Grand Menteur anove lean larc

FIRST EDITION

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I. Rue La Paix. Port Louis. Mauritius. 1956

MY FATHER USED TO RUN around in the mid-forties with a group of hustling street toughs called the "Sous Gang." A subject of spirited ridicule, the name was variously attributed to from as strange a thing as the practice of sooging catamarans clear of dead fish, to the synchronized smirking members performed when accused of a crime. One account, brimming with college petulance, even related the name to the Kreol phrase, "To ene sou inne vinne cinq sous" (Your penny's become a nickel) – a veiled reference if anything ever was to distinguishing sodomites by their similarity to the dimensions of circulating

coinage. These were young, darned-if-you-did-darnedif-you-didn't children, exulting behind the embrasures of a coconut-studded headquarters, who would arrange themselves for a bizarre allogrooming ritual that spilled out onto the street, the bazaar, or as was often their custom, the Champ de Mars Racecourse. They would blow nits out of each other's heads, and with a wad of chewed gum flattened into a four-inch square, catch the airborne pests, intent on selling them as an ersatz tukmaria for the composition of alouda glace. You will perhaps encounter no more challenging a task than to imagine this farouche network of children, these bandolier-wearing layabouts who carried stale tamarinds clumped into katty quids and were sensible enough to search for ectoparasites among one another, but were otherwise unmindful of honouring society's customs of civility with so much as a grunt of acknowledgment. If a shopkeeper inquired why they were not in school when they walked before his storefront in the noontide sun, they walked on by, paying him no heed, only to return after nightfall to render all of his goods invendible in one manner or another.

The story of how my father came into contact with this network of delinquents is rather a hopeless one. I stress this point because solicitors and constables always believe a lifestyle of crime involves an overdetermination of choice, like you could decide the quality of water that came out of the Colmar Canal into your taps any more than you could decide the colour of your skin. The architecture of survival does not care about those who quibble with its provisions for choice: there is always unfinished

business somewhere or other, and an axe to grind can meet life's challenge. Suffice it to say that holed up somewhere in a David Street tannery, poor and left to his own devices, my eight-year-old father would reflect silently on his exclusion, dreaming of the material world.

The Sous Gang meanwhile found relief from Lady Luck's retreating favours in the form of several well-coordinated rackets. It was not known to the majority of the wayfaring public, to cite one memorable example, that in the chiselled-hollow Tin Lizzies abandoned behind a walled junkyard on La Rue Royal, existed an elaborately structured glory hole where two hundred rupees could produce the epiphanic combination of a mastiff's unclenched cheeks and, if one was looking for it, a clear conscience. Though there'd be a greater likelihood of surviving a leap from Montagne des Signaux with a clutch of chickens strapped about your arms than finding true happiness, there was at the very least a sporting chance of getting your money's worth. Their eventual meeting, I have it on my father's word, transpired when the singular circumstance of a vacancy arose within the Sous ranks - a vacancy for a Grand Menteur, a position my father knew well from his time panhandling in the street with my grandfather. With his recommendation of a tannin-based tagging system to monitor the diminishing marginal returns of the stray dogs in question, my father was given probationary placement within the gang organization.

By the time he was sixteen, he had already engendered a reputation among Port Louis lowlifes as something of a smooth talker: consorting fellows were wise to avoid his badinage about "the porthole romances of the Silver Tent Gang" or "the blind fortunes of the pushcart poulterer." Such lies soon placed him among thieves and bandits, the tartuffism of their lifestyles enjoining him to forget the old ways of earning money. For there is great reserve in a dependable liar – in somebody one can trust to be tenaciously mistrustful. When asked, "Where's the money?":

Answer: What money?

Question: The money from the horse betting. Answer: I don't go in for things like that.

Question: You know what I mean.

Answer: The money from the horse betting.

Question: So you admit it. Answer: I admit to nothing.

Question: You admit that you don't go for things like

horse betting.

Answer: I admit I don't go for things insofar as horse betting is involved, yes.

Question: So you don't admit to admitting that you don't go for things?

Answer: You're trying to confuse me.

Question: Answer the question.

Answer: No.

Question: And why not?

Answer: No, I don't admit to admitting I don't go for

things.

Question: Then naturally you admit you do go for things; say horse betting, for example.

Answer: I don't admit I don't go for things, generally,

because I do.

Question: Are you some kind of nihilist? Answer: I don't go in for things like that.

For indeed, all he did was lie; he hardly stole, he trounced no one. His role, like the other Sous before him, was limited to what he exclusively knew best: falling behind the others on the getaway to stall and confab. He handled the police in the same way they handled him – with prejudice and a view toward humiliation. So it was that his encouragement of a friendship with a member of the constabulary, one Malbar, was bound to raise more than just a few eyebrows or, in his particular example, tightly clenched fists.

As far as first meetings go, it fell short of the hopedrawn promises a lifetime of cinematic exposure inevitably bestows. Malbar was an imposing fellow, hunched shoulders and an itinerant jawbone giving him the air of a constipated volcano. He walked with a striding confidence unmatched even in the annals of police history and amazed all manner of peoples with his indifference to those at the mercy of his absurd authority. The brave cock on his dunghill, raised on an unbroken diet of thuggery and snapping hardship, was equal parts bull and insensate, on the receiving end of denigrations only a gazetteer armed with a rotogravure could articulate. The young officer was eager to pass muster, and there posed no better means for this than by policing the stout-hearted brats of the Sous Gang. One morning, in the presence of two lowly gang members,

Declarative: Sa gogotte la enne voleur. Jamais li travail. Cotte to croire li gagne casse pour li habille coum ca? Li enne bourrique: li conne ziste coquin, mange, divertir, caca.

Question: You there, in the red! English?

Answer: Non.

Question: I'm looking for this dog's owner. Er . . .

enough people are complaining. Answer: Buyer beware, sousoute. Question: So it's one of you then?

Answer: Mod cons.

Question: Eh?

Answer: Conveniences. We offer all mod cons.

Question: I ought to take you in on charges - charges

of gross indecency!

Answer: The dog is not mine. I have never seen it

before. Ask anyone. Imperative: Your English has come along considerably

since we started. Leave the strays well alone!

Declarative: Get stuffed!

Malbar followed his instincts home in this fashion, propelling himself up the chain of miscreants until one day he found Sergent – as my father was known to others – in the process of tagging a Sous pup on a deserted thoroughfare. While another gang member of roughly the same age (though twice the size) named Ti Pourri held the dog down, the eager lawman sized my father up with a stinking crook-eye, poised finally for an actual arrest.

Accompanied only by that blear-eyed gargoyle, easily

mistaken for yon young gallant, what with the way he thumped behind like a rudderless ketch, my father simply looked up and muttered to Pourri, "You'll survive," before flying off around the corner to safety. Ti Pourri spent a fine time of it that night surrounded by hardened criminals anxious about the back-door parole, only to be welcomed upon his release with his expulsion from the group. Apparently (the source of which remained flagged in mystery), Ti Pourri succumbed to a statutory ouster on the Sous Charter grounds that he couldn't keep his mouth shut and abandoned his post when faced with the gablou. The seizure of "Old Faithful," as the pooch had been christened among the more reliable of his clients, was in many ways the end of that rather misfortunate use of canine flattery.

Sergent was not ignorant to the benefits of contact with blue arms of the law; such contact kept him spry and reminded him when to be aloof. At times, while cultivating this aspect of being standoffish, he went too far, and even became suspicious of his friend the constable. Meetings with Malbar sometimes sent my father deeper into himself, and the tightlippedness he bore like a badge of distinction grew intolerable. It continued in and out of the home, or so my mother would recount before her sad fate put an end to conversation between us; it must have made some sense, somewhere in the winding cockles of my father's brain, to engage in discourse with a dark concentration that could save him from incrimination. Only my father could conceive the phrase, "You're looking well," as an indictment after all. (How did he look beforehand?) Unable to otherwise articulate pleasure, envy, anger, frustration, my father took to his sacred refuge, this vow of unruly silence, with the ardency of the poverty line. But the transition from prolixity to silence did not occur overnight. At first, he began to lose track of stories he'd told certain officers. He squabbled among Sous members over what had allegedly been communicated by his own nefarious tongue. But maybe most significant was that his foundering as the Grand Menteur coincided with the decision that his services were needed by his eleemosynary countrymen. Something in his brain made him realize that even the least deserving were welcome to the ill-gotten gains of his imagination - whether in the form of handing out stolen merchandise, or simply to take the Sous to uncharted ground that would aggravate closed-minded superiors like the infamous Black Derwish, he decided he would become a humanitarian.

"What's this, Sergent?" Malbar asked one morning, wiping the beads of sweat that converged on his nostrils. "You're not out for yourself anymore?"

"I'm the enterprising sort," my father responded.

"Avant ki mo tane rumeur la! I hear that you have convinced the Black Derwish that the police chief is looking for him. That his 'worm-ridden guavas' are somehow responsible for sick officers, and in their absence, escalating crime rates. You have managed to convince the costermonger not only to abandon his fruit, but that both police and those they are responsible for are engaging in one form of backsliding or another. I can assure you, however, that my ability to impede the criminal element remains unwavering – on account of an iron stomach."