

Am I allowed to say I'm tired of zombies? Am I allowed to say it right before a story about them? I just find the brain-eating mob trope a little worked over, especially compared to the biography of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the book The Serpent and the Rainbow. Sorry.

Zombis Blanc

In the 1790s, Haiti was known as Saint Domingue and it was a French colony. The island's slaves mistakenly believed the French Revolution's declared Rights of Man would apply to them and, when the truth dawned, they rebelled. Many believe the flashpoint of the revolt was a voodoo ceremony led by Dutty Boukman. Meanwhile, the colony's rival and neighbor, Spain's Santo Domingo, watched the turmoil with a great deal of interest.

Raoul Rubio y Moreno sighed, impatient. The cat-o-nine-tails tapped against his silk-stockinged ankle.

“Dig!” he shouted again. “I’ll not abide sloth!” He gave a questioning glance to the foreman and received, in reply, a look that seemed animal in its blankness. Raoul took this to mean he ought to beat his new property personally.

“’Tis deep enough,” Raoul said at last. “Get your pup in its den and bare your back.”

He took a swig from his flask as the slave set her shovel aside and lowered her pregnant belly into the depression she’d carved in the black loam. He raised the whip and swung it hard as he could, glancing around to see the other blacks’ reactions.

“Why look to the hills?” he demanded. “No salvation awaits there! Only obedience can spare your skin the lash! Obey or suffer. There is aught else.”

He flogged with a joyless, restless determination, pausing only when the setting sun irritated his eyes.

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Hours later, in full dark, Claude Charbonneau awoke. His plantation was close to Spain’s seized territory and he was alert for musket fire, but it was a warm liquid patter on his face that roused him.

He sat bolt upright when he smelled blood.

Standing before him was Caprice, chief among his chattel women. Broad shouldered and fat, Caprice’s face was lit with a wide grin Claude had never before seen. In her right hand was a bloody machete. Her left clutched a thick, gore-soaked braid. A head hung, jaw-fallen, from the hair. It was Claude’s wife Mathilde.

“Look on your woman, planter,” Caprice said as Claude scrambled away, tumbling from under his sheets. “She thought she could lay with my man, yet...”

Claude stood and there was a flintlock pistol in his hand. Teeth chattering but hands steady he took it to full cock and pulled the trigger. The ball went cleanly between Mathilde’s teeth, through the stump of her neck, and buried itself between Caprice’s sagging breasts. With an astonished expression, the slave sat heavily, hands going slack.

Voices in the hall kept Claude moving. He dropped the firearm and pulled its twin, also primed, from under the bed. He lunged towards the door but was too late. Caprice’s youngest son Jean ran through and was met with a pistol ball to the face, the barrel close enough to singe his eyebrows. Jean’s brother Taureau, heavy with muscle, broke into a lumbering run up the steps as the boy fell. Jean was still convulsing as Claude kicked him aside and slammed the door. With a great heave, he tipped a wardrobe down to block the entry.

Claude’s boots, pants and coat were close at hand, along with three more primed guns. He had been waiting to flee, though hoping he wouldn’t need to. A rattle at the window led him to seize Caprice’s machete. He flicked up the lock on the shutters and paused a half-breath. When he saw black fingers pull the window open, he struck down with the point as hard as he could. He didn’t even see which of his servants he was killing, he was too focussed on keeping hold of the blade as the body fell. The door behind him began to splinter before booming, powerful blows.

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“Damn you, can you not fright these simple rebels away?” Raoul cried. One musketeer turned to give him a shocked look, then faced back out the window at a barked order from his commander.

“Sir,” the officer said, taking no pains to disguise his contempt, “We find ourselves mired in the mischief of French slaves. Clearly they know not that Spain protects this land or, if knowing, care not. My sole duty is to block the spread of insurrection to our island side...”

“Listen, you great powder-uglyed gamecock,” Raoul said, poking the military man in the chest, “This land is *mine*, the governor calls me friend, and I’ll not have my first crop trampled because some woman-livered ...”

He didn’t finish his sentence because the officer dropped one shoulder and punched Raoul’s groin as hard as he could. The young planter toppled and, to the coarse laughs of soldiers, vomited on the fine rug he’d appropriated, along with the house and land, not long before.

“Look to the *windows!*” the officer shouted. “Skin your eyes for any movement!”

With tears of rage and impotent loss streaming from his eyes, Raoul crawled away and rose. Crouching, he made his way up the stairs to his sitting room. Small, with a single window, there was only one soldier peering into the red-tinged night.

“Crown of Christ,” the musketeer muttered, eyes wide. “We’re surrounded. All they need do is bury us with numbers.”

“Risking the wrath of Spain? You rate their courage over-much,” Raoul said, then twitched as the soldier fired. His weapon produced a flash of powder and an acrid haze, along with its boom. As Raoul’s senses recovered he realized the soldier was moaning, that the gun’s ramrod rattled in shaking hands as he fumbled to reload.

“Ah God they come, ‘tis true, all true...”

Raoul slapped him. “Cease your prattle!” He seized the weapon and started reloading it himself, slower but with calmer hands.

“The zombis, the zombis, nothing can stop them, they feel no pain...”

“Superstitious dolt.” Raoul aimed out the window, but paused as he beheld the advancing forces.

They were blacks, but with faces ash-whitened and expressionless. Each was emaciated, stumbling, clumsy, tatter-dressed. Some had their jaws bound shut with rags, others... were those stitches holding their mouths closed, or merely unkempt beards? Impossible to tell at this distance. He heard shots and saw smoke puffing from below. Several of the zombis staggered, then stood and limped on.

Raoul frowned, aimed, and shot the top off one’s head. It collapsed.

“They’re but men,” he sneered. “And scrawny.”

“I shot one and he fell not,” the soldier said.

“Likely you missed.” Raoul’s attention was on powder and shot when suddenly the scene out the window blazed hellish red.

Raoul was no military man, but he understood the slaves’ plan. Send a suicide attack to keep the soldiers bottled up. Dress them as native boogeymen to frighten credulous fools. While the troops were distracted, light the fields and encircle them.

With a grunt, Raoul flung open the window. The roof of the verandah was below, it would be an easy descent. He might still make it down the road before the fields became an inferno he couldn’t escape.

“Where are you going?” The soldier clutched at him and Raoul brained him with the musket-butt. He scooped up the ammunition box, hesitated with one foot out the window, then hurried to his desk for a large brown bottle. With that and the weapon, he slid down the roof, tumbled to the ground, and ran.

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Claude crept through the undergrowth of the creek bed. The flow was muddy and low, with better water less than a mile off. He hoped to follow the stream to the coast unobserved.

There was a sound. A crack.

Was it the sound of a distant gun, or the break of a nearby twig? Claude strained his ears, knowing his survival depended on them, and heard a rustle of leaves. He could see nothing but shadows and shapes—the moon, clear at sunset, was now obscured by great clouds of smoke. The fire shone up from beneath and reflected back down, a lurid orange that somehow made Claude think of laughter. Everything was blur and shade but he saw branches move in front of him and kept still.

A man with a musket emerged and stepped heavily into the water. Claude drew one of his remaining pistols and considered its use before his eyes took in filthy silk hose, fine pantaloons and the glint of a silver buckle under a shoe's coat of mud. A planter, then, or a maroon. At best a house slave, but no, the hair was too straight and when the man raised a bottle, Claude saw a European profile.

"Who goes?" Claude muttered and the man spun, but Claude cocked his pistol with an audible click.

"Don't be a fool," the stranger said. "The sound of a shot will call them upon us. They make ruin and riot not a single mile off."

"Put your barrel up, then, Spaniard," Claude replied. The stranger did.

"Now do you likewise, Frenchman."

Claude displayed his weapon as he emerged, disengaging the hammer and easing it back into its holster. "Are then the slaves of Santo Domingo," he said, giving the words an exaggerated twang, "As rebel minded as those of Saint Domingue?"

"I should say no, 'twas was your own ill-disciplined wretches who assaulted us, their Christian saviors."

"Mean you, then, that you stole French land and found yourself facing France's rebellion?"

"Can there be true revolt against those with designs upon their monarch's throne?"

"Cease," Claude said. "I care not who rules in Paris when my plantation home's afire."

Raoul nodded, conceding the point, and offered his bottle. After a swig, Claude raised an eyebrow.

"Art wounded, my brother in rum and flight? Do I taste the poppy within?"

"It has a soothing effect," Raoul said, "For one man enough to use it sparingly."

"Indeed." With a curt nod, Claude handed the bottle back and said, "I wish you well, Spanish though you be. But one may travel in quiet where two would double risk."

"Stay," Raoul said abruptly, starting forward. "Before you hare away, have you a destination?"

Claude shrugged. "Could I but get to the capital, I have there a sloop fit to sail."

"Fit for two? For reaching the city is the rub on this night."

"Have you another plan?"

"I know a secret cave upon the coast close by. If I show it you, we could wait there until the dawn. With their fury spent, the blacks will surely sleep, and then we might hasten by day and not creep in the dark."

"And in return, you would take a berth upon my boat?"

"And more, provide you with welcome in Santo Domingo," Raoul said, aping the Frenchman's emphasis. "Have you coin?"

"Not all for which I married, but as much as is easily carried."

"Each of us meets the other's need. Come, do not despise a second set of hands to hold a gun."

Claude squinted, then nodded.

#

Raoul led Claude beneath the cliffs, and it was a slippery walk upon tide-slicked stones to reach the cavern's mouth. As the Spaniard bent with a grunt, he stopped.

"Undone!" he hissed. "I see lights within!"

But it was too late. Even as he spoke, Raoul heard a double click of pistols and turned to see Claude aiming at a grinning black man.

"Why, 'tis master Charbonneau," Taureau said. "Who of this night has shed so much of my family blood."

"I've balls for one more," Claude said, taking aim down both barrels.

With a mirthless chuckle, Taureau slipped behind the cover of a stone. "Go you within, gentlemen. Can you not guess what waits you there?"

As if on cue, the sound of deep drums started inside the cave.

"Keep back!" Claude cried, and then Raoul aimed his longarm over the Frenchman's shoulder and lit the night with a shot.

The men who lurched around the stone at Taureau's command were like those Raoul had seen at the estate. The first was scarecrow thin, tall for a slave, and he stumbled like a puppet with cut strings as blood flew from the impact on his shoulder. But with a groan the man stood and pushed forward, like the three rag-clad others who made their slow way across the rocks.

"Zombis!" Claude cried. "We must flee!"

"To where, the tides?" Raoul was struggling to reload from his precarious stance, and as the ashen creature he'd shot came near he could read no pain on its face, though the blood on its shoulder was black in the orange night. He saw its mouth clearly now, stitched with heavy thread at the corners, so that only a teaspoon might slip between its lips.

“Shoot them!” Raoul cried, even as Claude fired.

“No use!”

“Aim for the head!” In his haste, Raoul upended his box of shot and stared, aghast, as his precious ammunition tumbled among the rocks and water.

“What sad misfortune,” said a new voice. Deep, arising from the cave, it seemed to Raoul that the earth itself was mocking him. A face painted as a skull came into the light, and Raoul lifted his weapon to club it even as the newcomer raised a wood tube and puffed white powder into his eyes.

Claude’s last pistol shot went wide and he began to flail at the creatures with the machete, screaming curses. He did not hear his Spanish companion fall and kept his eyes only forward until a cord slipped around his neck and he was lifted straight off his feet, the blade tumbling from his grip.

“Oh Charbonneau.” The voice belonged to Gros Pierre, the voodoo priest for the Charbonneau plantation’s slaves. He had been Caprice’s husband, Mathilde’s lover, and father to both Jean and Taureau. “The loa surely smile on me, to give you into my power.”

“Kill me,” Claude grunted, face reddening as he clawed the rope. “I countenanced your rites, give me the grace of death.”

“You made me drop my eyes, call you master,” Gros Pierre replied, easily holding the rope tight with work-hardened muscles. “Have you no mind to see the rituals your generosity permitted?”

Claude couldn’t shake his head, the cord was too tight. With the last of his air he gasped, “For the pleasure you had... of my wife... please...”

“I took no pleasure in her dirty command.” The slave leaned closer and whispered, “I knew I was but her tool to strike envy into your heart. And for your inattention, your wife died, my wife and son as well, and so shall you. And after your death,” the skull-faced slave said, “You will serve me.”

Then he turned and, hoisting Claude onto his back by the strangle cord, Gros Pierre dragged the Frenchman into the cave.

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Claude awoke, if not fully, to the incongruous sensation of a tickle on his feet. He blinked and looked down to see Taureau, with Claude’s ivory shaving brush in his hand, applying white powder to Claude’s soles. He tried to struggle and only shifted feebly, feeling rough twine around his wrists and ankles.

Taureau looked up and smiled. In the firelit cavern, he looked like a Bosch imp. “Have awakened, old Charbonneau? Fear not. You shall soon pass from death’s counterfeit into its truth.”

Claude's head hurt horribly and he felt a strange warmth, a heaviness climbing his legs. He rolled his head to the left and saw the Spaniard, unbound, utterly still, mustache unstirred by breath. Claude tried to groan and his head flopped, the throb of pain synchronizing with the drums. His lips began to tingle, his chest tightened and the capering figures before the fire, the bleating of sacrificed animals, the chanting and scents of fire and blood and strange herbs, it all spun and twisted together, a braid of confusion, he could not breathe and then—darkness.

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His next awakening was sudden, his lungs recalled to movement with a great intake of stale air. It was entirely dark, and Claude could only tell if his eyes were open or shut by feel. He had no feeling of hands, he tried to call for help but was met by tight, pulling pain. His lips were bound, he realized, by two sturdy stitches, one by each canine tooth. When he groaned, the echo told him a surface was only inches from his face. With the scent of earth in his nostrils he realized he had been buried.

This, then, must be hell. For his callous treatment of Mathilde, for his covetousness, for his laziness in not expunging his slaves' sacrilegious rites—this would be his fate. A dark eternity, no hands, no speech, forgotten and entombed.

Claude went mad, then.

He screamed as best he could with his mouth pierced and bound, unable to think of the thinning air, unable to hear a distant thud and grind, empty of everything but horror, and then there was a tremor. He felt the wood of his coffin tremble, then a patter of earth upon his face, and the thinnest pinprick of light came through a gap in the wooden slats. He tried to cry out in thanks, tried to plead for release, but his numbed tongue and sewn lips permitted only moans.

He felt shifts and bumps as his coffin was exhumed, and when the lid came free the starlight was blinding. He began to weep with relief, until he saw who stood above him.

Taureau thrust the butt of a shovel deep into Claude's gut.

"Father," Taureau said. "Look to old Charbonneau."

"Ah." Gros Pierre's voice was all satisfaction, and sitting, too small and askew on his head, was Claude's own finest tricorn. "This zombi has no name now. Eat now, old master," A spoon of something was thrust painfully between Claude's sealed lips, and the taste was potently foul, like acrid walnuts. He spat it out and felt fingers steadying the back of his head only a moment before the hilt of a trowel impacted his mouth.

"You eat that," Taureau said, almost gently, as Claude spat out his foreteeth and tasted blood. Gros Pierre and his helpers held him motionless for another spoonful, and this time his jaw was clamped tight and his throat massaged until he swallowed. The second spoonful he accepted meekly, earning a nod from Gros Pierre.

“Look to the Spanish man,” someone called, hoisting a flimsy wood coffin and dumping it on its side. The man Raoul tumbled out. “His soul has gone, my *houngan*.”

Gros Pierre snorted. “I have a draught from the hand of Boukman himself,” he declared. “It will call this fancy man back even if he be pleased on the devil’s lap.” With rough gestures he packed a brown powder into Raoul’s nose, rolled him onto his back and set his foot atop the the planter’s fine shirt. With steady rhythm, like working a bellows, he pumped Raoul’s chest until, with a start, the body twitched. The men with shovels cheered, and immediately started battering the Spaniard’s arms and legs. “Two fine zombis they make,” Pierre said, “Let us take them to the fields, that they might repay us our toil!”

#

Raoul Rubio y Moreno could tell he was mad, had been made so. Long accustomed to the dreams of opium, he knew the sensation of a mind ajar. The rancid paste they crammed in his mouth daily was stronger and stranger than his gentle laudanum, but of the same type.

He and the Frenchman were dragged out by night, kicked and cuffed and made to haul wood so that the slaves might burn their bonfires, pray to their altered saints, and build crude fortifications against the inevitable French reprisals. For close to a week the blacks made sport of the “zombis blanc” but events were moving swiftly and there was much to distract Raoul’s captors. Rumors flew. The revolutionaries in France had given the slaves freedom. No, it was only the maroons who were to be citizens. The planters were amassing a private army of cutthroats and British to suppress the insurgency. The Spanish were plotting to sweep in while the colony was at war. No, the Spanish were offering to arm and train the slaves, to humiliate the hated French. Boukman was dead. Boukman was at war with Jeannot. Boukman was host to gods and could not be harmed.

Even dazed by pain, exhaustion and hell weed, Raoul knew who he was and could even muster part of his old contempt for the chattel and their childish belief in magic. One day, then, when he and Claude had been stuffed into a shed like two unused rakes, he began to chew through the thick thread sealing his lips. When he spoke, it was the first time since Pierre had blown the numbing white sand into his face.

“Frenchman,” he whispered, his tongue tired and dry. “Claude! We must escape.”

The eyes that looked back reminded Raoul of a beached fish. He tried for a sharp slap, but managed only a feeble swat at the Frenchman’s cheek.

“Come,” Raoul said, pulling the other man to his feet and fumbling with the door. “Your boat, your money... remember? We will take your boat and get away.” He was

speaking Spanish and couldn't recall if Claude understood the language, but any words he tried to recall in French flitted out of his thoughts like bats.

Together, they hobbled out the doorway and squinted, confused, at the glaring sunlight. Unable to judge west or east, they followed the easiest path, downhill and beaten flat by the feet of workers until they came upon a great surprise.

Around a bend, a wagon was stopped. It was just within the low stone wall that divided the fields where they toiled from the homestead of their confinement. A young black boy was attending its horse, and the two Europeans fell into cover as the tired driver strode impatiently into the house.

Under rough cloth, Raoul saw the clear outlines of muskets. He made towards it, feeling as if he walked on club feet or blunt stilts, vaguely aware of Claude behind him, until he reached the cart and pulled a weapon free.

Turning back from the horses, the boy saw them. He screamed.

"This is our chance," Raoul said, his fingers thick and heavy as he tried to measure powder and free a ramrod. "We can flee, take to horse, we can fight..."

The scream had called men from the house, and foremost among them was Gros Pierre. When he saw his white zombies attempting to arm themselves, he laughed.

"Ah, they escape! Have not the French taught us a runaway's fate?" At a whistle, a pack of dogs ran towards him and, at a gesture, raced towards the cart with snapping jaws.

"Damn your black soul," Raoul slurred, firing at Pierre's heart. There was a flash, recoil, but the magician stood there still, grinning and hard-eyed. The bang had at least frightened the hounds, who halted and scattered, as did many of the gaping blacks. Glancing over, Raoul realized Claude had his weapon loaded.

"Kill him," Raoul said. "Even if we die, let us die avenged!"

"No," Gros Pierre said, walking confidently forward. "No, zombi, you are my creature. I hold your soul and you have no will but mine."

"Fool dog!" Raoul cried, trying to reload. There was no chance he could prime it in time. With Taureau and the wagon driver, Gros Pierre hastened toward him.

"Fire, Claude! He owns you not, 'tis only a blasphemous fancy..."

"Kill your comrade, zombi," the voodoo priest said with absolute command, and his last word was lost in the thunder of gunpowder.

A body fell.

"Hmph. He is, at the last, free of toil."

Pierre took the rifle from Claude's unresisting hands and looked down at the dead Spaniard.

"Back to the shed now. You will have work later."

Mute, the zombi Claude Charbonneau obeyed.