



Michèle Sterling

## Mapou: In Search of Sacred Woods, Part II

[\[Read Part 1 in \*Caveat Lector\*.\]](#)

I remember we were a motley crew: an attorney, a journalist, a businessman and myself. I was in search of the lost woods of the mystical Mapou trees; my companions were out for an adventure. Jean-Baptiste, a local businessman, having heard of my interest in the legendary Mapou woods, set up the expedition inviting this party of strangers. Gérard, the attorney, and Christian, the journalist, were members of the Haitian diaspora recently returned to their country

of origin after decades of absence and wanted to rediscover their homeland through the nostalgic recollections of their youth and their present day foreign-ish perspective.

As for me, although not born Haitian, deep within me there was an unmistakable familiarity, a cellular resonance with the place and my roots. I knew, somehow, this island would protect me because I was home.

I say this knowing that my friend Julien felt the same connection I did. He had left as a child with his parents and went to Italy. Like so many members of the diaspora, he had come home after thirty years with his young Haitian wife, Colette. Year's earlier, Colette's family was killed and only she was spared, after she was raped. She had sworn she would never come back. However, Julien, a lovely gentle soul filled with optimism, had promised to protect her, so she agreed to return. A few weeks before our expedition began, two men climbed onto their balcony and into their bedroom, shot and killed Julien and raped Colette leaving her a survivor yet again.

Why did I feel protected? Why do people with painful histories come back? What is this call, this deep racial, cultural, ancestral call to connect with Earth, with my particular Earth?

The indigenous spirituality of Haiti is a melange of the original Taino and Arawak beliefs of the Caribbean with much of the Yoruba beliefs of western Africa. Believers say that since Haiti / Hispaniola was the first island in the western hemisphere where Columbus arrived— and the first island in the Americas to be pillaged, and raped, its indigenous inhabitants enslaved by Europeans—so, it follows that the healing must begin here

Haitians, spiritual or not, believe in this, as I do.

That was the cement that bonded our motley crew. We experienced the internal call of our ancestors, those blood conduits that yoke us indissolubly to this part of Earth, asking us to come back and connect or reconnect with this land's history, to excavate and visit its story, to see this ground as hallowed, and through our direct contact with Earth, with this Earth, put down a foundation for healing, or forever lay adrift.

When we finally left the city, it was much later than it should have been, so we ended up sleeping in a truckers' motel. It was a moonless night blanketed with stars. A sudden drop off the road, led to a concrete shoebox still in construction with unpainted cement walls, unfinished floors, blinding light bulbs dangling from the ceiling and makeshift muddy red-brown curtains. The rattle and clanging noise of a generator seated on gravel behind the motel guaranteed light, a freezer, a functioning toilet, and a television with reruns of the previous day's soccer match. A giant TV screen was already setup, with brownish leatherette sofas and oversized armchairs in the same room that held a large brown dining-table. Ugh! I was so tired from the bumping and bobbing on the road that I could manage ugly.

Breakfast's spongy white bread was as thin as the white towels we were given the night before. Despite the caustic décor, the Caribbean morning meal was a healthy pleasure: coffee freshly hand-grounded outdoors, then made dark and strong; juice and jam fresh from the neighborhood; butter stone-hard straight out of the freezer, which made the thin bread and hard butter a challenge; and fresh-laid eggs...well, we could hear the chickens just outside the doorway. Here nothing was called "organic," simply no one used pesticides or polluting chemicals. Food was as Earth made it. It was as simple as that. So, a few quick bites and we were off on the dusty road once again.

Ha! That is never how it worked, no matter how often I wished. Quick is never how it happens. Someone always decides to go for a walk, even though there is nothing new to see. Then there are discussions at breakfast. Political, social, sports, or just plain gossip, it doesn't matter, a discussion is "what we do," and besides, what's the hurry. "After all, it's early," they say. "Yes," I say. "Until it's not."

No matter, it's decided that things must be rearranged yet again in the two cars, JB's sedan and Gérard's Land Rover. Then we had to stop by the side of the road a few meters from the truck stop to buy more fresh fruits, ginger cakes and coconut water still in the coconuts. Finally, mid-morning we crawled back onto the road, waited for the farmer and his cattle to shuffle past us and then we were off. Too fast for the road's condition, but in someone's mind it was time to make up for our slow start. I said nothing for I understood nothing. I continued to witness the beauty of tropical life outside the window.

Sometimes, I must admit, the trip itself, the getting there, is the fun and very much the story. Noon. We arrived in Port-de-Paix, our transit point. I had always heard that it was a lovely provincial port, connected to the slow, gentle rhythms of decades past. Unfortunately, we were in full hurricane season and what we found instead was a city under siege. I'd never seen anything like it. Mud blanketed every walkway, slid into every doorway in every home and shop. Puddles more like tiny ponds were scattered across roads and the town's center was concealed under a field of mud; streets had turned into torrents seeking an escape to the sea.

Immersed in mire, we stepped away from the scene and back into our cars. There was no point playing tourists. Best leave this challenge to the locals; they knew what to do and didn't need to be distracted, explaining their drama to passers-by.

We'd come to Port-de-Paix to meet up with a friend of Jean-Baptiste who promised to bring scuba gear for Gérard and Christian and oxygen tanks for all of us. I had brought my own gear and presumably so did Jean-Baptiste. JB had arranged for his friend to meet us down the road by the sea. A boat would take us to a road-less remote region that promised pristine diving and a bewitching trek to a lost lush grove of ancient mapou trees, our adventure's destination.

Once we arrived on the beach, events took a bizarre turn. At first, I thought Jean-Baptiste was just impatient, waiting for his friend. We were to meet him around mid-afternoon and it was now mid-afternoon, so what was the problem? JB was pacing and visibly angry. Then he turned on Christian and Gérard for not having their equipment. Gérard turned slowly toward me and gave me the tiniest secretive smile, an amused expression that said “something is taking place, confirming what I suspected all along.” By now JB was in full expressive indignation, speaking French and then Créole. “No, no, no, it’s not possible. I can’t continue under these conditions, I will not continue.”

I was fascinated with how someone could whip himself into an instant lather when there was no there, there. But JB did. By now he had taken Christian’s things out of the mud-soaked sedan, moved into the driver’s seat and took off before anyone could protest. Christian and I stood stunned, wordless.

“What the hell?”

Gérard’s smile was now a broad Cheshire grin.

“If you know something, Gérard, please tell us,” I said, smiling and bemused by the diva display we had witnessed.

“Jean-Baptiste has no scuba gear,” Gérard responded laughing. “I bet he doesn’t even dive, and he has no friend who owns his own tanks. No one is coming.”

“JB is a liar,” Gérard continued, happy to impart his criminal expertise and what he had observed for the last-24 hours. “He’s an amateur con man, a want-a-be that doesn’t know where to go from here so he simply decided to kick up dust and disappear.”

“So, no sumptuous sacred mapou grove,” I uttered. My heart sunk.

“No, I’m afraid that was made up too.”

“But why?” Christian interjected. “All this was his idea; this place was his idea.”

“Prepping us for something down the line I imagine.” I speculated.

“Does it matter?” Gérard’s jocularly had disappeared, and clearing his throat, he replaced it with gravity.

“The important thing is that we’re here, and left to our own devices. What do we want to do?”

Leaning on the mud-and-sand encrusted Land Rover, I looked out to sea. Gérard and Christian did the same. It was time for a think. The pastel color pebbled beach was deserted save for the three of us. It was mid-day, mid-fall, a golden sun in a cloudless cobalt sky revealed dancing diamonds on aquamarine waves swaying to the merengue. The steady rhythm of the breakers, the intoxicating sea air, and the squawking of seagulls lulled me into a reverie.

Before us, bobbing in the waters was a single weather beaten old Haitian sloop, a lateen-rigged cargo vessel still showing some dark red and blue paint. The timeworn wooden craft was a scion of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Haitian buccaneers' sloops that for ages had run contraband throughout the islands. Now, muscular dark-skinned shirtless fishermen finished unloading their cargo and were prepping to leave. There was no wharf, no pier; only a rope and anchor tossed down from the bow to the waters twenty-feet away.

Christian walked to the edge of the water and called out to the fishermen. Were they willing to take on passengers. One man called back the name of where they were going. Christian glanced at us, then nodded that we agreed. The fishermen looked at one another, wordless; one nodded. We, on the other hand, needn't consult one another; there was no doubt this experience was not to be missed. A price was agreed upon with very few words, and a new adventure began.

We picked up our duffle bags, paid someone to watch the Land Rover, and walked to the water's edge. Three of the fishermen jumped into the water and came quickly toward us, presumably to take our bags. Or so I thought.

Gérard smiling, called out, "They are here to carry us to the boat so we don't get wet."

"Oh my, that's not necessary," I assured him.

"Oh, I think it is. Did you see how close we are to the city?" Gérard retorted. Both Christian and Gerard climbed onto the shoulders of the fishermen, duffle bags in hand.

I, armed with independence, had already placed my canvas bag on my head and proceeded into the choppy waters toward the sloop. Then it occurred to me what Gérard meant. But it was too late. Just at that moment a large wave caught the craft full center, pivoting the stern away from us while the anchor's rope catapulted full force at me, catching my shoulders and throwing me flat on my back, sinking me into seawater sludge: the city's sewage. I had understood Gérard's meaning just in time to shut tight both eyes and mouth as I was spun, reeled and rolled by the crashing breaker. Once again on my feet, soaked in dregs of raw sewage, I met with knowing laughs. I felt utterly dejected, foolish, thinking "well, got my comeuppance for being so damn cocky."

The sun, a golden sphere of nuclear fusion, floated in boundless cerulean skies as our craft danced on sapphire currents whisking us to worlds unknown. The wind leaned into heavy canvas sails. Winds and currents innermost of magic, secrets of Earth, friends of sailors, excited our souls. Our wooden craft creaked, then eased, and finally sung while the sea caressed and cajoled it on its way. As we moved amidst Earth rhythms, lulled within the most intimate primordial sway, we surrendered to the cries of nature, venturing without the slightest sight or sound of this century. Lost in timelessness and the vastness of being, we sat wordless in bliss. A Caribbean sloop of ages past, a journey into 17<sup>th</sup> century azure seas was the best adventure one can hope for.

Once we landed on the shore, we quickly obtained an invite to stay with a local family. We rented two rooms in their modest home expecting no electricity or other 20<sup>th</sup>-century amenities. Living as true salts of the earth was still very much a reality here. Then, for the next few hours I proceeded to unload my canvas bag, my clothes and my person from the rest of the frightful unwanted cargo I carried, while my friends enjoyed the golden sands and coconut groves.

The next few days we lived blissfully, taking showers under a lush waterfall, diving into a blue lagoon hidden in a banana grove, walking along deserted beaches, and snorkeling in pristine coral gardens. Incomprehensibly, satiated with such beauty and gentility, we wanted to experience the fierceness of the Atlantic, so one day we climbed a 60-foot cliff to see what we were looking for. We weren't disappointed.

Earth and oceans never disappoint. Unlike our quiet coves and azure waters, we witnessed our insignificance before the limitlessness and potential savagery of nature unchecked. Oceans, I had learned, are both thrilling and frightening that way. Why did we explore the savagery of nature? We wanted to know, to feel deep within, the vibrancy of being fully alive.

On our fifth day, lunching under shady trees a feeble stone's throw from the sundrenched beach, we were visited by a young couple with an invitation to their wedding in the mountains a few miles away. "When?" we inquired. "We are on our way now, so whenever you wish" was their Créole response peppered with giggles of delight and timidity.

We returned to the house, packed our things, told our hosts we were invited to a wedding so we'd probably be out late and would leave early the next morning, or whenever the fishermen were ready to go. We thanked them for their kindness and hospitality. They in turn smiled warmly and wished us a good time.

The walk started easily enough through a small verdant wood, then we clambered up dry underbrush to a rocky ridge, and stepped onto parched grassland, walking the rest of the way under an unforgiving sun. There were no paths here, just rocks and thickets blanketed in chalk

dust baked in the vast open furnace, a stark canvas of textured white and cobalt blue. We walked in silence. The blistering sun in its windless heavens seemed to demand it. The searing heat and caustic environment infused a hypnotic trance in our movements.

Midway on our journey, still stumbling through a white and blue emptiness, we noticed a single shed standing twenty meters away. At first, we thought nothing of it: distance, space and time all had a very different meaning on the island. The itchy-bitsy shack in the middle of nowhere was probably here to protect something left behind. As we approached the shed, however, I felt a sudden wave come over me, as if I suddenly underwater. The air around me felt much heavier.

This new medium distorted everything in view. Was I peering through a carnival's looking glass? The closer we got the more my reality became mutable, in flux, liquefying, and denser. Arriving at the shed, we saw it was in actuality a Voodoo altar. By this time, I felt unable to move, and everything else appeared to progress with leaden mobility. I could hear distorted voices, but couldn't make out what was being said. It was only when Gérard and Christian finally dragged me away from the shed that I found my wits again.

"My God, what the hell was that?" I was visibly shaken.

"You seemed to have slipped under the veil and onto the other side, or as some say, fallen into a hole and felt the draft from the underworld." Christian smiled.

Although many members of the Haitian diaspora, like Christian and Gérard, were raised Catholic and were not believers in the Voodoo religion, they lived nonetheless on its periphery, like a nonbeliever, a Jew, or a Muslim, raised in a Christian-dominated country may not know the religion, but hears things and is exposed to values, attitudes and behaviors. Over the last five-hundred years this set of spiritual beliefs—a fusion of West African and Caribbean Indigenous mysticisms—has been much maligned, grossly misrepresented, and inevitably misunderstood, as were its people of color. The result: elemental beliefs based on nature and ancestry that gradually formed the spiritual system known as "Voodoo" were taken underground, stunted in development, besieged by fear, and finally manipulated for power.

Gérard murmured, "Are you alright? Take a few deep breaths before we continue." I loved how my two companions took my unconventional experience all in stride.

- ✦ In life there is always more than meets the eye. Be with it.
- ✦ Our material reality is but one of many realities.
- ✦ Some people can move through various realities more easily than others; support them and make their experience safer, whatever it may be.
- ✦ Move with whatever reality comes your way, learn, impart it, and move on.

These principles, I came to understand, are at the heart of Voodoo. I was truly grateful that my fellow travelers who accepted these precepts could also accept my behavior without judgment.

“I believe you’re right,” I finally said. “It felt like I had moved through a portal of some kind and experienced you from the other side. Wow.”

I didn’t know what to say; It would take time to work out what had happened. My companions waited as I took deep breaths and steadied myself on my feet. Then we were on our way, dazed and stumbling in the glorious heat, on to the wedding.

Cobalt skies turned indigo as a sliver of turmeric gold shimmered just above the mountainous vista. It was twilight. Temperatures chilled. A small patched-up wooden shack sat solitary in the midst of fierce and craggy badlands. The warm glow of candlelight eloped through the doorway, while fervent hands drummed passionately Earth’s wild elemental heart. Aroused by song and laughter, we crept up the unsteady wooden stairs and stepped through the threshold unto another world.

The shelter we entered seemed much larger on the inside than from its outside puny appearance. Crammed into a few coarse wooden chairs, stools and tables, settled on makeshift benches, leaning against walls, and seated legs folded on a floor of well-used planks— this was a good gathering of boisterous wedding guests. A merry party dressed in homemade, plant-dyed earth-rich colors; faces molded from earth, sun, wind, and the ages; a living tableau bathing in the luminous warmth of candlelight. It was as if we had fallen into an old Rembrandt painting, but for the thunderous high-spirited laughter.

In a corner, members of a band were fully immersed in conversation with Terra through Voodoo drums, bamboo and metal horns, and inexplicably a violin. While the merriment enveloped us, a tiny table and three chairs were brought to where we stood. We gratefully took our seats, and it was only then that I noticed in all the kafuffle the wedding couple. She wore an elaborate white gown, and he an early nineteenth-century French officer’s uniform. His was a tattered attire reminiscent of a time when a ragtag band of newly self-freed slaves, with an inexhaustible fervor, defeated the legendary French army of Napoleon Bonaparte. The floor cleared, the violinist began to play, and the young married couple bowed to each other and began to dance, yes, the minuet.

This was no historical re-creation, nor a theme wedding. This was an exalted ritual handed down through the ages by this small group of indigenous people isolated in space and time, nurturing their place in planetary history. This was the gem in our adventure, a rare privilege, a sacred gift they chose to share with us.

Within moments the drums and horns joined the violin. In the music continents, races, cultures and centuries crashed into one another, merged, and in seconds fused. But I must not forget that in this mêlé of sound, scent, and color—in this cultural maelstrom played-out in a shack nowhere in particular—there was also present another vital ingredient, an extension of physical reality. Voodoo lived here, in everyone, and throughout the room.

The air filled with mirth, and with a somnolent, viscous, subaquatic reality, much like the fluid, otherworld reality I experienced in the tiny shed we had come upon earlier that afternoon. Only this time, it was teeming with life. Someone came up behind me. I turned to meet the shaman of this fête. Speaking a very old, nearly forgotten Créole—a mélange of Yoruba, Taino, old French and old Spanish—he asked me to dance. To hear him was a rare pleasure. I smiled and joined this Voodoo mystic, this houngan, in his whimsy on the floor.

We danced rooted in the wild, joining elemental Earth. Gradually, my body began to lose its density, barriers dissolved, and cohesion gave way until I was transformed into a translucent mist, luminous, allowing the life around me to move through me. I saw/felt others formed from earth, recognized them as living “historians” of Terra. I experienced times past, and our place on the planet in history.

There is a drink that is imbibed generously at such celebrations known as clairin, rum’s firewater. This clairin was from a recipe unaltered since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. My friends had some, as did everyone else. I, however, kept to my water bottle. I knew the drums, rituals, and the drawing back of the shroud between realities would be more than enough for me to “slip under the veil” and perceive the underworld and other worlds as well.

I have always loved to dance. I can easily dance for hours, tireless and in rapture. And so I did. My partner, the sage, smiled, knowing that I was experiencing a dual reality, as was he. I felt safe. So, I left myself open to the tales told through dance, drums, and this mystical experience. That night we all celebrated and merged with the past, in our own way, till wee hours in the morning.

“Micha, Micha, wake up, you have to see this.”

“Huh? I wasn’t sleeping. What is it?”

“Look!” Joëlle, who had turned to shake me out of my reverie, now pointed out the open window. “Isn’t it absolutely exquisite?” she beamed.

For hours our tireless, dust encrusted little blue sedan had crossed through lush green rice paddies, negotiated harsh and grim lands, ascended inhospitable peaks to emerge from a hairpin turn in the road. Finally, sprawled before us, a resplendent enchanted woods of majestic trees.

Joëlle was right. One knew immediately upon seeing this grove of timeless giants with their sumptuous canopies of pink and white in oxygen-rich silence that we were, in truth, upon hallowed ground. I, too, was mesmerized by the power of nature exuding from these impressive envoys of Earth. However, the moment we passed the hairpin turn I also felt that familiar other reality; a leaden, hypnotic sense of my surroundings that left me curiously ungrounded and somnolent.

Did I ever believe a sorcerer's veil kept this legendary grove hidden, making it impossible to find, so that guardians of nature could protect it? And did I believe that only with a formal invitation given to Gabriel, Joëlle and myself promising a passage through the veil, were we allowed to discover the mystical wood and witness these wondrous emissaries of Earth? I can only say that after years of searching, it was with Gabriel's help that I finally came across what I was looking for. This little-known valley was left to nature's keeping by distinctive custodians of Earth, protecting one of the rare remaining Mapou woodlands.

As we began our descent, a smoldering sun hung low in tepid skies, hovering over a quiet sea, a canvas set in vivid bleu azure. Gabriel had just renegotiated with our vehicle for its lengthier endurance. Now we were ready to leave the cool-protecting breezes of the mountains and pass through the soulful Mapou woods with its magnificent blossoming Ceiba trees, and begin our slow downward spiral into the sultry, feverish airs of the valley by the sea. The day's light was imperceptibly morphing into sunset.

A generous path, doubling as a road, took us to a scattering of tiny thatched adobe homes roosting atop an inlet embankment created by a receding lagoon. As we arrived, children came running from behind boulders, jumping over garden fences and climbing the embankment, fishing rods in hand. Visitors! As we stepped out of the car, a handful of village elders, all men, I noticed, walked up to greet us. Ahead of them, a tall thin man with a broad engaging smile and twinkling eyes dressed in a white cabana shirt, grey pants and sandals stepped up to Gabriel and hugged him.

“Allo frère! Como ye?” This warm and disarming man who extended a familiar term of endearment to my guide was surely our host, Francois, the *bokor*, a sorcerer of the left hand of Voodoo and leader of the guardians of the Mapou. He was taller than I imagined. His relationship with Gabriel, on the other hand, was, as I suspected, familiar and long-standing.

After introductions, warm exchanges, and concern for our comfort we were ushered into Francois's home; his was a rather imposing house surrounded by tall protective trees.

Despite the cool shaded interior and pleasant company, it wasn't long before I needed to get out of the house and away from the others. I couldn't shake that strangely intoxicating feeling; my surroundings shimmered through gummy vapors. I excused myself and clumsily

walked out the house and down the path to a set of rocks that seemed perfectly setup to witness the sunset. Oddly, there were no children surrounding me, asking questions and waiting for candy. I was left to my silence and much needed solitude.

Perched on a boulder and looking out to sea, I watched a deceptively tranquil, yet raging sun in a coral pink and blood orange sky as it gradually submerged itself into fluid Earth, leisurely slipping under its covers. For that exalted moment, I lost myself in the timeless splendor and boundless serenity of the cosmos. Feeling somnolent, leaden and with a curiously alien connection to reality, I closed my eyes. When I opened them I saw, in the distance, a large lagoon. Still further and to the left, below the horizon, I saw a clump of dry parched hills, and I remembered... “We must carry the dinghy through a passage between the hills to a pond, and cross it to the valley where we’ll be safe.” I repeated the words, recalling how we had never made it to the pond.

“What did you say?” Startled, I turned to face Gabriel leaning against one of the large rocks with a gentle smile and a puzzled expression in his eyes.

“Nothing,” I answered. “Just something I remembered, unpleasant really.”

“One day you need to tell me the story”, he mused. Or was he musing? He went quiet, looking at me for a while.

“Feeling a bit odd?” he asked.

“Yea.” I answered, while I sat back and watched darkened waters swallow the glowing tip of the sun. I thought he’d give me a word of caution or advice, but he remained silent. We sat in stillness awaiting the moon while enjoying the early evening sounds of nature. Then he turned to go, calling back, “Slipping under the veil to meet other worlds does that to some people.”

“Which people?” I called back. Of course, no answer. He simply walked back to a house enveloped in a glow of gaslight and shaking with uproarious laughter.

With night, the veils between our physical world and the worlds of spirit are thinner, easier to pass through. So, I’ve been told. It was becoming harder for me to keep my balance in what I perceived as a fluidic, porous world. My senses were off kilter as if I’d imbibed some powerful hallucinogen. However, I had kept to my own water, from bottles we had bought earlier from a vendor. Joëlle was unchanged. Gabriel, well, I suspected journeys into other realities were not foreign to him. But for me other realities seemed to be uncomfortably close. It was time to withdraw from social surroundings and find shelter. I asked to be shown to my room, where I shut the door on the confusion, flopped onto the bed, closed my eyes and instantly fell asleep.

In what seemed moments, my eyes literally popped open. The room was dark. Moonlight resting on trees and canopies outside the shutters was the only source of a low glimmer in the

room. I slowly became aware that I lay in a strange bed, frozen; gradually I grew conscious that every bone in my body was broken! Shaken, my mind still fuzzy. What...what is happening? Pain! Incomprehensively, I sensed a heavy crushing pressure entombed me, entirely! No! This was impossible!!

I attempted to move, but was flooded with excruciating pain. What is this? I didn't remember anything. Stunned. My body shattered, paralyzed, I lay there in unspeakable agony. My heart racing, lips trembling, my breath short, shallow and erratic, tears flooded my eyes, and flowed down my cheeks and neck soaking sheets and pillow. I called out, "Someone, please, someone help me!" But all was quiet. My voice carried no sound at all, however hard I tried.

The horror dragged on for hours. Or was it minutes? Ensorcelled by pain, time becomes pliable and elastic and seized by emotional hauntings. I begged for a reprieve, "God! Someone, help me. Please!" My screams were whispers I myself could barely hear, my plea a gurgling of tears in my throat. Closing my eyes, unable to call out, my body racked with a stabbing affliction, and surrounded by silence and obscurity, I was consumed with sheer terror and profound helplessness, I felt totally alone in the world.

Time stood perfectly still. The only out was to cry, to feel, and maybe to trust.

"This isn't the first time I find myself in dire circumstances, and it won't be the last. I will get out of it again." I told myself. That's what I decided to believe.

Closing my tear-soaked eyes, I concentrated on slow deep breaths, and trusting in the power of life. As I did this, I began to feel my terror subside. One deep breath, "someone will come", then another, and another, until the pain gradually began to slip away. I continued to lie perfectly still. Dare I move? Is it fading or simply teasing me, hiding to come back again, more painful than ever? I lay there not wanting to disturb this fortunate change, just breathing. Until finally, I felt the hurt was gone. I waited. Gradually I sensed I could sit up in bed my eyes open to the dark and to its motionless shadows. When I felt ready, I reached and touched my arms, then my legs; all was as before! Oh God, what just happened? Frozen in disbelief, I continued to sit quietly, closing my eyes again, breathing, relieved, baffled.

At long last, I found within me an unusual inner stillness, a knowing, perhaps it was time to accept what had just happened. As I did so, the portal closed. The air and space that surrounded me felt once more familiarly humid and filled with the sea. Sitting alone in the room in the dark, I waited for another portal to open. But it did not. And eventually I fell asleep, thoroughly spent.

When my eyes opened again, the room flooded with sunshine. Joëlle threw open the door, beaming one of her beautiful seductive smiles.

“Wakeup sleepy head! It’s already eight o’clock.” She teased with her slightly undulating British-Indian accent. “You looked pretty out of it last night, so we let you sleep in, but it’s time for breakfast and I’m starving. I decided to make you all a great omelet”.

And she did, East African style, hot-as-hell and delicious. The table was abuzz with jokes, stories, and the endless shuffling of plates with homemade sausages, freshly baked flat cassava breads, Haitian style cornmeal with coconut, along with Joëlle’s omelets. There were also bowls of fresh fruits and jams, pitchers of freshly squeezed juices, home cultivated coffee and freshly grated hot chocolate. It was a veritable island delight under the trees.

As the feast was winding down, plates emptied, voices lowered, Gabriel turned to me.

“You had a difficult night last night,” he said. I didn’t answer. I was not sure whether I should be shocked that he knew or righteously pissed that no one came to my rescue. I had a mind to counter his cheek, but instead I needed to talk. As I began, I noticed everyone else quietly cleared the table and left us alone. So, I told him. I told him everything. He sat back and quietly listened.

“Mapou’s nature is powerful,” he admitted, nodding. “It appears you were given an exceptional gift.”

“I’m sorry? Gift?”

He continued: “in the language of my spiritual tradition and practice, Voodoo, last night you experienced Dambalah-Wedo.” Gabriel noted my puzzled expression and explained, “For us Dambalah-Wedo together are the embodiment of the cosmos.”

“Oh?” I perked up.

He had started well enough and had me curious, only he got caught up in the weeds, explaining a little too much.

“Dambalah refers to the yang or male aspect of cosmic energy symbolized by the snake, the earth element. And Wedo refers to the yin or female aspect of cosmic energy symbolized by the rainbow, the water element. Together they make up the energy of the cosmos and are symbolized by the cosmic egg with a snake coiled around...”

“Gabriel, Gabriel...” I grumbled.

This was obviously Gabriel’s passion, but he quickly noted I wasn’t in the mood. He went quiet, searched my face, and got back on track.

“Anyway, Micha, when you connect with Dambalah-Wedo the power of this cosmic energy breaks all the bones in your body. It is the result of you having direct contact with the

very source of life!” His broad toothy smile showed delight with his assessment of such a privileged experience, and my horrific night.

“Well,” I quipped, “I should’ve been asked first. I’d probably have said, I’d pass,” resentful of the experience. Then I remained silent.

After having explained the crazy reality of my night, Gabriel relaxed into his seat and sipped his now cold coffee. We both stayed silent, allowing the sounds of children and nature to enchant the periphery of our awareness.

Finally, I stopped fidgeting with the spoon I’d been playing with for too long, laid it down and crossed my arms. Looking at the spoon, I finally broke the silence. “But what was the damn point of all that pain?” I cried.

Gabriel’s smile, relaxed and deeply felt, revealed a long-awaited appreciation of our journey. It seemed we’d finally gotten down to the crux of it.

“You wanted to visit a primal Mapou wood. You wanted to experience the force of its life energy undamaged. Now you have. In turn, Mapou has given you a course for your journey in life, an approach connecting you to a network of ancient planetary knowledge. Others connected to this network can help you for they possess its language and savvy. Please, treasure that.”

“I don’t understand what you are trying to tell me.” My emotions were in a jumble, the saucy heat teased my psyche, the island’s intensity played with my senses. I needed clarity. “You say nature’s life-force is exceptionally strong here, that Earth has a more direct and forceful communion here. I get that. That’s why I came.

“You say that on the island they call what I experienced last night, an encounter with Dambalah-Wedo, life-force of the cosmos. This implies that elsewhere, in other such powerful places around the planet—where Earth’s essence is stronger and more directly connected to us—others have similar experiences and have their own names and explanations for it. Is that right?”

“Uh huh,” he agreed, “That’s pretty much it”.

“Finally, you’re saying that through proximity to this intensified potency of nature some people like me experience a microscopic full-on direct communion with the energy of the cosmos. Right? Well, that’s insane!” I protested. The power of such a revelation threw me back in my seat. However, my catastrophic night with its deeply felt physical and spiritual experience knew this to be very probably and incomprehensibly true.

Gabriel grinned delightfully.

“Experiencing an infinitesimal spec of the power of the universe directly and physically, and doing so consciously is true magic, an unspeakable privilege, and an immense responsibility. With such a direct connection to life’s essence you can learn to gather, cultivate, and express the source of life.

“This is the foundation of qi gong, tai chi, and all martial arts although it may take time before you know how to use it. I’d say that this is definitely an invaluable path, wouldn’t you?”

I stared back at him, lost in thought. “Mmm” I grumbled.

I knew Hinduism spoke of Kundalini, the cosmic energy within the human body coiled at the base of the spine like a serpent. When this force is awakened a person is in touch with the cosmos, both its gifts and challenges. I also remembered that throughout the East as well as other ancient practices around the world, people spend a lifetime learning to gather and cultivate the essence of life.

I was obliged to acquiesce. I was indeed given a valuable gift. I felt a gentle smile grow from within and finally rest on my lips. But all this was a hell of a lot to take in, especially after such an eventful night. For a time, Gabriel and I remained rooted in our old wicker chairs under fabulous tropical pine trees deep in thought.

In truth, I remember precious little after that. Everything is either extremely hazy or a total blank. Later, I asked Joëlle to share her experiences and help me remember. But she couldn’t recall any particulars either. Neither Joëlle nor I could remember the road in or the road out. We didn’t recall any of the faces or names of the people we met. We remembered the joy of the evening and breakfast, but particulars have remained missing.

Was this simply an odd and trivial occurrence, or was this stipulated as a condition for our trip and Gabriel simply omitted to share this with us? We knew there was no point asking him. He’d just give us one of his enigmatic smiles say “Oh?,” and remained silent.

After abandoning Joëlle and Gabriel to the city, I found a ride going north toward my beach house. I climbed into the cab of an old beaten-up Mack truck, propped up my duffle bag, slumped over and closed my eyes. Ahh, I had found the elusive Mapou wood and had been touched by its power, as I had wished. Something deep within me had changed, grounding me, endowing me with loving peace. But for now, I was going home. Having completed my adventure, I was looking forward to a respite before beginning another.

Michèle Sterling, a writer and essayist, studied in Paris, earned a BA in Political Science in Montreal, as well as an MA in Consciousness Studies in San Francisco. Her doctoral work explores direct communication with the wild through empathic mergence with dolphins.

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