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Exile according to Julia

Gisèle Pineau

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Chapter 1

Goodbye Until We Meet Again . . .

Nigger
Négresse à plateau
Snow-White
Bamboula
Coal Black
and company . . .

Those names track us everywhere. Eternal echoes, devils hopping about in puddles, they splatter us with dirty water. Lost arrows, long and poisoned, reaching to the heart of a brief truce. Spitting on pride. Raining rocks on our heads. Suddenly our souls slip, crumble . . .

Sometimes we start suddenly. Our clenched fists begin to dream of one-two faces smashed, teeth broken. But to tell the truth, fighting is not our style. Ears trained in this music, prepared for the worst, some feeling always holds us back. It is enough to pretend as if those words were not burning our eyes. As if our tormented hearts were unmoved. As if our black skin was cast in bronze. "Don't pay any attention!" Manman would cry. "Don't pay any attention! Those words have no weight! You must not cry, above all you must not let them see they have hurt you, you mustn't give them that satisfaction, you mustn't draw attention to yourself."

"You," that is, my brothers and sisters and myself. Apart from Man Ya, my parents, and a few Caribbean army friends, there are only white people around us. Imagine, the middle of the sixties. A housing project in the middle of Ile-de-France. Our soldier friends are the only people my parents see. Together they unreel the threads of time, dreaming endlessly of the lives they had lived elsewhere, of the roles they played in bygone days.

That way, shaking off the dust of their humdrum everyday lives, they escape the numbness of the winters. They plait the sorrow that spreads its roots into their pretense at well-being and puts out its leaves in the carnival of savoir faire. They quell the doubts that keep springing up in them like weeds along a deserted path.

Our Pater, Maréchal, dearly loves those brave men, survivors, like him, of the Second World War. Veterans from French colonies, these men risked their lives in the mines of the same campaigns. Comrades, sharing the same barracks, brothers in arms, they ran desperate, ahead of enemy fire, suffered side by side on a hospital bed, in Indochina or in Africa. A spirit of almost mystical loyalty led them, in former times, to perform heroic deeds, etched indelibly in their memory. The army is their credo, France and her et cetera of colonies, their world. On Sundays, between the roast and the rice and peas, they tell the stories of their adventures, going over the numberless times when, helping out each other, they conned death. Saved, they have a good laugh. Make grand epic gestures. Their stories go from anecdotes to cheap army jokes. Sometimes bygone days come to jostle words from the present. Then they stutter, all choked up, stumbling with emotion over words that will not come. While these fragments of history come tumbling out one after the other, we children are only allowed to keep quiet and admire. Well trained, we sit up straight, our hands quietly on the table, our embattled feet fighting fiercely underneath.

Somewhat bored, the women listen, heads tilted, leaning on one hand. Mechanically they agree, smooth their hair, yawn behind their napkins. Without much effort, I can see them before me: widows in veils and black dresses, walking in procession behind a coffin draped in the flag, blue, white, and red, mourning for the unknown soldier cut down in his prime. How many times have they heard these stories, fascinating no doubt, but which, repeated over and over, have lost all their sparkle and now fizzle out miserably, like damp fireworks set off by forgotten heroes? Behind the screen of simple fraternity they know only too well that these men are also keeping close secrets sealed

in male honor. So, the delight of the early days is no longer with them. I am how old . . . ten, eleven, perhaps. I can sense, without being able to express it, the feeling of derision that smiles at these heroic tales. The efforts the actors expend to rekindle the embers of past gallantry are only half-effective. Everything now is mere show, a great arsenal of words to dazzle and to disturb. I sense that one must not laugh, however, even behind a hand. For me, each life is an illustrious story that deserves a patient hearing because its mere evocation cuts the thread of time and builds tomorrows. Lives are throbbing in those stories. Unfortunate lives of the nation's minor players, returning on their knees from trenches where heroism, its deeds and its medals, lie rotting. Anonymous heroes who have given their entire youth to France and who have been accorded only grudgingly the leaven of glory.

Fulfilling their wifely duty, the ladies compel each other to be sympathetic. They discover they have things in common, speak about children, sewing, knitting. In order to show that they too belong to this exciting whirl of adventures, they tell stories of their lives in Congo Brazzaville, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Chad, or Madagascar. Often, the ritual of doing the dishes catches them comparing their colonies, recalling the markets in the African quarter to which they ventured, black wives of black junior officers in the service of the French army. I like to listen to them. Drying the dishes, they also dry up their secret sorrows and speak cryptically, in very confidential tones, because of importunate ears—mine on this occasion—of their bitterness as wives and of the military regime that they sometimes endure. Late in the evening, after dessert, cake made by the lady of the house, they let slip nostalgic couplets about the faraway islands where they grew up, just before being carried off by the prestige of a uniform and the carefree freedom of youth. They were sentimental young women who read romances, love stories filled with rose water, orange blossoms, and the cypress-lined pathways where lovers stroll. How did they get to where they were? They are still asking themselves that . . . One day they had said Yes to the chance that stationed a man in uniform on their path.

Yes to all the reasons love laid out, to a tomorrow filled with travel on the arm of a hero with bars and stripes. Yes to exile, which seemed as easy as changing blouses. They saw themselves becoming grand, free women. Over there in France, saved from the paternal yoke, relieved of the duties of seniority, spared from the fate of old maids whose only ecstasy now was to be found in God. These soldiers had landed like prophets, with the word in their mouths: France, the great promise of romance, beautiful dresses, balls, patent leather shoes, and furbelows . . . Alas, the sighs they now utter betray all their dreams. And the "If I had knowns . . ." evocative of the sunless beds in which they pass their existence, are evidence of the broken dreams they have already suffered. When their eyes meet mine, round and greedy with questions, their faces once again fall back into their ordinary mold, and I turn away my head.

My grandmother, Man Ya, does not join in these disillusioned laments. Her spirit floats above the melee. There she is, not troubling anyone, like an old outmoded piece of furniture, carved in a hard wood. A kind of cumbersome chest of drawers relegated to a corner of the kitchen generations ago. The cracked doors with peeling varnish squeak and the hinges need oiling. *Poulbwa,* wood ants, cockroaches, and mice eat and sleep inside. You can do nothing to repair it again, but you will never throw it out. You keep it, lovingly and with respect, telling yourself that, perhaps, the world's great secrets have seeped into the veins of the wood, have been written in the debris that it still holds in its drawers.

Man Ya is getting a big stomach. The skin on her legs is dry and cracked, just like the black crust on the puddings made from stale bread, taken out of the oven on Saturdays. Her caloused feet have nails that are dark and hard, so hard that before any attempt can be made to cut them, they have to soak for a long time in a basin of soapy water to soften them a bit. We children supervise the procedure. An array of scissors, files, nippers, graters proves to be imperative for this operation. We lay out the instruments in question with the slow, deliberate gestures of pretentious surgeons. And the one who starts shaping

the nails, cutting and scraping the thick shell, is sure to have memorable shivers. Man Ya does not resist. She grimaces if the clippers cut into more tender skin. She has the wide-spaced teeth of those who, long before their birth is announced, have cracked open the dry shell of the good-luck nut. Yet, she rarely smiles. Hardly ever laughs. She didn't learn how, or else she has forgotten. Her body stays there, with us; her spirit wanders tirelessly between France and her Home Country, Guadeloupe, where every day she hopes to return. Unimportant as we are, we rejoice for her, and no one tries to lift the shades that cover her gaze, which is far, far away. Meanwhile, waiting for the great day of her return, she takes care of us, is always at our disposal, and we find all that quite natural. Her ways are rough. Her caresses more like vigorous rubs. Her words go straight to the point. She says life has one end and two destinations. Those who want to take the wrong paths get there quickly, but fall into ravines and savannahs where light does not penetrate.

Back Home, she said she used to cross over raging rivers and scale steep *mornes,* carrying on her back her load of misery, and the misfortune of having been born female and black. Her husband, Asdrubal—nicknamed the Torturer—used to kick her violently and then wore out his whip on her back. In a whisper, she confided that he was pursued by the ghosts of the dead who had fallen in the trenches in 1916, when he was fighting in France. In her youth, she had lost children in the sad waters of miscarriages and the hell of colics . . . She tells us stories—nobody admits that they believe her—about how in Guadeloupe, friends of the Devil have the power to fly, to turn themselves into dogs, to halt the course of rivers, and to dismantle life. She has already been chased by *diablesses* with cloven hooves and twisted fingers. She has seen night in broad daylight and day breaking in the middle of a moonless night. We shiver at these frightful memories. But she continues to tell these stories and to linger at ease in these nightmares, proclaiming all the time a thousand reasons why she wants to go back to the beloved country she has lost. She speaks of hordes of jealous men, of torture in the early dawn, of devils' brews and sorcerers' mari-

nades. Terrorized, we feel weak, surrounded by Lucifers in shorts, by damned souls in tail coats. But all at once, she takes us back to her garden, and we escape from the bad men. Even more than her house in Routhiers, she misses her garden. She pictures it for us, a wonderful place where all kinds of trees, plants, and flowers grow in abundance in an overwhelming green, an almost miraculous verdure, dappled here and there with a silver light that shines nowhere else but in the heart of Routhiers. She conjures up an everlasting, flowing spring, gushing from a rock, hurled onto her lands by the great Soufrière. She lets us see her river, which comes down from the mountain to flow through her woods and wash her clothes. She sings us the song of every bird; afterward she names the foliage and fruits. Then she hoists us into the branches of her trees, just so we can see the horizon better, the horizon with its little bumps of islands bending under the weight of their smoking, spitting, pot-bellied volcanoes. We see it all through her eyes and believe her as one believes in Heaven, wavering endlessly between suspicion and deep conviction.

Of course, she does not feel at home in Ile-de-France, in the narrow confines of an apartment. But it's either that or death Back Home, they tell us in a whisper.

Long ago, in the war years when General de Gaulle was saving the mother country, Man Ya had urged her son, Maréchal, to join the dissidents. To stop him from raising his hand to his Papa, she had told him: "*Foukan De Gaulle! A yen pé ké rivé-w!* Go join de Gaulle! Nothing will happen to you! You will come back alive, crowned in the glory of the Lord . . ."

Maréchal came back in 1950, in one piece, victorious, decorated, with ribbons and stripes. That was when he fell in love with my manman Daisy. A dark-skinned black man from Routhiers, he had in his favor his good education, his flawless French, and as a guarantee of honor and nobility, the uniform of his country, which he wore easily. He courted her, faced her parents, and ended up marrying Daisy, to whom he had promised Paris.

Eleven years later, just before returning to France once more,

destiny brought Maréchal back in the meantime to Guadeloupe. He had known various parts of the world and learned to love the Mother Country even more. He had seen wars and countries born at the same time. Everywhere he had met men, arms in their hands, seeking peace. He had lived, loved and hated, defended women and children in Africa, in France, and in Indochina. In that year, 1961, already blessed with a lovely family, Maréchal had the feeling that the Good Lord was giving him one last chance to save his Manman. Perhaps, if he delayed any longer, he would never see her alive again, he told himself, and he would be haunted with remorse for the rest of his days. I was five years old in 1961 and for me . . .

First there was the time in Africa. From '60 to '61, I think . . .

I remember very little of the time spent in that land. I see huge almond trees, slow to move like crippled old bodies that don't move a hair for fear of waking a pain. They cast amber patches on a terrace bleached by the sun. Columns as big as elephant's feet.

The seaside was far away, the bush as well . . . Apart from the snakes, which kept us out of the jungle of the cassava field spread out behind the house, African animals never came near us in the military compound where we were quartered. To frighten each other, the grown-ups would tell the story of some lion that massacred a village. Some tiger that devoured a whole family, down to their teeth. As children, we would only gather the exciting side of these stories. Combined with our picture books, paid for in CFA francs, they grew and grew in our imaginations and took possession of our dreams, which changed them into great adventures, wild expeditions filled with unforeseeable animal life. Elephants, roaring lions, great monkeys, zebras, and giraffes wandered in herds through scorched savannahs. Tarzan could appear and disappear at any moment on an indistinct track leading to sleepy villages. There, women in *boubous* pounded millet. Ivory hunters and seasoned English explorers pursued Pygmies in the midst of an impenetrable jungle ruled over by warlike tribes who aimed their poisoned arrows. There was such a thing as "Africa," which competed, with

its colorful representations, which passed through and passed away in our minds, seeping through all the ramparts of the French army quarters.

There are still photos from that time . . .

I leafed through what is left of our family albums. It was the age when I was turning over lots of questions in my mind. I wanted to put names to faces. I wanted dates, I wanted to put colors on the black and white photos. Moods. Words to express the ethereal and the elusive, the insignificant and the forgotten. Manman was very reluctant to indulge in reminiscing. I could feel that she was still resistant, that she wanted to keep all her treasures for the corners of her heart. I had to soften her up before asking questions. After a long breath, as if extricated from the trammels of her memory, she would bring back past times. Then her reticence would vanish, and her words soon outstripped her thoughts, burning her lips. Thanks to her, on glossy paper, I would recover the splendor of the Africa where we had all lived, all except Suzy, who would be born in 1963 . . . Manman used to say that Africa had nonetheless always kept us at a distance, as if skin color alone was not enough to make family . . .

For a long time I have had the feeling of having lost something: a formula that once upon a time would unlock jails, a sovereign potion that would release knowledge, a memory, words, images. I have nourished within me this loss, weighing me down like a bereavement, an indefinable emptiness. Hungry for knowledge, thirsty for an authentic essence, eager to find the very foundation of the world, I loaded my shoulders with a bitter burden. Africa left the weight of this cruel baggage . . .

Once upon a time I wandered in deep woods where all the paths looked the same. I always found myself embittered in the face of death, which closes in its darkness the trunk of memories and then consumes the body of times past. I spent the days of my life gathering scraps, old bones, stale food, damaged documents, yellowed photos. I knew for sure that I would have to fish for words in traps, catch them in seines, haul them in, spike them on hooks. I wanted to tread in ancient tracks, gather ashes, dust . . .

I wanted to grab hold of each saying, stuff it, turn it inside out, and then bite into it. A hunger that cannot be imagined . . .

1961. Guadeloupe awaits us.

For eleven years our parents have not set foot in that place! Eleven years since they went away to see the color of other lands. Has their country changed? They themselves, are they still Guadeloupeans?

Having left as an innocent young bride, my Manman Daisy returns to her country with five children. Maréchal has earned other stripes. A kind of intoxication grips them. The crossing lasts ten days, and as the island gets nearer, they are shaken by a force from within. Their fingers fastened, they return together to other waters, crazy, rough, which wash them. The waters of a river mouth where ocean and river join. They bathe their bodies and wash off the marks of life. We children wet our lips and lick that salt which heals wounds. We run up and down madly on the deck of the steamer, our hearts filled with an inexpressible joy. Guadeloupe! Guadeloupe! Soon, soon we shall see her! Three days. Three short days. Tomorrow! Tomorrow! One more night and the country will come into sight. *Cap Est!* Head East! Land! Land! the captain will shout. What is that vast country—surely a hundred times Africa and France together—which leaves gold specks in their eyes? We don't know anything about it, but we laugh with them. The happiness of the heart is a feeling that comes in easy and disappears like quicksilver. What is that country? . . . "It's my Country," Manman repeats. "That's where I was born. My whole childhood is there. Near to rivers and cane fields, *mornes* and woods. At the seaside, Sainte Claire beach. You are going to see Pa and Man Bouboule, my sisters and brothers, my uncles and aunts, my whole family. It's my Country. Mangoes, breadfruit, fresh fish. It's Guadeloupe! Goyave! Capesterre! . . ." The unknown Country seems infinite to us in the black of Manman's eyes.

These eleven years that have passed.

What has become of the beautiful Daisy and her Maréchal?