

**Beudelaine Pierre****Inheritance**

## Chapter One

“Beyond the mountains are more mountains.”  
(Haitian Proverb)

The sun had remained hidden behind the mountains and had not yet appeared. The sky looked heavy, but the clouds had not yet returned. The leaves were dancing, a bit of wind was blowing, but not even a drop of rain had fallen to the ground. It was November 13, a Saturday morning.

It was already dawn, but the mat was sweet underneath my back; my eyes were heavy to open. A small, cool breeze was blowing through the window slats to caress my face, blowing on all of my body to make me keep sleeping. And, though my soul wanted to fly, I slept deeply.

When I awoke, it was ten. I left the room where I had slept and went down into Timas Street for a soccer rendezvous. Everyday was like this, every Saturday, since I had left the countryside to come live in Port-au-Prince.

My own area is Saint Michael. Saint Michael in the Artibonite. That is where the entrails of my ancestors are established. That is where all the umbilical cords of my family were tied. And it is also there that the umbilical cords of my father and mother were severed, because it was in an automobile accident in Saint Michel that the two of them died. At the time, I was six years old. One month after the accident, my aunt in Port-au-Prince sent for me. Now I am seventeen.

I slept and woke in Sanfil, in Timas Street. I didn't have any other occupation, but had forgotten the pain of the school bench. Since I had come to Port-au-Prince, my aunt never had any money to send me to school. That was what she always told me, every time that October came around.

But I was a king when it came to dribbling a soccer ball. Everyone in Timas Street knew that. That was even why they called me “Little Football.” I do not remember when they started calling me that. But it would appear that I never had another name. All my life I spent my time playing soccer, it was the only occupation I had. It was the only job my aunt gave me, too. I remember that she was always happy every time the neighbors would praise me for the way I played soccer.

My heart was open. I was breathing hard when I took to the street that morning. I was shirtless with a pair of shorts. There was no sun, but a gentle breeze was tickling my chest.

I didn't see anyone on the soccer field, but nature was there. It was next to me, it was on my body, it was inside me, in my spirit.

I pulled over a cinder block and I sat down. I had closed my eyes, and I turned my face to the right and the left towards the wind that was cooling it. Everything inside me, all of me was dancing to the beautiful sound of the wind that was going through me. For the first time since I started playing soccer, I was happy not to see anyone on the Timas Street field.

I was trying to experience all by myself this moment when I heard a leaf crackle next to me. When I opened my eyes, I did not see anyone, but when I turned to my right I was not by myself. I saw sitting on my same block an old person. I had never seen him before, but when our eyes met my heart beat faster, and, and...and I lost control. I did not know why, but at that moment I felt that this Saturday morning would be my first day in Port-au-Prince.

We sat side-by-side. The old person did not speak. Me too, I did not say anything. There was a large silence between us. There was only a bit of wind that was blowing, the sound of the dry leaves falling from up in the trees. There was the singing of the little birds, and there was a bit of sun breaking through?

“What is your name?”

“Little football.”

We both broke out laughing. For myself, there was no reason to, but I laughed with all my heart.

“Me, they call Father Bone.”

When I heard this name, my heart would not stop. And, inside of my, the name resonated. Father Bone, Father Bone, Father Bone...Father Bone! I had started to reflect, searching my mind for a story, an event hiding behind the name. I did not know exactly what, but it spoke to me somehow...

I was digging, digging and looking, digging in my memory until I was tired. The old person himself, during this time, was looking straight ahead at the ground. And, suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, I saw myself in Saint Michael.

And then I remembered...yes, I remembered well. And I raised my head, and I stared at the old person more closely, so that I could see more clearly the person sitting next to me...

This person represented one of the best memories I have of my childhood in Saint Michael, even though I had never met him in person.

I was still small and did not understand well when I used to hear my mother and my father talking about Father Bone. It was not only them. Many people in the neighborhood where we lived in Saint Michael used to talk about this old person, how he had a great deal of wisdom. But many of them had never met him in person. My mother was one of those, because one of the things she often talked about was her desire to meet this old person one day. To meet with Father Bone and ask him for a word of wisdom. This was what she used to tell my father and all of our neighbors. But sadly, she went to the other side before she had a chance to meet him.

“I come from Saint Michael, in Artibonite.”

This was how Father Bone followed my thinking. I had remained silent. I had not found anything to say to him. And then, suddenly, my tongue was unleashed. I do not know if it was my mother, wherever she is, who sent me the words that would come out of my mouth, but it was the only thing in my heart at that moment:

“Give me a bit of wisdom.”

He did not appear surprised, but he took quite a bit of time before he answered me. He stood up from the block where we were sitting, he bent down; he picked up a little rock, he held it in his hand. Father Bone was examining the little rock while he bent his knee on the ground in front of me. I did not understand what he was doing, but he took my hand, he placed the little stone in it. Then, suddenly, he said something that has stayed fresh in my mind until this very day:

“If one day you managed to understand the beauty that is in a speck of dust, you will possess all the wisdom a person can have.”

I did not understand anything. But after this remark, he bent his head and took the little stone, and he sent it flying. And suddenly, he was standing on his two feet as he said to me:

“Follow me.”

And I followed him.

I do not remember the road we took that day. But we left Tomas Street and Sanfil behind. I was walking and dancing the entire way as my heart smiled. The sun, for its part, had begun to open its eye. Nature was singing; the leaves were crying. But the road was long, and we had just started walking. We had not said a word while walking, but our two hearts had met and were engaged in unspoken conversation.

We had pushed onwards we left the city behind. On our road, the trees had multiplied and the birds were singing. I had never seen Port-au-Prince look like this. I was humming a little song to myself, and, my mouth and eyes were smiling. It was at this moment that Father Bone, who was ahead of me, chose to turn around and look at me. In

his eyes I saw the same light of happiness; in his face a little smile was shining. But suddenly he turned his head and continued to walk.

But I could not walk quickly anymore. My feet were beginning to hurt, my throat was dry, thirst had invaded me. Fatigue was capturing my mind, I had started to tire. I was walking step by step and Father Bone was gaining ground. But a little while later, I saw Father Bone walking slower. Then I came up next to him. What I saw in his face was something I could not explain. But I saw in his smiling face great satisfaction along with a calm heart. I saw him turn his eyes everywhere, to the right and to the left. And a small smile came to my heart.

We had arrived at the top of a hill. Below our feet was green grass; beautiful grass that made you want to spread your body on the ground. Everywhere, palm trees were reaching up to the sky while their branches danced in the air.

I did not know whether I was in the air or on the ground. I tried to grasp every marvel that was in each tree, each flower before my eyes. Butterflies of every color that were fluttering before my face. I was breathing the freshness of nature and the beautiful sweet sunshine that was warming my heart.

As I was walking, the beauty of the countryside was growing. My heart had opened even further to take in the miracles. Meanwhile, we had descended from the top of the hill. The sounds of the birds filled my ears, every color of bird, every kind of bird. I saw Cuban ground doves, I saw many small pigeons, hummingbirds and fly-catchers teemed about. Even I was gaudy!

But a little while after, I could not feel my feet anywhere; my heart was guiding me; it had transported me then here, then there. I was hot, I was cool; I was both; in all of my blood, in all of my body. I felt a warmth that rose within me. But underneath my feet I felt cool water running. When I looked down, I saw that I was next to a stream.

The water was clear, it was beautiful. It was as if it were calling you to drown in it. I bent down and collected a small bit of water with my two hands to freshen my face. I was seeing more and more clearly. It was as if the water that was running over my face was passing through my entrails. It was as if I were going into the water. The pretty small rocks next to where I was walking were teasing me. I also saw small freshwater fish dashing between my legs. Then, suddenly, I saw myself throwing myself in the stream, plunging behind them. I did not know how long I was in the water, but I saw myself in it, my entire body was wet.

When I raised my head, I shook off all of the water that was on me. I did not see when I managed to stand on my two feet in the middle of the stream. But my heart was beating fast, my tongue did not want to speak. I turned my head back and forth, I raised my eyes to the sky, my teeth were grinning until my mouth wanted to burst.

“But, there is a hand behind these things!!!”

“First lesson of wisdom.”

I startled when I heard the voice of the old man in my response. It was then I remembered I was not alone. When I turned my eyes to look at him, his face had been transformed; I saw the same beauty of the countryside in his eyes.

“Learn to live with the idea that there is someone greater than you.”

He stepped next to me and continued:

“Turn and look at the trees, the birds in the sky and all of the other animals. How many times have you taken a moment to consider the richness that is in these creatures? How many times have you not understood that these things are beyond my and your comprehension? Will your heart beat faster one day as your eyes cry before a mango in bloom? Did you ever ask yourself who makes the sun rise?”

“Take a moment to contemplate the marvel of nature that is a butterfly in flight, in a caterpillar that is crawling on a green pigeon pea, in a drop of rain that startles you.”

“Take a moment to look. Look around you. Look at a cricket jumping all about. Look at the beauty of the stream as it shimmers in the middle of the rocks. It gives life to all creatures, it makes all of the trees happy, it finds life in giving life. Can you understand this?”

And then he stood up a moment to catch his breath and said:

“Now look at yourself, Little Football. Take a mirror and look at yourself.”

I was speechless. I had been following every word that came from his mouth, each gesture he made, each breath he took. I had been following him step by step. His words had reached into my entrails. I was like a dry well where the plants could not drink. But each word turned into a cascade of water that penetrated my spirit.

“Many times you bite the hand that made you. Sometimes as well, in the way you think, you say to yourself that it would be better if you were a bird, or a cow, or even a little duck. You can even reach the point of cursing the day you were born. Each time you look at yourself in the mirror, your eyes want to run from the person you see.”

“But go back to yourself. Look at yourself. You have two legs to take you wherever you want. You may tell me there is nothing extraordinary in that; a dog also has legs to run everywhere. This is true, but let us go on.”

“You have two hands to help you touch the things you like that are next to you. Once again, you may tell me, even though a dog does not have hands to appreciate what is next to it, it has its own way to show its feeling to people who make it happy.”

“But look at your two eyes shining in the mirror, are they not beautiful things? They are the light of your body, they light your path everywhere you want to go. But you are right, other animals have two eyes in their heads to lead their bodies. That is true. But let us have a little talk.”

He took my hand and we crossed the stream together. I did not speak at all, but the old man led my mind far. These things made me reflect a great deal.

We came to a large rock on the other side of the stream, and we sat down. The old man had turned his face towards me, he placed his right arm on my left shoulder, his two eyes were on mine. The words that came out of his mouth were penetrating the bones of my body.

“In the midst of all these beautiful creatures, which of them can dominate and control all that your eyes permit you to see? Look at this garden of bananas, is it a dog that cultivated it in order to give you a good crop? You have a house where you live. Which of the creatures make the foundation for it to stand on? You have clothes to put on to protect you from the heat of the sun and the cold of the wind. Was it the little birds that created this invention? When you cry, you find a shoulder to let your tears flow. When you speak, you have someone to understand you. Which of the other creatures has these privileges? Have a little chat with me.”

I did not have anything to say to him. Everything he had shared with me was the truth. I understood this even better with the words he added:

“They call you Human. Every one of your cells, every bone in your body, each limb, each of your veins, is there in a manner that suits the magnificent architecture you represent.”

“They call you Human. Among all the creatures, you are the only one that can think, reflect, and say what you are thinking through your words.”

“They call you Human. That means you have inside you an extraordinary machine that you will not find in any other creature, an invention the people have never surpassed to this day: YOUR BRAIN.”

“It is true, the same way as the birds in the sky, you have two eyes in your head to show the way for you. The same way as the dog can run everywhere, you have two legs to lead you where you want to go; two hands to appreciate what is next to you. But you have a brain of your own. With this marvel, you can create many wonderful things.”

When he finished this phrase, his face was filled with anger. Then he moved, he walked in the middle of the stream. The sun, which had not yet come out completely, shone on his face. This man was not like others. He saw things in a way many others could not.

The way he walked showed that he was different. In his speech, you could see that he was a strong figure. In the way that he looked at everything around him, he was not just any person. In the way he looked at nature, the trees, the birds, he was not a person like others.

His face was raised, his eyes were looking up at the sky. His face had become younger, but it was then I saw the whiskers on his jaw; lots of white whiskers, white like cotton. They were tied together, they looked like dreadlocks, they were very long, as if it had

been some time since they were combed. In my mind, I tried to capture all of the traces in the face of the old man.

I had finished examining his face, I had started looking at his body, as I was trying to think how old he was. I was thinking about this when I saw him come next to me, he sat on the side of the stream and he said:

“When I look at all of the riches there are in nature, it makes me see many things. The flower that opens its petals under the heat of the sun takes off its hat to the human being. The stream that cools all of the trees is softly singing the name of this human being. The birds in the sky are also calling the name [of the human being]. The beauty that is in you and me tells us that there is someone greater than us.”

“But when we look at what human beings are doing, when we look how powerful are the actions of human beings, sometimes too when you see, yourself, the beautiful marvels you can accomplish, it is easy to forget who you are, to take yourself to be God. That is when to beware, that is what you can go wrong.”

“The first thing you need to make your life a success is to understand there is a person who dominates the universe; it is to understand that this person is not you, it is not men. It is the same way too, the first condition that will lead you on the road to failure, is to think that you are better than everyone.”

As soon as he had spoken these words, we saw a fine rain was falling on our heads. As the sun had gone, it had grown chilly; the little birds that had been flying returned to hide in the tree leaves; the little butterflies had disappeared. The mist was falling on the leaves of the tree, on our faces, and on our clothes. In the stream, the design made by the raindrops on the water was very beautiful.

In an instant, I saw Father Bone go back into the stream with his pants on. When I saw this, I did not hesitate; I threw myself in the water. When I lifted him up, I saw Father Bone staring where the sun had gone; and he turned his eyes to me. The way he looked at me made me realize that the sun was in the middle of the sky. It was just noon.

[...]

*Translation from the Haitian Creole by James Ellickson-Brown*

**About the story:**

*Testaman* was selected in October 2002 by the monthly *Bon Nouvel* as the best story written in Haitian Creole. The 76-page novella, which is divided into two parts and a brief epilogue, tells the story of an encounter between a seventeen-year-old and an elderly wise man. The first part, which consists of five chapters, takes place during the course of one day, and in each of the five chapters the old man imparts a new life lesson to the young man. The second part, which consists of two chapters, takes place the next morning, and the epilogue consists of a newspaper account of remarks by the young man at the old man's funeral

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