

In The Cave

His fingers relaxed and his grip loosened. Gustave let go. I'm slipping into the water. It's cold and deep. It's like the cave we swam in last year when Tant Elizabeth came to visit.

“Come on Marie, follow me. Don't be afraid. This cave opens onto the hillside overlooking Milot. We just have to swim around the corner. Come on, you'll see.”

“Wait, Gustave, I can't see where I am going.”

“I'm going to count to twenty slowly. Follow my voice. By the time I get to twenty you will start to see the light. By the time I count to forty, we will be around the corner and at the opening on the other side. One, two, three....”

I can't remember a time when Gustave didn't boss me. It's always *his* adventures, *his* ideas. I can't remember a time when Gustave asked me—What would you like to do today, Marie? But I was always welcome on his trips, even when Cheeko was trying to set rules that only boys can be tourist guides up to La Citadelle.

“No, Cheeko, Marie comes too.” His voice was firm and his body stiff as he stood and confronted Cheeko, who is much older than him. “She speaks English the best and can run errands for fruit on the way up the mountain.”

So I follow his voice and start counting—one, two, three.... After a while my eyes grow used to the dark and I can make out the shadowy outline of the cave walls. Gustave is swimming close to the walls. Sometimes, I hear the plop plop of water dripping from the cave roof. It makes a hollow sound. Those drops that fall

close by disturb the water and cause it to gently nudge against the crest of water that precedes me. A tiny ripple bumps me on the chin.

“Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.... There, Marie—see!”

He’s always right, except when it comes to spelling. I’m better than him at that. Even Tant Elizabeth thinks so. I won the spelling bee this year and Sister Thérèse let me mail my certificate to her. But he’s mostly right and that’s why I follow him.

“I see the light, Gustave. Wait! Wait for me.” I swim hard. The water is very cold and the current tugs on me like Pepé on a leash stopping at every bush to pee when I just want to walk on straight. My breath starts to come quickly and I open my mouth to take in a big gulp of air. It’s half water and it catches in my throat. I splutter and cough. My nose burns as water rushes up looking for an escape route. I thrash about in the water, kicking and pushing upward to rise high out of the water. Get some pure air. Thwack—something hard—something.... Down into the darkness.... Cold.... Wet.... I surface, try to scream, open my mouth. Nothing. Eyes bulging, straining. Another gulp of water-air on the down stroke. Down. Down.

“Marie, come on. Marie? Marie!” I’m up at the surface again. I heard that. Gustave over here. Please! I scream, silently. I’m sinking again.

I feel weak. I just want to slip under and close my eyes. I’m very tired.

I roll over, cough, breath a rasping sigh. Gustave is leaning over, examining my head.

“What happened, Gustave? My head hurts.”

“You hit your head off the side of the cave and knocked yourself out. Silly girl,” he scolds. His voice has a tremor in it. “I had to fish you out like a big fat parrot fish. Only you don’t swim like no parrot fish. I dragged you to shore.” He’s looking at me now, examining my face. He looks scared. I’m lying on my side, looking at the sandy shore that hugs the elbow of the river. Sand grains and pebbles swirling around, rising and falling before my eyes. “You don’t look so good. You okay?”

“I don’t feel so good.” I vomit.

My throat feels sticky and sore, but after I wash my face in the water and take a cool drink I start to feel better.

“Come on, Marie,” he says, now holding my hand and helping me to my feet. “We go by Grann Louise’s house. She fix you up good.” We walk along the hillside on a foot trail between the cave and the village. People walk for miles to fetch the pure water from this high location. The path is dusty red today. There has been no rain for weeks. My feet soon look red instead of black, red up to my ankles, the dust mixing like a paste on my wet skin. We leave the trail to take the coffee bush road to Grann Louise’s house.

Grann Louise is sitting outside in her yard sorting coffee berries. She is sitting on a low wooden stool, leaning over the berries, rolling them with her finger tips. She puts the ripe ones in a large wicker basket and rolls the others, turning their green sides to the sun. She sucks her teeth, making disapproving clucking sounds at the number of unripe berries that have been picked.

“Those boys got lazy eyes.” She still has not acknowledged our presence.

“Onè, Grann Louise,” Gustave says and he sits down beside the largest basket and pats the ground beside him for me. We sit quietly, waiting for Grann Louise to answer. Grann Louise nods and smiles at us both. She doesn’t reply. We’re too young. Now if Tant Elizabeth had been with us she would have replied, “Respè, Mme. Elizabeth.” She would have stopped her work and invited Tant Elizabeth in for coffee. For us children this is unnecessary and she continues her work as if we were not there. Grann Louise’s arms are long and her fingers a little twisted. Her stretched skin rolls loosely over her muscles. She’s still strong and carries her baskets to market on her head. Some people are afraid of Grann Louise—say she’s a *sòsyè*. Say she can work magic. Say she has never had a man, is as strong as two men. Built her own house

“What brings my cousin’s children to my yard?” she asks without looking up.

“This girl cracked her head, Grann Louise,” Gustave answers.

“Come here, chérie, let me have a look.” I move close to her and she starts to part my hair and examine the gash. She pushes on my skin, cooing as she parts the black curls which are matted with the drying blood. She notices the crumbly green skin from the cave roof that forced its way into the crack on my head. “Tsk,

tsk,” she clucks. “Children should not be swimming in the cave. Bad medicine in that cave.” My head is throbbing now. Grann Louise is cleaning the cut, gently removing the tiny pieces of the cave embedded in my scalp. When she is finished she gets up, sits me on her stool and walks into her house. She is tall with strong broad shoulders. Her hair is big, curly and gray, growing out of her head in every direction. When she walks, her hip dips slightly to one side. She ducks to enter her house. It’s a wattle house with a thatched roof, just like the home of Françoise and Henri. But it’s smaller and has only one door and one window. She comes back with a glass jar in one hand and a small basket of oranges in the other.

She gives the basket to Gustave. She puts her long middle finger into the jar and scoops out a glob of brown colored paste and smooths it over my cut. At first it feels a little hot and then it tingles my skin. Now I don’t feel anything there anymore.

“Peel an orange for the girl with the cracked head,” she says to Gustave. “And peel an orange for the woman who sealed the crack.” Gustave peels the two oranges and hands them over to her. He sits silently, watching us as we suck the oranges in the hot sun. I can’t look him in the eye, so I look at his hands, which are rolling the last remaining orange from one to the other. Finally – “And peel an orange for the boy who saved the girl with the cracked head.” --- she stamps her foot, slaps her knee, throws back her head and laughs loudly. I look at Gustave. We both want to laugh. But we’re not sure if it’s okay for us kids to laugh. Gustave parts his lips so wide that I can count all his teeth. I cover my mouth and giggle.

“Children should not swim in the cave.” She glares at Gustave. His lips fall together instantly. The corners curl down. I want to leave but I’m feeling very tired. “The little one needs to rest awhile before you go down the mountain. You can help me sort these berries.” She points at Gustave and then at the coffee berries. She takes my hand and brings me to her hammock, stretched between two mango trees. The canvas wraps around me, hugging my sides in a secure embrace. I close my eyes.