to the World Bank, please say we’re a good investment because we never lose hope.” His sunglasses slid back into place.

She deflected his cynicism with her own sincerity. “It’s for a public health journal. So, yes: human interest. Specifically regarding cholera.”

“Well then, you’re in the right place.”

“And you?”

“Me too,” he answered obliquely.

She elaborated, “I’ll report on cholera regarding the status of orphans.”

He leaned toward her as if with a secret. “They have no status.”

Now her own smile was complicit. “I know that too. But for a social scientist any situation is always measurable.”

Raymond interrupted to ask Ivy if she would please allow Achille to join her, to free up his table for the couple waiting in the doorway. He gestured like a mime, forgetting that Ivy could speak enough French to get by.

Achille admitted, "Yes, it's a setup," this time folding his sunglasses to place them on the table beside hers. He struck an at-your-service pose and flashed her a comically eager smile as he said, "My uncle Raymond has decided that I should be your official guide to Haiti." Then he added, more seriously, "He also recommended you to me."

"For what?" She could feel the heat in her face.

Achille saw the color as the pleasing pink interior of a conch shell. "I need someone to tutor my niece in English."

"You sound as American as I do. Why aren't you her tutor?"

"Because she needs me for other things. How about I introduce you, and you decide? Basic conversation, is all. In the afternoon, after school. You could do it here at the guesthouse. Her name is Estelle."

"But I just arrived last night."

"You said that."

"I mean, I have to get here."

His smile was a smirk. "First of all, you don't have to *get* here because you already *are* here, and secondly, having been here before, you know we can't afford a lot of time for inaction even though time is the one thing we have in oversupply." He refused to sound desperate, but her hesitation provoked him to say, "Alright. To answer the question you didn't ask directly, I'm here for

my niece and nephew. Their father was killed in the earthquake and their mother, my sister, dropped dead a year ago tomorrow. So I have two orphans for you to 'report on.' As you put it."

Ivy drew in a breath and held onto it. "I apologize for sounding clinical, and I'm very sorry for these losses. Yes, of course I'll tutor your niece."

"Bon. You'll come to dinner tonight and I'll introduce you. Bertrand is twelve, a year older than Estelle and more self-sufficient. His English is also better. The trouble is that Estelle still believes my sister will come back, and she waits for her every day."

Achille paused to let this much register with Ivy before continuing, "She tries very hard in school, but all our teachers here are overwhelmed and can't provide extra help. It makes me very sad that I can't give Estelle the comfort and reassurance she needs, but this is the situation. She needs companionship in the form of conversation, back and forth. So you could call it tutoring, or mothering."

They counted their uncle as a New Yorker, but in a good way because he supported the family from there. His power seemed absolute, especially now. He and Ivy sounded the same when they spoke American.

Ivy wore a dress made for her by a Haitian seamstress in New York, a fitted skirt with a flared blouse. The cotton fabric was cooler for this climate than those drip-dry synthetics marketed to travelers heading toward the Equator, and the floral pattern was a flattering pale olive and aquamarine. She looked like an underwater garden.

Estelle still wore her school uniform's green jumper and white blouse, but Bertrand had changed into a black T-shirt and the new Levis that Achille had brought to him. He struck athletic poses, trying to appear significantly older than the sister who was only younger by a year but didn't seem to mind seeming girlish. She was completing her homework, unlike him.

Achille's Haitian equivalent of a Hawaiian shirt featured a pattern of wide-open red hibiscus, the national flower. He handed Ivy a tall thin chilled glass of grenadine-tinted rum punch while explaining, "Welcome to our temporary housing." To his question to the children, "*Ça va? Oui ou non?*" they chimed, automatically, "*Oui!*"

The gloomy room was made airless by heavy shutters to block the sun, with only a heroic electric fan's slow propeller for circulation. The square table served as Estelle's desk until she declared her homework finished and put her notebooks into the two-drawer filing cabinet that Achille had liberated, he bragged, from the empty offices - no place to go on impassible roads - of the

Transportation Ministry. One deep drawer for each was sufficient to hold most of their possessions.

Ivy felt awkward at first because she wasn't sure how to engage Estelle, who seemed content to listen intently without speaking. Ivy could handle the French required for asking about school, but after a polite Q&A they just smiled, understanding that what they had in common was the ability to tolerate silence. Meanwhile, Bertrand and Achille were sucking all the oxygen from the room.

The one-pot meal was provided by a woman who announced herself by calling "*Bonswa!*" when she entered and, after placing a fragrant stew on the hotplate, "*Bon apeti!*" as she left.

"I don't cook," Achille explained, "so I hope it's not too spicy for you."

Of course it was, but Ivy's involuntary reaction served as entertainment for Estelle and Bertrand. It felt like her face was peeled away, like the plastic model of the head in cross-section that she'd seen in the office of the ENT doctor she'd once consulted for a sinus flare-up. The interconnectedness allowed the heat to penetrate those intricate passages, to make her cough and sneeze and weep all at once.

She hand-signaled to Achille that she needed water. And because she could tell that Estelle and Bertrand weren't sure if it was alright for them to

laugh, once Ivy could breathe again, she laughed, to show them it was.

“Wow!” she said when she could speak, and so did they, imitating her, loving the siren-like sound of “*Wow! Wow! Wow!*”

Estelle returned to her file drawer for the bamboo fan she flipped open so she could wave it in Ivy’s face as if she’d fainted in church.

Ivy was grateful for both the air and Estelle’s expression of concern. To Achille she said, “Of course I should have dipped my bread into the sauce to gauge its power. I didn’t realize anything short of nuclear annihilation could obliterate all five senses at once. Which it did.”

He answered, “Sorry for that. But thanks for not being stereotypically *blan*. Estelle and Bertrand don’t get to see many foreigners up close, and I think you impressed them. You didn’t get angry for totally embarrassing yourself in front of them, and you didn’t blame me for it either. They noticed.”

“Well, you’re welcome, and so are they.”

Achille explained, “The meaning of French *blanc* and Kreyòl *blan* is the difference between ‘white’ and ‘foreign.’ You’re both. But Michelle Obama is *blan* too.”

Ivy said, “You have a lot to teach me.”

“I know.”

“And,” she added, “we all know Michelle Obama definitely would have

handled this more elegantly.”

Achille nodded and cut her a second slab of bread, repeating the perfunctory, “*Bon apeti,*” to encourage the children to eat their stew before it got cold.

For dessert, Achille peeled them each a small orange washed in bottled water, his paring knife turning the zest into four perfectly concentric ringlets that he hung on Estelle’s ears like jewelry. This gave Ivy the opportunity to compliment the gold heart-shaped locket that she wore, and for Estelle to reveal the photo of her mother, whose image she kissed before closing the locket.

“My sister’s name was Marie,” Achille told Ivy.

“*Maman,*” Estelle said.

Ivy noticed that Estelle had her mother’s round face and plump cheeks, unlike Achille’s more angular features. “*Elle est jolie, comme toi,*” she told Estelle.

Achille said, “Yes, pretty. And kind.”

Bertrand withdrew to his phone, and although Achille set the limit at “*Dix minutes!*” his shrug conveyed to Ivy the futility of telling a twelve year-old boy what to do or not do. From her place at the table Ivy regarded the framed poster on the far wall. The image was of a male dancer performing an

exquisite leap, and when she asked about it, Estelle said, "It's he."

"Achille?"

"*Oui.*"

Ivy crossed the room to inspect it, and when she didn't exclaim "Alvin Ailey!" the way he expected her to - like everyone else did - he said, "Don't tell me you've never heard of Alvin Ailey."

"I have, of course, and I've always meant to see a performance. As soon as I get back to New York, I will now. But so far I haven't."

Achille flicked his hand as if it could possibly matter to him that she didn't know Ailey's most famous dance when twenty-five million other people around the world had seen "Revelations" so often they knew it by heart.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to insult you."

"*Pa gen pwoblèm.*"

"I'm apologizing." In the photograph his body looked like open scissors, his legs the blades, his feet turned into sharp points. "I'm embarrassed not to have recognized you. But it *is* you!"

Achille corrected, "It was."

He had already texted his cousin Junior, Raymond's son, to come pick

her up, so there wasn't time for her to learn more. She'd planned to walk the relatively short distance back to the guesthouse, until Achille explained, as if to a child, that she ought to know it was increasingly unsafe for a woman, especially a *blan*, to be out at night alone. "Junior's a taxi driver. It's his job - his profession - so you can trust him. But only him."

"*Merci. Bonne nuit,*" Ivy said to Bertrand and Estelle. She was unsure of what Achille may have said about the tutoring plan until Estelle asked, "*A bientôt* is seeing you soon?" Bertrand shook Ivy's hand but said, "Take it easy," like an American kid.

Achille guided her along the unlit hallway toward the door to the street. "Tomorrow is the anniversary mass for my sister, so I'll bring Estelle to you either tomorrow afternoon or the next day, depending."

Ivy felt it might be intrusive to ask, "Depending on what?" so she asked instead, "The anniversary mass?"

"My sister died a year ago tomorrow, as I mentioned, so it's a commemoration. I'm hoping Estelle will understand this means she's actually dead." He paused before saying, "I see you're not Catholic."

The cooler air outdoors was a relief, and Ivy inhaled it before answering, "I'm the daughter of a secular Jew and a lapsed Protestant, if that counts as religion."

“It doesn’t, here.”

“So, no.”

“Me neither,” he admitted, “except when I’m here.”

She laughed, as if they were already friends. “Thank you for this evening, Achille, and for my impromptu welcome back to Haiti.”

“You saw how Raymond engineered it, and you can probably guess that everything in Haiti relies on improvisation.” He smiled like a salesman.

“Yes, but it felt like a chance encounter.”

“And now?”

“The same, only more so.”

Achille signaled with a tap on the roof of the car at the curb that this was Junior. He said something in Kreyòl which he then translated into Junior’s offer to drive her around so she could see how much of the city had not been reconstructed, or even repaired, since the earthquake.

Junior returned Ivy’s “*Bonswa*” with “Hi,” but when she then said, “Nice to meet you,” he indicated that “Hi” was actually the only word he knew in English. “*Pas gen pwoblèm,*” she said equally misleadingly, inviting a response in Kreyòl that she couldn’t understand either. Now having established that they would speak French, she realized that the version he spoke was not what she’d learned in school. It recalled for her the sixth grade Spanish class at her

private school when her teacher condescended to the pronunciation she'd learned from Rosita.

Junior drove her uphill to an overlook above the supposedly temporary housing illuminated only intermittently by lanterns that made the blue plastic tarp roofing look like puddles of water. When he said, "*Attention!*" she understood that he was telling her never to go there, so she didn't try to explain that the contaminated water in a refugee camp like this was the source of the cholera transmission that was her concern.

He then took her past the damaged cathedral and the partially collapsed presidential palace, neither building yet restored for occupancy. But then he also showed her the bakery called *Notre pain de ce jour* - from the Lord's Prayer, Junior said - to show her, by opening the car windows, that Our Daily Bread was in the oven. "*Grâce à Achille,*" he said, in place of "*Grâce à Dieu.*"

This seemed to Ivy, whatever it meant, like a good note to end on, so she used her travel fatigue as an excuse to ask to be taken back to the guesthouse. Awkwardly, she said she didn't know what to pay him for the ride, but Junior communicated that he preferred to defer the decision to his worldly cousin.

The guesthouse was dark, except for a nightlight in the shape of a hibiscus on a pedestal inside the locked door. Ivy found her way to her room

using the flashlight on her phone, by which she undressed and brushed her teeth in the small basin in the corner. The window's shutters had been fastened shut in her absence, and one side of the top sheet was folded back into an intricate accordion-pleated pattern. Again, as with the embroidered tablecloth at breakfast, the extra effort to be artful touched her heart exactly because Americans wouldn't bother.

Achille's sister Marie had obtained passports for Bertrand and Estelle in the narrow margin of time between the earthquake that buried her husband and the embolism that killed her. So that in this year since, while Bertrand expected to be rescued to Newark the way Achille was, Estelle allowed herself no such hope, instead dreading being sent to one of the pop-up orphanages, like her friend Aimée-Claire.

In his sister's orphaned children Achille saw both the stunned submission of serial refugees and the glib high energy of regular kids without adequate adult supervision. Their school building had been declared permanently unsafe, so their lessons were now delivered with haphazard success in a far corner of a sweltering corrugated tin warehouse constructed to house building supplies that, promised by the Red Cross, were yet to be

delivered. On Achille's routine visits during this year neither Estelle nor Bertrand ever asked him how long he could stay or whether he would take them with him when he left again, but although they manifested it in opposite ways, the uncertainty was urgently implicit.

Very little money went a very long way in Haiti, so with the help of the extended Lamartine family in Newark he'd managed to patch together a support system here that had allowed him to come and go. After Marie's death, Bertrand and Estelle were cared for by their paternal grandmother, but when she too died, of cholera, the house the children grew up in was abruptly taken - reclaimed, they said - by her surviving sons and daughters who had their own children to house and feed. The room Achille secured for Bertrand and Estelle was closer to where Raymond lived, which gave him confidence if not comfort, given his own mother's chosen absence.

The priest compensated for the sparse attendance by acclaiming the Gospel as if to a multitude of believers. Achille knew nothing about his sister's religious faith, but he could assume that, after the loss of her husband, Marie had prepared for her own death by imagining an afterlife where they would be reunited. He proved capable of releasing his own disbelief in exchange for the hope that Marie had sought and been given comfort. He was concerned for Estelle and her confusion about death's permanence, and he hated having to

tell her that, except in her own heart and the heart-shaped gold locket she wore to hold Marie's image, her *maman* was gone forever.

The congregation lined up to receive the wafer and sip of wine that signified the body and the blood of their Savior Jesus Christ - *Jezi Kri* - and Achille joined them even though he no longer considered himself a member of a Church that required confession from its communicants but refused to atone for the mortal sins committed by its priests and bishops. Throughout the Caribbean Basin the Pentecostals regularly multiplied or diminished their ranks according to the level of damage done to the islands in each year's hurricane season, and in Haiti it went without saying that the indigenous *Vodou* practices had resurged after the earthquake. Achille's relatives in Newark attended services at the Haitian parish, but the Ailey-Fordham program's double demands on his time excused him from that practice. His aunt and uncle were content to see that many of Mr. Ailey's dances were inspired by Gospels and Spirituals.

But why incense? The smoke from the brass container of smoldering resin was released by its being swung on a chain like a Yo-Yo. Its spicy fragrance was oddly familiar, but the use of liturgical incense in a city without basic services seemed wrong. Achille didn't attend Marie's funeral mass - he used the Ailey II tour schedule as his excuse for avoiding his mother - or

otherwise he might be feeling less alien, and alienated.

Because he was ten years younger than Marie and was the child of their mother's second marriage, their lives were parallel rather than overlapping. Luckily for Bertrand and Estelle, Marie didn't share Achille's animosity toward the mother who sent her son off to New Jersey and her daughter into early marriage when she took off for Paris with her third husband, Air France's first Haitian pilot. Marie did not inform Achille about Véronique's involvement with her grandchildren, nor did he inquire. He guessed that Raymond's insistence on his presence here today was informed by his mother's intended absence, and he left it at that. He knew Marie was correct in thinking it immature of him to be so unwilling to reconcile, but he felt justified when he asked himself if his feelings had changed, and they hadn't.

The soloist's piercing "Ave Maria" was irreparably off-key, but the piano could be tuned, and Achille decided to make this a gift to the priest in Marie's memory. He'd spent so many hours in the dance studio that he knew how the instrument should sound. The priest would probably also ask to have the church's broken windows replaced, but there were limits to how much he could afford to be regarded as a rich American.

Estelle took his hand and held it in a fierce grip. Her dress was too small for her, but she'd insisted on wearing it so her mother would recognize her.

Estelle's confusion was both perfectly normal and problematic, the same as Achille's when his mother put him on that plane with a cardboard suitcase and no explanation for why he was being banished. What crimes was it possible for a child to have committed so unintentionally? He understood that this was Estelle's question too. What had she done to cause these losses? What more could she do to undo them?

Now Achille retreated into the deeper privacy of a separate grief. His teacher at The Ailey School was a mentor, but he loved her like a mother, and never more than when he told her he felt summoned home by the earthquake. "Lift your chin, lift your heart, let me see you," Miss J coaxed her students, "show me your power, let me see my pride in you." To take her class every day was like being born again and again. But she understood and endorsed his decision.

She'd discovered him in Newark in an audition that was held across town in a studio with the first flexible floor in his limited experience. It had the effect of lifting him like an updraft, and since any male dancer who could both jump and leap commanded attention, all eyes were upon Achille as he emerged from the warmup into those athletic verticals and horizontals. The

forty dancers wore numbers pinned to their leotards, and there were three people, sitting in folding chairs, whose job it was to make a note whenever one of the forty notably failed or succeeded. The Ailey School's head Horton teacher led the class through this African-inspired technique, a surprise to Achille because she was white.

His first impression of Miss J, not knowing that's who she was, was of the pearl necklace that he then got to see up close when she asked to speak to him afterwards. In this conversation he tried to hear what she was telling him but was so distracted, by her brown heart-shaped face and the heart-shaped mouth painted with Valentine-red lipstick, that he couldn't speak.

At that time Miss J was in her late-fifties, wearing her ageless body like an heirloom. She later told him, "I thought - O God - he can't speak English!" Then her deep voice broke into the bright laughter that was never *at* anyone but herself. "I thought - O God - that won't work!" So when she discovered a moment later that he was fluent in three languages and an A student who could surely qualify for the academic half of the new Bachelor of Fine Arts program that she'd created for Ailey students at Fordham's Lincoln Center campus, she was ready to break all the rules by announcing, "You just won a full scholarship!"

Here in Haiti at his sister's anniversary mass Achille felt unbearably sad

that no one wears red lipstick like that anymore. He thought - O God - maybe he didn't have the energy after all to meet these challenges. If he could ask Miss J to help him right now, she'd remind him that her new job was to Rest In Peace. But then she'd give in, as always. "Well, alright," she'd say, "here's my advice. Find a way to bring Bertrand and Estelle to New York. Don't quit. You can dance without performing. But you need to find a more suitable partner than Dahlia."

He opened his eyes to confirm that Dahlia wasn't there to catch him in the act of grieving Miss J instead of Marie. Dahlia's demands were those of an only child whose parents had put themselves at the service of her talent by moving to Winston-Salem so she could live at home while attending the North Carolina School of the Arts. Achille thought UNCOSA was too white for a conservative Black girl like Dahlia and called it a Country Club Conservatory - one of the academic courses was called "Self, Society, and Cosmos" - but there was no denying that as the star of their renowned program in classical ballet, Dahlia had perfected the illusion of weightlessness. She was like a kite lifted up to balance on air currents, while in fact securely tethered to those parents who were themselves firmly anchored by membership in their church. Her sheltered upbringing was overcompensated for by her insatiable drive, and upon joining Ailey II she'd latched onto the dream that she and Achille would

be partners onstage and off, like the first company's legendary married couple Linda Celeste Sims and Glenn Allen Sims. Achille's biggest mistake was letting Dahlia coerce him into cooperating in her long-delayed sexual initiation, which then of course intensified her relentless pursuit. Only Haiti was off-limits for her, which allowed him the freedom to meet other needs, including his own.

Now the congregation stood for a hymn. Miss J had died six months after the earthquake when he was still in Haiti, on leave from Ailey II. During those months he would text her whenever his phone held a charge, and she always texted right back with concern for his welfare. She'd kept her diagnosis so private that he didn't know she was sick, and after the announcement of her death was sounded like an alarm, he could barely function. He was driven by a debt to Miss J that he felt obliged to repay, but she alone would have intuited, as he himself came to understand, that his expressed desire to reclaim his vocation was also a wish to fend off a bottomless grief.

When the priest invited the people to pray, Achille sat again. He tipped his upper body forward to place his elbows on his knees, supporting the weight of his head in his exquisitely long-fingered hands. The news of Miss J's death reverberated throughout the dance world, and a merit scholarship at The Ailey School was established in her name, awarded to a student demonstrating the rare balance of "extraordinary talent *plus* leadership,

kindness, and dedication.” Her loss had caused a somersaulting grief that upended him, then and ever since. This is what showed in his face.

After the mass Achille greeted the small group of workers from Marie’s clothing factory and her husband’s solar technology business, who then returned to the jobs they felt fortunate to still have in the country’s deteriorating economy. Achille learned that the priest was named Père Victor, but he too declined the invitation to join the family for lunch, on account of his hospital visits to parishioners. None of Marie’s former in-laws had dared show their faces, and since Véronique and her pilot husband Rémy had not appeared, only Raymond and his family remained on the steps of the church. That Raymond wasn’t even related to Marie by blood prompted a gratitude to compensate for Achille’s bitterness toward the others.

At the guesthouse Achille unlocked the liquor cabinet and poured himself a *Ti’Punch*. The harsh *rhum agricole* mellowed by cane syrup and a coin of lime was medicinal, and all it took was three sips for the bigger questions to postpone themselves without him having to resolve them. He enjoyed belonging to a culture where First Things First - triage - was a rule of law. That Haitian society was in free-fall and couldn’t otherwise function was

Rule Number Two.

When Ivy appeared from inside the guesthouse and he motioned for her to join him, she did. He opened the padlock on the refrigerator and she helped herself to a very cold bottle of beer, noting the sale on the clipboard as she asked, "And how was it?"

"To be expected," he deflected, "so Estelle needed a nap. And your day?"

"Well, I made the mistake of going to the *Archives National d'Haiti* in search of numbers of cholera deaths. I couldn't get near the building because the plaza was crowded with the cane-cutters recently expelled from the Dominican Republic. They need their Haitian birth certificates in order to get replacement identity cards, but with all the death certificates required since the earthquake, the bureau isn't able to function. I'm sure you could have told me not to bother going there."

He nodded.

She'd read that the half-million Haitian cane-cutters imported to harvest that lucrative Dominican crop were slave-laborers imprisoned in their barracks, their eventual expulsion from Haiti's next door neighbor so swift that they were rounded up like outlaws, their scant wages confiscated as if stolen property. "These undocumented refugees are now foreigners here at home too. It's an outrage!"

Achille wanted to acknowledge her blend of knowledge and naïveté but feared coming off as patronizing, so instead he simply nodded again. He saw for the second time the way strong feeling changed the color of her skin. This time, instead of the pearly pink of a conch shell it was the meaty red of a watermelon.

He said, “I’m glad I asked you to help me with Estelle, and it’s good you agreed. But I realize that aside from what you just told me I know nothing else about you, including what to ask. So what would you like me to know about you?”

“Today my doubts outweigh my convictions, which isn’t always the case. It certainly wasn’t when I was younger.”

“And who were you then?”

“My melodic name, Ivy Ames, means nothing in either French or Kreyòl, but it once registered among activists. My hit song on college campuses was my ‘Tinted Windows’ anthem, exposing the American-funded army of white Toyota four-by-fours in the war against the people of El Salvador. For my fans in the Occupy Wall Street movement, ‘Tinted Windows’ translated to the stretch-limousines concealing the identities of Wall Street profiteers. I believed it also described the fleet of Hum-Vees rushed off to war in Afghanistan after September Eleventh, but my manager told me no one else

would agree, and no one else did.”

Achille’s phone rested on the table between them, and though he had the power to summon her song, he simply took note of the fact that she’d had a manager and asked instead, “And then?”

“I became the warm-up act for a pop star and tried to persuade him, but he wouldn’t risk losing his fan base. I was so disillusioned that I left him. And quit performing.” This description of her breakup with Brian was both an oversimplification and an understatement.

Achille waited to see if she had more to say about that, and when it seemed she didn’t, he offered his own advice. “There are two eternal truths here: it’s been worse and it will get worse again. So why not write a protest song about Haiti?”

She answered by asking, “Is there a melody in Haiti’s troubles?”

He shrugged.

“So that’s why I enrolled at City College, by which time I was six years older than my freshman classmates.”

But Achille had no interest in her studies. “Tell me about your songs.”

“A *Rolling Stone* critic claimed they’re all about bullying. The first to get noticed was about those boy soldiers in El Salvador who were stolen from their mothers. ‘Their sisters are violenced, silenced and cursed, Fathers are

missing, murdered or worse.' The 'Tinted Windows' chorus is 'I can see you, See through your shades, See right through you, Yankee Dollars paid, I can see you, See right through you.'" She hummed the tune for him because he patiently waited until she did.

"And you were how old?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen!" He clapped her shoulder like a proud brother.

She'd always had the only child's acceptance of solitude as a plus, or at least not worth agitating against the way her friends wasted their time on remedies like serial romance. "I withdrew into my adolescence like a cocoon, but my secret diary turned out to have a soundtrack once I got my parents to buy me a keyboard."

He smiled. "And why El Salvador?"

Ivy answered matter-of-factly, "I was fourteen when the six Jesuits were assassinated along with their housekeeper and her daughter, the crime that brought the conflict to the climax from which a truce became inevitable. My family had a Salvadoran housekeeper named Rosita - not a mentor, a muse - whose brave *guerrillero* brothers during *el conflicto* made it impossible for her to return home."

Achille said, "It's a common story in Central America and around the

Caribbean, then and now.”

“I know this. My point is that it’s a straight line for me from El Salvador to Haiti.” She could have been standing at the blackboard in that classroom he had no interest in.

“I can see that too,” he allowed, “but I have to wonder. What if, instead of Rosita, your parents had hired a Haitian housekeeper?”