

TURNING WATER INTO BUTTER

A SPIRITUAL MEMOIR BY SAMMY ORELIEN

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LIVING THE POWER WITHIN

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Turning Water into Butter: Living the Power Within

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I dedicate this book to my mother, Marie Liliane Orelie, and to the generations before her—represented by my maternal grandmother, Gran Thérèse—who have planted the seeds of ultimate alchemy by showing us how to turn water into butter.

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Living with an intimate partner while writing a book inevitably affects them, whether they contribute to it directly or not. Writing takes time away from "us time" together, and when a partner reads and reviews multiple versions, that contribution deserves recognition. My beloved soulmate, Jala, has spent hours reviewing drafts, offering insightful feedback, and enhancing ideas. Although this is a memoir and I am the one who experienced these events, the interpretation and lessons drawn from them are shaped in the present, with Jala as a sounding board, helping me reframe these moments.

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I once heard of an artist who never signed his paintings, explaining that inspiration came from everyone he met and didn't know how to credit them all. To everyone who has, at some point, held space for me, shared a smile, or offered a word of encouragement—thank you for your indirect contribution to this book. To my siblings—Gladys, Euphonia, Volande, Cardone, Luna, Jonas, Williams, Wilson, Stanley, Ruth, Chango, Alex and Joanne—thank you for putting up with me as the “special one”. I honor the memories of Gilberte, Sperkland, and Camille who are no longer with us. To my cousins, I am grateful that so many of you are like brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, it would not be fair to the readers of this book to list each one of you. To my nephews, nieces, former and current colleagues, clients, collaborators, and friends—thank you for every piece you have contributed to the puzzle that is my life.

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Foreword

Writing a book is an undertaking that requires deep reflection long before a single word is penned. It calls for moments of pause and countless questions—questions that linger, press, and demand answers before I could even commit to this journey. Why write? Why share these particular stories, and what do I hope readers will find within them? In this foreword, I'll share some of these questions, the conclusions I reached, and a few thoughts on how to approach this book as you explore its pages.

Why Write a Book?

In a world filled with books, you might wonder why write yet another one. I asked myself this many times before embracing the journey of writing this memoir. My motivation was simple: I felt that my story and the lessons I've learned could help someone who might need them and perhaps wouldn't come across a similar message elsewhere. They might connect with my book because of our shared background or through a recommendation from a friend.

Why Write a Memoir?

Then, another question arose: why a memoir? Memories are famously unreliable, and our recollections aren't always accurate. Yet, there's value in our remembered experiences and the meanings we attach to them. We gain the most from our memories when we're not overly attached to them. To me, this means recognizing three truths about our experiences:

1. An event happened.
2. We had an emotional reaction to it.
3. We created an interpretation of what happened.

That last part—our interpretation—isn’t fixed; it changes over time, and as it does, it colors how we recall the event itself. Or, as the great philosopher Yogi Berra might say, “The past ain’t never the same.”

With this in mind, the events retold in this book are my imperfect recollections, shaped by time and perspective. I acknowledge that I may have forgotten or remembered things differently from others. I have tried to observe my story with as much objectivity as possible, aiming to recount what I saw, felt, and experienced with compassion for everyone involved.

Embracing Universality

My goal was to write a book that speaks to the common threads in all our lives, one that anyone—regardless of background—could relate to. I didn’t want anyone to feel excluded. Yet, I realized that my background as a former evangelical Christian comes through, especially with the occasional Bible verse or mention of “God.” While I don’t view the Bible as an infallible guide, I respect its wisdom and draw from it as I do from other traditions. For inclusivity, I sometimes use “G-d” or other terms like Creator, Source, or Universe to represent a higher power. Although I aimed for consistency, you may find variations throughout.

I want to emphasize that belief in a Creator isn’t necessary to benefit from this book. I believe in a creative force, but not an anthropomorphic deity waiting to judge or punish. Whatever your belief systems, you will find some value in the book.

How to Read This Book

I believe in the 80/20 principle—that 20% of effort often yields 80% of the result. When reading a nonfiction book, I wonder which parts I can skip and which are essential. For readers interested primarily in resilience, I recommend Chapters 8 and 9, which can stand alone.

If you're at a life crossroads and asking, "What's next?" or "Is this all there is?" Chapter 7 might be beneficial.

Chapters 1, 2, 7, 9, and 10 provide a meaningful framework for those who prefer to skip around. However, I hope readers who are tempted to skip sections will consider that each chapter contains insights that may be valuable when viewed within the context of the whole story. It's not just about the lessons I share; it's about the connections you may feel with the emotions, thoughts, and experiences woven throughout the journey.

If you find meaning in this book, I'd be grateful if you shared it with others or provided feedback.

**Happy Reading,
Live the Power Within,
Sammy**

CHAPTER 1

Birth of a Special Child The Years in Haiti (1970–1980)

“In every real man, a child is hidden that wants to play.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche

My earthly journey began in Haiti on April 4, 1970; my life, however, was shaped less by the place I was born in and more by the events transpiring in my family during the period before my birth.

These include the emigration of my aunt, Marie Andrée Bichotte, to the United States, as well as the rivalry between my mother (who we call *Manman*, which is Kreyol for “mother”) whose given name was Liliane, and the mistresses of my father, Horacius. If we include my own birth, my father was responsible for conceiving close to twenty children, including seven with my mother.*.

My three older siblings on my mother’s side were my sisters, Gladys and Euphonia nicknamed Foufoune (born in 1956 and 1957, respectively), and Sperkland, a son (born in 1959) who died before he turned a year old. Although I never knew him, he would somehow still manage to become part of my story.

In this chapter, I will try and share how the ways in which the events leading up to my birth would come to affect my life.

ab

My first ten years in Haiti unfurled within the blurred boundaries of a middle-class existence that was, in truth, defined more by the

*I am grateful that overall, I have a great relationship with my siblings that doesn’t depend on whether we share the same mother or father.

wherewithal to eat each day than by any true financial abundance. We—a patchwork quilt family of nine who owned neither a car nor the standard status-marker of a black-and-white TV—were emphatically far from wealthy. However, we *were* well enough off to afford a maid, and although we *did* have electricity in the house, there was no running water, with our “bathroom” being a bathroom in name only, existing as little more than a humble outhouse at the end of the backyard.

While our living situation was a modest one, what truly placed us in the middle class was the privilege of having access to a private education. Public schools, I understood, were the domain of the very poor and *restavèks*—children from rural families traded to city households in exchange for scraps and survival accommodations.

Though treated as second-class citizens, those who were allowed any education—even in public schools or evening classes—were considered to have been fortunate. In Haiti’s highly stratified social system, attending a public school simply wasn’t an option for us. While we attended private schools, they were certainly far from the hallowed halls of the elite, such as the revered Saint Louis de Gonzague in Port-au-Prince—institutions that families like ours could only dream about.

Although we were not able to feast as similar mainstream American families did with their abundantly provisioned pantries, our privilege took on the humbler—but no less consoling—form of reliably looking forward to having three meals a day. Six days out of the week, our staple fare was yellow grits paired with hearty beans (black or red, in a thick *sos pwa*—or pea sauce-soup) or stirred directly into the grits. Sundays brought a welcome relief from the daily fare, with protein gracing our table in the form of chicken and rice replacing the inevitable grits. Weekday meals often featured a simple Creole *sauce* (*sòs kreyòl*), its tomato base enlivened by bits of salty herring, which was more for flavor than sustenance.

Only twice can I recall my hunger gnawing through the predictable rhythm of the “three-meals-a-day” continuum: once, when I was six, *Manman* surprised us with a vibrant green papaya dish instead of our customary beans. It burst with flavor, unlike anything I’d ever tasted.

“Why haven’t you made this before?” I exclaimed, my tongue still dancing with the sweet tang.

Her reply, which remains etched in my memory to this day, revealed an unsuspected insight into our actual life circumstances: “Papaya, son, is for those who have *little*. Today, it’s all *we* have.”

The second time, after Mother had left for Guadeloupe in 1977, my sister Gladys stepped in to juggle our needs. There was this one occasion (before *Manman* began regularly sending us a much-needed stipend) when beans filled our bowls—but without the company of the ever-reliable grits; a rude surprise not unlike that of an expected guest (*invité mal élevé*) who suddenly stands you up.

To a Western eye, our lives might have hinted at scarcity. For example: for us, leaving our plates empty was almost always the norm, and we savored each morsel, licking them clean in the privacy of our home. Sometimes, my younger siblings and I would strategically drop by the neighbors’ as they were about to serve food. To do so was to risk being tagged as *visye*—colloquial Haitian for “deficient in moral integrity, teetering upon beggary.”

Even at this early juncture in my childhood, pride had already become a fiercely burning ember within my breast. Almost any trigger (the sting of an unwelcome glance, the unvoiced censure etched in another’s stare) had the power to eclipse any pangs of hunger I might have been suffering at the time—though, I confess, one twilight, hunger gnawed with a ferocity that refused to be quelled. Even my heroic determination to avoid the shame of begging ultimately bowed to its onslaught, and I soon found myself at a neighbor’s door, humbled—waiting, yearning for the comfort of even a partial, steaming plate.

Despite what might have seemed to be a background of poverty, I never saw it that way; my childhood was in fact filled with joy, and I cherish my memories of life in Haiti. I enjoyed the liberty of playing outdoors without supervision for many hours, and once I had learned to read, I began immersing myself in books to my heart's content.

Those memories include playing soccer with makeshift balls fabricated from stockings filled with whatever happened to be available at the moment, such as discarded papers and rags. Having since played soccer with a real ball later in life after I had left Haiti, I can say from firsthand experience that the perhaps-dubious quality of the makeshift ball did not in the slightest compromise the joy, the fervor, or the many delightful antics resulting from the passionate pursuit of the sport.

One of these memorable events was the time an airborne soccer ball somehow managed to splash straight into a huge pot of *sos pwa* (black beans stew) that was simmering on the outside fireplace. With the cook's complicity, we unceremoniously removed the ball, wiped it clean, and tacitly agreed to say nothing to anyone who had not been a direct eyewitness to the event. Our ad hoc thinking at the time was, "What you don't know can't hurt you" (*Sa ou pa konin, pa ka touye ou*)—and so far as I have been able to ascertain, this served the highest good in this particular instance.

My next favorite game was marbles. We played on a variety of surfaces—some more level than others—as an implicit part of the game had to do with the nature of the surface one was required to negotiate at the time, mandating that you have different kinds of shots in your repertoire for striking your target.

While I enjoyed actively playing the game, there was also a certain vicarious pleasure in watching older, more skillful players in action as they made incredible hits. The infinitely shifting strategizing required for marbles brought me so much joy that for a long time, I kept a jar of them front and center on my desk.

Turning Water Into Butter

The girls played a game that we called *osslè* (or *osselet* in French) which involved using five pieces of bone fashioned from goat knuckles (which I would later learn, while writing this book, is called “knucklebones” in English, and was played as far back as Ancient Greece, where it was called *astragaloi*—meaning “divination dice”).

The game made its way across the different continents, adapting itself to local customs along the way. It consisted of sending a piece into the air and then (while it was aloft) quickly turning the other pieces to the right side before picking them up—a progenitor of sorts to the 20th century game of “jacks” in the West. One begins by picking up one piece at a time while throwing one of the five pieces in the air; then two pieces at a time; then three pieces at a time; and then all four pieces. Should the airborne piece fall to the ground, you lose your turn. Once the pieces are turned the way a player wants and they find themselves unable to pick up the incremental number of pieces that they are up to, they lose their turn.



Picture of “*osslè*” pieces by Roland Zh, used under Creative Commons License.

While boys were not forbidden to play *osslè*, it turned out that the girls often possessed more finesse and were able to throw a piece in the air and quickly turn or pick up their pieces without the airborne piece crashing down too soon. Like many games in Haiti, you didn't have to be an active participant to enjoy it. Being a spectator and commenting on the game—or even giving advice as to what you would do if you possessed the skills of one of the players—was equally enjoyable.

Another game that favored girls was jumping ropes. I don't remember ever going past a count of three. On the other hand, I would often be amazed at the girls' ability to become one with the rope, jumping in whatever direction and for however long they wanted to, while two of their colleagues rotated the rope from each end.

When it came to playtime, evenings were special. Some of the most memorable sessions included the game of riddles, which we called *devinette*—mental puzzles which were followed or interspaced with various stories that I believe are unique to Haiti. The riddles themselves were not that different from ones one might hear in Western culture. However, the way in which we spoke these riddles, and the atmosphere in which we narrated them, fostered a different level of fun.

Our riddles started with the person about to give the riddle saying, “Krik,” and everyone else responding, “Krak”. Someone would say, “Krik”, then we would reply, “Krak,” at which point they would share a riddle they had heard somewhere or that they had made up.

One of the riddles I recall hearing was:

“Krik,”

“Krak,”

“What animal walks on four legs in the morning, two legs during the day, and three legs late at night?”

When I got older, I would recognize this riddle as the one from Ancient Greek mythology that the Sphinx would issue to men who failed to solve it before it killed them.*

Such fictional stories (*kont*) or real stories—some hard to believe—were part of the entertainment that filled our evenings. These stories often included fictional characters such as Bouki and Ti Malis, characters I believe might be unique to Haiti. The latter is the conniving and smarter of the pair, while the former is the forever gullible victim of many tricks. The *konts* I liked most were the ones that included singing.

One of those stories was about a girl who ate some oranges and was threatened with an unknown punishment by her stepmother. She went to her mother's grave, and while weeping there on the grave, a couple of orange pits that happened to be stuck to her clothing fell to the ground, where a tree started growing.

The young girl began to sing:

Ti zoranj grandi, grandi ti zoranj

Ti zoranj grandi, grandi ti zoranj

Belmè pa Manman,ti zoranj

Small oranges grow, grow small oranges

Small oranges grow, grow small oranges

Stepmother is not Maman, little orange

With that song, she influenced the orange tree to grow and harvested some oranges to bring to her stepmother. In the end, her stepmother persuaded her to confess how she had managed to get the oranges—but due to her avarice, she conveniently winds up exploding in the end.

All Haitian stories culminate in creative endings that attempt to explain how it was that there happened to be an eyewitness who

*The answer given by Oedipus who answered this riddle in Greek Mythology is that it's a human being. He walks on four legs as a baby, then he learns to walk on two feet, and then in old age walks with a cane, so he can be said to have three legs.

ultimately came to be the narrator. For example: for the orange story, you might come up with something like the following:

“*Mezanmi* (i.e., ‘*mes amis*’—my friends), I went to the market where this old woman was selling oranges and I told one of the vendors, ‘It’s true the stepmother was an evil person, but maybe she didn’t have to die.’ When I said that, the vendor told me to mind my own business and gave me a huge kick in the posterior that propelled me here in order that I would be able to share this story with you.”

There were also true stories (perhaps unbelievable, but nevertheless true—at least according to their narrators). The ones I liked most involved encounters with werewolves (*lougawou*) or secret societies called *sanpwèl* that roamed the streets at night. There was one story, based in our hometown *Croix-des-Bouquets* (a commune in the Ouest department of Haiti that includes Port-au-Prince) and told by *Manman*, of a *lougawou* who had killed many children and who, on her deathbed, started confessing to so many misdeeds that her family members had a doctor administer a preparation to her to accelerate her death.

I also heard many stories about men who had been so brave as to be outside during the wee hours of the night and encountered *sanpwèl* bands or mysterious animals guarding bridges, crossroads, and other pathways and, by minding their own business or boldly asserting their right to be on the road, were able to pass without harm.

I was fascinated by these tales, and too young to question their authenticity. In hindsight, if I were to believe every *lougawou* story that I’ve been told, I would have had to admit that Haiti had historically harbored the highest per capita population of werewolves of any country on Earth. It is well known that we Haitians love to put pepper and other spices into a story (*pwav ak epis*). Similarly, there is no question that some of those stories are spiced up with superstitions and exaggerations.

However, I have my own story of *lougawou*. In *Croix-des-Bouquets*, my mother and father had separate houses. As I understand it, the dwellings came down to them from their respective families through inheritance. In the front yard of *Manman's* house was a huge almond tree (*pye zanmann*). I remember vividly one particular night when a crowd primarily made up of men carrying makeshift lanterns that included slow burning pine torches (*bwa pin*) brought a woman with them that they accused of being a *lougawou*. Apparently, they had caught her in the act.

Someone retelling that story might say they have seen a *lougawou* with their own eyes, and that might be technically true. In my case, keeping an open and critical mind, I can only say for sure that a woman whom they *claimed* to be a *lougawou* was caught and brought under our almond tree, and that I witnessed the event.

Because my access to a wide variety of books was quite limited, I devoted much of my time to exploring the Bible, as it was always available—especially the captivating tales from the Old Testament. For an inquisitive young child like me, the Biblical narratives (such as David's battles and rise to kingship, Jacob's deceit, the great flood, or Joseph's saga) were enthralling adventures.

But the center of that remembered world is filled with the warmth of a very loving home, for even from my earliest recollections, I always felt cherished and important. There was, however, one person who had the capacity to instill fear in me: our next-door neighbor, Madame Eugène. She was deeply religious and highly respected by the other women in the neighborhood.

Her methods of disciplining her children were harsh; treatment that would be considered child abuse in the US or elsewhere. Her youngest son, who was 16 or so, would be tied down for her ritual beatings. His screams during these chastisements would echo through the neighborhood, sending chills down my spine. Occasionally, when my mother had errands to run and my older sisters were absent, she would ask Mrs. Eugène to watch over me,

saying, “Neighbor, don’t break any bones, don’t draw any blood, but if he misbehaves, discipline as you think necessary.”

Madame Eugène never actually laid a hand on me. The mere thought of being disciplined by her was enough to keep me more than well-behaved.

Another figure who was capable of invoking fear in me apart from Madame Eugène was my father; I grew up hearing tales about his stern nature and how harsh he was toward my mother. Yet, he never physically harmed or threatened me. My father had a presence that commanded respect and caused you to think twice about crossing him.

This sense of respect extended even beyond our home, as well. As he was the brother of a twin who had passed away early, the people in our hometown of *Croix-des-Bouquets* attributed mystical abilities to him, due to mythologies at large in Voodoo lore. These included being able to cast spells without having to visit a *houn-gan* (which is to say, a male voodoo priest) and being protected by voodoo spirits that made him somehow invulnerable to spells that might be cast by enemies. My father would also claim that he could be in several places at the same time, and that if he wished to, he could travel wherever he wanted by using a matchbox as his means of transportation.

It was only later in life that I understood that he possessed—or at least demonstrated—no such powers, and that it was rather the case that he relished the respect that stemmed from people’s unfounded fears. This skepticism about my father’s powers is not shared by all my siblings. Some still believe he had special powers.

I distinctly recall two instances in which I had an unsought opportunity to witness my father’s harshness firsthand. I was around six or seven years old at the time of the first occasion; my mother was out of money, coinciding with my dad’s payday at Hasco, the railroad company where he was employed transporting sugar cane. I’m not certain about her reasoning, but perhaps she sent my sister

and me along in hopes that our presence might soften my father's heart.

We needed to take two Haitian *tap taps* (converted pickup trucks serving as public transports) to reach his workplace—but unfortunately, she didn't even have enough money to cover both our fares. As a result, we took a *tap tap* for the initial part of the journey and then had to walk the remaining distance.

To this day, that trek remains the longest I have ever walked for reasons other than pleasure, and I have walked a considerable amount in my life. I vividly recall my sister and I being the only ones on that road, under Haiti's intense sun, our stomachs empty, and so thirsty that the dryness in our throats was palpable. Upon reaching our destination, we found out, ironically, that my father wasn't there. We had been unaware of his work situation since he did not live with us despite being married to my mom

Exhausted and unable to return the same way we had come; we explained our situation to my dad's supervisor. Although it was against the rules, he compassionately decided to give us an advance on my dad's salary.

When my dad next visited us, he was furious. This was my first time witnessing him in such a mood. My mother tried to justify her actions by explaining she saw no other way to feed us, but this explanation did not appease him. What truly astonished me was his indifference to the arduous journey that I, as a young child, had to endure in this situation. Even at that young age, it felt profoundly unfair that my sister and I had to endure such hardship just to implore my father for what should have been his willing financial support. I could never comprehend his reaction—especially his complete lack of concern for the suffering his youngest children were going through.

On the second occasion I witnessed his unkindness, I was not directly involved. I was about eight or nine years old at the time and staying with my Aunt Vierge (my father's sister). He was living with

his young girlfriend, Woulone, who was barely 22 years old. They resided in a house that shared a large backyard with my aunt's place, where other family members also lived. Despite his proximity, I hardly remember seeing my father during that summer vacation, nor can I recall him spending any one-on-one time with me.

However, I do remember one afternoon distinctly: father came home and saw Woulone playing a board game called *kay* with my cousin Jocelyn (my father's nephew) and other cousins. The game involved a board with 2x6 holes in the ground, using pebbles as pieces, and I was sitting nearby watching them play. Jocelyn, older than me, was about 18 at the time.

Upon witnessing this scene, my father became very angry. He said that he thought it was inappropriate for Woulone, as his partner, to be indulging in such childish activities, and that he felt disrespected by her behavior. Although I might not have realized it at the time, it's now clear to me that my father's anger stemmed from jealousy about Jocelyn.

But my father and Ms. Eugène were outliers in my otherwise positive childhood memories. During my younger years, I often felt special—both due to the unique circumstances of my birth and the affection with which my grandmother treated me.

There was a significant age gap between my siblings and me. My sister, Gladys, was born in 1956, and my sister Euphonia (nicknamed Foufoune) was born in 1957, making her 13 years older than me, who arrived in 1970. Even when one accounts for Sperkland (the son who was born after Euphonia in 1959 and died as a toddler), I was the only one born with such a gap between myself and an older sibling. My brother Jonas arrived in 1972, Stanley in 1974, and Ruth (my youngest maternal sister) in 1976. After she moved to Guadeloupe in 1977, my mother had two more sons with a different father (Camille and Alex) in 1980 and 1982, respectively.

The story behind the significant age difference between my older sister and me is quite remarkable.

For several years prior to my birth, my mother suffered from a mysterious illness. Her abdomen was unusually swollen and she experienced pain, but no doctor could accurately diagnose her condition. Initially, they suspected fibromyalgia. My sister has recounted to me how our mother sought various forms of healing, including a pilgrimage to Seau D'eau, a mystical mecca in Haiti known for its miraculous cures.

I grew up hearing that one of my father's girlfriends did not want me to be born. Rumor had it that she was trying to harm me in the womb, hoping to be the first to give my father a son, and she was the reason behind the mysterious death of Sperkland.

My mother regarded my birth as a miracle. She had turned to both medical and traditional Haitian remedies, but believed her recovery and my birth had both been divine interventions. She has shared several times the dream in which a voice told her, "You are not sick, you are pregnant. You will have a son and you should name him Samuel." Upon awakening, she wrote the name "Samuel" with charcoal, as instructed in the dream. The story of my mother's difficult pregnancy, including how she came up with my name, was told to me by my older siblings and cousins, who have confirmed it and added to the details.

This name "Samuel," given by what *Manman* believed to be an angelic visitation, was the name I was known by during my early life. It was only when I was about to leave Haiti for Guadeloupe that I discovered, upon viewing my birth certificate, that my father had named me "Jean-Guilmond" which I was told was to honor his father Raymond. Given the uniqueness of my name Jean-Guilmond, I have reasons to believe that my paternal grandfather, having lost his first grandson (my older brother Sperkland), desired this name as protection for me. Literally, the name "Guilmond" means "will protect" in German.

My birth played a pivotal role in my mother's conversion to Christianity. Being named after a prophet, Samuel, instilled in me

a belief that I had been chosen for a special purpose. Once I learned to read, the Bible (being the only book available) captivated me—especially the stories of the prophet Samuel. I felt a connection to his divine calling, and eagerly anticipated my own. I believed I had special protection, having overcome the “dark forces” as purported by local legends of werewolves in *Croix-des-Bouquets* that allegedly sought to harm me after my birth.

This sense of divine shielding, coupled with being the first son of my parents’ marriage, shaped my self-perception as a leader—particularly a spiritual one. By the age of five, I was already playing at being a preacher. At eight, I delivered my first sermon during a series of evangelistic meetings in Leogane, in Southern Haiti. Interestingly, in my youth, these evangelistic gatherings (which were geared toward gaining converts) were called “crusades,” without any awareness of the term’s historically negative connotations.

In addition to the extraordinary circumstances of my birth, the special treatment I received from my maternal grandmother, *gran* Thérèse, contributed greatly to my sense of being unique. Among my many cousins (I know of at least 41, with 13 from my eldest aunt DieuDonne alone), I was the sole one chosen to be her godson. In a predominantly Catholic country like Haiti, this status held significant meaning. While the common outsiders’ view of Haiti as a voodoo-practicing culture—an overhang from its African origins—my experience growing up was that most people, including my extended family, were Catholic. The exceptions within my own family were my mother and one of her sisters, Aunt Eunide, who were evangelical Christians—specifically Seventh-day Adventists.

My grandmother was a spirited woman who wasn’t shy about playing favorites, and as her godson, I often found myself being the privileged recipient of this personal bias. I remember times when she would wake me from sleep, tired but not grumpy, to ensure I had a full plate of her cooking. Sadly, not all my siblings share similar fond memories of our *gran*. To this day, my sister Foufoune

harbors resentment toward her, believing the preferential treatment I received and the disparity in how she and other siblings were treated stemmed in part from their darker skin tone, which was inherited from our father, of whom grandmother was distinctly less than fond.

Foufoune often recounts a particular incident in which *gran* Therese lost something. She then lined up all the cousins who were old enough to be considered suspects and used a makeshift pendulum—a key dangling from a thin string over a partially filled glass of water—as her “truth divining rod.” As she moved from one cousin to another, she would repeat with a voice of certainty the dreaded commands to the pendulum: “*Par St Pierre, Par St Paul, dis moi la vérité*” (“By St Peter and St Paul, tell me the truth”). The pendulum would remain still until reaching the supposedly guilty party, where it would then swing wildly—and in this instance, it chose Foufoune. *Gran* accused her of the theft with unalterable conviction, claiming that her pendulum never lied. My mother, following grandmother’s insistence, disciplined Foufoune.

Reflecting upon my childhood, I see the impact my birth narrative had in shaping the course of my life. It set the stage for me to feel empowered to achieve extraordinary goals, a narrative predestined even before I was born. In a way, I was like a divine child, shielded by higher powers from malevolent forces, akin to Harry Potter—but in my case, the protective magic started much earlier, a decade before conception, while I was still *in utero*.

The way people regarded me early in life as someone special, coupled with the belief in a unique calling attributed to the way I was named, likely influenced my self-perception and contributed significantly to the unusual level of confidence I possessed. This was not merely confidence in my own abilities, but also in the reassurance that when my own efforts fell short, there were higher powers upon which I could rely for support.

I have always been intrigued by other characters, both historical and fictional, who were convinced by their parents or guardians that they were special figures (such as Samuel of the Bible, Alexander the Great, Harry Potter, John the Baptist, and even Jesus). While I recognize that a part of the confidence they exhibited likely stemmed from innate qualities, I am also convinced that a significant portion of it was nurtured—deriving from the belief instilled by their parents or others in their world of their specialness. This nurturing undoubtedly played a crucial role in the full expression of their confidence and potential.

The privilege of being born as a “special one” is, in my view, one of the greatest gifts any child could receive. It’s a gift that continuously enriches one’s life, equipping one to tackle any challenges that might arise. Looking back, I wish I had imparted this belief to my children, and I hope that as a society, we can learn to view every birth with the same reverence and joy we associate with the nativity of baby Jesus, much like the sentiment expressed in the lines of the French carol:

*Il est né, le divin enfant
Chantons tous son avènement*

(He is born—the divine child
Let us all sing to his coming)

I yearn for a world in which every child is assured they are—and is consequently treated as—the Divine Being they are, recognizing that our existence on this Earth is as miraculous as the odds each of us has had to overcome. Consider the immense journey of any human being: first, the survival of ancestors through wars, famines, natural predators, and other uncontrollable forces; and second, there is the remarkable (indeed, almost inconceivable) biological journey, starting as one singular survivor among hundreds of millions of sperm cells, braving the hostile conditions of the fallopian tubes, the

acidic environment of the vagina, and the immune defenses of the female reproductive system.

Indeed, I was born a special child, and so were you—each of us a miraculous testament to the wonder of Life. Everyone carries what the theologian Duns Scotus calls “the imago Dei” (the image of God), with the potential to express the fullness of her love and creative power.

So, where do we go wrong? At some point, I believe that every human loses their childhood innocence and experiences rejection—a sense of not belonging or something being “off” with the world. This key turning point in life is something that should unite all humans, and we can all learn by sharing with each other how we lost that innocence, as well as the filtered lenses we have been seeing life through since that experience.

In the next chapter, I will share my story of how this innocent child from Haiti who loved everyone and felt loved chose to become a Lone Wolf.

CHAPTER 2

From the Trusting Child to the
“Lone Wolf” (1976–1980)

“The ego is the false self—born out of fear and defensiveness.”

— John O’Donohue

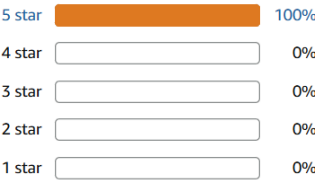
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Sammy Orelie

Dr. Jean-Guilmond Orelie (Sammy): Entrepreneur, Innovator, Author

Born in Haiti, Dr. Jean-Guilmond Orelie, known as Sammy, has dedicated his life to advancing solutions that improve human well-being. A visionary entrepreneur and leader, he has built and scaled organizations at the cutting edge of science, technology, and public health.

