

ERIC MARGOLIS



Haitian terror

The most truly evil person that I have ever met was Haiti's late president for life, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier. In a world of petty despots and bureaucrats, this former doctor achieved a degree of malign perfection that is only challenged, in our time, by Cambodia's Pol Pot.

Duvalier, who died peacefully in 1971, imposed a reign of terror upon the gentle Haitian people through his Ton Ton Macoute, a band of blue denim-clad killers sporting one-way sunglasses, pistols and clubs. Papa Doc also encouraged the practice of voodoo, of which he was the island's high priest. My memories from this dark period abound:

- A group of Duvalier opponents are assembled before a firing squad at Fort Dimanche, the yellow-painted prison where thousands were tortured and killed. Duvalier watches the proceedings, which are being broadcast live over the radio: "Ready, aim, fire." The soldier's rifles are loaded with blanks. The condemned men, thinking they are to be saved, cry out "Vive Duvalier." Then the soldiers fire a volley of real bullets into them. The radio announcer observes the "miracle" of how Papa Doc's enemies laud him even as they are dying.

- One of Duvalier's leading enemies has been executed. The body is placed on a chair in downtown Port-au-Prince. Each morning for a week Duvalier comes and speaks to the body, lecturing it. Haitians know that magic is keeping the body alive. On the seventh day, the corpse is carted away by a garbage truck.

- School children in white uniforms attend public executions. They sing, "Our president for life, who art in the National Palace, hallowed be thy name."

Invaders' deadly mistake

- A tiny group of anti-Duvalier exiles and some deputy sheriffs from Dade County, Florida, land in Haiti and seize the police barracks across from the palace. Duvalier is about to flee the country when the invaders make the fatal error of sending a small boy for cigarettes. He reports there are less than a dozen. The emboldened Ton Tons attack and kill them all.

- I am attending a cocktail party at the palace. Sweating in the sultry heat, I reach in my back pocket for a handkerchief. Three Ton Tons immediately shove sawed-off shotguns in my face. I keep withdrawing the handkerchief very, very slowly.

- We are out at night. It is almost totally black. From the hills come the constant throbbing of voodoo drums. Going into a little store, lit by a kerosene lantern, we hear the sound of Mozart playing on the proprietor's transistor radio. In Haiti, French culture blends with the drumbeat of West Africa.

- We have to hire a man armed with a big stick to beat off the beggars, syphilitics and cripples when we walk in downtown Port-au-Prince. Soon, we stop walking.

- A man in the town of Gonaives says he wants to be either rich or dead. He is arrested and taken to Papa Doc. Duvalier gives him a wad of gourds, the local currency, sends him back to Gonaives and then has him shot. The newspaper reports the wisdom of the president who has granted both the man's wishes.

- Two Americans, overheard speaking against Duvalier, are tied to the back of jeeps and dragged through the capital until dead.

- I am lurching with a friend high in the hills overlooking Port-au-Prince. The coast guard sails into the harbor and shells the national palace for 10 minutes while we watch, sipping wine. The small boats then sail away into exile.

- In Port-au-Prince's main street I see cars driving up onto the sidewalk. A tall Ton Ton is swaggering down the centre of the road. Cars rush to get out of his way. Other Ton Tons stop pedestrians and collect "street tax."

Mountain zombies

- Up in the barren mountains, once rich but now denuded of topsoil after all the trees had been cut down to make charcoal, we see real zombies. They are unfortunates whose minds have been destroyed by exotic drugs known to local witch-doctors and who then are used as beasts of labor.

- Our hotel, the wonderful Victorian gingerbread Oloffson, has the Somerset Maugham suite. Chickens run through the halls that are hung with beautiful Haitian paintings. Among the few guests are a Nazi war criminal; a 75-year-old American who deeply impresses us by having two prostitutes together every night; two terrified school teachers from Philadelphia who won't leave the hotel; Caesar, the limping bartender who knows all; and Jolicoeur, Haiti's one and only journalist who dutifully records in the paper each of the tiny number of tourist arrivals. I am described in the press as a "Master of Business Administration."

- Driving to the casino, we see a man running for his life in front of our car. A pursuing Ton Ton takes aim and shoots him in the back. My host advises me not to look back.

- I am sent on one trip to buy Cohata, the ramshackle Haitian airline. At its headquarters I find to my dismay that it is owned by the Ton Ton Macoute. I sit across from a chief Ton Ton who is wearing the usual one-way sunglasses and I am informed that for reasons of "my continued good health" it would be better to make no more business inquiries.

- Duvalier is now gone, replaced by the new president for life, his son, Baby Doc. The terror has abated but Haiti still remains an island of sorrow and magic.

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