Las Terrenas

Porter Fox

I.

The pistol creates a space in the air. The barrel is chrome. It gleams in the sun. When the man in the hooded jacket talks, when he beckons to me to be quiet, when his partner pulls my hands behind my back and pushes my girlfriend toward the bedroom, everyone refers to the gun.

I was watching sunlight spread across the hilltops when they came in. The winter sun doesn't penetrate the mountain valleys of the Dominican Republic until noon. Before then it's dark and musty in the house. When I woke, I opened a window in the guestroom to air the place out.

Now the two shapes suck the light from the room. The shorter man has a towel wrapped around his head to conceal his identity. The taller one is wearing a Northwestern State University Demon Sweethearts windbreaker with the hood cinched around his face. The pair are hunched over, as if trying to crawl through something, over and under something, like the way people step through barbed wire. Push down, pull up. They stare at me like I'm an exhibit in a museum, spread the wire and step through, the whole room crisscrossed with fencing.

For some reason I walk toward them. I can't hear their footsteps. The tall one lifts his finger to his lips. The pistol cuts across the room, two shadows gliding behind it.

The shorter man reaches for my hands. What he is about to do is not happening. The gunman erases it before it happens. He holds his finger in front of my face, wide and pink at the palm, deep brown across the knuckles, and levels the pistol three feet from my forehead. He's not shushing. He is suggesting we are not here. We are by the ocean, under a blue sky and puffy clouds. The sand is golden and there are tiny ripples on the water.

This day is already over, he is saying. Or most of it, anyway. Perhaps there are a few things left to settle.

♋

When it rains here, the drops hit the ocean so hard they suck the water into the sky. The storm begins as a dull roar. A line of black clouds rises off the horizon then runs across the sea, the beaches, a row of whitewashed hotels behind them. Windswept ripples become whitecaps and a thin layer of mist rises off the bay. The fishing boats are gone. The rain puts down the dust and drives people into doorways and under eaves. The sound is so loud you can't hear the meringue playing in the open-air bars or the whine of *motoconchos* driving to and from town.

When it's sunny, the beaches bordering Las Terrenas and the cemetery and the fish shacks along Francisco Alberto Caamaño Deñó road look like strands of golden thread discarded on the floor.

♋

I was watching the light when they came in. They pushed in the screen, crawled through the window and walked into the kitchen. They were there when I turned around. Maybe we moved toward each other. Maybe they were hunched over. I remember thinking they looked scared.

The towel around the shorter man's head is a dull shade of blue. Metallic blue, I think it's called. Metal eyes too. But there is a softness to him. He grips my wrists but not hard. His head is metal, but his hands are soft and hot. He holds me with one hand, like we are going for a walk. *Let's go for a little walk*, he is saying. *Let's go for a walk and see about these things we've forgotten.*

The men smell like coconut oil and cigarette smoke. The gunman's eyes are red and bulging like he's high on something. Their skin is ebony and I assume they are from Haiti. It is a biased assumption. Discrimination abides by a rainbow of black and tan in the D.R. The two countries share a border on Hispaniola, but that's the only thing they share. Thirty thousand Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent are deported to Haiti every year solely for the color of their skin. There is no judicial oversight. Many of the deportees have never been to Haiti.

The shorter man marches me forward and A'yen walks into the room. She's wearing shorts and a tank-top. She is holding a brand new laptop and looks angelic in the light. The three of us pause and stare at her. Her mouth opens. The words fade away.

She bought the computer in New York City a week before we left. We were going to work here. That was the plan. We would live here for three months and work and do something different.

Everything's okay, I tell her. Everything is just fine.

The gunman lifts the computer from her hands and pulls a gold ring off her index finger. He puts the ring in his mouth and flips it on his tongue. This is the game. Forget about the things we have. Forget about ourselves. The shorter man tightens his grip on my wrists. The gunman puts the computer on the dining room table, turns to me and hisses, *Dinero*.

Terrazas de Coson

What could be better than having a home where you would love to vacation?

Prepare to fall in love. On an island in the pristine waters of the Caribbean sits the warm and inviting nation of the Dominican Republic, filled with natural treasures, friendly people, and exciting things to see and do. It's a land of lush hills and turquoise waters and year-round tropical weather. And this Caribbean jewel is a modern democracy, with a stable government and a stable economy. On the north side of the country, facing the beautiful waters of the Atlantic Ocean, is the Samaná Peninsula, a magical world the natives call, simply, Samaná. It's a piece of the Dominican Republic considered to be the most picturesque; with pure, white beaches, palm-covered mountains, and lush, tropical rain forests. It is in the hills of Samaná where Terrazas de Coson is located. Right next to the vibrant, international town of Las Terrenas. Founded by the French forty years ago, Las Terrenas is a charming mélange of French, Italian, Belgian, German, Spanish and Dominican cultures and peoples; with restaurants, nightlife, clubs and a European flair.

— terrazasdecoson.com

The developers came en masse, Litvinoff says, mostly Europeans. They bought everything they could. The price of beachfront property jumped three hundred percent. The price of land in the hills doubled. The Dominican government passed laws in 1998 and 2001 allowing foreigners to buy as much land as they wanted and tourism businesses to be tax exempt for ten years. In 2006 the government built an international airport servicing Las Terrenas and the Samaná Peninsula and, in 2008, finished a new highway connecting Samaná to Santo Domingo.

The value of the Euro spiked and foreign direct investment in the D.R. jumped eighty-four percent in a year. Snowbirds and developers from France, Italy and Spain swept up land and condos for pennies on the dollar. The land rush spread to the United States and celebrities like Julio Iglesias and Oscar de la Renta invested in massive resorts and upscale housing developments in Las Terrenas. In the spring of 2007, Brad Pitt flew around the area in a helicopter looking for land. In 2008 alone, $1 billion in development poured into the town of fourteen thousand. President Leonel Fernandez announced he would make the Samaná Peninsula the world's new Monte Carlo.

The Haitians came to build the hotels, Litvinoff says. The minimum wage in Haiti is $1.75 a day. Unemployment is at seventy percent and more than half the country lives in extreme poverty. With inflation over nineteen percent, it's cheaper to buy imported rice than seeds to grow your own.

While the D.R. saw double-digit growth in the last decade, Haiti was decimated by a series of natural disasters. Five thousand Haitians died in 2004 in Tropical Storm Jeanne, and in 2008, Tropical Storm Fay and Hurricanes Gustav, Hanna and Ike wreaked $900 million in damages and left half a million people homeless. The World Bank's *Natural Disaster Hotspot* study of 2006 listed Haiti as one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to acts of God. At the time of printing, the death toll from the earthquake that leveled Port-au-Prince in January had passed one hundred fifty thousand and affected a third of the country's nine million residents.

Fifteen years ago there wasn't a single Haitian on the Samaná Peninsula, Litvinoff says. Now there are a million in the D.R., most illegally. They work twice as hard as Dominicans and are paid half the price. They live in the empty hotels and condos they build until the structures are finished. Dominican contractors list regular wages on the books and split the difference with government officials. Nothing, he says, happens in the D.R. without the government getting a piece. Often, contractors deport Haitian workers the day before payday. The police take everything they have and sell it, then put them on a bus for Haiti and charge them for the ride. The next day a new crew is hired.

When I ask the Europeans why Haiti—the first post-colonial black nation in the world—and the D.R. turned out so differently, they say Haiti revolted too soon. Another few years under Napoleon would have done them well, they say. After the January earthquake, Pat Robertson said on

national television that Haiti has been cursed since it made a pact with the devil to beat the French.

When the Santa Maria went aground on the north coast of Haiti on Christmas day, 1492, Columbus asked the local Taíno Indians to help him build a fort from the timbers of the caravel. When they finished the garrison at La Navidad, he kidnapped a dozen natives to bring home to Queen Isabella I.

The police are in on the crime, too. Officers in the D.R. make two hundred dollars a month and have to supply their own firearm. A family can't survive on that kind of money. In the old days, Litvinoff says, Dominican hotel proprietors organized an owner's association that paid cops a stipend every month, to keep them clean. The association even packaged food and sent it to officers' families around the country. But European developers refused to join. They said things should run like they did at home.

But this isn't home. And now most policemen in Las Terrenas use the law as a means to make a living. Some simply turn a blind eye in exchange for a few hundred pesos. Others set up phony drug deals to extort foreigners. Still others pay Haitians to do the job then make bogus arrests to satisfy victims. Some cops just put on a mask, rob a house in their uniform and go to back to work.

In March of 2009, President Fernandez fired seven hundred police officers and thirty-one military and police generals, in an effort to clean up corruption. He did it only after the head of the nation's top anti-drug agency was connected to trafficking. Six months before we arrived, the entire Las Terrenas police force was fired due to widespread corruption. It took about three months for the new recruits to learn the game, Litvinoff says.

> There's an old expression in the D.R., he says. If they aren't working for you, they are working for them.

The *motoconchos* see all. They park at a three-way intersection in the center of town, a band of blaze orange vests and sun-bleached 125cc motorcycles. They sit on their bikes and wait for customers, their heads waving back and forth with the traffic. When a woman walks by they press their tongue against their teeth and make a hissing noise. For five dollars, a *concho* will take you anywhere. For ten, he'll tell you things.

I watch them in the morning. A cobbler on the corner yells at a woman in a pink headscarf and she laughs. A prostitute wearing oversized white sunglasses smiles at me. She has gaps between her front teeth and dark, almond-shaped eyes. A woman wearing cutoff jeans sells blanched hot-dogs for a dollar. She has a green clip in her hair and grins when people speak to her. She never answers, just smiles and turns her head.

This is my routine. Wake up at the hotel. Check the locks. Walk to the terrace. Brew coffee. Drink coffee. Call the police station. Watch the maintenance boy dance with his rake. Eat fruit. Pay a *concho* to drive me to town. Tip him well. Ask the news. Sit on a bench and observe.

The day I met Litvinoff in the hotel restaurant, he told me he grew up farming coconuts in Las Terrenas. He is sixty-two with gray hair and soft green eyes. He said the only way to get to the Samaná Peninsula back then was on a railroad that delivered coconuts and cacao from Sanchez to La Vega. A wealthy Scotsman named Baird constructed a road in the late 1800s. Sometime after that a jeep path was cleared over the Cordillera Samana to Las Terrenas. When French expats discovered the town in the 1970s, there was a single dirt road and land was priced by how many palm trees grew on it.

The waitress brought us coffee and he asked me the only question of the day:

> Did he have the killer eyes?
> Yes, I said.

It was an instinctual response. I couldn't think of any other way to describe the man.

> OK, he answered.

♋

I was watching light reflect off the water cooler when they came in. We'd installed it the night before. The house we'd rented was brand new and the landlord sent us on a shopping spree at a home supply store to outfit it. A'yen and I had been dating for six months and pretended like we were newlyweds. She picked out fancy ceramic salad plates with swooping corners and I found a set of six working glasses. We bought a juicer for the boxes of fruit we saw for sale around Las Terrenas and a knife rack for the carving knife we'd brought from the States. We lived on meager freelancer salaries in New York and felt like we'd stumbled across a windfall. We

bought a blender and four margarita glasses. Friends and family said they'd visit. My mother told us she already had plane tickets.

It only took a week to find the house. Our realtor was from New Jersey. He had bright blue eyes and had lived in the D.R. for eight years. He was constantly running between meetings and in awe of the money pouring into town. His partner had just built a spec house—three bedrooms, high-speed Internet, wicker patio furniture, a pool and hardwood floors. He'd rent it to us for $800 a month. It was three miles from town and set next to two other houses in a fenced-in complex. It came with a twenty-four-hour armed guard and a cleaning lady if we wanted. You can't do better than this, he said.

Skeletons of half-built mansions towered over Juan Pablo Duarte Road on the way to our new home. Every twenty yards, a real estate agency displayed photos of property for sale. Opposite the storefronts, men sold gasoline in plastic soda bottles at five dollars a liter. We passed an Italian café, a creperie, a pizzeria and a French bakery with fresh baguettes and raisin brioche in the window. At the intersection in the middle of town, a half dozen Mercedes and Porsche SUVs lined up behind a cluster of locals on Honda Super Cub mopeds. On the soft shoulder, Haitian workers ambled slowly, watching each car drive by.

The men somehow know no one is coming. The guard is gone, as are the maintenance men who were raking outside the window minutes before. The neighbors are at work. The landlord, who lives next door to the complex, is in Santo Domingo for the week. I lead the men to my money clip on the dining room table. They leave our passports and credit cards. All they want is cash. And the computers.

They gather the money and laptops in a pile then lead us to the hallway where the gunman tries to put us in different rooms. His partner pulls me toward the guestroom while the gunman pushes A'yen into the master bedroom. She slips away and stands beside me. The gunman grabs her arm again and she wriggles free.

We are striking a deal. They get the things they want. We get some of the things that we want. It's not a fair trade. The gunman grabs A'yen again and pushes both of us into the bedroom.

There is no order to their search. They don't recognize the value of most of our belongings. They toss a GPS unit worth the annual per capita income in Haiti, an iPod and a backup hard drive that holds the book

I've been working on for two years to the side. They take our sunglasses and a pair of computer speakers.

They rifle through each bag and two bureaus three times before they give up. Then they stand in the middle of the room, seemingly unsure what to do next. The gunman looks toward the door. Then he takes A'yen's hand and leads her to the bed. He yells something at his partner who pulls the sheets off and starts to tie my hands behind my back with them. The gunman hisses at A'yen like the *conchos* and draws his fingers across his neck. She holds her hands in the air and he touches the pistol's barrel to her lips. She lowers her arms and he pushes her back on the bed.

It's strangely euphoric to realize there are worse things than dying. Like a burden has been lifted. I envision a peaceful place, our family lake house in Maine. My father sets a tin can filled with water on the porch railing. He shoots it with a twelve-guage shotgun. He wants to show me the power of a firearm. When he pulls the trigger, the can disappears in a cloud of metal and water.

II.

There are four doorways in the police station. There are no doors in the doorways, just openings in the concrete. Officers and civilians drift in and out. Four plastic chairs sit in a circle in the dirt parking lot. Behind them is a pile of motorcycles with no engines. When the *concho* lets me off, three officers in tan uniforms look up from one of the bikes, then go back to what they were doing.

The detective's office is in the northwest corner of the building. In the middle is the officer's room. There is a wooden chest there with a lock on it. Six shotgun barrels jut from one side.

There is no glass on the detective's windows. There's a simple desk and chair and a computer on the desk. Lieutenant Garcia reclines in an office chair with his feet on the desk. He has short-cropped black hair and tired, dark eyes. Captain Brito's office is on the other end of the building. He takes notes in loopy cursive in a composition book. There is a chair opposite his desk waiting for me.

He says he has the men in custody. He touches the corner of his eye with his index finger then points at me. He wants me to identify them. A cadet puts his hand on my shoulder. I stand and he leads me behind the building, past a concrete barracks where a half-naked officer is bathing with a hose.

The prisoners lie head-to-toe in a cement cell with wrought iron bars and a padlock. There are fifteen of them. The officer smacks his baton across the bars and yells something. The men wake and sit up. It is dark in the cell. I am lit by the sun. There is no one-way mirror, no shade. They look me up and down.

I don't see the gunman at first. All the men look the same: dark skin; flat forehead; high cheekbones. These are the faces of Africa, descendants of the first wave of slaves to cross the Atlantic. The first shipment arrived on Hispaniola in 1502. By the end of the eighteenth century, Africans on the island numbered 800,000—a third of the Atlantic slave trade—and cultivated half the sugar and coffee consumed in Europe.

I scan the faces then see one in the back. I recognize his eyes. He's wearing a sleeveless black T-shirt. He drops his head and puts a hand over his face.

That night Litvinoff buys me dinner at the hotel. I tell him they found the men. He says they'll be free by the end of the week.

> They are ghosts, he says. Nameless, faceless ghosts. They have no paperwork, no home. They are the perfect pawns.

The waves are smaller now that the storm has passed. The sand here isn't white like in some parts of the Caribbean. It's golden and fine. The trade winds pick up at noon and peak at three. It is the same northeasterly breeze the Arawaks and Taínos fought to get here from South America twelve hundred years ago. The same that Columbus followed from Palos, Spain, to San Salvador Island then Cuba then Hispaniola in 1492.

A half million natives died on Hispaniola in the twenty years following Columbus' arrival. In the next half century, five million Europeans died from the syphilis Columbus' captives brought back.

Travel is not exploration. It is about taking things from each other.

The water is indigo and pale green in the morning. Stretches of reef appear like ink blotches at midday. The water turns blue in the afternoon then pink and red at night. There are three small islands called The Ballenas off Playa Coson that people say look like a whale breaching. Beyond that is the shadow of a larger island I don't know the name of.

House music plays twenty hours a day on the beach. Remixes, minimal techno, drum and bass. The Europeans park their SUVs on the dirt road behind the beach and lay out all day. They cover themselves in *oil de coco* that they buy in recycled beer bottles. They eat crepes and ceviche and drink caipirinhas. Then they lie out again.

Almost every foreigner I meet owns a home or a timeshare. Whoever doesn't is here to look for one. The value of the Euro makes the cost of an apartment in Las Terrenas equivalent to an expensive car at home. A cook and a cleaning lady go for fifty dollars a week. The Europeans are euphoric, frenzied by the high standard of living. They talk about real estate incessantly, about how the new highway and airport will affect land prices. During the day, seventy-year-old men drive ATVs bare-chested down Juan Pablo Duarte Road. At night their wives throw catered dinner parties with Dominican servers passing around rum punch and hors d'oeuvres. It's like they are reliving the imperialist life they'd always heard about but never enjoyed.

The *conchos* find them anything they want: French champagne, lobster, land. A bag of cocaine is five dollars. A girl goes for eighty for the night. A handgun is fifty. When I ask an older expat one night if he feels guilty about living in a condominium that was built with slave labor, he shrugs and says it was finished before he arrived.

In the morning and at night, Haitians walk home from Playa Bonita, where the big hotels are being built. Their pitched roofs emerge through the canopy week by week, as if they are growing alongside the palms. Seventy-eight villas are almost finished in Terrazas de Coson. Marina Puerto Bonita is constructing thirty-six villas, two hundred luxury apartments and slips for one hundred seventy-five boats. The same Italian construction company building one of the developments is blazing a private highway from the new airport in El Catey directly to the development. There are no environmental impact studies. It's all tax free. In town, there is so much dust from the construction that store clerks keep a damp rag at the counter to wipe food down before bagging it.

We sit on the beach most days now. Big, puffy clouds darken the sand, then move northwest toward the headlands. They're charcoal in the center and white and frilly on the edges. The sun lights them from behind. There are no jets in the sky. Just the single-engine Cessna that flies businessman and fresh fish from Santo Domingo every morning and afternoon.

There are still double scratch lines on A'yen's thigh. They are long and curved, perfectly parallel. This is how the scratches are made: Two metal

prongs on a twelve-foot fencepost drag across her skin. They are a half inch apart. When she swings her leg over the top of the fence, two gunshots ring out. When she falls over the other side, the prongs slice into her leg and lay it open.

The shorter man puts another wrap around my wrists and I pull free and hold my hands in the air. I have no idea what I'm doing, but this is not part of the deal. The gunman orders him to tie my wrists again, and when he cinches the knot this time I push him violently and yell, No! He drops the sheet and the gunman points the pistol at me. This time the shorter man ties it loosely around my arms.

Lo siento, he whispers.

Something has changed. The gunman leaves A'yen on the bed and pulls his partner into the middle of the room. He hits him across the back with the butt of the pistol and directs him to look through two more suitcases in the walk-in closet. Then he tells A'yen to stand next to me and searches a duffel bag at our feet for the fourth time.

He waves the pistol back and forth as he rummages. For the first time I think about grabbing it. They have too much time. They are starting to want more. The man's hood has come un-cinched and I realize we can identify him now. I focus on the gun, watch it swing close. I visualize grabbing the barrel, pulling up and away. But then he's gone, back to the closet to see what his partner found.

The lake in Maine. The exploded tin can. My father takes the gun apart, shows me how to clean the levers and springs with a toothbrush, run powder solvent through the barrels. We shoot shotguns, rifles and pistols and clean them too. To disarm a pistol, he says, open the chamber and take out the clip.

I whisper to A'yen that I'm going to open the patio door. It is directly behind us and leads to the front yard. I go over the locking mechanisms in my head three times. It opens to the outside. There is no deadbolt. The handle unlocks by turning it. The gunman sees me glance over my shoulder and tells us to move closer to him.

We do and he hisses again and draws his fingers across his neck. Then he opens the pistol's chamber to show us it's loaded. The mechanism malfunctions and a bullet falls to the floor. He watches us as he kneels to pick it up. Then he removes the clip.

After reloading, he quickly opens the chamber again, but the mechanism malfunctions a second time and the bullet falls out. He picks it up. If he removes the clip again, the gun will be empty. The only thing he can do with it until he reloads is throw it at me.

He turns the gun on its side and I pause. The fallen bullet looks hot in his hand. The barrel gleams. When he switches the release lever and ejects the clip, I run.

III.

Las Terrenas Country Club

> The Country Club aspect of Las Terrenas represents the ideal social atmosphere, incorporating an elite, private feel with an active, recreational lifestyle. Members will enjoy a variety of entertaining activities along with full access to leisure sports facilities, including the Signature Golf Course, Fitness Center, Tennis Club, Spa, and Beach Club. Residents and their guests will enjoy the exclusivity of the Las Terrenas Country Club, knowing they will be able to discover every exciting feature, privately.
>
> While Las Terrenas offers an impressive array of fun-filled recreations of all kinds within the Country Club walls, what makes the location of this delightful property so unique is the wealth of activities also available outside of the Resort boundaries. Fascinating and exciting adventures await you as you leave Las Terrenas to discover the hidden gems scattered about the Samaná Peninsula.
>
> With the charming Las Terrenas Village within walking distance of the site, it's never a hassle to go out and explore the local boutiques and cafes, or dine out for a taste of the local foods at one of the many restaurants. You'll be impressed by the quality and presentation of every dish, featuring freshly caught fish and succulent, locally grown fruits and vegetables, all prepared for your enjoyment as you sit by the ocean with the sun shining down upon you.
>
> —lasterrenascountryclub.com

I'm taken by fantasy every hour. In most, I grab the gun and wrench the barrel up. They say the wrist will start to break and he will let go. But what if there is a hesitation? The gunman could grab the pistol with the other hand or double over and twist away. The fantasy always splits into a thousand endings that flash through my mind.

One ending has me with the gun, wrested away and secure in my hand. I shoot the gunman, every time. Even after he has surrendered. I shoot him somewhere low, so as not to kill him. Sometimes I shoot his partner too. Sometimes I let him go.

After I pull the trigger, I send A'yen for help. I always fire again when she's gone. Not when she's out of earshot. Just when she won't see.

There are four armed guards at our new hotel, maid service and a restaurant that everyone says serves the best food in town. I look behind doors and curtains in the morning, midday, at night. I lock the bathroom when I shower and sleep with a kitchen knife under my pillow. One night while we lie in bed with the lights off, I watch a figure move across the balcony while A'yen speaks to me. She asks why I'm not listening at the same instant I realize the shadow is a breadfruit leaf. I tell her I dozed off.

It was A'yen who wanted to stay. She said she wanted to face the demons here, not at home. I was on the phone with the airline when she told me.

The day after we move to the hotel, I secure every door and window with extra locks and hasps and ask the hotel staff to replace two broken panes in the balcony door. When the clerk at the hardware store asks what the locks are for, I tell him our story. He retells it to his coworkers and they laugh.

The only safe place in the D.R., he says, is up in the sky.

I can't concentrate on my book and begin researching crime in Las Terrenas. Facts make the assault more real, and I become obsessed with information. I call the U.S. Embassy, Amnesty International, Transparency International, anyone who has information on Las Terrenas. I talk to the *conchos* and sit at the creperie in the center of town. I read about Columbus' brother constructing Santo Domingo; Dominican independence; U.S. occupation under Woodrow Wilson and Lyndon Johnson; Trujillo's brutal thirty-year military dictatorship.

I search local media for reports of crime, but find they are run by people in the tourism or real estate business and only a few robberies are recorded. I look online and see that most local web sites and message boards are also owned or mediated by businesspeople who stand to lose if visitors

think Las Terrenas has a crime problem. When I question expats, I get mixed responses. Some say there isn't any crime. Others say there used to be but that the town cleaned up. Everyone says what happened to us never happens.

Yet within twelve days of our break-in, I find victims of five home invasions. Most are still in shock when I interview them. In one instance, three men armed with sub-machine guns held a French woman and her cancer-stricken husband hostage in their million-dollar home for an hour—while they emptied the couple's home of TVs, stereos and computers. In another, a French tourist was shot in the foot when she refused to do what thieves told her, and in yet another an American tourist woke up in a hotel downtown to find his two adolescent children being held at gunpoint.

When I ask Europeans about the crime, most deny it. It's as if the idea spoils the image of their imaginary paradise. When I tell them about the victims I've interviewed, many clarify that there has long been an unspoken agreement between foreigners and locals—that Hispaniola's Catholic roots keep thieves from killing or raping anyone. Many expats store valuables in a safe depository in town called Fort Knox and keep a small amount of cash on-hand, as an offering to thieves. Sometimes they drive by the depository just to make it look like they are dropping valuables off.

The ladrones see you within an hour of arriving in town, a Dominican working at a café on the beach says. They'll rob you within seventy-two hours if you don't take precautions. A young Frenchwoman manning a hotel reservation desk—who'd been robbed four times by men with machetes her first week in Las Terrenas—laughs the break-ins off.

> It's better than home, she says, where they'll jail you for smoking a cigarette indoors.
>
> This is the price you pay for paradise, muses an older German expat who's owned a beachside condo for seven years.

Most people I tell our story to say we'd been foolish to run, adding that the only people in Las Terrenas who get robbed are newcomers who don't know the rules. Yet all six victims I interview have lived in Las Terrenas for eight to twenty years. One is an affluent sixty-two-year-old Italian woman who moved to town in 1988. Two weeks after our robbery, two Haitian men sneaked past her guards and into her mansion, then shot at and beat her with a shotgun before tying her up in the bathroom. Another victim is from Holland. He'd run an auto repair business in town since

1997 and had burglar-proofed his house with iron bars and an alarm. When he drove home the night before I interviewed him, three men were waiting for him outside his front door with a pistol, a hunting knife and a club wrapped in barbed wire.

I tell our story to an older Parisian couple that afternoon and they repeat that the incidents are isolated. They are the exception, not the rule. When the man's wife leaves the room to get a bottle of wine, he whispers to me that the hotel guard who sits three hundred feet from their condo was shot to death three days before.

It's the colors that cast the spell. The way the light glances off the bay, the golden sandbars, the deep green breadfruit leaves and steep mountains that lurch straight out of the ocean. The Taíno word for Hispaniola translates as, "Mother of the Earth." The Taíno grew tobacco on the island and enjoyed relaxing and smoking a thousand years before Europeans arrived. When Columbus landed, they welcomed him and his crew with gifts.

Years later, when the female Taíno chief, Anacaona, rebelled against the Spanish, the regional Spanish Governor hanged her in front of her people. She was thirty-nine. They say she composed beautiful ballads and narrative poems.

The more information I find, the more I want. CNN reports that the D.R. has become Colombia's new transit point for cocaine trafficking. That afternoon I interview a young Frenchman in the lobby who runs cocaine across Samaná Bay in a skiff. (It's beautiful there! he says. You should go!) A week later I notice two policemen and two civilians walking into our hotel, holding suitcases. Twenty minutes later, they leave separately.

> They keep the place safe, the manager says. And they drink for free.

Dominican Republic 2009 Crime & Safety Report

Crime Threats

- In 2008, 65.5 percent of all deaths in the D.R. were attributed to criminal activity.

- 58.4 percent of all victims were between the ages of 18 and 34.
- 62.5 percent of all crimes happened between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.
- 55.2 percent of the crimes happened between Monday and Thursday
- 92.6 percent of the victims were men who did not cooperate with the assailants.

One day I meet two Dominican brothers in the hotel restaurant. Felix lives in Miami; Manuel is a cop in Santo Domingo. I pay them a hundred dollars to drive us to the house to get our things.

Felix takes us down Juan Pablo Duarte Road then turns left on a dirt bypass. I ask him to stop at a random shack on the left to interview whoever lives there. I want an impartial history of Las Terrenas. Angela del la Cruz Martinez answers the door and says she has lived on the half-acre plot for fourteen years. She is thirty-two and bought it ten years ago for three hundred fifty dollars. She has five kids and no husband. Relatives in New York send her money to survive. The walls and roof of her house are corrugated steel, but she keeps the place spotless. Three of her children sleep in one of the three rooms and she and the two youngest sleep in the other. A display of a hundred stuffed animals sits on four shelves on the living room wall.

I ask Martinez about violence in Las Terrenas and she says it spiked in the last five years. Her ex-husband was a guard at a wealthy Korean couple's home that was robbed a month before. He and the owner hid as three Haitian men ransacked the house and took the owner's wife captive. She died of a heart attack during the assault. Four years ago, she adds, her brother was shot and killed outside her doorway.

> Crime followed the foreigners, she says. But we want them here. They bring the jobs, money.

We wish her well and continue to our old house. An acre of jungle has been clear-cut behind the complex so thieves can't hide there. Inside, the house is trashed. We gather our things in duffel bags as Manuel stands guard. On the drive back to town we wait for a bulldozer at a construction site where an Italian developer has flattened half of a four hundred-vertical-foot mountain. Felix says he's building sixty condos there. When Manuel drops us at the hotel, he tells us to be careful.

> The guards just sell tickets to the thieves, he says.

I am leading a double life. I drink caipirinhas with expats during the day and drive a rental motorcycle around town in the afternoon to conduct interviews. Since I was identified by the prisoners, entire groups of Haitians watch me drive by. At first I think it's in my head. Then I turn around and see them watching me.

It's the *guapa*, Litvinoff says. In the rest of the D.R. the word refers to a curious stare. In Las Terrenas, it's meant to intimidate.

I visit the police station every day and get a different answer each time. They say the original suspects were released because they'd been held too long without charges. Then they say they arrested them again. The next day they claim they got the wrong men and show me a stack of mug shots that look like they were taken decades ago.

One day they tell me that they recovered our computer speakers and sunglasses from a jungle hideout. They hand them over and as I leave the station, a Frenchman stops me and asks where I got them. I tell him they are mine, that the police found them after we'd been robbed. He says that's not true. He found them that day in his yard—two hundred yards from our old house—and gave them to the police. We compare stories and realize that the thieves who put a gun to his daughters' heads a few days before were wearing our sunglasses.

I ask him what kind of pistol the men had. He says it was a .45 with a chrome barrel.

Then he looks at the station and says: Don't believe what they say.

When Haitians invaded Santo Domingo in 1822 they drafted Dominican men between sixteen and twenty-five into the Haitian army. The soldiers weren't paid. To survive, they were forced to steal from their own people.

In 1937, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina's men murdered thirty thousand Haitians living in the D.R. to realize his dream of a whiter nation. The soldiers used machetes instead of bullets so they couldn't be traced. They identified Haitians by the color of their skin. Anyone in question was made to trill the "R" in the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*.

Trujillo was one-quarter Haitian.

♋

When I pitched this story to travel magazines, they said it wasn't their kind of thing. Too scary. Too depressing. Their readers like to read about nice things, they said, "sunny things."

After I sat down to write it anyway, I had to cut my notes into strips and drop them into a fan to find the beginning. I'm still looking for the end.

♋

I remember light. And air. The space outside seems infinite. I don't remember opening the door, just running and yelling. The gunman somehow gets past A'yen and chases me. She darts behind the patio furniture and runs around the edge of the yard. I see her twenty feet behind me on my left.

I scream for help but no one responds. I'd naively assumed people would come running the moment we escaped, but there isn't a soul in the yard or the guardhouse. It seems more important to get help than wait, unarmed, for A'yen. Looking back, I can't be sure it wasn't self-preservation.

I don't know where the first bullet hits. The second ricochets off the flagstone eight feet to my left. An image of Yosemite Sam running across the desert flashes through my mind. I'm so overwhelmed with adrenaline that I almost laugh.

I duck behind a stone wall separating the compound from the main road and wait for A'yen. When she rounds the corner I take off again for the landlord's house. We'd been barefoot all morning and still didn't have shoes. I look back at her as we run. She seems to be slowing, like she's running in a dream but not moving.

We turn into the driveway and find the guard, maid and an electrician with a ladder on his truck. They look at us curiously. A'yen yells in Spanish that there are men with pistols. She's not crying; she's not frantic. I'm amazed she can remember Spanish. The workers don't move. A'yen says the men are coming down the road and the guard walks casually down the driveway to investigate. He disappears around the corner and we hear two more shots.

We're not sure if the workers are in shock or if the robbery is a setup. We have to assume the latter and hide behind the house. We hear three more shots, seemingly closer, and I tell A'yen that we have to climb the fence. She throws her scarf over the coil of barbed wire looped over the

top and starts up. When she gets to the top, two prongs slice through the scarf into her leg. Another shot is fired and she falls over the other side. I follow her and we run across a field of rocks and brambles.

Another shot rings out and we crawl through a low barbed wire fence and lie on our stomachs. Our hands and feet are bleeding. We wait a few minutes then chase down two young boys driving a moped down the road. I pull the passenger off and tell the driver to take us toward town. All three of us squeeze onto the seat as the kid weaves along the crown. He stops at a massive construction site where a woman in an SUV asks us what happened. We tell her and she takes us to the police station.

Brito is sitting in his office when we arrive. A few other officers mill around the yard. I explain what happened then look around for two chairs to sit in. A'yen asks for some water and an officer tells her they don't have any. I ask him for first aid supplies and he says they don't have that either. A'yen puts her head in her hands and I put my arm around her. She starts shaking and the officer asks her why she's crying.

IV.

We've fallen under the spell too. It's been two weeks since the assault and we are still here. We sit on the beach for a few hours every day and watch the ocean and the sun. I find peace snorkeling around the reef. I float with my arms out to the side and watch schools of trumpet fish swim just under the surface and iridescent parrotfish chew on the coral. Most of the coral is dead, but occasionally I find a colorful sponge or fan. Every now and then I come across a plastic bag hanging off the reef or a car tire sitting on the bottom.

One day A'yen comes with me. She holds my hand and we swim past the first reef into the deep water. Light blue clown fish circle beneath us and we hover over them. A'yen never lets go. At one point she puts her whole arm around my waist.

We're still sore from scratches and cuts. A'yen's heel is bruised and she has a small limp. The cuts on her hands are healing but she still can't sleep at night. She plays the guitar we brought and writes constantly in her journal. She's reading *The Invisible Man* and cried for a half hour yesterday, saying that we live in a sad world and how everything is so sad. I see her sitting on the edge of the bed and don't know what to say. I envision her running down the road behind me, starting to slow, falling further behind.

These thieves are like fire. I want to want to warm my hands on them.

♋

Litvinoff says I have to offer the police a gift. I take two hundred dollars to the station and tell the prosecutor, a young man named Medina, that I want the thieves' names and passport numbers. Surprisingly, he refuses the money. Two days later he hands me a scrap of paper. The names are written in cursive, like drawings on the paper.

Wilfelue Noel #1223385
Max Lilu #0657352
Jacklin Chouloute #unknown

That afternoon I hire a Haitian man named Michel who works in the hotel to find the men. He was given a scholarship by a Christian group to go to college in Texas and is a kind, excitable twenty-five-year old. He hugs me every time he sees me. He studied computers and came to the D.R. to find work after he graduated. The only job he could get was in a hotel.

He comes to our room after his shift a few days later and we sit on our balcony. I hand him one of the hundred-dollar bills I'd gotten for Medina and he folds it and puts it in his pocket. I tell him I want to interview the men who robbed us. He doesn't respond and I add that I don't want to hurt them. I just want to ask them questions.

The words sound strange coming out of my mouth and I wonder if I've started to lose my mind. I haven't told A'yen my plans. This is the final stage of the inquisition. I need to be in the same room with the men again. We shared something at the house, and I want to see them again.

Violence is not about survival. It is not taking. It is a communion.

Michel shifts in his chair. He says they'll think it's a trap. That he'll have to pretend like he has a job for them. Something specialized, like pouring concrete.

Two days later we meet in our hotel room. We continue meeting every other day after that. He tells me what he's found. I give him cash. The men are from Saint-Raphael, he says, a Haitian border town three hours away. They live in a house across from the Western Union and drink at a bar adjacent to the grocery store we use.

He says it is difficult to speak to them directly. When he hasn't made contact a week later, I tell him I want to go to the barrio. He meets me the next day outside the hotel. He's wearing cargo shorts, a long-sleeve T-shirt and gold sunglasses. He says he should drive and I climb onto the seat behind him for my last trip on the motorcycle.

They live in the spaces in between—behind the buildings and banks and real estate offices on Juan Pablo Duarte Road. Footpaths weave through the market toward it. Foot-worn steps lead down from the hardware store and auto repair garage to it. The paths meander around open toilets and piles of trash then merge with larger paths, before crossing a bridge and a road and, finally, entering the other side of paradise.

The neighborhood opens up like a dusty orchid as we drive in. Hundreds of tiny houses made of corrugated steel, wood and cardboard shoulder up against each other. The houses extend into the hills, are supported on three sides by two-by-fours. They line the road as far as you can see, until the road turns left where they continue again out of sight.

There are bars and nightclubs. Markets and electricians and butchers. Residents linger outside their houses and talk to passersby. Some are Dominican but most are Haitian. A group of men near the bridge slam dominoes on a card table and yell at each other. It's three in the afternoon on a Saturday and four women are dancing on a twenty-square-foot dance floor in the nightclub. In the front yard of a small house, two men hold a fighting cock by the wings and force water from a white plastic bucket down its throat.

In the month that we've been in Las Terrenas I've never heard about this place. I've never seen it. Not once has it been mentioned in an interview or conversation. I'm not sure the Europeans even know it exists.

I want to stop at the nightclub to talk to people but Michel wants to go further. We drive another ten minutes and then another. The road widens into a four-lane, dirt highway and the houses continue. There are no potholes in the road because no one has a car. There are a few motorbikes but most people walk.

We stop in the middle of the farthest neighborhood. A small green sign indicates it is the Pan Come district. All the neighborhoods are new, Michel says. They weren't here six years ago. The workers cobbled them together after building the resorts and hotels in town. We get off the bike and walk down the road. There are a few houses with front gates and real paint among the shanties. Most of the Haitians live in dormitory-style apartments.

I think I'm anxious but it's hard to say, the scene is overwhelming in so many ways. We pass a group of young men who look so similar in age

and build to the thieves that I'm convinced it's them. A dozen yards past them I stop and ask Michel if he'll go back and interpret for me.

The men live in six tiny apartments connected in a row. Laundry lines holding shirts, undershirts and blue jeans zigzag from the gate to the farthest apartment. When someone walks out of one of the rooms, all you can see is his silhouette moving behind the fluttering cloth.

Michel puts out his hand and introduces himself to the men in the yard. They smile and say hello. Bob Marley plays in the background. I try to say "Bob Marley" and nod and one of the men takes my hand and shakes it. Michel asks them where they are from and what they do for work. They are hesitant at first, then say they are from Saint-Raphael. They do a bit of everything: construction, excavation, driving *motoconchos*. They make eleven dollars a day, no matter what the job. I ask what they make at home, and they laugh.

A man named Emanuel says he owns thirty acres of farmland but can't afford a bag of seeds. So he left his wife and two children four years ago to come here. He travels back four times a year. Every time he crosses the border he pays the Dominican guard sixty-five dollars.

I ask him about crime in Las Terrenas and he says the police hassle them a couple times a week. After a robbery they round up a half dozen men and keep them in jail for a few days, accused of some crime or other. After a week they let them go. If the charges are serious enough, they'll take one into the hills and shoot him.

Michel shows the men the piece of paper and asks if they recognize any of the names. They shake their heads. Never heard of them, they say. And somehow it doesn't matter. The story is the same. No one is to blame. This is beyond systemic failure. It is a different way of life.

That night I dream I'm in a high-rise hotel. I'd just testified against the Haitians and identified one as the gunman. I am in one of the rooms at the top of the building with A'yen and had seen the man, free, on one of the floors below. He'd seen me too.

We try to get out but the men chase us. Somehow, A'yen gets away. Then I'm alone in the building. They chase me on the elevators and I keep eluding them. But they're figuring it out and getting closer. Then the elevator opens on the floor they're on. I see them huddled in a room with glass walls. The gunman looks up and our eyes meet.

V.

It's time to go. The Frenchman from the police station called to say his bodyguard unexpectedly quit and that he was taking his girls out of school. The police have stopped returning my calls.

Last night Michel showed up at the hotel and said he needed to speak with me alone. It was getting difficult for him to keep my identity secret, he said. People wanted to know who was asking the questions. I asked him what he needed to keep us safe. *Dinero*, he said.

The night before we leave, the manager asks us to help push the tables together in the café. He made a paella and wants to share it with the guests. We haven't told anyone that we'll be on a plane in twelve hours, that all of our belongings are packed and boxed in our room. We eat and drink for three hours and after dinner Litvinoff plays his guitar. The group sings along with Dominican and Spanish folk songs and, in a way, the dinner feels like a secret going away party. At one in the morning we say goodbye and start up the stairs. Litvinoff calls after us, This is the way it used to be!

I want to say goodbye to him, to thank him for everything, but I can't. We haven't told the police we are leaving. I haven't told Michel. When you realize there's no law in a place, you realize anything can happen at any time. After making the plane reservations, we decided it would be best to simply disappear.

The taxi arrives early the next morning and the beaches and water slip away as we climb into the hills. At the top of the pass we cruise by a scenic turnout we'd stopped at in our rental car the first week. Six months ago, four tourists made a similar stop. As they were taking pictures, two men in paramilitary uniforms with automatic weapons leapt out of the jungle, stole their cameras, tied them up and drove away in their car.

We continue down the Sanchez side of the mountains and see Samana Bay and the mangroves of Los Haitises National Park. The cabbie turns east at the foot of the mountains and we continue toward Nagua, Cabarete and Puerto Plata. I check the road behind us, half-expecting to see someone tailing us. But there is nothing. Just endless beaches, the palms and frothy white surf crashing on the shore.

Four hours later, the plane seems incredibly quiet. We are deeply tanned and our clothes are faded. I can taste salt on my lips. A'yen holds my

hand during takeoff and most of the rest of the flight. When we get to our apartment that night, the first thing I do is lock all the windows.

♋

Events fade in time, but nothing goes away. A month after we return, I get an email from Medina saying our attackers had been caught again. They were pulling a heist in Peurto Plata and this time they killed a man. If I can identify them, he writes, he can press charges.

I look at the attached pictures and recognize both men immediately. The shorter one has dreadlocks sprouting from his head. The gunman looks the same—dead eyes, broad shoulders, thick neck.

I don't reply for a couple of days and Medina writes again. He doesn't give details of the assault; he just wants a response. When I finally write back, I tell him I don't recognize the men. He asks me to reconsider. He's sure they're the ones. I wait a few more days then write him again. Yes, I tell him, I'm sure. I've never seen them before in my life.