

## Soursop, Orange, and Lemongrass

I had already been thinking about it for a few days. And I woke up after a long sleepless night, my body unsure, my soul hazy, without being able to control the completely crazy whirl of my thoughts that were running up against each other, more rapidly from time to time and sometimes bolting like horses when a storm is coming. It was only after I sat down, legs folded under me, and after I had breathed deeply, very deeply in the bluish light of dawn, that they were willing to release their tight hold and not leave me for dead. I felt the movement of my chest growing slower and slower under the faded T-shirt that serves as my nightgown. A red T-shirt with the white Texaco star. Erminus has been working there as a driver for almost two years. He gave it to me last year at carnival time. Businesses always take advantage of carnival to launch their publicity blitz and we, the poor, invariably inherit a T-shirt, a cap, or a bag. It is a similar situation during electoral campaigns. The candidates arrive with their loudspeakers, set up a platform on a street corner, make us extravagant promises of happiness with many grand words, and go away as quickly as they came, conferring on us these T-shirts, caps, or plastic bags. Then we use them until they are threadbare. We keep them for a long time, too long in a country where events go quickly, outwit our vigilance, and sometimes catch us unawares. Yvana, my neighbor, knows something about that. Just last week, she almost got herself lynched by supporters of the new government in power while she was going to market in a T-shirt belonging to the provisional government that preceded this one.

But today I wasn't thinking about carnival, even less about those merchants selling happiness at street corners. I had a long

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day ahead of me. A day when I was to gamble with my fate. I knew it so well that my legs trembled a little when I got up from my bed. Like the day when everything between Erminus and me had begun. Like the day when he had declared his desire to take me, Vilcina Fleuranvil, as his woman. I got out of bed in complete darkness without making a sound. Outside it was already no longer totally dark. I wanted to wait until the first rays of day came before going back into the room. And for some unknown reason I felt like waiting until the first rays of light came to calm the turmoil of life and death inside me. Back in the room, I walked over to the window and opened just one shutter for fear of dazzling Erminus. Turning around, I could not prevent myself from contemplating the disorder revealed in the bluish light of dawn. I could not keep myself from watching this man sleep, from listening to him breathing, stretched out on the sheets, this man whose mouth etched like an island, whose gaze golden like the bread of my childhood, I still loved—God only knows why!

Contrary to my usual custom, I did not make the coffee immediately, preferring to wait for my return so that Erminus could drink it hot and fresh when he awoke. At the beginning I had liked the idea of being the gray shadow behind the sacred person of a man, the chosen one of a king, of a man-king. Soft like a rag doll at his feet. Like a starving bird, I contented myself with the crumbs that Erminus threw me on the bare ground. I pecked at them, completely humble and contented. Following him on the paths of pleasure traced by his own hand. And then as the days and weeks passed, I had less and less taste for it. Something like a bone was stuck deep in my throat. Something that almost strangles me sometimes, that forces me to close my eyes, compelling me, in order to breathe and see, to place my feet back in childhood, where I can contemplate a scene, any scene: twilight rhymes, grass for the animals in the hollow of my hands, and my pure joy, flooded with sunlight. The period of this escape, this sharp little point caught in my flesh, was becoming less intense. When three months ago, I paid a visit to my godmother Edèle, and I caught on the television screen

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the look that a man gave to the woman pressed against him, I was completely turned upside down. That look was enough to make me see myself definitively as I am, I, Vilcina Fleuranvil, the servant not of a king but of an ordinary man. Erminus Laveneau had marked my heart in sweetness, but without really thinking of sweetness. The sweetness had come in spite of him. In error. Inadvertently.

The day when I had spoken to Soline my neighbor of the trouble and the doubts that were prowling all around, she had replied quite simply, with the tone of one who was giving well-informed advice, that I ought to consider myself happy. Happy that Erminus slept next to me every night, that he had never ever left me a single day without food or clean clothes, and that he had never ever hit me after two years spent together under the same roof. So I had not dared to speak to her about the look that the man on the television had given the woman pressed against him, much less about the words that he had spoken, almost trembling, words to unsettle your soul. Soline had repeated over and over a lively list of sulks, ruses, and petty spitefulness that she had at her disposal to exact revenge on a daily basis. André, her man, goes into jobs where he never stays very long, spends the better part of his time leering at young women passing by and imagining what is hidden beneath the shadowy triangle of their thighs. He frequented and still frequents women who have given birth to a host of boys and girls. To the already long list of the fruits of her own womb, Soline recently added three offspring that André entrusted to her one fine morning without saying a word. I refrained from answering Soline. I am sure that she took my silence for compliance. Poor Soline. And then I could not forget that one evening two months ago Erminus had come home with a reddish scar on his right arm. No explanation that Erminus gave had satisfied my insistent questions. Some young female, in a moment of anger or heat, must have sunk her wildcat teeth into his flesh, I am sure of it. Regarding both the look and the scar on his arm, I did not breathe a word to Soline, who would have gossiped to her heart's content, assailed me with questions, and given

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me advice about a thousand magic spells . . . And then again things are not quite clear in my head. Despite the look on the television screen, despite the scar on Erminus's arm, I was very pleased that another woman should want Erminus.

I took a long time this morning choosing what I was going to wear. I washed the basin particularly carefully and put it behind the house. The Texaco plastic bag was once again resting on a chair by the door. I had carefully taken it out the day before. I wanted to go fetch the water myself, not at the standpipe, but from the spring an hour's walk from the area. To avoid useless discussions I purposely avoided Derisca's house at the end of the street. Derisca is formidable and with her implacable logic she always ends up worming information out of you. She would not have understood why I insisted on going so far when the neighborhood at last had its own public standpipe. She quite simply would not understand. All the more so because I had been an active member of the committee initiating the installation of this standpipe. Derisca does not brook any opposition except from those likely to fatten her wallet. Because Derisca is a real businesswoman who does business in the Dominican Republic, Miami, and Curaçao in an explosive mixture of English and Spanish and who has already corrupted half the racketeers in customs in Port-au-Prince and Saint-Marc. "As for the other half, it is only a matter of time," she loves to repeat.

Like all the males in the area, Erminus is not too fond of Derisca. Like them, he had understood that Derisca did not need a man for all the normal reasons that other women do. For him to tell her boring stories, for him to beat her sometimes, or for him to lie on her when he feels like it and forcibly give her children.

On the way to the river, I stopped first not far from Soline's house for soursop leaves, then at Man\* Cléa's doorstep. I knew that she would not hesitate to give me a few sprigs of lemongrass. She has a single bed of *ti baume*,<sup>†</sup> lemongrass, mint, and

\*A title of respect used for older women, equivalent to "Mother" in some Anglophone Caribbean cultures.—Trans.

<sup>†</sup>A kind of common garden mint.—Trans.

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sweet basil. I like to sit at Man Cléa's side. Man Cléa knows everything about the seasons, omens, the living, the dead, dreams, illnesses. Certain important people come from far away to see her amid her rare herbs and obscure bits and pieces. As always, Man Cléa only half answered my questions and lent an absentminded ear to my replies. Man Cléa makes light of time and space. In spite of having her two feet firmly planted on the ground, Man Cléa never completely leaves her world of reminiscences, omens, and signs.

The stream has visibly diminished. I wanted to go as near as possible to its source, very high up, very far away. Near those places from which we are increasingly being driven out every day and that we realize too late are our only paradise. I filled the bottle then I retraced my steps, stumbling from time to time and stopping at times to catch my breath but tormented with thoughts each one crazier than the other.

On my return, the sun was not yet very high in the sky. I emptied the water from the plastic bottle into the basin behind the house and I picked the leaves from the little orange tree up against the neighbors' wall. The leaves from the orange tree were the first that I rubbed one by one and put into the water. Six o'clock was barely striking when Erminus woke up. He stretched languidly and asked for his coffee. He sat down as usual on the veranda. I sat next to him and talked to him about the long day that I had ahead of me. He told me that he had to hurry because of the new boss, who did not seem to be an easy man. I never mentioned my long morning walk at any time. I watched him leave with his shuffling and somewhat clumsy gait.

All day long I was haunted by the need to ask Erminus the real question, the question that would make him take from his body the only response, like a thorn in your heel or a tooth pulled out. I did the housework, made the bed, without ever abandoning the question, without ever ceasing to guess the answer. I put the few odds and ends from my improvised business on two tables at the entrance to the house, where I could keep an eye on them. Between doing the washing and preparing the meal, I sold three spools of thread, two exercise books, and

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four pounds of white sugar. I moved the washbasin as the sun made its way slowly across the sky, imagining my fate moving in its shadow.

Yvana and Soline both came by. Our laughter and our complaints as women who ironed, washed, were patient, were concubines, wives, mingled together in the little dark streets of the village. When Soline left, an infant in her arms and two little ones fussing in her skirts,\* I could not help thinking of my mother, who waited for my father every Thursday when his legal wife went to see her sister in the next village. My father always took his coffee and his glassful of rum before noisily scratching his throat, looking at my mother. Not one of those looks to topple walls and raise clouds of dust. Just one of those looks out of the corner of your eye of a man filled with desire, claiming his weekly due. Moreover, my father wanted to get from my mother's eyes the assurance that he was the only one. I never found out what my mother let him see. All I know is that she never complained. She followed him between four walls, all the time that her body felt pleasure beneath the clumsy hand of a man in a hurry, all the time until he left her at forty for a young hussy of eighteen, until she was erased like a drawing that is rubbed out. I suspect that my mother never ever looked at another man after that, not even at Maître Hannibal, the teacher at the Brothers' school; that she never ever again saw a desired face framed in a doorway or by the moon or by the branches of a tree. My father had all the trappings of a respectable man: a legal wife, four children, and a position. I was born of the fleeting joy that dispelled the bitterness of his married life. He had paid for my studies, me the illegitimate child, as far as my diploma, and afterward thanks to him I learned cooking and sewing with the Sisters in la Croix des Bouquets. Money had spread a slight odor of decay in the house. But here, very early, women like me understand. So, very quickly I got used to the idea that I would prefer to have my heart ravaged like a

\*The preceding lines in this paragraph are omitted from the Éditions Mémoire d'Encrier (2003) edition.—Trans.

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garden after a hurricane rather than open it up to these respectable men, deceitful and false like postcards that boast of a false paradise. Still (God knows why!) when Erminus confided that he wasn't married, that he too had his diploma, and that he went to the Baptist church every Sunday, I had examined him from every angle. For a while I had believed in an angel fallen in my path and I was pierced through from head to toe by flashes of light.

It has been almost two years since I set up house with Erminus in these two rooms. In the beginning, he continued to make his interminable trips between Port-au-Prince and la Croix-des-Bouquets, at the wheel of a *taptap* belonging to an inveterate moneylender. Very early he had spoken to me of his plan to go live in town. He had got his license and dreamed of driving one of those trucks that hum along the highway leading to Port-au-Prince. But as the days passed, Erminus began to be less talkative. His voice grew quieter at the same time that anger and despair were taking hold of my throat just at the very place where the little bone was. Gullible and a strategist, for a long time I thought that he did not like my way of cooking rice and red beans, corn with herring, or that he was getting bored in the warmth of the bed. I redoubled my efforts at shrewdness and imagination, but nothing improved. When I found out two months ago that I was expecting a baby, I thought of that house in Port-au-Prince; of those walls that I would surround with my two arms to keep them in, Erminus and all the children to come. To distract them from the fancy for going off in search of adventure that men and children have had since the beginning of time.

I undressed behind the house and had my bath as the day drew to a close. The silence around me penetrated to my very bones. The warmth of the water went through me from the roots of my hair to the soles of my feet, a crazy idea coming into my head: I who have always followed Erminus around like a shadow, faithful to the body from which it is inseparable, could I lead him toward the glistening edges of my waters, guide him on my paths of fire?

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Erminus came home from work a few minutes later. He sat on the veranda waiting for his dinner. I spoke to him about my tiredness, Soline's troubles, Derisca's vexations. Erminus replied only briefly or not at all. But I persevered in my story like a chant. I know that Erminus does not really speak to me. That he doesn't listen to me either. He waits for me to be quiet or to stop chattering. Everything that I say reaches him like a distant refrain. He waited for his friends to come to speak. Really speak, I mean. To laugh around the domino table. I watched him the whole time in a mixture of absentmindedness and ardor.

Afterward the sun set and the shadows slowly shortened on the hillsides. Then Erminus went toward his fragrant washbasin. I followed him silently onto those paths widely spread out, stumbling in my new strength. On his back I rubbed all the day's weariness. On his hair, all the bitterness of a man to whom life had given no gifts. But nothing surprised Erminus. Neither the intoxicating scent of orange leaves, nor the subtle fragrance of lemongrass, still less the night odor of soursop leaves. He yawned and dozed off like a big fish at rest.

In the bolted cell of night Erminus took me that evening as one brushes one's teeth or goes to the barber.