

Kyle Minor

In a Distant Country

I.

Rev. Samuel Tillotson, Baptist Mission, Koulèv-Ville, Haiti, to Mr. Leslie Ratliff, Principal, Good Shepherd Academy, West Palm Beach, Florida, June 11, 1983.

Technically, Leslie, and in keeping with the practice we're supposed to maintain around here, I'm supposed to be writing to thank you for visiting last month with your graduating seniors, and for the gifts toward the 44 cubic ft. refrigerator for the mission and the new stone cistern for the village and especially the ionized oxygen allotrope gas (IAOG) water filtration system, which, I'll admit, this place has badly needed for as long as I can remember. I'm also supposed to make you aware of our other needs, among them the replacement diesel generator, the razor-wire project to replace the broken glass deterrent atop the mission walls, and 142 sponsorships for our planned expansion of the school-and-food project at the Angels of Mercy orphanage up the road.

In many ways, though, it pains me to make you aware of any of it, or to give you the missionary song and dance at all, really. The best thing about seeing you again was taking those long walks out into the village where we could be candid. Leslie, I'm lonely, and wanting for candidness these days. The mission board is threatening to yank thirteen percent of our funding, which means whoever first talks out of turn in front of someone else gets sent home without so much as a kiss goodbye, so here lately I'm silent as a monk. The Haitians are candid among themselves, but not with me. They look at me and all they see is a walking cash machine, and who could blame them? Good people like you come to visit, and we're not to be candid with you, either, because you're *our* cash machine. We scam people, Leslie. The last two groups before you—the bonnetheads from Pennsylvania I told you about, and the Alabama rednecks whose minister kept sneaking off with his dip can—Brother Joe told Henri, our driver, to take the good tires off the truck before he picked them up from the airport, and put on the old worn-out set instead. Right there in the airport parking lot, he shows the tires to the group

leaders, says, "Times are hard. I hope we make it to the mission on those things." Sure enough, on the way there, both times, one of the tires blows out, and Henri gets out to patch it, and up there in the back of the truck, the group leader is already calculating how much for each tire, and how quickly he can wire the money from the States.

I wouldn't let them do that to you, Leslie. I probably ought not let them do it to anyone at all, but you have to pick your battles. Remember Professor Phelps, our first year at old Apalachicola Bible College, talking equality this and justice that? He was right, and we all knew it, or ought to have known it: They should've been letting blacks into that college all along. But, thinking about it, if Phelps had just kept his mouth shut, say, four more years, history would have caught up to him, because they let the blacks into Apalachicola Bible College eventually anyway, didn't they? But they never let Phelps back in, ever. That's something I think about from time to time, when I'm thinking about opening my mouth. Wise as serpents, harmless as doves, the Scripture says.

Enough griping. Here's the real reason I'm writing you. It's obvious you are running a quality school up there in West Palm Beach. Your students were uniformly well-behaved, and more mature than many of the ones we get from the church groups or even the college groups. I found them to be highly intelligent, cooperative, and given to the highest standards of moral uprightness. No doubt you think of them as children, since you have seen them along their journey since they were children. But to a person like me, meeting them for the first time at the ages of seventeen and, mostly, eighteen, they didn't really seem like children so much as they seemed like the young adults they have become. They have graduated now, Leslie, and you have turned them loose into the world knowing that you've done your job well. It must be hard for you, to turn them loose, but every year you do it, and I imagine it brings you not a little sadness to go along with your hard-earned pride.

One of these students in particular, the young lady named Sheila Brocken, impressed me even more than most. From day one, it was clear that she was not here to pal around with her girlfriends or have a Third World frolic or impress the boys. She was here to touch the lives of others. You should have seen her up there, Leslie, at Angels of Mercy, combing the little girls' hair, braiding it, placing beads. Or upstairs, where they keep the retarded kids, touching their faces, picking them up, spinning them around in circles until they were giddy with laughter.

I'm not the only one who noticed Sheila, either. The day after the field trip to our hospital, one of the nurses came over to see me. You met her, remember? Yvonne, from Gonaïves? Sheila's whole day, Yvonne told me, was spent down in the hospital basement, where we keep the pregnant girls, the ready-to-pop girls who don't have families, or whose families don't have a place for them. Haiti is a grim place for girls like these, Leslie. We can only keep them until the babies arrive, and then they're on their own, and they know it. But this girl of yours, this Sheila, she was only four days in country,

and she had already learned the words for good, for beautiful. All day she was touching their faces, touching their swollen bellies, saying *bon, bèl, bon, bèl*, and even more than the words was the way she said them, her smile, which—I agree with what Yvonne said—it was like an angel had come down from heaven to lift us all a little closer to it for a little while.

That last day you were here, Leslie, in the morning—I hope you will forgive this small indiscretion—I went to see Sheila before breakfast. My motives were not ulterior, I assure you. It's just that I had observed in her these very special qualities of faith and goodness, and others had observed them in her as well, and I felt it was my duty, as host and representative of the mission, to praise and encourage these qualities, and to let her know, on behalf of the Baptist Mission, how much I appreciated the way she cared for the children and young women under our care.

That's all it was, Leslie. That's all I intended. I asked her to take an early morning walk with me through the village, the same route I walked with you, past the home of Yves and Prudeut Estimee, where we're building the stone cistern, and alongside the fields where the farmers from our co-op are doing their planting, and down the red dirt path toward Fermathe, where she could mingle some with the children walking to school in Petion-Ville, and the working men making their way toward the paved roads to meet the tap-tap.

Sometime on the way back toward the mission, we passed those fields again, and I told Sheila the same story I told you, about this carpenter Rene who has a co-op plot where he grows cabbage and lettuce. I told her how Rene had a little bit of money in his pocket because he was saving to pour a foundation for a new house. His wife knew about this money and asked him to give her some, because her aunt had died, and she wanted to go to the beauty salon in Pétion-Ville and get her hair and nails done for the funeral. But Rene said no. He was firm. They had a child on the way, and he planned to build her a new house with a floor. He asked her, "Do you want our baby to sleep on dirt?" But his wife was angry anyway, and told all the women in her family that Rene had this money and he was keeping it from her, and many of these women went home and badmouthed Rene to their husbands. The next day, one of these husbands went to see Rene. He said, "I am family. I am the husband of your wife's cousin. I know you have some money in your pocket, and I need work. I am a good roofer. You should hire me to repair your roof." Now, Leslie, it's true that Rene's roof needed mending. It was one of those corrugated aluminum numbers you see all over the village, and the last few storms had loosened its moorings to the top of Rene's tiny old one-room house, the one he had been born in, dirt floor and all. But it's something Rene can fix himself. He needs the money for his foundation, and he's under no obligation to this husband of his wife's cousin. So Rene turns his back politely and replies, "I'm truly sorry, I can't hire you today." At this, the wife's cousin's husband becomes very angry. Later that day, he brings his cow down into Rene's field and lets him loose to graze on Rene's cabbage and Rene's lettuce.

I didn't even yet get to the end of the story, Leslie, where Rene asked me what to do, and I told him to do what the law allows and confiscate the cow and charge the offending man a fee for every day Rene kept him. It's a good story. I had a head of steam, and I wanted to finish it. But all of a sudden I look over at Sheila, and two lines of tears are rolling down her cheeks. She's not crying for attention, she's not making a sound, but the tears are just rolling down her cheeks, and she says, "Brother Samuel, your heart for these people is so beautiful to me."

When she said it, Leslie, I didn't know what to do with it. It was like she reached into my chest and clawed at the scab that had been covering over the wound of my loneliness. I reached both hands to her face, and I wiped the line of tears from each cheek. By then we had been gone too long, so we started the walk back to the mission. She was still crying some, and she leaned into me. I put my arm around her, to comfort her, that's all.

Ever since then, Leslie—ever since I brought her back to the mission in time for breakfast, ever since Henri and I took all of you to the airport, ever since I watched that American Airlines jet light out toward the water, and imagined her trajectory past La Gonave, past the eastern ridge of Cuba, past Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas, and wished her safely all the way toward Miami International—she has been with me, in my thoughts, in my prayers. Forgive me this detail, but I can still smell her apple shampoo on the shirt I was wearing when she leaned against me as we walked together toward the mission.

It is a risk to tell you these things, Leslie. I don't have to tell you it is a risk. To a certain kind of person it might seem the slightest bit unseemly, a man of forty-two so taken with a young woman only eighteen years old, and that after only a week together. But you know me, Leslie. We are bosom friends and have been ever since we shared Room 23F in the Oldham-Betts dormitory at Apalachicola. And you know, too, that my life has borne out again and again how God's ways are not our own. I never planned to come to this place any more than I had planned to attend Bible College in my thirties. You've heard me preach plenty of times about how I was engaged to be married to Marisa Holden, how I had a thriving plumbing business with my brother Frank, how I had a whole happy life planned out in High Springs—good honest work Monday through Friday, dinner every evening with Marisa, six or seven kids, at least one of them a boy I was going to name Samuel Jr., weekends out at the cold springs, jumping off those cliffs, swimming in those shallow caves, picnic blankets, cold cuts, laying out there in the cool of the evening with Marisa and the kids . . .

But the Lord got a hold of me, Leslie, in a tent meeting of all places. They don't even have tent meetings in High Springs anymore. This might for all I know have been the last of the tent meetings. And that preacher laid his hands on my head and said, "The Lord is commissioning you to bring the good news to a faraway place," and I already knew it before he said it. Do you think it was easy, Leslie, to walk away from Marisa? To walk away from my business? To walk away from my brother? I didn't understand it at the

time, but I had faith. I had trust. I believed in the things I had not seen, and it led me to Apalachicola, to Room 23F in the Oldham-Betts dormitory, to you, to the mission board, and eventually here, to Koulèv-Ville, Haiti. My home, Leslie.

What I'm trying to say is that God works in mysterious ways, which is a thing we all say but we hardly ever believe enough to let it happen to us. I'll admit, even here, even after everything I've seen and done since that tent meeting, even I am reluctant sometimes to do the strange things a person might have to do if that person is open to the word of the Lord. But, Leslie, here's what I'm trying to tell you, strange as you and me might find it to be, strange as it certainly is: When I was walking that dirt path with Sheila Brocken, I wasn't thinking for once about what all things I had given up for the Lord's work. I wasn't thinking about my loneliness. I wasn't thinking about my past or my present, not about the mission board or the thirteen percent budget cut or money this or that. Leslie, I wasn't even thinking how she was eighteen and I was forty-two. All I was doing was just being present in the moment, being open to the Lord and all he has for us, and in that moment what I was hearing—clear as day—was the word from the Lord: This young woman, this Sheila Brocken, is the one I've been keeping aside for you. This young woman, this Sheila Brocken, is the one I've had you waiting for.

I'll tell you, Leslie, as you know from your own experience in the world of men and women, that this waiting has not been easy for me. Often it has been very difficult. Over the years, before Marisa and especially after, I've had a lot of chances to stray from the promises I've made to the Lord. I may not be the most handsome man in the world, Leslie, but I can't say I've not had my share of admirers. I am a man like you and like every other man, and I can't say I've not been tempted. But here's something I have going for me: I've kept my promises, Leslie. I can stand and proudly say that I've kept myself pure unto the Lord for such a day as today, a day when I can sure enough sit down and write you a letter to say that my history is true, my intentions are pure, my motives are noble, and when I say that I mean to pursue Sheila Brocken, what I mean to pursue is a lifelong kind of love, the honor and cherish kind, the in sickness and in health forsaking all others as long as you both shall live kind.

So what I'm asking, Leslie, is this: You know me. We go back many years. At one time you even said you considered me like an older brother to you. So in that spirit of love and family, I'm asking you to go to Sheila Brocken's father and tell him about me and what I have written you today. Explain to him that even though the circumstances are a little unusual, what with the geographic distance, the difference in age and everything, that this is a situation that seems to be coming from a source more powerful than our human minds can even contemplate, and that we all need to sit down here and try to listen to what God is telling us about his will for me and Sheila. And tell him he should listen to his daughter, too. It might be that I'm a fallible soul. I know I can be. I know I am. So we should see if Sheila is

hearing the same thing from the Lord that I think I am hearing. And if it is so, that would seem to me to be a confirmation. We may not understand it, Leslie. Not you or me or Sheila's father or Sheila herself. But it might be right, and we'd be wrong to miss it.

II.

Rev. Joseph B. Waddell, Director, Baptist Mission, Koulèv-Ville, Haiti, to Rev. Ervin Medlock, Caribbean Region Director, Foreign Mission Board, Richmond, Virginia, February 11, 1984.

I'm writing to thank you for your letter dated January 4, and for the good news about the record-breaking Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Missions. Whatever y'all are doing up there in Virginia, the word must be getting out to the local congregations. I'm proud as punch, because we could sure use some help down here. You'll see I've attached some documentation about some of the building programs we really need to initiate by March or April at the latest to accommodate the swelling need. There are other kinds of capital investments I've noted in those pages, too, chiefly our need for a second diesel generator and a couple of new trucks to facilitate the new outreach work we're doing farther up into the mountains. Our first large scale project up there involves clothes washing and bathing stations that collect and concentrate the flow from various mountain springs, so that we can (1) help the people use more of the water from the sources they already exploit, (2) create sanitary barriers between the water people are collecting to drink and the water they are using for bathing and washing clothes, and (3) regularly test the water for various nasties that are making people ill or killing them. The government in Port-au-Prince is very high on the project, and once we get one up and running, if they see that it works, they have agreed to match our funds for the next five. This kind of goodwill is hard-earned. It is evidence of real divinely inspired progress with the temporal powers that be. For all of these things, we are truly thankful.

It is also my burden to keep you up to date about a staffing and spiritual life difficulty about which we have previously corresponded, that being the continuing saga of Brother Samuel Tillotson. For the sake of clarity, and for whatever records you might want to keep, let me catch you up again. Last May, we had the pleasure of a visit from a group of high school seniors from South Florida, whose job it was to do various camps to encourage our children and infirm, and, in the case of the able-bodied young men, to do some light maintenance around the mission. It was noticed by many staffers that Brother Tillotson, age 42, was spending an unusual amount of time around some of the young girls, particularly one by the name of Sheila Brocken. He and she were seen standing abnormally close at evening devotions, speaking idly in the lunch line, and—this unconfirmed rumor came to us thirdhand, and Brother Tillotson, when confronted, denied it—

holding hands in the darkness beneath the mango trees that line three sides of our modest hospital.

None of these observations or whisperings alone would suffice to call Brother Tillotson's reputation into question, but taken together, they certainly raised suspicion enough to invite a confrontation. We followed the Scriptural pattern. First, I went to Brother Tillotson alone and asked him about the talk that had come my way. He admitted to what he called a "brotherly affection" for the young girl, and pointed out that there was nothing inappropriate about friendships between brothers and sisters in Christ. Furthermore, he reminded me that the girl was eighteen years of age, and therefore an adult, not a child. He said that he had done nothing to violate Scripture, doctrine, or conscience, and that he resented my questioning.

I'll admit that I went to see him in a spirit of distress. I was worried, frankly, about appearances. The school group that had visited included children from many of the families in the Palm Lake Baptist Association, a group of forty churches of which at least thirteen give directly to our mission in excess of the support they already offer the Foreign Mission Board. I fully expected Brother Tillotson to admit that he had been in some small ways inappropriate, for the two of us to make our peace with what had been, and agree to forge on anew. But his belligerence caught me unawares, and in my surprise, I did not summon up wisdom enough to recall for him the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "Wherefore, if meat causeth my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh for evermore, that I cause not my brother to stumble."

So I went to see Brother Tillotson a second time, and I took with me Brother Johnson and Brother Garvey. We confronted him again with what we had heard. Brother Garvey, in his gentle way, said, "Samuel, we come in a spirit of love. We're not here to judge you. We're imperfect people just like you. We're not even saying you did anything wrong. We're just asking you to think about avoiding the very appearance of evil, for the good of this whole place."

I'll tell you what, Ervin. Brother Tillotson was unmoved. If it had been anybody else besides this dear brother, I would have his bags packed and shipped to the airport with him and his one-way ticket before you could say boo. But even with all this, I figured you have to give the man the benefit of the doubt. Up until then, he had been a model citizen, a good fundraiser, good with mechanical projects and good with people and a good administrator of the farm co-op program which has been such a success for us here. So instead of doing what I should have done, and taking him before the whole body, I just pulled him aside. I'm not ashamed to tell you what I told him. I reminded him about the thirteen percent budget reduction we were facing. I reminded him of my discretion under these circumstances. I said, "You're on thin ice, buddy." I said, "I'm telling you this for your own good and the good of this mission. You pull anymore stunts with anymore visiting girls and you're out on your ear." He nodded and hung his head and thanked me and said all right. It seemed to me like I had got through to him,

like maybe what we had was just a bout of the single man's blues, something even an old married chump like myself could understand. The end. Case closed. Problem solved. Or so I thought.

Last September 3, Brother Tillotson asked for and was granted a two-week furlough. His stated reason was "private family matters back home." Upon his return, I personally went to the airport to pick him up, and, to my surprise, found that he was traveling with the young girl from the school group, Sheila Brocken. She was wearing a thin bright orange dress that only covered her legs to mid-thigh, orange boots, and large earrings shaped like hula hoops. They were holding hands, and he was grinning like the cat that ate the bird. Things being so sideways, I didn't know how to even address him directly, so I said, "Brother Samuel, when I took you to the airport you boarded with one carry-on bag, and now I see you have six suitcases." Big suitcases, mind you. Two big green matching hardshell cases like were popular when I first came over here myself, and one pink and one powder blue, and two smaller soft sided bags. Brother Tillotson lifted up the hand of Sheila's he was holding and pushed it toward me and said, "Meet Madame Samuel," and I'll admit the quarter-carat on her finger seemed to me flawless in color, cut, and clarity. I asked him who performed this ceremony, and he produced and unfolded a paper from his pants pocket, attested by the Clerk of the Circuit Court, witnessed by Frank Tillotson and Robert Tillotson (do these last names ring familiar to you as they did to me?), and stamped and sealed by all due civil authorities in Alachua County, Florida.

I'm sure it was quite a sight, the three of us parading those suitcases through the mission. You should have seen all the extraneous material in those suitcases. Blowdryers, curling irons, hot rollers, makeup boxes, all varieties of shoes, cassette tape players and headphones, all manners of shoes and clothing, dolls and stuffed animals, books and magazines, a small record player and stereo system, bubble-wrapped record albums, colored pens and pencils and drawing papers, feminine sundries, boxes of Little Debbie snack cakes, a typewriter, postage stamps and envelopes, rolled wall posters, a snorkel and fins set.

I pulled Brother Tillotson aside and asked him if he had given any thought to the matter of where Sheila would be housed, much less where her things would be housed. "My room," he said, not having given a moment's thought, obviously, to the notion that perhaps his room was too small to house a larger bed, too spartan to house a woman, too full already to accommodate all the possessions she had seen fit to bring. "It's not as though she overpacked for a holiday," Brother Tillotson explained to me. "She's come here to make a home."

How, Ervin, could I spell it out for him? How could I help him come to terms with the deep and abiding nature of his selfishness? Surely this girl had not undergone a period of preparation for living in a country such as ours, with all its hardships. Surely he had not considered the strain upon our facilities and resources which she now represented. Surely we had not been

party or even privy to the decision-making process by which he had imposed her upon us.

Immediately and right away, the other women began to complain about her. Sheila in her vanity was burning the available electricity early, every day, running her hair dryers and her curling irons. Sheila was running around in shorts rather than dresses, her bare long legs hanging out in contravention of the long tradition of women in this place. Sheila was out in the village with the boys and their drums, teaching them American rock and roll songs instead of hymns, or doing the hymns themselves as though they were American rock and roll songs. Sheila's French was abysmal, and instead of bringing it up to speed, she was privileging the local Creole she was learning out in the village, and in so doing, setting an example that would keep the lower classes low, in contravention again of our long practice. On Sunday mornings, Sheila was overdoing it with the lipstick and the eyeshadow, overdoing it with the brightly colored dresses, making a show of herself that made the other women feel less desirable themselves, that made them worry that their own husbands' heads would be turned inappropriately, not because their husbands were bad men, but because their husbands were, quite simply, men, and it is the responsibility of a godly woman, they wanted to tell her (and did, repeatedly), to avoid making herself into an unhealthy distraction.

Brother Tillotson, for his part, was not strongly receptive to various kinds of advice and wise counsel offered for his benefit by others on our staff. To the contrary, he was full of suggestions for how we might adjust to Sheila, for how we might better understand Sheila, for how we might make Sheila more comfortable. Now, Ervin, I am not suggesting that it is inappropriate for a man to wish to please his beloved, nor am I suggesting that there isn't more we could have done on our part to ease the transition despite its having so caught us by surprise. But many of these suggestions seemed less like suggestions than demands, and they were quite often couched in rather manipulative phrasings that made them difficult to properly deflect. For example, the matter of housing. "I can't help but notice," Brother Tillotson said, "how Brother T.C. and Sister Thelma, or Brother Larry and Sister Patty, are quartered in large bedrooms with large beds, attached to private bathrooms, while me and Sheila are still in a tiny outer room where we have to walk to single-sex community showers with the staff members who are single. Haven't I been here longer than any of them? Don't I outrank them? For me, I don't mind, but now I have a family to think about. I have Sheila to think about."

This argument extended to his stipend. It is true that single staffers are paid fairly less than married staffers, and that a married man must think about putting money away for his eventual return to the States. But when we evaluate staff members for our mission, we evaluate them as single or married people, and make our choices taking into account their own character and the character of their spouses, and the resulting financial need, with an eye toward our own budget. Certainly we would expect that some of

our single staff members would one day want to marry, but we would expect a reasonable time of waiting, and a conversation within our community about the marriage. That way, we could help prepare the couple for marriage, offer wise counsel to the intendeds, make budgetary and housing arrangements for the year forthcoming. I'll admit, Ervin, to losing my patience with Brother Tillotson after one of these conversations. I'll admit to speaking to his selfishness, dragging that girl down here. "But now, friend," I told him, "what's done is done." I said we would revisit the salary issues at the annual board meeting, but for now we could move the Haitian maids out of the housekeeping suite and move him and Sheila into their place.

Mind you, Ervin, this room moving was quite the undertaking. I would estimate I personally lost three days of mission work accomplishing it. The maids were understandably upset to be so uprooted, and, strangely, they bore no ill will toward Sheila or Brother Tillotson, but reserved all of it for me, the decision maker. They were afraid we would move them out to the village, which perhaps we should have done, because they had grown unnecessarily fat in the comfort of the mission. Instead, Brother Tillotson, Brother Johnson, and I refurbished six storage areas, which, with the room the Tillotsons had abandoned, provided seven single-occupant rooms for the maids. We expanded the women's shower from three nozzles to five, and my Junie even made new cloth privacy curtains to replace the old ones, which had grown rather moldy and raggedy. Brother Tillotson negotiated a price with a man who had some wooded property up the mountain a ways, chopped down eight pine trees, hauled them to a warehouse in Petion-Ville, traded them for the cured cedar boards Sheila coveted, and fashioned by hand a new queen size canopied bed for his and Sheila's new room, with matching nightstands and a five-drawer dresser. For all the concerns I have about Brother Tillotson, his woodwork is not one of them. Ervin, the only word I can use to describe this bed is decadent—sheer lines, intricate woodcuts up and down the four posters—the whole thing done without benefit of table saw, belt sander, lathe, or router. It cost Brother Tillotson three weeks of evenings in his own labor. When he was done, he drove down to the shop in Port where Michèle Duvalier herself buys bedroom furniture, somehow established a line of credit, and returned with a queen size mattress, bedsprings, black silk bedskirts, and a garish silk canopy, the color a deep garnet fit for the Queen of Sheba.

I did not and will not begrudge a man nice things, especially nice things made nice by the sweat of a man's own brow. The problem with the bed was not its luxury. The problem with the bed was the noises that came from it, night after night, often late into the night, disturbing the sleep of other men's wives, causing troublesome questions child to parent. An informal council of married men was convened, not out of secrecy or malice or any other ill motive, but in order to come to a decision about how to handle the matter of the bed and the noise quietly and delicately, with a minimum of embarrassment to either of the offending parties. After much prayer and discussion, we decided that the wise course of action would be to invite

Brother Tillotson into our meeting that very day, and confront him directly about the noise, to say, as married men ourselves, we understood the prerogatives of the newly wedded, and that we were not people who bought into the idea that God is some kind of cosmic killjoy, that we knew full well that the pleasures of the marriage bed are God-ordained, and that he and his bride had our blessing on their goings-on, not that our blessing was necessary. But that we requested – out of courtesy, out of decency – that they keep it down in there, bearing in mind that the designers of the mission had been strategic in placing the old housekeepers' quarters quite centrally, so that the maids could have quick and efficient access to the beds they were expected to make daily, and that the unforeseen placement of the Tillotsons in the housekeeping suite had the unexpected side-effect of making efficient the broadcasting of the noises coming from inside.

So we sent for Brother Tillotson. But when he arrived, he arrived with Sheila. His posture was quite defensive – his body drawn up to its full six feet, four inches, and his arms protectively around her shoulders – and he said, "If you have anything to say, you can say it to both of us. We are man and wife. We are a unit. We are a team. We won't be divided and conquered," and went on this way for quite a long time, with plenty of pious talk about two becoming one flesh and so on, and on, and on. I don't know about the other men, but watching him hold forth, seeing the gray in his hair, seeing his size alongside her tininess, I was struck (perhaps unfairly) with the idea that what we were facing here was not much more than a young and immature girl unfairly saddled to a man closer to pasture than he could imagine, and I was ashamed and unwilling to discuss such a thing as their noise in her presence. Perhaps you, Ervin, are a man more worldly than I am or than any of the other men in that room were or are, but my suspicion is that you would have been taken with these kinds of thoughts yourself, and my shame extended outward, and expanded until it took unto itself the shame that they themselves ought to be feeling for shacking up, but which they clearly did not feel, since they were holding forth daily in postures of such pride.

My thinking about these matters has become bothersome to my own spirit. Ervin, how does a person even begin to address such shame, since it cannot be undone without entering into grave sin – what God has joined together let no man tear asunder, and all that? In the weeks that have followed, Brother Tillotson has rejected every attempted pulling-aside to discuss the matter, holding to his line that his marriage is not a subject for addressing to anyone except both parties, together, and rejecting the rejoinder that his duty as the man and therefore the head of the household is to be the representative of the household in matters that ought not be discussed in mixed company. Meantime, Brother Tillotson continues to minister to the co-op farmers, teach them how better to cultivate their vegetables, raise their rabbits, tend their fish ponds, negotiate with buyers and sellers, and invest their earnings in their own homesteads for the purpose of building a future for their families. He prays with them, trains

their leaders, travels with their leaders to seed other villages with the tree of civilized life, and all of it toward the ends we are all of us pursuing—the glory of God and the promotion of His eternal Kingdom. It is as though there are two Brother Tillotsons—the one who has made family of strangers, and the one who has no time or patience for the granting of simple human dignity with the true family of neighbors and friends he lives among here at the mission. Part of me is inclined to stay silent and grant to Brother Tillotson the great grace that bears witness to the grace God offers us all. But part of me is weary, partly from my heart for those who are hurting here in Haiti, partly because neighborly peace has been breached here in the mission, partly because of my growing concern for the blind spots in Brother Tillotson's own character, partly because of my worry for the girl Sheila, and partly quite frankly from the absence of the silence we all need in order to rest properly at night, because, Ervin, the noises continue.

III.

Rev. T.C. Johnson, Baptist Mission, Koulèv-Ville, Haiti, to Rev. Ervin Medlock, Caribbean Region Director, Foreign Mission Board, Richmond, Virginia, February 10, 1986.

I'm sure news of the regime change is getting to you in dribs and drabs, and I send this dispatch with fervent prayers that it will be received. My first obligation is to report whether or not the mission has weathered the change in government safely. I'm sorry that I don't know any other way to be but direct. It is my devastation, telling you that the Lord has taken Brother Joe Waddell and Brother Sam Tillotson to be with himself in this hour. It was me and Brother Larry Garvey who found their bodies. It is no comfort to me that they passed while engaged in acts of service (trying to save the water station.) We buried them this evening beneath the mango trees behind the hospital. I pray the circumstances surrounding their passings might be comfort to their families as time passes, but to me it is nothing but sheer agony to write you and tell you about it. Our good Henri is at the gate waiting to courier this letter to the MFI pilot in Port, and time is short. I will try to write more this evening, but I do not know when I will next have an opportunity to get an envelope out. Please pray for us.

Rev. Larry Garvey, Jr., Baptist Mission, Koulèv-Ville, Haiti, to Rev. Larry Garvey, Sr., University Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, February 13, 1986.

The first thing we saw was the black smoke. Not the thin reeds of cooking smoke that rise throughout the village, but a thick, wide swath of smoke. Then voices arguing loudly. Then much shouting. Sam came running in from the village and said, "It's started." Brother Joe told us to close the mission gates. We had trouble closing them because someone drove an old

pickup truck in front of one of them and started a small fire in the truck bed and left it there. We had to put out the fire, and we had to move the truck. Some of the maids and some of the drivers and some of the doctors and nurses from the hospital helped. We all helped. People began to throw rocks, seeing us close the gates. Others were trying to get inside. Sam wanted to let certain ones of them in. Brother Joe said no. They argued. Brother Joe pulled rank. Sam cursed at him.

By then, the women were running out of the mission buildings to see about the commotion. Brother Joe told them to go back inside. Sam said men were burning tires out by the road. We heard pistol shots. Sam said there were men in the village who knew how to make Molotov cocktails. He worried the mission would be a target. Brother Joe said the people would be with us because of our good reputation for taking care of them. Sam called him naïve. Everyone knew it was us who had built the new water station. The rumor in the village was that we had taken money from the government to build it. Brother Joe said that wasn't true and the people in the village knew it wasn't true. Sam said some people were saying Macoutes had delivered us the money in burlap sacks.

I've never once so much as thought about disrespecting Brother Joe's leadership. But who knows the talk in the village better than Sam? T.C. and I urged Brother Joe to listen to Sam. Brother Joe said it didn't matter if Sam was right or not. All we could do now was hunker down, turn off the generators, get the doctors and nurses locked safely in the hospital, get the other workers into the buildings, get the women and the children as far from the gates and the walls as possible, and pray. Sam said we should take all the extra food we had – all the hundred pound bags of rice, all the vegetables, all the salted meats, all the boxed provisions – and set it outside the gate. Sam said he would go out there himself and tell everyone it was theirs to take, a celebration gift.

Brother Joe was very concerned about giving away the food. "The precedent," he said. He forbid it. Like always, there was a standoff. Brother Joe must have thought T.C. and me would follow orders like always. But this wasn't like always. This was an extraordinary circumstance if there ever was one. I looked at T.C., and T.C. looked at me. We decided that way. T.C. said, "Sam, let's go on in there and start hauling that food out."

Brother Joe gave me a Judas Iscariot look the way he can. He said, "Are you gonna forsake me, too?"

I said, "I'm not forsaking anybody, Brother Joe." Then I followed Sam and T.C. into the storehouse and started hauling food.

Brother Joe stood there and watched us with his arms crossed. At first he looked angry, but then he looked scared. His foot was tapping. I felt for him. Real softly, I touched his shoulder. I said, "Brother Joe, we really need your help right now."

He kind of dropped his gaze and went into the storehouse and came back out half-dragging a hundred pound bag of rice. He helped us and didn't complain any more. The four of us hauled all that food out by the gate. Then

Sam climbed up so his head was sticking up over the gates. He started calling names. Pierre, Carlo, Kenel, Michel, Victor. I did not see any of them standing nearby, but they were friends. Sam knew they would be watching over us. They came from the places where they were hiding, and told the other people near the gates to stand aside. Sam told them about the food. He said it was a gift to the village to celebrate the flight of the Duvalier family from the country. He said we were going to open the gate, and would the people stand back so we could bring the food outside?

Pierre and Kenel began to yell orders to everyone to stand aside, and because they are such big men and so respected in the village, people backed away as they approached. Sam came down from the wall, and he said, "Move fast, because there's gonna be a crush."

We opened the gate to about three feet wide. Pierre and Kenel stood guard at the threshold. Sam, Joe, T.C., and I lifted, carried, and dragged the various bags and boxes of food outside. Right away the people began to press in on us, to get at the food. Carlo, Michel, and Victor called for orderliness. Pierre and Kenel crossed their arms. At first, that was enough to slow the press, but now people were coming from all over the village. Others came from the direction of the road and the smoke. People running, people yelling, people whistling for more people. The noise of it was astounding. "It's too much," Brother Joe said. He was yelling over the din. Sam nodded his assent. I noticed that we were all waiting for Sam's assent. When he nodded, we went back inside the gates. Pierre and Kenel helped hold people off as we closed them.

Plenty of the extra food was still inside the gate. "What now?" Brother Joe said. Now he was looking to Sam, too. It seemed to trouble Sam that Brother Joe was treating him as the leader, even though you would think it was what he had wanted all along. Maybe it wasn't. He said, "Brother Joe, should we haul the rest back into the storehouse? In case somebody peeks over the wall and sees it?"

Brother Joe seemed to expand to full size again in response to Sam's deference. "We don't want them breaching the gates," he said. We hauled it all back into the storehouse. It was probably half what we had hauled out.

Now Kenel was calling out from other side of the gates. Sam and Brother Joe, both, went running toward him. T.C. saw him running and said, "Would you look at that?" It was strange to see Brother Joe in fast motion, a man his size. We had never seen him at the gates before except to come and go. Now he climbed up alongside Sam, and they poked their heads over the top to speak with Kenel.

By now the noise from the other side was such that we could not hear what they were saying. After awhile, they both jumped down and headed toward the residences. Brother Joe went right past us without saying a word, but Sam put a hand on T.C.'s shoulder and mine and said, "Best get on in with your families now." Then he went in, too.

Me and T.C. followed as far as the exterior doors to the residences. T.C. stopped me there. He had something to say. I encouraged him to come out

with it. He said, "I keep a .22 in Thelma's personal drawer. I keep it loaded. I love my children."

I don't think at the moment he was worried about the mission board's rules against guns or any such thing. At the moment, I wished I had one, too. T.C. said, "You want, you bring Patty and the kids over, and we'll hunker down together."

I didn't know what to do. "You think," I said, "a little .22 is gonna keep us safe?"

"Nope," T.C. said. He didn't even blink. "Thelma's in there with the kids praying, and I don't know if that will make a difference beyond calming them all down some." He was probably doing the recent missionary death tally, same as me. Luc Preval, in Gonaïves. Ed Reelitz, up in Okap. Ben Miller, in Les Cayes. Salvador Arruza, in Carrefour. Even the natural causes, like the heart attack that took Brother Joe's Junie last fall. The Lord's ways are not our own.

Brother Joe came out again with his canteen on his belt, and saw us and said, "Get on inside."

"You, too," T.C. said.

Sam came outside and said, "Brother Joe, you ready?"

Brother Joe nodded. "You fellas aren't welcome to join us," he said, "but they're up there busting up the water station."

"You think you're gonna stop them?" T.C. said.

"I think we're gonna go up there with Pierre and Kenel and tell them to come get the rest of our extra food," Sam said. "Ya'll better haul it out again."

Brother Joe was nodding, even though he had just told us to get inside. The color was out of his face. I could tell he didn't want to go up to the water station, but he didn't want Sam to go when he himself wouldn't go, either. It was a matter of his own pride working on him, I think.

T.C. tried to let Brother Joe off the hook. "Let Sam go," he said. "Pierre and Kenel will take good care of him. We need you here. All this extra food is too much for me and Larry to haul out alone again."

Brother Joe just shook his head. The two of them walked toward the gates, and then they scaled them together. They disappeared to the other side, their bodies first, then their heads.

T.C. said we better wait a little while to start hauling the food out. It took forty or fifty minutes to walk to the water station, and it seemed risky to leave the food very long in an open sightline of any heads that might raise themselves over the walls. The broken glass on top of the mission walls didn't seem much a deterrent anymore. I went inside and got Patty and the kids and we went over to T.C.'s and brought some blankets and spread them out on the floor and we all lay down on them and stayed real still.

By then it was starting to get dark. With the generator out and the dark out the windows and all the truly terrifying sounds—the vodou drums unsettling, but the familiar uses of the human voicebox worse—it was all we could do to keep calm. The children, ours and the Johnson's, were preternaturally calm. I feared some kind of shock had taken them. Thelma

and Patty prayed in whispers, and T.C. and I spelled them here and there, just to keep soothing voices in play. Every once in awhile, the orange red of some roaring fire someplace up the mountain flared up high enough to be visible against the dark of the window.

None of us gave thought enough to Sam's wife, Sheila. All that time, she was alone. It was Patty who realized it first. She leaned against me on the blanket on the floor and said, "Oh no, Larry. Sheila."

T.C. overheard and said, "We got to go out and get the food, anyway, Larry."

We went out into the hallway, toward the old housekeeper's suite where she and Sam stayed. She didn't answer when I knocked. T.C. said, "She's scared." I said, "Sheila, honey, it's me and T.C.," and right away regretted talking to her like a child, saying honey. Sam was always hair-trigger sensitive to anybody saying anything to her that made her feel like a child.

But when she came to the door, she looked for all the world like a child. Her face was ashen and tear-streaked, and her hair was disheveled, and she was a girl whose hair was never disheveled, even after whole days spent in the village. I felt the weight of conviction, looking at her, knowing she had been in there alone and afraid all this time. "He's dead, isn't he?" she said. It was a spooky feeling, hearing words like that coming from her.

"Nobody's dead," T.C. said. He didn't like her, but you couldn't tell it in his voice, not then. His voice was gentle, fatherly. He reached out his arms and took a step toward her. She took a step back and shut the door softly. The wood grazed his fingertips.

A coldness came into us, then. Later, T.C. said it was the conviction of the Spirit resting on us because of how we had neglected Sheila, but I can't shake the superstition I want to shake, which is that it was our spirits knowing Sam and Brother Joe were gone, before our minds could know it. What happened, in any event, was we picked up bags of rice and carried them to the place just inside the gates where we had carried them before. We carried the salted meats and the vegetables, and we carried the boxed provisions. Then we waited. This was the worst of it. We waited and waited, but neither Sam nor Brother Joe returned.

Sometime around dawn, Henri came knocking on the gates, calling for T.C. and me. When we saw his face, we knew. He said we better come help him collect the bodies. All I could think of was that old homeless lady Marie who died last year out in front of Le Dieu de Justice school and we thought she was just sleeping on the steps again, and how crazy old Jean Sitney covered her with his black blanket, and when her people never did come to take the body, he started dancing with it, round and round in circles, until the schoolchildren stopped him by throwing rocks at his arms and body.

T.C. went over to the place by the mission wall where Sam cultivated the sugar cane, and threw up into it. When he was done, he wiped his mouth, and said, "You gonna go tell Sheila, or you want me to?"

It didn't seem right to make him do it. I knocked on her door again, and as soon as she saw my face, she knew. I could tell. Her voice was flat.

"Where?" she said, and I told her the water station. She pushed me aside and took off running, flat-out running, past me, past T.C. and Henri, through the gate, and out into the village.

There was no catching her. Maybe Henri could've caught up with her, but maybe he was as soft as we were, spending his days driving that truck instead of walking up and down the hill for water, instead of walking everywhere, the way most people do who don't live in the mission. The only person in the whole place who could've run from here to the water station was Sheila herself, because she was the only one out running around the village all the time.

The three of us didn't say anything to one another. We just started walking. We walked in a triangle, me and T.C. up front, and Henri, watchful, bringing up the rear. We walked through the village, all the way to where the good dirt path ended, up the mountain, and down again, toward the fresh springs where the people washed and bathed.

You could see the water station busted up from far away. It looked like they had come at it with hammers and axes and pieces of wood. Whatever they could get their hands on. Later we found a young tree that had been pulled up by the roots and swung like a baseball bat. And from that distance, already, we could hear Sheila wailing. She did not sound like herself, but her voice was not strange. She sounded like almost any Haitian woman I had ever seen bent over the body of a lost father, a lost husband, a lost baby. Wailing.

We followed her voice to the far end of the water station. She was knee-deep in the stream. Chunks of concrete and scraps of wood and PVC pipe floated around her or lay in the shallows. Her whole body was leaned over what was left of Sam. Her arms were under his shoulders, holding his head out of the water. Her forehead dipped in and out of the stream. She was shaking with cold. When we came closer, we saw that the left side of Sam's face was completely caved in.

I had to shout to be heard over the sound of the stream, and her wailing. I said, "Where is Brother Joe?" I asked three times, but she did not answer. She may not have known we were there until T.C. came behind her and put his arms around her. Even then, she did not let go of Sam's body. Some ways downstream, I caught sight of Brother Joe bobbing face down among the reeds. I left Sheila with T.C., and waded toward him, to fish him out of the water. His face was caved in, too. Upstream, T.C. was saying, "He's with Jesus, Sheila. He's with Jesus." I don't think I'll ever see a sight like it again, T.C. holding Sheila, Sheila holding Sam's body, the three of them in the water, bobbing amid all that trash.

IV.

Mrs. Linda Reelitz, Okap Baptist Ministries, Cap-Haïtien, to Rev. Ervin Medlock, Caribbean Region Director, Foreign Mission Board, Richmond, Virginia, May 10, 1986.

I'm sorry it has taken so long to get back with you about this Sheila Tillotson affair. MFI is only running every-other-Tuesday flights out of Cap-Haïtien, and those are Palm Beach hops, with Santo Domingo stops midway. So the fastest cheap way into Port-au-Prince is Okap to Santo Domingo on Tuesday morning, then the Thursday afternoon flights to Port with the Presbyterians. On the way back, it was the Presbyterians to Santo Domingo, then (lucky, this) a helicopter full of anthropologists from Johns Hopkins who thought it would be a hoot to pal around with a missionary woman for awhile. (Some anthropologists they were, too. One of them asked why I wasn't wearing my habit. I asked him if I needed to explain to him the difference between the Baptists and the papists, and he held up his hand as if to say, "The vocabulary offends." In my mind, he says it with a British accent, but we're hard up for fun around here. In truth, his talk was Chesapeake Bay all the way.) All told, Ervin, and even with all the rushing around, this errand of yours cost me almost three weeks. I'd say you owe me, but I guess you can't owe me if I didn't come back with anything.

The Koulèv-Ville mission is in surprisingly good shape. I say surprisingly, because since the Duvaliers fled on that plane (smuggled out a little peasant girl with them, they did!, to do the cooking and cleaning no doubt), very little that has been in any way associated with the regime has been left untouched. All the way from the airport, through the city, through Pétion-Ville, Henri (their driver) pointed out the various signs of carnage. The burnt shell of a building here, the bourgeois house overrun by shanty people there. It made me fear for what I would find, because tensions in the country are still running high, and even in Okap it was known that Brother Joe had dealings with the regime.

But you and I know Brother Joe was a shrewd man, and he had his people do a shrewd thing. When the lawlessness flared up, instead of hunkering down right away, they first dragged much of their excess food and sundries outside—bags of rice, cooking oil, salted meats, vegetables—and let the people take them, knowing what goodwill would follow. Where Brother Joe went wrong, I would say, is in miscalculating the limits of that goodwill. This was a failing, I believe, to which he was prone, expecting big goodwill when all you are is a person who invites a little goodwill. Down there by the hospital are rows of mango trees, where me and Ed spent some pleasant hours back when I was young and Ed was still alive. That's where I expected to find this Sheila, bent semi-comatose over old Sam's grave. But all I found there were those two pet monkeys they used to keep in those tiny cages before they dismantled the mission zoo. They wore harnesses, and they had been tied to the tree trunks by the old man who parades them in the street with their tin beggar cups whenever any work groups—American or Dutch, he does not discriminate—are in town doing their good deeds. It's a

real breach of protocol, not to mention security, that the monkey man could get away with a thing like that, and it never would have happened in Brother Joe's day. Nor would there be a hole in the mission wall near the garbage dump, so people could reach in and grab the trash bags and dump them on the property next door and claim their chicken bones and whatnot. Nor would there be dirty hospital needles in those bags like the ones I found among the wads of befouled toilet paper, the discarded food wrappers, the slit-cut burlap rice sacks I watched children carrying away at the direction of their mothers. Brother Joe would have stood over the shoulders of the orderlies as they dug a pit, built a fire, burned everything infectious, covered the hole with the dirt they had just finished digging. If he so much as saw something so useful as a burlap sack in a garbage can, he would have fired the cook on the spot, and made somebody's wife finish making the meal.

When I got back from the mango trees and the graves and overseeing the dreary work of cleanup and the business of reuniting monkey with master, I marched into Larry Garvey's office and said, "Where is she?" He just shrugged his shoulders and pointed vaguely in all directions. I met T.C. Johnson out in the co-op fields, and I said, "Where is she?" He turned his palms toward the sky and said, "Last time I saw her, she was headed toward the village." I walked out into the village by myself and I asked all the women, and they would speak with me of everything but the girl. I walked all the way to the next town. No one would talk there, either. It was getting dark by then, and if I had any regard for my own life I wouldn't have been out walking those mountain paths by myself, anyway, but, Ervin, this country has made me a tough old broad, and I like to think I could hold my own with any two machete-wielding teenagers. Somewhere between the Pentecostal church and the old French fort, a woman with whom I had spoken earlier in the day, name of Jilene, stepped out of her house and took my arm and walked with me for awhile. At first I thought she meant to be protective of me, but then she said, "You are looking for Madame Samuel?" and I said I was, and she pointed toward a house a few hundred feet away and said, "Do not bring her any more sadness." Then she kissed me on both cheeks and we parted.

The house was made of stone and mortar, with a roof of corrugated tin with holes rusted through at irregular intervals. Here and there, the holes had been patched by laying a square of tin or aluminum on top and anchoring it with a large loose rock. Probably underneath the rock, inside the house, was a floor full of pots and basins strategically arranged to catch the rainwater. I've seen it plenty before. The outside of the house had been long ago painted a thick green, but time had washed the color thin at the mortar, and thinner where the stones protruded. Mortar and stone alike were dirtwashed and claywashed. Here and there the gray and orange overtook the green, so there was a shag carpet effect when you saw the place from a distance. An old dirty shag carpet from the floor of somebody's doghouse, let's say. I could only imagine what it was like on the inside.

Nobody answered when I knocked, but I could hear whispering inside, and soft clattering. I knocked again, and it got quieter. I knocked a third time, and the door opened a crack. I saw a white eyeball in a black socket. A man spoke to me in a broken-down English that sounded like Kreyol: "What do you want?"

The girl, I said. Is she here? Will she come talk with me? I came from Okap to see her. People are worried about her. Can I come inside?

"Wait," the man said. He closed the door. More whispering inside. Perhaps some arguing. The door opened again, and the man came outside. He was tall, for a Haitian, and handsome. "There is no one here," he said.

"But there is," I said. "I heard the voices inside."

"That is my family," he said. "My brother, my sisters."

"Are you a Christian?" I said.

He allowed that he was.

"Do you mean your brother and sisters from your father and mother, or do you mean your brother and sisters in Christ?"

He looked around, up and down the street. People were watching. He said, "This is not your country."

I switched to Kreyol. "For many years it has been my country," I said.

"Look at your skin," he said. "You are a *blan*. This is a country of *nèg yo*."

"You are a Christian," I said. "Do you know the Scripture, the words of *Bondye* spoken through the Apostle Paul? In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female."

"And yet," he said, "the missionaries have everything and we have nothing. Look at me. Look at where I live. I live very well, but next to the mission, I have nothing."

"Is that what you desire for her, then?" I said. "To have nothing, like you say you have nothing? She is missing, and she is far from home. Her husband has died. Her mother, her father are worried about her."

He scratched at a scab near his temple. "Her husband was a brother to me," he said. "He baptized all my children. He paid for medicine for my mother. He told me if I died, he would take care of my family."

"What is your name?" I said.

"They know my name at the mission," he said. Already he was going inside. Already he was closing the door.

I put my foot between the door and the doorpost. He drew himself to full height. I said, "Sheila, honey, are you in there?"

"Please," he said. "Do not put your foot in the door."

I called out: "Sheila? Are you in there? My name is Linda Reelitz. I have letters from your mother and your father. I have documents from Brother Sam. There is property that is yours in Florida? Did you know? There are people who love you, Sheila, and they are worried about you."

Nobody made a noise inside. The man put his foot against mine. He did not kick or push at my foot. He said, "Please, now you will go away."

What else could I do? "Sheila," I called. "I will be back tomorrow. Let's talk tomorrow morning, okay?"

I took my foot away from the doorpost. He looked at me for a moment. What I read on him was mostly relief. He closed the door softly. I walked back to the mission in the darkness, alone.

A late night staff meeting was hastily convened. I described the shag carpet house, and Brothers T.C. and Larry right away exchanged one of those *Didn't we know it?* looks, and in unison, like some quarter-throated choir, everyone in the room said *Kenel*, by which, I learned, they meant Kenel Depitor, a co-op farmer who had been close with Brother Sam. I asked the questions you'd expect: What's going on here? How long's she run off? Why this Kenel Depitor? What's the relationship here? Is this a mere friendship, or might she have waded into something sexual?

Nobody seemed to know what to say, right off. Faces drew tight. Shoulders were shrugged. Glances, seemingly meaningful, were exchanged, but not with me. Eye contact of that sort was rare as a seven dollar bill. Things were said that didn't mean anything: It's hard to know, it's complicated, Sheila's a tough nut to crack, Sam could be a weird egg.

"Listen," I said. "You people have been through a lot. Lord knows. You've lost a lot of people you love. Good people. In a short time. And here's your last link to one of them, this girl who got dropped on you even though you probably didn't want her, but here she is, and she was Sam's, and you loved Sam, and Sam is gone, and she's all you've got left of Sam. So you've got your loyalty to Sam, and you don't want to hurt this girl, and neither do I. Neither does anybody. But there's stuff going on here that doesn't smell right. I've seen it all, and now I've got the spiritual gift of seeing through it all. I watched my Ed's head crushed between the cab and the bed of an old pickup truck, and I watched my housekeeper fall off the side of a cliff with her house back when we still lived in the mountains. I don't know what to do with any of it. All I know is there's this girl, and one way or another she's in over her head, and we've got to get her home so she can make some kind of life for herself and not have everybody just thinking of her as the widow at the ripe old age of fourteen or whatever she is."

I went on like that for awhile, just provoking. It didn't hurt me one bit to do it. I just beat on them like that. When an English word wouldn't do, I used a French word, and when French wasn't crude enough, I hammered them with Kreyol. I played the tired old widow and I played Ervin's monster come down from the north to chew and spit. Finally, Sisters Patty and Thelma started talking a little. Yes, they said, Sam *was* a weird egg. Yes, Sheila *was* a tough nut to crack. It's not that they knew things and were choosing to withhold them from me, their interrogator. They *didn't* know, and it's what they didn't know that wore them at the edges. What they had to offer was gossip, idle talk, conjecture, theories half-formed. What they had was nothing edifying. What they had wasn't much. That's why the hemming and that's why the hawing.

"Ladies," I said, "if theory's all we got, then theory's all we got."

The long silence. Then Patty: "Kenel and Brother Sam were very close."

Like brothers, Thelma said.

"After Sam died, Kenel started to come around a lot more. Usually he kept to his fields, and that's where he spent his time with Sam. But after Sam died, he was always bringing baskets to Sheila. Food, clothing, things he bought or his wife bought at the market."

"Things he couldn't afford," Thelma said. "Not possibly."

"Did you ask Sheila about these things?" I said.

"Yes," Patty said. "Indirectly, but that didn't get anywhere. Then directly. But she was just a mess. Her face turned witch ugly. It took so little to set off the waterworks. Once it started, she'd go off to her bedroom and shut the door, and you'd hear her for hours. She wouldn't answer if you knocked. Such a horrible sound, and you could hear everything that came out of that room anyway, because the walls were so thin, and because of where it was. So we just stopped asking."

"Where do you think he got the money?" I said. Their speculations were thin. Maybe she had some stashed away, and Kenel came and got it and made purchases on her behalf. Maybe Sam left some of his money with Kenel. It was no secret the troubles were coming. It was just a matter of when. Maybe he thought he ought to have a backup plan if this place got tore up. I said these were reasonable possibilities, and that's why I didn't buy them. They believed something darker, and might as well be out with it. They looked at each other. The men glared at the women. I had a pretty good idea what the women were going to say.

"We think maybe Kenel was his backup plan," Patty said.

"But Kenel has a wife," I said.

"Kenel has three or four wives," Patty said, "stashed away who knows where."

"What's one more?" Thelma said.

By now, the men had stopped glaring at them. Some leaky water pipe was dripping every few seconds, and the men turned their heads in direction of the showers every time a drop hit the drain. The women seemed to be waiting for the men to say something, and I waited them out. They fiddled with their ears and they fiddled with the creases in their pants. Finally T.C. gave in. "It's just a theory," he said. "It's just talk, and it's not kind, and it's probably not true."

I didn't have to say it was midnight, and Sheila was in Kenel's house, and not in her own bed, and not for the first night, I gathered.

Well, Ervin, this story doesn't end well or end at all, for that matter. The next morning I set off with Patty and Thelma for Kenel's house. When we got there, the door was open, the bedsheet curtains were gone from the windows, the inside was picked bare. Everybody and everything that was there was there no more. We interviewed the neighbors, and the neighbors were predictably ignorant concerning these matters. We interviewed the relatives, and nobody had a thing of value to share with us. Somebody said maybe they went to Jacmel, somebody said Belle Anse, somebody else said Miragoâne. All of these were places none of these bodies have ever been, I can assure you. If I had to guess, I'd say they're all some place three

mountains over, sharing some uncomfortable space with some children Kenel hasn't seen since they were born.

What to do? I guess you could call the FBI kidnapping squad if you want, Ervin, and let Kenel Depitor take a bullet for the crime of doing a favor for his dead friend. They call us colonialists, and that's what anybody'd expect, right? My advice is wait it out. Soon enough, the money will run out, or she'll get homesick or she'll get sick sick, and one fine afternoon she'll walk or be carried through the front gate, dehydrated and weak with diarrhea, and one of those nurses will run an I.V., and then T.C. and Larry will send her stateside. As for me, I want to wash my hands of the whole sorry affair. What I want to know is: What kind of man was Brother Samuel Tillotson, anyway? And what was Brother Joe thinking, letting him bring that girl here in the first place? And what kind of girl is she, to get mixed up in a distant country with one man she hardly knew, and now another? And what kind of parents must she have, to let us deal in fact-finding trips and bureaucratic reports instead of getting their old behinds down here on a plane and bringing their little girl home? And what kind of people are we, in a time like this, to let her grieve it out alone in that thin-walled bedroom? Why wasn't she put on the morning plane to Miami the day after Brother Sam was buried?

As usual, the questions pile up like dug dirt, and the big ditch forms for lack of answers. Days like these I want to throw myself in it and sleep the long sleep, but that's not what we do. As soon as I'm able, I'm gonna get myself back to Okap and lead some Bible studies and oversee some women's meetings, and plant some trees, and teach some children to read.

V.

Mrs. Tina Brocken, Loxahatchee, Florida, to Miss Anna Ratliff, West Palm Beach, Florida, May 10, 1993.

Im so sorry to here the news about your daddy passing after such a long and bravery struggle. I don't even know if you remember me because you was so little when we knew your daddy. We knew your momma too and she might remember us. If she does, you say hey to her for us and you tell her we don't care what anybody says we think she is a fine person. She was always a good lady to all of us even though there was problems between her and your daddy that's the things that happens to everybody in the world and when you get older you will know it too. You are an adult now so you like to already do but thats neither here nor there. Kay-Sara-Sara, like that old French song goes.

I will do my best to write all the things I want to say to your daddy in this letter. I want you to forgive me for not coming to the funeral service to say them for my own self and to his face. There is a lot of reasons for it. Some of them are because I don't go to the Baptist church anymore even though I still believe in God and pray in Jesus name. I have gray in my hair people

don't gossip probably like they used to or even remember me but maybe some do I dont like there stairs when I pass by and what they are thinking about me and what kind of mother is walking by them when I walk by. Also I am not a disrespectful person especially to somebody like Leslie Ratliff when I first heard about the brain cancer I just cried and cried you can ask anybody around because they all heard me. Not just because I felt sorry for him with his pain or but because it really is such a blow to loose him we loved him so much.

Let me start at the beginning because I know your daddy was a discrete man and wouldnt tell everybodys business so you might not know. We had a daughter. Her name was Sheila. When she was born she was the love of our life mine and her daddy too. She was bad sometimes and got into things but thats how children do and she wasnt any different. We didnt have much trouble with her until she got to teen age. Even then she wasnt so bad but just wanted to wear makeup a lot of dark makeup around her eyes thick blue eye shadow and red lipstick and so forth. She was never one to mouth off but some kinds of rebellion are silent like the preachers say the devil doesnt come dressed up in a red Halloween suit he is more like to be the man in the suit and tie on the airplane real handsome with his hair slicked back and two hundred dollar shoes. Well Sheila was very pretty and spoke good to everybody and cleaned up nice and dolled up she was a prize fit for a movie star actor or a tv anchorman or a rich man which I admit to thinking back then that Sheila was just going to catch the eye of one of those boys in her class from Palm Beach who was going to be a doctor or lawyer or inherit a business and I could just see us out there visiting maybe taking one of those yachts to the Bahamas because that is something her daddy had in common with a lot of those guys with the yachts is he was and is a very good watercraft man. People who are into watercraft know who is able and who is not able and you get respect that way no matter how much money you have or dont have and I know it because we have ended up on boats with people like that and it always worked out okay even though it made me a nervous wreck because you always wonder what people like that think about a hairdresser and a Sheet Metal Technician II nearly to Sheet Metal Technician I certification.

So we could of went on like that and everything turned out okay like it does for other families whose daughter wants to wear some makeup or hoop ear rings or a short skirt like many do since we might be in the Last Days before Armageddon and Jesus riding on the white horse to rapture the living and the dead in Christ will rise first. But one day a mimeograft paper comes home from school about the senior trip. Sometimes the senior class goes to Europe but this senior class the note said is a very special one and they the students voted to make theirs a service and missions trip to the poorest most backwards country in the world which is right in our backyard Haiti you see on the tv the black people men women children washing up half naked in the rick kitty boats and running from the police and hiding in the bushes the ones who werent able to get away.

Sheilas daddy and me thought there was pros and cons of going to Haiti and not Europe. On the one hand it would be a good cultural uplifting experience to see Paris and London and Big Ben and the Eyeful Tower and that one class a few years back got to go to Omaha Beach where Sheilas granddaddy almost died fighting for our freedom that would be a good thing to see. On the other hand it would be very expensive to ride the airplane over there across the ocean. They have these chicken barbqs to raise money for kids who arent rich like most of the kids but every year I watched those kids sorting dirty t-shirts for the rummage sale and their parents marking notebook paper price sheets for the silent auction items and on the day of the event the same kids and parents up there with the teachers people like or dont like in the clown dunk tank or running the duck pond for the little kids or the ring toss or whatever and all the while you see those rich kids and their parents running around like life is easy and spending the money on the expensive rummage like one year I saw this boob doctor from Palm Beach buy a real nice baby grand piano for his church then strut around like he was the Warren Buffit of charity and filantrophy, and everybody knew that his money was going to pay for some kid not much different from Sheila because of the in adiquacy of some parent like me and Sheila's daddy. Nobody wants to be made to feel that way.

It didnt matter anyway because once Haiti is where the class was going thats where Sheila was bound and determined she was going and I was not one to stand in her way. Her daddy neither. So I just signed the papers. Right away Principle Ratliff called to say there was a special senior trip scholarship fund nobody knew about so we had to keep it quiet but would we like to take advantage of it. This was not the first kindness of your daddys we had seen. I dont want you to think we were poormouthing him. We had money coming in from two jobs but tuition was not cheap at the Good Shepard Academy.

The school sent home all these lists of items to buy. Pack heavy and leave light, they said. All those little Haitian kids didnt have toys so we packed some Matchbox cars and bored games and some baby dolls. We bought a pair of cheap underpants for every day the idea being to use them one time and then give them away so some Haitian lady could have a new pair of her own after it got washed. We bought packs of cheese crackers and pop tarts in case a snack was needed because it was dangerous to eat the street food and there wasnt enough at the mission to go around except for regular mealtimes.

You should of seen all those kids lined up at the airport in Miami with all there luggage and backpacks and laughing and horsing around. Me and Sheila's daddy both took the day off work and went down there to see her off. Your daddy was there too with his clipboard playing his role of principle just making sure everyone was accounted for and handing out these little hard candies butterscotches and peppermints and also some caramels to everybody just to make a nice mood. We watched that plane go up in the air through the window by the gate. Sheila's daddy said this was a big turning point in our life because soon she would be gone to college or married or

both. I said she would not be our little girl anymore and he said she will always be our little girl. She will never stop being our little girl. He wasn't ashamed his eyes got wet. That wasn't like him. If you ever met him you would see a man with green navy tattoos and a weightlifter and a black beard just a big man some would say intimidating. That was part of who he was it's true. But he was a daddy foremost and that's what killed him if I get to lay blame.

We knew while they stayed over there we wouldn't hear much from the kids. Sheila only got to call us one time for about three minutes the connection was bad and it costed us fifteen dollars. She said it was so lovely the retarded children were lovely and the pregnant girls. Just to hear her voice was reassuring. You know that's an island where people are fleeing from danger so you worry about violence and all that. But nothing like that happened where they were. They didn't see anything like that. She felt safe over there and maybe it would of been better if she had got a scare while she was on that senior trip.

She was real quiet when she got home but also somehow lit up like a fire beetle. You know teenagers are moody and girls especially. We got used to that and tried to be understanding. But when Sheila got back from that trip she like to floated from cloud to cloud even if she was just vacuuming the living room. Twitterpated is what her daddy said. I agreed but there wasn't a single boy calling the house. One day I just came out and asked her and she got shy and wouldn't say very much. But after graduation I knew she was going to William Jennings Bryan College with a full scholarship even room and board then all of a sudden she said she was going to stay home and go part time to the junior college. That was worrisome, her walking away from an opportunity like that. She clammed up about why but we were for sure it was a boy.

Then one Saturday morning the third week of June, there was a knock on the front door. I looked through the curtain liked I used to do and it was your daddy. That was weird for the school principle to be at the door after your daughter already graduated. I called everybody to the living room then I let him in. He was wearing a two-button shirt and corduroy pants, and I remember thinking that was funny because it was hard to imagine him in anything but a suit and tie and penny loafers. I offered him some tea and we all sat on the couches in the living room to talk. It was small talk for a while and then he said to Sheila would she excuse us for a few minutes. Her face was red flushed the whole time he was there then it got redder when he said that. Her daddy said Sheila you better get on to your room. After she left he said what kind of trouble has my daughter got into.

Your daddy had a real nice way with people. He said you know sometimes it's not the children who get into trouble but the adults who might get them into some. He said something has happened but I am not sure exactly what or how much of it. It took him a long time to get into it but the long and short was that one of the missionaries in Haiti was an old school buddy of his from Apalachicola Bible College and maybe that's what blinded

him to what must of been going on between this older man and our Sheila. He said this missionary man had wrote a letter saying would your daddy come talk to us about how him and our daughter were in love from only a few days together and then it all made sense to me why Sheila was acting like a lovesick fool and not taking her scholarship and room and board at William Jennings Bryan College.

Right away Sheila's daddy got up and started pacing the room. Principle Ratliff said if it was his daughter he would want to punch somebody in the mouth for being the bearer of bad news but he would reframe because of his love for God. But something we had to consider now that Sheila was eighteen and legally an adult was something could come of it. He asked did we think she was motivated enough to do something rash? Her daddy said he was. Principle Ratliff said that was another matter but he understood well enough because he had a daughter of his own, and here Anna you should know he went on and on about his love for you even then when you was so little he was thinking about when you would be grown and married he would be so proud of you but he wanted it to be somebody your own age or a little older who loved you and you loved. We said that was what we wanted for our daughter too.

We called Sheila into the living room and told her in front of your daddy and all of us what he had said and was it true? She was slippery about it. She said that this man Brother Samuel she had met was very nice and they had got close but no closer than very close friends. Nothing unto ward had happened. Principle Ratliff said he had a mimeograft letter he would give to us so we could see what Brother Samuel had said and from here on out he would leave the matter to our family to make some choices about but he would help if he could he just didnt know what more he should do about it telling us was the right thing to do he thought.

I must have read that letter a hundred times since then including one time today. That letter is really what got so much of this thing off the ground between Sheila and Samuel Tillotson. One day I came home and saw her reading it and she was cucumber eyed like she had been getting. I said that is poison and fire you are playing with and she acted like it wasnt. At that age you know everything or think you do.

A couple of times the phone rang and she answered it then said a few words like she was speaking code. After that she would leave the house all the time. Later we found out she was going to my sister's house her aunt Glory that traitor. Over there she was talking to Samuel long distance Lord knows how much it was costing him or how he was paying for it. What we know now is they were making their plans. One day she was there in the kitchen cutting carrots and the next day she was gone. He swooped in on the airplane and took her up to his brothers house in north Florida and they came back married and saying they were moving to Haiti in two days.

At the time what I thought was what can I do about it now? What is done is done. Marriage has always been sacred to us we are belivers in Jesus. Now I am more sophisticated about my thinking on it. Now I think my daughter

was just a child and you cant make a child enter into a binding agreement she was manipulated into. We should of pushed for an annulment like her daddy wanted and put our foot down and said no way are you leaving the country no way with that man old enough to be your daddy with salt and pepper hair and crows feet at the corners of his eyes and his teeth gone so yellow already. But then I just thought what can you do? She was already a year older than I was when I married her daddy.

We said stay at our house then even though it was strange but they had already got a room at the Holiday Inn on Okeechobee Road the same place where her daddy and me had our honeymoon so that was a strange thing to ponder all those memories and think of what was going on in that hotel room. So we took them to a very nice expensive dinner at the Red Lobster to celebrate the wedding we had not been invited to or told about. That was very hurtful even though it saved a lot of money I always wanted to give Sheila the kind of wedding like I never had with a big white cake and a train for her dress and I was going to do her hair up in a tiara and spend a lot of time getting it just right like nobody did for me. A church wedding and not a reception in the church fellowship hall but a real banquet hall someplace like in the movies.

I was real proud of Sheila's daddy during that dinner he leaned over to Samuel Tillotson. He was trembling which is as unusual as tears for him or it was then. He said now that you are a part of our family I want to welcome you into it and you are like a son to me. Which was funny because they were about the same age. He said I just want one thing from you and thats you take good care of my daughter because she is the only thing we got in the world worth a tinkers dam we dont even care about the house or the cars its just her we would give anything in the world for her and you should feel the same way. And Samuel to his credit said that he did feel the same way and we should all feel good knowing that Sheila would be very loved. Right then he put his hand on both our shoulders and prayed there in the restaurant for the family we were becoming to each other. That was embarrassing for us but it would of been impolite to say so because this seemed like a real important moment for all of us. Plus we wanted everything to be nice since Sheila was leaving and it might be a while before she could get back home to see us.

We drove them to the airport. They sat in the back seat and held hands. I didnt like the way Sheila was dressed for the trip a little tarty but I tried to keep it to myself because she was leaving like I said. I had made sure she had all her comfort things she needed and things to do her hair curling irons and so forth. I kept thinking something was missing and later I relized it was some of her stuffed bears she slept with every night until then that her uncle Frank got her when she was little for Christmas one year. At the terminal there she said Sammy I am hungry can you bring me something? Her daddy like to leaped up to run get her a sandwich. He brought back four sandwiches and four ice cream sandwiches. Her pretty mouth was chewing.

Her mouth was always so pretty. I saw Samuel looking at her mouth like a wolf but what could I say I couldnt say nothing they was married.

Her daddy was always quiet but he got more quiet. There was a plane that went down sometimes from the missionary flights international sometimes we brought down some packed boxes with cheese crackers, magazines, granola bars, fresh underwear to give the old ones to those Haitian ladys and pass the goodwill along. I always wrote a letter too but Sheila didnt write back very much. When she did it was short and she just wanted something like feminine products which I was happy to send the next box. One day your daddy called and said its Principle Ratliff but we can be friends now so just call me Leslie and thats what we called him from then until the day he died. He said what can I do and I told him there was nothing to be done about our daughter whats done is done but my husband has got very quiet.

A few days after that your daddy knocked on the door again it was early evening. He told Sheila's daddy he heard we was going to put an addition on our house. Sheila's daddy said that was no longer because the addition was for a guest room for visiting grandbabys and no body of that discription was going to visit us now they just planned to stay overseas always. And your daddy, Leslie, he said time has a way of working these things out. He was very gentle. He said he knew a few things about construction. He was good with electrical work and he could knock out walls with hammers and crowbars and he could hang dry wall and he could lay all kinds of floors from tile to laminate to wood or even carpet.

Every Saturday for eight months after ward he came over and helped Sheila's daddy with that addition. We lived with a open house for a long time. Just Visqueen hanging over the open part to protect from the wind and rain. When we was both gone to work or shopping or church the old jewish lady two houses catty corner from the mailbox was agreeable to watch over the house so no robbers saw no one was home and stole from us. We got a dog too. Big Doberman named Sweetheart. Sweetheart loved your daddy. Thats another way of knowing how good a man he was because guard dogs know bad people.

Almost two years that guest room sat finished and empty. We bought a bed to put it in there but no body slept in it. One day on the six o clock news came word that Baby Doc Duvaliy was fleeing from a cooday law. We heard there was un rest but the reports now got bad. Somebody at the Baptist church brought over some articles from the Miami newspaper which covered Haiti a lot because of all the Haitians living there and sure enough it was bad enough we got worried. Sheilas daddy said he was going over there on the first plane but the missionary board called and said no planes were getting in and dont go over any way it could put Sheila's life in danger if not handled right the customs being different over there and kind of savage with bribes and extortions possible.

Her daddy stopped going to work then. I called the boss who was an old friend and he said dont worry do you need money and I said we had some

saved. He said if his daughter was in trouble overseas he would wait by the phone and they had sheet metal men to cover the hours dont worry. Sheilas daddy stopped sleeping in our bed. He went into that empty guest room and just sat there on the bed. I told him he was going to rot in there and not do any good. He said he was waiting for the next knock on the door with the sheriff or some missionary saying his daughter was dead. I told him dont talk like that you have to have faith. He got real cold then and said havent you figured out by now it doesnt matter how much faith you have the same bad things happen to Christians as pagans. I said I know I have seen the same things as you.

There was that knock on the door. It was a week later. I heard her daddy there in the guest room. He said shes dead our daughters dead. I said its probably some kids selling worlds finest chocolate bars for the school money drive trying to win first prize of a black and white tv. He said if its somebody in a suit then you will know.

Who it was was Leslie. Sheilas daddy said he wasnt coming out of the guest room. We all went in there and sat on the bed the three of us. Its bad news he said. She is dead, Sheilas daddy said. Leslie said no shes not but Samuel is. Sheilas daddy closed his eyes. He didnt make a sound but there was tears shooting down his cheeks. That son of a bitch he said. Leslie put his arms around both of us even though he was not a hugging man. We told him we ought to go down there and get Sheila. He said dont do it let her grieve the loss her own way let the authorities at the missionary bored handle sending her back who knows what shes liable to do in her grief if we show up there.

This made me angry. I am her mother. I am the one whos supposed to be with her when she is grieving. I dont care if shes in Haiti or Timbuktu or if the plane ticket costs three thousand dollars or you have to fly on the back of a bird. I said we are going its settled. Your sweet daddy said I don't blame you. He opened his billfold and gave us some money. We wrote some letters and sent them down with the missionary flights plane. We bought some tickets and went down there as soon as they opened the airport for comercial flights. There was a hundred people outside the gate wanting to give us a ride in their taxi which was probably a run down car or pick up truck. These people smelled to high heaven. They dont wear deodorant down in those places. We chose this one short little fellow who had all his teeth and spoke English. His name was something like Ornery but I dont think thats how its spelled. We asked him if he knew the Baptist Mission in Koulev-Ville and he said he had a cousin who used to be a cook there.

He put us in his pickup truck all three of us in the cab together. The roads were terrible. People were walking between the cars in the streets trying to sell you things through the window it was terrifying. The buildings were all cinder block painted some god awful color pink or green or yellow sometimes with a picture painted on the side or some words in french. There was a lot of places that had been tore down very recently. You could tell because people were picking in them for food or whatever was inside,

scavenging like vultures. What kind of country is this I wanted to know. I was so happy we had come to take our daughter home.

We gave the driver some money at the mission gate but he said it wasn't enough. We tried to haggle but he acted like he didn't understand and he kept saying I gave you the ride why won't you give me the money? Some other Haitians came around trying to sell us trinkets and paintings and others were saying you are thieves. Finally a white man came out and saw us and said who are you and what are you doing here? I said we are the Brockens, our daughter lived here, she was Sheila Tillotson. When he heard that he took money out of his pocket and gave it to the driver and started talking to everyone in that Creole and some people were arguing but he sent them away and took us inside.

I need to make this long story shorter. This is supposed to be a letter about your daddy and I am going on too long about this but this is part of the story okay. They brought us out all this food but Sheilas daddy said he didn't want to eat anything in this god forsaken country he just wanted to see his daughter where is she. He went storming around yelling Sheila Sheila, and it took a while to get him calmed down. They took us back into a back room. I said she's not here. One of the women said no she's not. Where is she? The woman said she didn't know. Is she alive? These are the questions any mother would want to know. The woman said as far as we know. She was not unkind. She was trying to be calm but she was upset as us. Sheilas daddy said tell us what you know. The woman started to talk but the man said we just got there we should rest. Sheilas daddy grabbed him by the shirt and said you tell us what you know. The man put his hands on Sheilas daddys hands but what can you do? Sheila's daddy had sheet metal arms. The man said okay all right you tell him to the woman who I gather was his wife. The wife said I don't know how to say this but she ran off with this Haitian man Kinnel who was friends with Samuel. She's been gone a few days and we don't know where she went. We didn't know this would happen we are so sorry. Sheilas daddy said this Kinnel is a black man? He is Haitian the woman said. Sheilas daddy said when you say run off do you mean escaping danger or site seeing or romantic or boyfriend girlfriend or get married? And the woman said there's no way to know for sure but we think romantic by now. She's very confused she's been thru so much.

What was there to do after that but go home? We stayed the night in the mission but neither of us slept at all. In the village you could hear some people singing hymns in that Creole. Even though it was Christian it sounded like the voices of the demon possessed. The whole country was infested. Somewhere out there I was sure Sheila was singing with them. She was turning into one of them and probably having babies with one of them or made one already because there is no birth control in that country for sure unless you are getting it from Americans and she was out there living like a savage. Her daddy said the same thing in the middle of the night. If she has any babies they are going to be black. That was his last word on the subject. He also said we are never going to see her again.

Your daddy was very good to us after that. He had the ladys at his church cook us meals in a rotation one for every day of the week for a month and bring them to us so we didnt have to worry about the cooking. He visited with Sheilas daddy and he said dont listen to the poison those old bitties are spewing. Just because they go to church doesnt make them spiritual. No person in their right mind can blame you for what choices she has made. If any body is responsible it is me Leslie Ratliff I should of not taken those kids down there my old friend was a snake and I should of known it I should of kept him away from her I should of been more aware. Sheilas daddy said no its not true. What a girl learns about love she learns from her daddy. Theres something I did wrong and I should of known it when. Even those early signs I had a chance. That red lipstick and those hoop ear rings and those short skirts. I said your not leaving this house done up like a two bit whore but I could of put my foot down more. I could of got out the belt or the switch like the bible says spare the rod or spoil the child but I couldnt bare to do it not when she was little and not now and now I am paying the price you sow what you reap. Your daddy was so compassionate he said no thats not true I have been a principle for many years now and you see all kinds of kids good and bad from all kinds of families good and bad and you know God forgives sins and there is still time for Sheila I knew her she was a good girl even if she had a wild streak. He said you know the story of my wife who left me for the navy captain. She may be a kept woman but I know in my heart God will bring her back to me. She is still my wife in the eyes of God. God will forgive my wife and I will forgive my wife and she will come back to me. And God will forgive Sheila and you will forgive Sheila and she will come back to you. Then we will all sit down and kill the fatted calf and feast like in the story of the prodigal son your family and mine all of us together. The day is coming you will see.

Every Saturday they had this same conversation. Then one Saturday there was some news from the mission. Some body had creeped back from the provinces and said Sheila was dead and they buried her in a family crypt somewhere. They werent telling where. She had got sick and died and everyone was afraid because she was white. There was some debate about whether to send news but finally they did send it out of a heart for her family. But you tell me. If they really had a heart for our family they would say where she died and where she was buried so we could go get her. Those people. But it never happened. We dont know where she is and we dont know if she had any babies. They would be our grandbabys. I would take them now even though they might be black. They would be black but they would still have Sheilas face and some of her features. I would love them the same as I loved her. I am not prejudice. I would raise them to know the lord and go back to church and never let them wear any thick makeup or jewelry. I would work as hard as I had to so I could send them to Good Shepard Academy and give them a good education because its so important. But every day I think they dont even know English and probably cant read or do

basic math. That just galls me every day. They are alive and carrying her blood I know it. They will never know my name or that I am there grandma.

If you think it was hard for me you should of seen Sheilas daddy. He lasted 18 months after that. Massive coronary. His heart just exploded. There was surgery but it was to late. The only person who came around after that was your sweet daddy, Leslie Ratliff. Oh was he a friend to me. We sat a part on the couch and watched television and some times went to the movies one time he even took me to the musical play Fiddler on the Roof. Lonely days were made less lonely even doing things like watching the Kentucky Derby on tv or baseball then making cookies or sometimes he would help repair the toilet or any thing else that was broke. One day I said to him why dont we get married. We love each other in the right way and never did any thing un toward. We could make a life together. I said I made my peace with my daughter is never coming back. I said your wife is never coming back to you either. He said she is not dead. I said I know but she might as well be dead to you. He said I trust the lord. Well I admire him for that but as you know, your momma had made her choices and they were ever bit as binding as the ones Sheila made. But your daddy was not scared off. He kept visiting just as a good friend and I was respectful to the love he still had for your mother and he was respectful to me and treated me like a dear sister in Christ even though I had stopped going to the Baptist church because of those bitties and there gossip.

One thing I never said to your daddy because I never blamed him was how different life would be if no body had invented the mimeograft machine. It was that mimeograft machine that brought home the paper that convinced all the parents to send their children to Haiti instead of Europe. And it was the mimeograft machine that brought the copy of the letter from that terrible Samuel that Sheila always used to sneak off and read and help her fall in love some more and go down the wrong path. Thats something I think about all the time. I was thinking about it today. I was sitting on the bed in that guest room your daddy helped build. Sweetheart was barking. The rest of the house was so quiet I had to go turn on the tv to keep me company. Its what made me think of writing you the letter. I was thinking about that mimeograft machine and it got me thinking of your daddy. He was so special. Every body must of told you by now but I wanted you to know how much he meant to me being here for me in my darkest hour. I wish he would of known God doesnt always answer prayers the way you want him to. Maybe you could of been a daughter to me. I couldnt take the place of your real momma or your daddy and you couldnt take the place of my Sheila but we could of still been like family to one another. Maybe theres still time.

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 awhile 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.