

*D'lo d'Amérik – Elixir from America*¹

Translated from the French and Creole by Karen Fleetwood & Laëtitia Saint-Loubert

Roger Parsemain

In the yard of the pharmacy owned by Farné Ahénobarbe, known as Pè Farné, at six in the morning on a Monday of the present year, 1930.

I can cope with my eyes ... the tears. But my nose ... it keeps running and running ... and then there's the coughing ... constant coughing! My head is in darkness ... *Mwen toudi! I'm dizzy!* Dying perhaps! Surely?

What time is it exactly? Ah, the Angelus. From the bell tower, Bannès, the bell-ringer, is tearing the night apart. But the smoke is enveloping me, filling the yard and rolling against the walls. I can't see a thing. How long have I been here, bound to the devil's boucan², heating and reheating the sugar for the day's syrups? I can no longer hear the hubbub of the nearby bakery, yet its chimney lets out a thin white smoke, drawn down to roof level by the muscular blasts of my inferno. Under the cooking pot, the red-black flames are roaring, sending out curls of soot. This Northern wood and its musky resin are a disaster! Nothing but shavings collected from the workshop next door, where Romanel, carpenter-joiner-cabinet-maker, saws, shaves, taps and joins, night in, night out.

He's a real grabber, Pè Farné. What jaws he has! He lets nothing go. When will he decide to get a real kiln with heat-proof bricks and a chimney to propel the smoke up beyond the walls and roofs? He's stingier than a star apple tree ... You need a stick with a hook to pluck the star apple from its branches. The fruit finally comes off, bleeding sticky milk. It doesn't fall easily like ripe mangoes or mameys do. Spells of rain and sunshine gnaw at the fruit on the end of the branch. Weeks and months go by. The pulp turns black from necrosis and disappears without rotting. That's how a star apple tree works. As for Pè Farné, he's less generous than a star apple tree. How many living souls have seen the colour of his money? Finistère, master mason and his dear old friend, couldn't scrounge a sou for his vegetable patch from Pè Farné. Some lime, a few heat-proof bricks and tafia for the couple of apprentices who work for the mason. That's all it needs. Please let him decide to speak to him! I wouldn't be here then, on all fours, barbecuing my lungs and turning myself blind from blowing on this timber, still wet from the night's rain.

My grandpapa, Mait' Montout, what does he want for his grandson from the Grand Master of the clouds? Not the snake-infested land of Morne Valentin, though it's the land he works. Not the cane of the *békés*. I'm too puny for cane-cutting. And I'm not capable of abusing the cane workers and hurling insults at them, so I couldn't become an overseer or even book keeper for the great house. Ever since I was born, my grandfather has forbidden me from using filthy words.

He, Mait' Montout Marcellin, who is loyal to the socialist Lagrosillière, a member of the neighbourhood's municipal council whose words are always sharp and to the point regardless of the fact that he can barely sign his own name, will not cut off a promising offshoot. An offshoot who obtained his primary-school leaving certificate and completed two years of further education in Saint-Esprit. Pè Farné, the pharmacist, is Mait' Montout Marcellin's friend. Pè Farné, the pharmacist, can open up a better path for his grandson.

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² *Boucan*: A wooden frame on which meat is roasted or smoked over fire.

Days at the pharmacy are long. *Sé avan soley jis apré soley. From before sunrise till after sunset.* Mait' Montout has a place in town. A small room consisting of a few unpainted boards heaped under some rusty metal sheets in a yard of black earth. The passage opens onto rue Saint-Michel. Rue Saint-Michel! Which starts behind the church and peters out down in the mangrove swamp and the Channel. The open-air latrines for the slums of the low town are there, on the edge of the mangrove trees. And you, curled up on the roots of a mangrove, tremble in the small hours as you defecate with the crabs. You'll remember the chilliness of the *faitnoir*³ and the ravenous mosquitoes on your exposed buttocks as long as you live. At night I sleep in town, but not on Saturdays. What's the point of climbing the hill every evening after the pharmacy closes? With or without the moon, night is evil on the flanks of Morne Valentin. The world of the serpents unleashes its dangerous silence. But other more venomous spirits roam in the same silence, those of the evil-doers, *quimboiseurs*, jealous neighbours, even your own kin. I don't listen to the words of Pè Montout and Pè Rénor because the gang keeps its distance: *Timanmay pa ka kouté conversasion gran moun. Children shouldn't listen to adult conversation.* But I, Lambert, can sense things. Mait' Montout is wise: the youngster needs protecting. Pè Farné, his friend, knows. He understands and approves.

Yes, the pharmacist will teach me to deal in phials and concoctions. But the gentleman doesn't want to lose out. I help. I learn to sell, stick labels on phials, polish the counter and tiles until they're clearer than mirrors. Every day he demands twenty litres of syrup already cold for seven in the morning. And his bottles and jars rinsed, gleaming in the early sun on the edge of the basin in the yard. Wipe them, then line them up in the outhouse where preparations are kept. Pè Farné is already there. When did he get up? Does he sleep at all? The town says that he takes off in the middle of the night on the devil's business. The word of the world is evil.

Night is dissolving unhurriedly over the town when I arrive via the passage. I can hear the pharmacist clinking his phials already. The slop of sandals moves away towards the closed shop, returns and stops at the foot of the stairs. Pè Farné is hunting down his girls, who are slow to rise. He barks an order to the servant jostling dishes and pans in the kitchen.

Without waiting, I ready the fire and the pot and settle down for the ordeal. It takes an age.

On top of the wall, the first hint of sunlight caresses the edge of a metal sheet. That's it. Pè Farné suddenly appears in the yard and his eyes glint. What now? Perhaps he thinks I'm lazing around?

"You're young, so learn. A fire needs to blaze and then die down gently for syrup. It shouldn't die like that, all of a sudden. It's more delicate than simmering soup. Did you measure out your sugar and water? Did you watch it? *La farmaci sé siro ki ni. Sé pa lotcho, sé pa karamel. The pharmacy's all about syrup. Not lotcho. Not caramel.* Is that understood, Lambert?"

"The syrup is ready, monsieur Farné. It's cooling down."

He ignores my reply.

"Rinse the bottles. We've not got all year! Wash your hands before you touch them. Your hands, eyes, nose, they're all full of ash. We're not roasting cats or manicou by the river. Don't dawdle! *Fê débrouya! Fê débrouya. Hurry up!* Ah! Someone's knocking at the door. This customer is an early riser. Go and open up!"

The man apologizes for knocking so early. "*Eskisé mwén. I'm sorry. I've come...*" A narrow, black face, tough as leather, wrinkled up under a straw hat. A nervous twitch troubles his lips. A thin hand tightens on a white canvas bag. I recognize Tertullien Davila.

He lodges in a corner of Morne Lajustin, very close to the Makandya spring. The hut has a dirt floor and houses eight children and his good lady, Germanise, heavy with the ninth, which is almost at term. During the harvest, Tertullien and Germanise cut the cane of the *béké* at

³ *Faitnoir*: Darkness.

Fontânes and La Digue. The oldest two accompany them. Marietta minds the younger ones. She's the third child but the first girl in the brood. Calamity looms over the gaggle during the course of the day. Quarrels weigh down the air, their curses fit to unbutton the priest's robe. Semi or completely naked, the imps cry out, terrifying the snakes coiled up beneath the bamboo. Marietta and the others are capable of killing them in a frenzy of sticks and stones. Their squeals shatter the chattering of the blackbirds. Surprised, the birds fall silent and scatter beyond the trees to squawk at their leisure.

He ignores my polite gesture. "*Mwen sé lé wè Misié Farné. I'd like to see Misié Farné.*" I understand. Tertullien is bringing the pharmacist the formula from a healer recently consulted. The *quimboiseur* requires some ingredient indispensable to his work. Beware messed-up formulas. Saints who are invoked don't appreciate being disturbed for nothing. As for the devil, his touchiness is fatal. The monster pays you back with a thrashing, and you become stupid to the point of madness. Tertullien mistrusts me. His distrust strikes me full in the face. He will speak to Pè Farné in person. Not to me, this little lad. I am a neighbour of Morne Lajustin and I will reveal his business up there.

"*Alé krié Misié Farné ba mwen. Go and find Misié Farné for me.*"

The two men bend over the counter, forehead to forehead, mumbling. What are they confessing to? I make the empty phials clink on the sly to mask my attention while my ears work, imbuing themselves with the secret. On hearing the name of the terrible product, Pè Farné wants the confession repeated. Tertullien's revelation eludes his own vigilance and reaches my ears: "*D'lo d'Amérik*". Tertullien wants Elixir from America. I struggle to control a start.

With a distant air, I reach the small preparations room. Pè Farné follows me without a word. He watches me and his eyes roll, fixing me with those small blinks that I know so well. I settle the score, mumbling to myself. He doesn't notice.

I've got a handle on you too, Pè Farné. I can beat you in vices and ruses, Monsieur Farné Ahénobarbe! I know your game. But you're in a real muddle this morning. *D'lo d'Amérik!* What are you going to come up with? Somewhere in the hills, the *quimboiseur* must be laughing at both you and your customer. Yet ultimately the sorcerer trusts you. He knows you. You find solutions to help him dupe the entire earth. Ah, Pè Farné! You lift jars, shake phials, bring them to your nose and fix them with an irritated eye. For God's sake! How can this Elixir from America be concocted? It's the first time! Eh! Eh! Eh!

Silence. Pè Farné is no longer in the room. The flap of his sandals can't be heard on the stones in the yard, nor in the dispensary. Ah! His shoes are in the doorway. That chap is more cunning than a thieving cat lying in wait on a kitchen windowsill, smelling fried fish or scorched meat. Yes, the kitchen! He's in the kitchen. I move towards the door, craning my neck, and I see. Mathurine, the servant, is slipping him a jar with something blue inside. Methylene blue for the washing. The man's coming back. I leap to the far end of the room. In his hand I can make out the phial full of water and the two blue lumps, which dissolve under the pharmacist's shakes. He puts his sandals back on and goes into the dispensary.

This time he doesn't call me to do the label. He writes *Elixir from America* on the paper. Brush and glue, then an arm carelessly handing over the phial to Tertullien.

"That's twenty sous."

"*Mèsi Misié Farné. Thank you.*"

Six in the morning, two Mondays later in the present year, 1930.

In the yard, I'm poking the fire beneath curls of smoke. Suffocating in the soot and ash. Dying to sleep. A knock on the door of the dispensary.

"*To to to! Misié Farné!*" Tertullien, standing to attention, wants to talk to Pè Farné.

This morning, hints of a smile furrow his cheeks. But as soon as he sees me, Tertullien once again puts on a blank face. Too late. I've seen his contentment. I return to the end of the counter. Today, his joy overcomes his caution.

"*Pè Farné, sa ou ba mwen-an té bon.* It all worked out. The Good Lord is mighty!"

"I'm glad, Tertullien. Elixir from America is not an easy thing to find."

I dry the jars and arrange them, one by one, on the shelves. My conscientiousness reassures Pè Farné. I realize that Tertullien wants more of the precious liquid. I go to the preparations room and stand behind the door. My ears work well, even from a distance.

It's about the three goats that were found with the help of the *quimboiseur*. Jonas, his own cousin, had stolen them one Sunday afternoon. Yes, the Elixir from America wards off the enemy and sends to sleep the serpents unleashed on your family by evil-doers. For the world is evil. As for Germancé, the other cousin, he is the embodiment of the *dorlis* that torments the young girls of the neighbourhood.⁴ He breaks into houses at midnight and possesses young girls and married women alike, unbeknown to them. In the morning, a mysterious fatigue numbs the victims. They wander around in a daze, all day long. Germancé even turned Tertullien's own wife, Germanise – yes, Germanise – into a madwoman. But the Elixir from America prepared by the *menntô* of spirits has been spread around the house, which is now protected.⁵ Germancé cannot enter their abode. Therné *Gwo lonbri*, the son of Ivanès Gervius, known as *La Guinée*, found him one morning, curled up tighter than a toad under the green mango tree below the house. The child took off screaming. Since then, that *isalop*, Germancé, has lived life squatting down and croaking.⁶ Yes, Pè Farné, a genuine toad. His own children and their maman throw roasted breadfruit onto the dirt floor of the house while insulting him. The big toad. He jumps or crawls to catch the earth-soiled bits. Why did he have to do business with the devil? He's plunged his family into shame. He must pay the price himself, for his descendants will not carry the burden of an evil being. May he remain a toad among toads, swimming in his own excrement! *Sé sa 'w fê, ou ka wê! You get what you deserve!*

Tertullien can no longer control himself. He speaks louder, with more animation. I can make out what he is saying more and more clearly.

"The Elixir from America! I don't have much left. The man who conducts business with the spirits is satisfied. He is expensive, but he is a reliable *menntô*."

"It is good stuff. I've been selling it for two weeks. Tertullien, you are bringing me luck."

"Another bottle, *Misié Farné*, will you give me another bottle? At the same price, right?"

Pè Farné tilts his head with a knowing look and disappears into the small room without a word. Tertullien has reached the door. He waits patiently on the threshold. He turns his eyes, his head, watching the village waking up, the women going to dawn mass, the factory workers liberated from their night shift, and Joseph's horse-drawn cart. A good man, Joseph. Tertullien knows the carter's story and the loss, in less than a year, of his first two children. The babies barely lived a week, a matter of jealousy some still say. *Sété pandan Ladjyè 14 la. It was during the First World War.* But time has marched on. Joseph hasn't been a horse groom since the deputy mayor of the town passed away. He works as a road mender, village cleaner and cemetery keeper. In the wee hours of the morning, he loads the empty cod barrels onto his cart in front of Man Mano Manclétine's shop. The stench of cod remnants would resuscitate a thousand decomposing rats. Joseph responds to the greetings of passers-by with his usual *Lanmizè sur lé pôv! Dlo dans zîé. À tout bèt, dlo dan zîé! Mercy on the poor! Everybody has tears in their eyes! Even horses!* The dawn world, with Tertullien in its midst, rejoices in the carter's tune.

⁴ *Dorlis*: Incubus.

⁵ A *menntô* in Martinican Creole is a master *quimboiseur*, a sorcerer and healer.

⁶ *Isalop*: son of a bitch ("salope" in French), similar to the Spanish "hijo de puta". The "i" in "isalop" could derive from "hijo", son.

But I am otherwise engaged. Curses and grunts uttered by Pè Farné can be heard through the thin partition. He has no recollection of the methylene blue he used as the Elixir from America last week. He lets out moans, fretting and fuming with worry and rage.

What did I give him? It won't do; my mind is too preoccupied. Is it age? Fatigue? Oh! I forget everything these days. *Mwen ka vini vié! I'm getting old!*

His despair suddenly dies down. Silence follows, replaced by the clinking of glass. My ears locate his hands on the shelf where the antiseptic, the eosin solution – *d'lo rouj* –, the arnica tincture, iodine bottles, ether and non-reduced alcohol are stored. Silence falls again. He reappears. I make out the bottle between his fingers. It is full of an oily water of a red so bright that the first ray of sunshine that strikes it through the door explodes like a bloody broken star on the counter. Tertullien runs forward, his ravenous eyes on the bottle.

"Mèsi Misié Farné."

Pè Farné feigns indifference. He is now absorbed in a new and urgent task. He flicks through notebooks, pencil in hand. He finally grabs a label and the pot of glue. Tertullien takes the bottle and examines it.

"But, Misié Farné, last week ... it was blue. Today it's red. How come? *Mwen pas ka comprann! I don't get it!*"

"Oh! But, Tertullien, you didn't specify. You asked for Elixir from America, but without saying whether you needed Elixir from North America or Elixir from South America. Now you have both! This one's a bit more expensive, as it's superior to the other one. *Dlo tala pli fô! This one here's stronger!* That'll be thirty sous!"