

Kyle Minor

In a Distant Country (cont.)

VI.

Günter Maier, Director, The Committee for Haitian Reforestation, Pétionville, Haiti, to Angela Lopez, Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of History, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, March 19, 1995.

The referendum is in: I will not be visiting North Carolina anytime soon. The Americans give with one hand and take with the other. The sticking point is the guns from El Salvador. They held me for three days and since there was nothing for me to say, I said nothing, and they fed me well enough and gave me a blanket, and I slept like a baby. Eventually, our good friend Nils came down with three men from the German embassy and a Dutch diplomat and three Haitian lawyers, and the good American colonel declared me a free man, but a Jeepload of American soldiers knocked on the door at committee headquarters yesterday and served papers saying I was hereafter barred from flying into Miami or any other port of entry to American soil. I wanted to grab these men by the shoulders and shake them and say who do you take me for? I'm one of the good guys. I did say to the one, "Have you been to La Saline?" He said he patrolled the road by the market almost every day. I told him to get a good look at that filthy maze of shelters and shanties, imagine some reckless poor man with fifty fresh dollars in his pocket and a rocket launcher on his shoulder. "Look past his shoulder toward the sun," I told him. "There you'll see the flight path of every American Airlines flight that ever landed in Port-au-Prince." He didn't say anything, but he blinked his eyes a few times. I'd heard the stories. He was probably in a convoy some time that took sniper fire right around the same place. I'm sure he was wondering the same thing I was wondering: What was his government thinking, restoring that crazy communist priest to power? Remember the idiom you taught me that evening in Boutilliers, when we were sipping clairin on that strip of grass overlooking the orange-and-silver glinting of the sun off the rooftops at dusk? "The inmates are running the asylum"? This is what I wanted to say to him, but I was angry, and my mind was full of anger-fueled idioms of every variety—French, Spanish, Creole, German, Dutch, Italian. My English was not close enough at hand, and I could not summon the words I needed to say: You don't take the guns from the good people. You take the guns from the bad people. Or: The last thing this country needs is a democracy. What this country needs is an iron-fisted benevolent dictator. Somebody who will protect the businesses and protect

the port and build roads and build up the banking system. Somebody who will refuse to accede to the tyranny of poor people whose every action seems calculated to keep them poor forever. Let me tell you something your professors in North Carolina won't like, Angela: Poor people don't want not to be poor. Poor people just want everyone else to be as poor as they are. That's where we're headed as soon as the Americans leave, I'm afraid, unless our dear president turns out to be a more accommodating fellow than he has proved himself to be in the past.

I wish that was the strangest thing that happened yesterday, but you did your time here. You know how it is. Yesterday we drove to resupply the safe house in D_____. Sometime around noon three teenage boys came up the street dragging a blue blanket. The blanket was heavy with something. They moved like they were running from something. A second group of boys came yelling. They were carrying machetes and swinging them above their heads. We closed and barricaded the door and watched on the security monitors. The first group of boys dropped the blanket and fled. The second group stopped at the blanket. They kicked at it and poked at it with their machetes. For a while they stood over it and consulted one another. No one who passed on the street looked at them or what they were doing. I had never seen these boys before, but how often do I get to D_____?

After awhile we heard the voice of a man screaming. The sound he made was terrible, animal. When his body appeared on the monitor, it matched his voice. It was a wiry, haggard body, muscled and too lean. The man was tall but hunched. He had an overfull beard that curled at its ends. When he came into the frame, the boys began to shout at him and raise their machetes, but they backed away. Then, from the distance, came gunshots. The boys and the man fled alike. We left the video monitor, then, and went into the back of the safe house, where we could achieve a greater distance from the gunshots. We waited until the shooting ended, and then we waited some more.

When we returned to the front room, we looked again at the monitor. The blanket was still lying on the ground, but it no longer carried its burden. Nils asked if the videotape was still running. I checked, and it had ended. We took the tape from the recorder and put it into the VTR in the back room and rewound it. There we saw the men with the guns run past the blanket and past the front of the building and out of the frame. Then we saw the concrete shop and the machine shop across the street taking bullets from both sides of the frame. Two groups of men were shooting at each other. The shooting went on for some time, but not for as long as it had seemed to go on when we were waiting it out in the back room. When it was over, a little boy who could not have been more than seven or eight years old came into the frame. He walked directly to the blanket. His back was to the security camera. We saw him bend down over the bundle and reach in and grab something and begin to pull it out. Slowly—for this child, it was an effort—he came away pulling a pair of arms, a woman's arms, by the hands and wrists. Nils said, "Is that a white woman?" and when her head came briefly into the frame, the hair did not appear to be the hair I had seen on the head of any Haitian.

"Maybe she's Levantine Haitian," I said. "Maybe she's Lebanese." There was no way to tell for sure, the quarterframe picture was so blurry.

The little boy dragged the woman's body out the right of the frame, in the direction of the alleys where the squatters have built. Perhaps it was not advisable for us to do what we did, but we opened the front door and walked in the direction from where the boy had come. We walked toward the squatter houses, but when we reached them we did not go any farther. It did not seem wise to go any farther.

When we returned to the safe house, we watched the tape again and again, but we could not come to any agreement about the woman—was she Dutch? was she Lebanese? was she one of those mythical Polish Haitians everybody's heard about but nobody's seen?—except that surely she was dead. And who was the child? And why was he taking her?

Nils made his jokes: We go to the police. We go to the old macoutes. We go to the CIA. We go to the missionaries. We go to the priests. We go to the American soldiers. But the only place we went was home. I have lived here since I was five years old, Angela, and this country is the only home I really know, but the older I get, the less I understand this place. I hate it that you left, but all night I dreamed about that bundle in the blanket, and I was so happy it was not you.

Please, love: don't return to me.