

HAITIAN CHRISTMAS

I was raised by my paternal grandmother in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Christmas Eve would be spent quietly at home waiting to go to midnight mass to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

On the rare occasion that I was allowed to spend my Christmas holiday with my mother, it was a different story. She lived a few miles away with my stepfather Edner, my little sister Elsie, and my little brother Lesly in a little town called Bizoton. It was not unusual to have a Christmas Eve party where roasted goat with gravy full of hot pepper was served with rice and beans, fried green plantain, and a green salad. There was also lots of rum, clairin, and soft drinks.

We would then go to the midnight mass while the party continued. Some would stay all night at the party, while others went home to sleep. At around eight the next morning, they gathered together again to eat the seasoned goat “bouillon.”

But while the adults would be having a good time at the party, I sat in the front yard with the children from the neighborhood and played Tire Conte, a guessing game. We gathered around and sat in a circle.

“Tim tim, or cric,” someone would say.

“Bois cheche” or “crac” one of us would answer.

“Tou rond, sans fond”? What is all round without a bottom?

“Bague,” a ring was the proper answer.

“Tim tim”

“Bois cheche”

“Habille sans soti?” What is well dressed but stays home?

“Kabann,” the bed.

“Tim tim”

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“Bois cheche”

“Main’m la pran mwen?” Here I am take me.

“Lombraj,” your shadow.

There was another riddle whose answer was “Lombrage”:

“Kon’m mache li mache tou.” When I move, it moves too.

“Tim tim.”

“Bois cheche.”

“Koto koto co’ou nan Guinin tande?” Big noise, heard all the way to Guinea.

“Lorage,” the thunder.

Everyone would try to outsmart the others, even though we all knew the answers. When one of us came up with a new riddle, it was booed at first, then accepted.

Afterward, one of us would tell a story, a “conte,” mostly about “Bouqui and Malice.” Bouqui was slightly retarded and Malice was very smart. There were hundreds of short stories about those two guys going around the small towns of Haiti. Malice was always outsmarting Bouqui, either trying to sell him as a cheap laborer or making him responsible for some of his own wrongdoing. Malice was always right, Bouqui always wrong. Every one of us wanted to be as smart and mischievous as Malice.

But the story I liked the most was the one about the little orange tree. It was about a beautiful young daughter living with a very bad stepmother. One day, being very hungry, the daughter ate an orange that looked very appetizing sitting on the dining room table.

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When the stepmother found out, she told the girl that she would be killed if she did not replace the orange. The little girl ran to the backyard dump and retrieved the seeds of the orange. She then planted them and sat down next to the bumps formed by the earth covering the seeds. She then started singing with the most beautiful voice, asking the seed to germinate. It did. Then she asked it to grow into a beautiful orange tree, and it did. She asked it to bear fruit, and it did. The stepmother was surprised to see this beautiful, fruit-bearing tree in her backyard.

“That’s okay,” said the little girl, “you can go and pick some.” When the wicked stepmother tried to get an orange, “Quick, orange tree,” said the little girl, “grow and grow.” The tree grew until it reached the sky and went even further, until the top disappeared along with the wicked stepmother.

When the “raconteur,” or storyteller, talked, everyone listened quietly, even though we already knew the story. We told stories about kings and queens, the poor and the rich. Sometimes we all would sing together. When we did not feel like telling stories we made a “ronde,” all of us in a circle holding hands, while running to the left as fast as we could. We sang French or Creole songs we had learned at school and teach them to each other.

Oh the wonderful memories and innocence of childhood!

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