

I ran my fingers along a tattered quilt as I looked over the Ghanaian sand pebbles my mother had kept, in the shape of a cross, on the floor of her prison cell. I inhaled deeply to keep my lungs from aching from a desperate need for air. Turning my back to the lime-washed walls, I opened a scrapbook filled with very old photographs and saw a snapshot of my mother in a long black dress, her belly bulging slightly. Turning the pages, I glanced over several pictures of her surrounded by her “sisters” as they walked The Trail of Blood to a dusty cemetery behind an old battered house, which was once the female slaves’ quarters in Cap-Haitien.

The crowd of black dresses engulfed her like a somber wave, as she reached over to accept a pair of shackles from our hostesses, The Bizango Sisterhood of Our Ladies of Good Death. Many elbows shadowed my face as she raised my fingers to the chains. Once I had touched the chains, I was lost. As soon as my mother died, the sisterhood membership would be mine and—with my illness—if I ever had a son, I would have to repeat her deed.

They said I could keep anything I wanted from the cell. Aside from the members of the sisterhood I was the only party concerned. But all I wanted was a clue, a key, a prescription, something which would show me how to escape. Maybe there was no way out. But then again my answer could be anywhere, hidden in 25 years of arts and craft, created by the same hands that had pressed a baby’s face into a pillow and watched a child struggle to take its last breath.

Over the years, she had written many letters to me from prison—in care of the convent orphanage. In her letters, she mostly said two things. She wanted to lay eyes on me before she died and she was most grateful for my silence. Grateful that I didn’t tell the Cap-Haitien Head Justice that she had made me watch.

Your silence, it assures me that you were born for the sisterhood.

A resourceful city journalist had tried to find a link between her crime and the mysterious deaths of other Cap-Haitien baby boys. Boys, who it was claimed, drowned in streams, died of heat stroke, or fell from mules. At the trial, the sisterhood publicly denied her. They said they were members of a very legitimate, reputable organization. There was no hideous secret about them.

They started as one. Now they are thousands. Their foremothers were slaves who ran away from the plantations, then came back in the pitch darkness of the night to rescue each other. They risked their lives for one another as maroon women: sisters, daughters, of a long trail of blood.

After my mother was put in prison, to serve her sentence, a few of those same women visited me at the orphanage. My mother had to kill my brother, they said, so that I would live. I was born with weak lungs and scarcely took a breath. My mother promised the gods her son, so that I might survive.

The members of the sisterhood took turns coming to the orphanage. Deathly afraid of them, the white Canadian nuns at the orphanage would let them take me to Cap-Haitien Square. We would sit by the old red clay fountains and there they would teach me to accept my destiny and how to answer the questions, which they said would be asked of me once my mother died.

The conjuration was always the same.

-Who are you?

-I am a child of the night.

-Where do you come from?

-I come from a long trail of blood.

-Where are you going?

-I am going into the dawn.

-Who are you?

-I am the first daughter of the first star.

-Where do you drink water?

-I drink in the dew.

-If you can't find dew?

-I drink from the rain before it falls.

-If you can't drink there?

-I drink the turtle's hide.

-How do you find your way?

-By the light of the mermaid's comb.

-Where does your mother come from?

-Thunderbolts, lightning, and things that roar.

-Who is your father?

-I have no father.

-Then how were you made?

-My mother stole creation dust and made me in her image.

They wouldn't let me visit her until a year ago, when I turned 21. By then, I didn't want to. I was afraid that she would tell me what I already knew, that there was absolutely no way for me to get out. I knew all the daily rituals, even though I didn't practice them. I knew that you were to take seven steps backwards and then forwards before leaving the house, so that you could shake the old spirits who had lain down beside you during the night. I knew that you were always to sprinkle the ground in a cross before you ate or drank anything. You were to sleep with your face to the east and choose your children's names from the headstones along The Trail of Blood.

Every time I had thought of going to see her, I would first go to the nuns at the orphanage and tell them about my dream from the night before. It was always the same dream. Me standing over her with an arm-length saber that I was trying to drive deeper and deeper into her chest.

"Think of the pleasant times," the Mother Superior would say. "Were there any pleasant times?"

I had liked going to church with her during Lent. The priest would make crosses between our eyebrows with holy ashes. And there was a time when we made a trip to Ghana, to a slave dungeon, along with 70 of the oldest members of the sisterhood. We leaned against the cold stones in the cave as a tour guide lectured us on the lot of the slave women who had been kept there. We were told that the ground beneath our feet was made of tears, urine, feces, and the menstrual blood of thousands of women who were penned in that space like cattle for two or three months before they were put on the slave ships. My mother had raised her head towards the sunlight at the cave's entrance. We could see the ocean that bore our foremothers to Haiti, the beach their feet had trodden, and the sea that had swallowed a great many of them. She'd grabbed my face and buried it in the folds of her black skirt before she broke down and cried.

We took a trip to Guadeloupe a year later. We walked up a mountain with hollow caves where echoes followed our steps. The last night we were there, we sat around an orange flame in one of the deepest caves. Seven towering black ladies passed around a piece of cactus which they rubbed against my palm. It took all of them to hold my body still as they dug out cactus needles with the razor-edged tip

of a scalding knife. The bleeding wouldn't stop, so they took turns soothing my palm with their tongues. I have the scars still, bright red circles where my life lines should be.

I never visited her in the prison hospital. After speaking to Mother Superior, I knew I wasn't ready. Perhaps the sight of her walking, living flesh would tell me too much about my own future. It might break the fragile wall of sanity I had been trying to maintain since I saw that little body lying lifeless on her breasts.

In the cell were pillows stuffed with balls of her thick black hair. Women were not allowed to grow long hair in prison so each time they shaved her head she kept the hair for her pillows. I sat on the edge of the small sisal mat she used as a bed and I hugged the pillow against my chest. They would burn her body as final punishment for her crime. We would come to the public burning—it was open to the whole village—but we could not take away any of the ashes.

The nuns had once helped me get in touch with a voudun priestess from Martinique who was living in Cap-Haitien. They wanted me to ask if women could walk away from The Sisterhood of Good Life, The Sisterhood of Good Death, Daughters of Sheba, and the other groups my mother had been affiliated with. The nuns felt that perhaps if I talked about what I knew, The Daughters would expel me and deny me my existence.

“Not so,” said the Daughter of Sheba priestess. She, too, was from a petit bourgeois family. “We're all somebody's daughter. How can you get that out of you?”

In my dead mother's cell, I threw the pillows on the ground and kicked the Ghanaian sand pebbles across the red clay. A pile of them rolled towards the hair sticking like cat whiskers out of the pillows.

“Ma se, Sister.” My back stiffened as though I'd been caught stealing. I hadn't heard the door open. “Sister, they told me you were gone.”

Their voices came flooding back.

-Who are you?

-I am that which you do not know. That which you will never understand.

-Where do you come from?

-I come from the dust of that cave.

-Speak to me.

-There is no need. I have no voice.

-But I hear you.

-You hear my mother, who speaks through me.

-Who is your mother?

-The shadow which follows my shadow. The flame at the tip of my candle. The ripple in the stream where I wash my face.

-State your name.

-I have no name.

-State your claim.

-I have no claim.

-Who are you?

-I am the daughter of that cave.

-Where do you come from?

-I rise from your ashes.

-I am ready to serve you. What will you drink?

-I drink the dew off flowers which you have planted.

-What makes you strong?

-The blood of that lost child.

-Who will you tell?

-I'll eat my tongue if I ever whisper of having known you.

My mother believed that if a life is lost, then another one springs up, replanted somewhere else, the next life even stronger than the last. She believed that we were part of an endless cycle. That two children could live through one and that one's loss could make the other one stronger. We were daughters of the cave. Offspring of a trail of blood.

An old woman entered the cell, dressed in the customary long black mourning gown of the sisterhood.

“Sister, they told me you were gone,” she said.

She moved closer, squinting to see me better. Up close, her pupils had the glazed look of complete blindness. She had been there that day in the caves, in Ghana.

“Sister, they told me you had died,” she said. “That your body had been taken away for the burning.”

“You are mistaking me for someone else,” I said.

I stepped back, my feet sliding over the sand pebbles on the floor. I tried to walk to the door, keeping my legs steady so I would not trip on the pebbles and break my neck.

“What is your haste, sister?” she asked, feeling her way around the room. “I want to exchange a few words with you.”

“I cannot stay.”

“But you must.”

She sat on the edge of the sisal cot and began pulling the hair out of the pillows.

She pulled a long piece of black cloth from one of the pillows and wrapped it around her belly. Then she began pounding her fist against the ground and calling my mother’s name.

“Where I come from, this is how we mourn our dead,” she said.

I stepped back towards the door. The woman quickly looked up at me, her eyes now piercingly clear.

“Before your infant brother died, you walked the trail with us,” she said.

“I have walked many trails,” I said. “I think I remember you from the Ghanaian caves.”

“Will you come to watch when they burn your mother at the stake?”

“What would be the use?”

“We will be there,” she said. “All of us. Then we will take her to be buried in that old cemetery behind the women’s slave quarters.”

I did not want to argue with her or try to convince her that they would not allow her near the body, either before or after the burning.

She walked over and grabbed my hand. Her fingers felt warm against my palm. Like the tongues that soothed my flesh in the Guadeloupe cave that day.

She pulled herself up and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. For a brief second, I saw nothing but black. And then I saw the light from the Ghanaian cave, as I had seen it sway on the ocean when we were standing over a loam of urine, tears, and blood. The old woman held me tightly against her, so close that I could smell my mother's hair in her breasts. She rocked me softly and I felt like a tiny infant being cradled by a strong and secure hand. The glow of the cave entered my body through her chest. The swing of the ocean floated like a cloud in my head.

"You will not betray your mother," she said. "Your silence, it assures me that you were born for the sisterhood."