



**THE BIG
READ**
HOLLAND AREA

2016

Brother I'm Dying

By Edwidge Danticat

GROUP RESOURCES

“I knew from very, very early in my life that I wanted to tell stories.”
— Edwidge Danticat

The Big Read

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American popular culture. Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America, a 2004 NEA report, identified a critical decline in reading for pleasure among American adults. The Big Read addresses this issue by bringing communities together to read, discuss, and celebrate books and writers from American and world literature. A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining The Big Read.

The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.

OUR PURPOSE

The Big Read Holland Area seeks to create and foster a culture where reading matters. We strive to bring our community together around one book and use this shared experience of reading, discussing, and exploring the themes of the book as a springboard to learn from and listen to each other.

OUR PARTNERS

The Big Read Holland Area is a collaborative effort among many partnering institutions and organizations including Hope College, Herrick District Library, Western Theological Seminary, Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, Howard Miller Library, cultureWorks, and the Holland Museum.

OUR PRACTICE

The Big Read Holland Area actively works to offer a wide variety of programming that will appeal to a diverse population. Events take place in a variety of spaces and locations. In addition, we actively collaborate with area middle/high schools, and the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, engaging students in the larger conversations of our community. We also provide participating schools with a unique opportunity to interact with a world-renowned author. Our main events are planned to engage each book and its topics from a variety of perspectives, experiences, and angles, including not only lectures by engaging speakers, but also featuring film, food, music and art to explore and celebrate the topics under discussion.

This November, The Big Read Holland Area will focus on Edwidge Danticat's memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying*, a National Book Award finalist in 2007. Through conversation, food, film, music, and art, our community will come together to explore this story of roots and family, life and death, hope and sorrow, countries of origin and countries of tomorrow.

Our program this year will feature a wide variety of events surrounding the many themes of this book including a keynote address delivered by Edwidge Danticat, presentations by leading Haitian educators and musicians, a local immigration lawyer, and award-winning children's author Annie Sibley O'Brien, a student exhibition of learning hosted by hundreds of area middle and high school students, and more than a dozen public book discussions.

OUR PAST

Our first year, we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Over 3,000 people participated in the 7 main events and the 38 public and private book discussions. In that first year 6 schools, and 8 teachers participated.

In 2015, we focused on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Over 7000 people attended 10 main events and took part in 49 public and private book discussions. We increased area school participation to 10 schools and 16 teachers. The project culminated in a visit from author Tim O'Brien, who delivered the keynote address to a standing-room-only community event.

Why Brother I'm Dying?

We are excited to read *Brother I'm Dying* as a community for a number of reasons. First of all, it is beautifully written memoir of an intriguing true story that we believe our participants will deeply enjoy. It is also a newer and lesser-known title, so it will be a fresh read for many readers. Many churches, organizations, and members of the community of Ottawa County have connections to Haiti through mission work, adoption, heritage, and plenty of other ways. The book serves as a rich celebration of Haitian culture and history, and we would love to share in the country's traditions and values as we immerse ourselves in Danticat's story. The memoir also addresses some timely issues, and will likely prompt important conversations about how we can interact with and embrace people of different cultures and backgrounds than our own.

About the Book

Brother, I'm Dying, is the true-life story of Edwidge Danticat's father, Mira, and his brother, Joseph. Born in the Haitian countryside, both brothers move to the big city of Port-au-Prince to work and raise families. Many years later, after Edwidge's father marries and begins a family, he decides to immigrate to the United States, while her Uncle Joseph—a community leader and pastor—chooses to remain in Haiti with his congregation. Edwidge, only two years old at the time of her father's departure, is left in the care of her Uncle Joseph and his wife, Tante Denise. Joseph and Edwidge develop a close relationship over the next several years. Edwidge spends most of her free time with her uncle, and after he suffers severe damage to his vocal chords, she acts as his interpreter.

Ten years later, Edwidge rejoins her parents in the U.S. and must adjust to an unfamiliar world in Brooklyn, where she struggles to balance her new life with memories of the vibrant home and beloved uncle she left behind in Haiti. Now grown and living in Miami, Edwidge faces the impending death of her father and the birth of her first child.

Meanwhile, political unrest and violence in Port-au-Prince heighten due to government and gang disputes, and Edwidge fears for the safety of her Uncle Joseph and his family. Fleeing for their lives, Uncle Joseph and his son Maxo seek safety in America and come face to face with the complications of the U.S. immigration system. Over the next 72 hours, Danticat's world is forever changed as her father's condition worsens and her uncle's whereabouts are unknown.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. "Brother, I'm Dying." iBooks.

Major Characters

Faidherbe “Fedo” Boyer

Husband of Edwidge and father to their daughter, Mira.

Edwidge Danticat

Author of *Brother, I'm Dying* and the eldest child of Mira and Rose Danticat.

André “Mira” Danticat

Edwidge's father and a dedicated family man, Mira works in a factory and drives a gypsy cab to sponsor the immigration of his wife and two eldest children.

Maxo Dantica

The son of Joseph and Denise, Maxo spends time in the United States for college but later returns to Haiti. Maxo joins his father in the attempt to flee Haiti after a surge of political violence in Port-au-Prince. ”

Bob, Karl, and Kelly Danticat

Edwidge's three younger brothers. Karl and Kelly were born in New York City while Bob, like Edwidge, was born in Port-au-Prince.

Joseph Dantica

Edwidge's uncle and Mira's brother, Joseph abandons political dreams to become a pastor, opening a church and school.

Tante Denise

Wife to Joseph, Denise is a stern but dedicated guardian of the many children in her care and is known as a skilled seamstress and the best cook in the Bel Air neighborhood.

Granmè Melina

Illness and old age bring Granmè Melina and her folktale traditions from her village in Léogâne to the home of her daughter, Tante Denise.

Marie Micheline

Abandoned by her father, Marie grows up as the adored role model of the younger members of the Danticat household and spends her life in Port-au-Prince working in various medical clinics.

Tante Zi

Doting and playful sister of Mira and Joseph, Tante Zi is a resident of Port-au-Prince and owner of a stationary stand. Tante Zi assists Maxo and Joseph when they are threatened by neighborhood violence.”

Excerpt From: The Big Read. “Brother, I’m Dying.” iBooks.

About the Author

Edwidge Danticat (b. 1969) was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where she lived with her aunt and uncle until she joined her parents in New York City at age 12. Her parents, Rose and Mira, left Haiti for work and safety in the United States when Danticat was a toddler. Growing up, Danticat was shy, and though teased in her Brooklyn high school for her accent and lack of English, she was proud of her heritage.

Danticat grew up in a rich storytelling tradition and loved writing and reading from an early age. Danticat published her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994. She had just graduated from Brown University with a master's degree in creative writing, after completing her undergraduate studies in French literature at Barnard College. Only one year later, Danticat's first collection of stories, *Krik? Krak!*, was short-listed for the National Book Award.

For several years, Danticat co-produced documentaries for Hollywood director Jonathan Demme and worked as an associate producer on the films *Courage and Pain* (1996) and *The Agronomist* (2003)—both about Haiti. During this period, Danticat began to think seriously about a career as an author, though her parents considered writing somewhat impractical. Having spent most of their lives under dictatorships, they also were concerned about Danticat writing openly of Haiti.



Edwidge Danticat. Photo by Jonathan Demme.

In addition to writing and making films, Danticat was a visiting professor of creative writing at New York University (1996-1997) and the University of Miami (2000-2008). Meanwhile, her writing career continued to evolve steadily alongside her other endeavors. Danticat has published numerous novels and several works of creative nonfiction, including her memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, which won the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography.

In 2009, Danticat received a MacArthur Fellowship (nicknamed the “genius grant”) and her literary career took a new direction with a collection of essays on art and exile, *Create Dangerously: The*

Immigrant Artist at Work (2011). Part personal anecdote and part historical narrative, this book focuses on the creative work of individuals who bear “witness to violence, oppression, and poverty.

Danticat has often been called upon as an informal diplomat and advocate for Haiti. In 2000, she moved to Miami with her husband and their two daughters, only a 90-minute flight from Port-au-Prince.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. “Brother, I’m Dying.” iBooks.

Timeline

- 1492:** Columbus lands on the modern-day island of Haiti, claiming it for Spain.
- 1697:** Spain cedes the western part of Hispaniola (Haiti) to France.
- 1804:** Haiti wins its independence from France through a slave revolt led by Toussaint Louverture.
- 1915:** U.S. occupation of Haiti begins as an attempt to maintain political and economic stability after presidential assassination. Occupation lasts nearly 20 years.”
- 1920s:** Harlem Renaissance celebrates black culture and identity in Harlem and beyond.
- 1954:** “Papa Doc” François Duvalier declares himself “President for Life.”
- 1965:** U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 liberalizes immigration.
- 1969:** Edwidge Danticat is born in Port-au-Prince.
- 1971:** “Papa Doc” dies of natural causes and is replaced by his son, “Baby Doc” Jean-Claude Duvalier.
- 1971:** Mira Danticat immigrates to the United States.
- 1973:** Rose Danticat joins her husband in New York City.
- 1981:** Edwidge Danticat moves to Brooklyn to live with her parents and three brothers.
- 1986:** “Baby Doc” Jean-Claude Duvalier's constitution is annulled and his rule is illegitimized.
Haitian immigration to the United States increases.
- 1988:** Lieutenant General Prosper Avril replaces interim military government as president.
- 1990:** Edwidge Danticat graduates from Barnard College.
- 1990:** Jean-Bertrand Aristide elected president of Haiti.
- 1991:** Aristide flees Haiti after a coup led by Brigadier General Raoul Cedras.
- 1992:** U.S. Coast Guard rescues more than 40,000 Haitians at sea as they attempt to escape a worsening economy and political unrest.
- 1993:** Edwidge Danticat graduates from Brown University with an MFA in creative writing.
- 1994:** *Breath, Eyes, Memory* published.
- 1995:** Aristide restored as president, with support from U.S. troops.
- 2002:** Edwidge Danticat marries Faïdherbe “Fedo” Boyer.
- 2002:** Aristide's government orchestrates attacks on civilian opposition using police and government supported gangs called “chimères.”
- 2004:** *The Dew Breaker* published.

2004: Armed rebellion leads to the forced resignation and exile of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to South Africa.

2004: The United Nations Security Council creates the UN Stability Mission in Haiti in June.

2004: Maxo and Joseph Dantica flee violence and political unrest in Haiti, traveling to Miami.

2005: Mira, daughter of Edwidge and Fedo, born.

2007: *Brother, I'm Dying* published.

2010: Earthquake of magnitude 7.0 hits Haiti, killing 300,000 people.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. "Brother, I'm Dying." iBooks.

Haitian History and Culture

Located in the West Indies, Haiti (the French spelling of Ayiti, the native Taino name meaning “mountainous country”) shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic and is roughly the size of the state of Maryland. A revolution led by slaves gained Haiti's independence from France in 1804, making it the world's first independent black republic. Haiti's official languages are French and Haitian Creole, and roughly 95% of the population is of African descent—almost all indigenous peoples were lost to disease and brutal labor practices at the hands of the Spanish colonizers.

Despite influence from Spanish and French settlers, Haitian culture remains distinct and vibrant, reflecting many elements of West African traditions. Rara festival music, twoubadou guitar ballads and merengue-style compas music exemplify traditional Haitian sounds. Haitian visual art includes intricate flag making to decorate places of worship, landscape painting, and sculptures that feature recycled and natural materials. Artwork from Haiti is bought and sold internationally and several major galleries in the United States and Europe have hosted exhibits of Haitian painting. Dance in Haiti is both a social and ritual activity—featured in Vodou ceremonies and carnival celebrations. Traditional quadrille or karabela dresses, worn by women on formal occasions such as weddings or religious holidays, are celebrated for their bright colors and full, flowing skirts. Haitian cuisine is based on Creole and French cooking styles. Beans and rice are staples of the Haitian diet and are usually flavored with coconut and hot peppers.

Haiti has given birth to several internationally celebrated authors such as Jean Price-Mars, whose works were translated from the French by Langston Hughes. The country was once home to abolitionist Frederick Douglass as well as to Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* while living there. Today, Haitian culture continues to influence artists of all disciplines, including the pioneering choreography of Katherine Dunham and the watercolors of American painter Lois Mailou Jones. Though Haiti is often associated with political unrest and

economic troubles, it is a country of great beauty and cultural richness, reflected in its landscape and its peoples.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide is a controversial political figure in Haiti's history, and he appears often throughout *Brother, I'm Dying*. Aristide was an outspoken critic of "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier, and was Haiti's first democratically appointed president. He was first elected in 1990 and served as Haiti's President three different times: for eight months in 1991, from 1994 to 1996, and from 2001 to 2004. His presidential terms were abruptly ended by violent overthrows. A man with contentious policies, Aristide survived four assassination attempts, including one by the powerful Tonton Macoutes, which is referenced in *Brother, I'm Dying*. At the end of his final presidency in 2004, Aristide was forced into exile in South Africa, not returning to his home country of Haiti until 2011.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. "Brother, I'm Dying." iBooks.

Selected Works

by Edwidge Danticat

Claire of the Sea Light, 2013

Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work, 2011

The Dew Breaker, 2004

Behind the Mountains, 2002

The Farming of Bones, 1998

Krik? Krak!, 1995

Breath, Eyes, Memory, 1994

Other Resources

"Immigration, Xenophobia, and Racism" -Apoorvaa Joshi, Asia Society

<http://asiasociety.org/education/immigration-xenophobia-and-racism>

An article that provides lists of online resources about immigration and similar topics, including facts and statistics, and how to incorporate an informed discussion of these issues in the classroom.

“All Immigrants are Artists” - Doug McLean, The Atlantic

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/08/all-immigrants-are-artists/279087/>

An interview with Danticat that discusses the artistry and creativity that comes from starting a new life in another country and culture, inspired by a passage from Patricia Engel’s *It’s Not Love, It’s Just Paris*. Below is an excerpt from the article:

“...And that’s another thing this passage hints on: that first-generation immigrants often model artistic behavior for their children. They don’t necessarily realize it, like the father who says the immigrant life is art in its greatest form. But I realize now I saw artistic qualities in my parents’ choices—in their creativity, their steadfastness, the very fact that we were in this country from another place. They’re like the artist mentors people have in any discipline—by studying, by observing, by reading, you’ve had this model in the form of someone’s life. My mother could not have found time for creative pursuits with four children and a factory job. But she modeled the discipline and resourcefulness and self-sacrifice that are constant inspirations in my own life’s work. The things she did, the choices she made, made the artist’s life possible for me. I didn’t know it, but she taught me that being an artist makes sense.

While it’s natural for the children of immigrants to want to be artists, it is natural for the parents to feel threatened by artistic vocations. As a parent myself, I completely understand that impulse. When you’ve given so much, when you’ve sacrificed everything to make this huge transition, you want to see your child have an easier life as a result. You want to spare them the anguish of worrying always about survival, especially after all the sacrifices you’ve made. The first generation feels they created a path, they sacrificed, they made the way—and now their children should have stability and peace of mind. This, of course, is not the emphasis of being an artist.

And so, for children of immigrants, the creative path is fraught with added risk: There’s so much more at stake if you fail. There’s a feeling that—as the character in the passage feels—if you fail, you’re not only failing yourself, but your family, your parents who have gone through so much to give you this opportunity. It’s not just your own failure at stake—artistic failure can mean the failure of your family’s entire enterprise.

My father died of pulmonary fibrosis in 2005, after a very long illness. On his deathbed, he wrestled very much with the idea that his life ultimately meant nothing. He’d ask me questions like, “What have I contributed to the world?” And the conclusion he came to was: *well, you guys—my children. You are my contribution.* I think the fact that my brothers and I had some success in life helped him come more readily to this conclusion. My father always wanted me to be a doctor. As he was dying, if I had become neither doctor nor writer, I fear he might have felt like his life meant nothing. That weight was on my back, this feeling that success—however it’s defined—was somehow crucial.

The worst feeling that immigrant parents can have is, “Maybe we shouldn’t have come here. Maybe we should have stayed.” Often, their feeling about their decision to leave home is bound up in the fates and careers of their children. If they *do* succeed, though, this wonderful thing can happen: When they speak to the culture about the journey a particular family went through, and it validates the parents’ decision publicly. I found that, as my father was dying, this counted for him somehow—the fact that other people, through things I had written, knew how much he sacrificed to raise me and my brothers. This success ultimately convinced him that he made the right choice. It validates the decision he made all those many years ago.”

McLean, Doug. "All Immigrants Are Artists." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 27 Aug. 2013. Web.

Interview with Danticat - Guernica

Guernica: We get a host of characters and voices in this book, but there seems to be a special affection reserved for Claire, the title character. How did you first find her?

Edwidge Danticat: Claire came like a vision, really. It was the year after *The Dew Breaker* came out. This was a painful time for me. My father was dying from pulmonary fibrosis. My uncle Joseph had just died in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security while seeking asylum in the U.S. My oldest daughter Mira was born soon after that. I started writing a memoir about all these deaths and a birth, a book called *Brother, I'm Dying*. And right about that time I saw a documentary about orphans in Haiti. Or rather, not quite about orphans. It was about kids who have parents, but their parents bring them to an orphanage so they can have a better life. One of the aid workers in the documentary said that the parents do this because these people are not that attached to their kids. My own parents left Haiti to work in New York while I stayed behind. I didn’t grow up in an orphanage, but I grew up in my uncle’s house with a lot of kids like me, whose parents were abroad, working. So after I saw this program, a new character came to me, almost the way someone appears in a dream. Claire Limyè Lanmè. Claire of the Sea Light, a child that a beloved parent would rather rip his heart out of his chest than to leave, but has no other choice but to try to give her to someone else to raise because he does not have the means to do it himself.

Guernica: The story began to fill in around Claire?

Edwidge Danticat: I started writing about Claire and her father, and then it became too about the town where they live and how some of the town people are linked in some way, large or small, to this little girl. The story is told from different points of view. At first you get the story from her father, then from the woman to whom she's being given, then from Claire herself. I broke those stories up, as the three pillars of the book, and I always knew that Claire's story would come last. Because one of the pressing questions of the book is where is this girl going. Even I wasn't sure for a long time. My editor, Robin Desser, was asking me until the last moment what would happen to Claire. Is she alive? Is she going to stay with her father? Will she go with the woman he wants to give her to? I have written many different endings. The last thing I did, just before the galleys went through, was decide what happens to Claire.

Guernica: You're coming back to this fictional town, Ville Rose, where you've set stories in the past. Did you have any tricks for getting yourself oriented in the old space? Maps? Telephone directories?

Edwidge Danticat: No maps or telephone directories. Ville Rose itself is a hybrid of a town, a mix of several coastal towns I have been to or have spent time in while in Haiti. For a long time, I just had fifty pages of material that I had already written and kept reading over and over again to keep re-immersing myself in the town. But the best moment in writing any book is when you just can't wait to get back to the writing, when you can't wait to re-enter that fictional place, when your fictional town feels even more real than the town where you actually live.

Guernica: When you're writing in English about characters that live in Haiti and speak Haitian Creole, how are their stories coming to you?

Edwidge Danticat: All of it basically comes to me in Creole, with mental SimulTrans.

Guernica: Like your work at the UN?

Edwidge Danticat: Yes, except it's implanted in my brain. It's just automatic. Part of it has to do with the bilingualism/trilingualism of my life. The characters are speaking Creole in my mind. I can hear just what they're saying, and I'm the translator. Some things I leave in Creole, for readers who are bilingual and who may have another interpretation. The term "dew breaker," for example was "choukèt laroze." That could be translated as "dew shaker" or "dew smasher." But "dew breaker" is much more poetic, so that's how I translated it. It all happens quickly. I feel like I'm there watching

or listening to the characters. I remember an early review of *Claire* that called it “a love letter to her homeland.” And for a tiny split second, I was surprised while reading this, because to me that implied that I wasn’t there in my “homeland”—in Haiti. I thought “What? I’m not?” When I’m writing, it feels like I’m very much there.

Guernica: Would these be very different stories if you didn’t translate? If you took them down in Creole?

Edwidge Danticat: Oh, definitely. I had that experience with *Krik? Krak!* I made some of the stories into radio plays in Creole and they become totally different. More alive in some way. More immediate. In the epigraph to *Drown*, Junot Diaz uses a quote from a Cuban poet, Gustavo Pérez Firmat—“The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you.” This is the dilemma of the immigrant writer. If I’d lived in Haiti my whole life, I’d be writing these things in Creole. But these stories I am writing now are coming through me as a person who, though I travel to Haiti often, has lived in the U.S. for more than three decades now.

Often when you’re an immigrant writing in English, people think it’s primarily a commercial choice. But for many of us, it’s a choice that rises out of the circumstances of our lives. These are the tools I have at my disposal, based on my experiences. It’s a constant debate, not just in my community but in other communities as well. Where do you belong? You’re kind of one of us, but you now write in a different language. You’re told you don’t belong to American literature or you’re told you don’t belong to Haitian literature. Maybe there’s a place on the hyphen, as Julia Alvarez so brilliantly wrote in one of her essays. That middle generation, the people whose parents brought them to other countries as small children, or even people who were born to immigrant parents, maybe they can have their own literature too.

Guernica: Jonathan Lee recently interviewed your agent, Nicole Aragi, for *Guernica*, and she was talking about the insanity of a recent controversy on Wikipedia, in which you and other authors were moved out of the “American novelists” category, onto other lists. You were put in the “Haitian Women Novelists” category, I think. So apparently Wikipedia editors are part of that crowd that’s fretting over how to categorize you.

Edwidge Danticat: Isn’t that something? The funniest reaction to all of this came from someone who was shocked that, with a name like Edwidge, I am even a woman. But I agree with Nicole that

the whole thing is pretty outrageous. And also, what's the point? I don't see any reason to keep micro categorizing women writers, setting them more and more apart, except to marginalize them. I'm happy that someone brought it out in the light before the categories could keep getting more and more narrow. Soon I might be [categorized by Wikipedia] in "Haitian novelists under five feet five tall."

Guernica: Talking about how these categories are used to marginalize women in the writing industry, it still seems to be the case that the literary press skews white and male, and that books by women are reviewed less often. Have you noticed any particular slant to the attention your work gets?

Edwidge Danticat: There is definitely some imbalance. Sometimes you'll see a formidable book come out by an extraordinary woman writer go nearly unnoticed. Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, for example, was mostly reviewed in the big publications after she won the National Book Award. You also wish that there were more parity to the press that the book is getting. Last year when Jamaica Kincaid's book, *See Now Then* came out, the press was so one-toned. It wouldn't have been that way for a male writer. It's not a matter of whether the reviews are good or bad, it's about being taken seriously, both as a woman writer and as a writer of color. Also, it worries me when people point to a couple of women writers or writers of color who get some attention—and I am sometimes pulled into that category—to prove that others are getting a fair shot. It's like those people who keep saying that racism no longer exists in this country because Barack Obama is President of the United States.

Guernica: You've talked about a certain pressure you feel from the Haitian community, which sometimes takes offence at the way you're portraying Haiti. How do you deal with those encounters?

Edwidge Danticat: For better or worse, we all have a tendency to over generalize our individual experiences. After I've published something, I'll meet someone who says, "I'm Haitian, and I don't know this, so it must not be true." Even if we're talking about a work of fiction. I understand very well the desire to protect and defend Haiti. I've gotten very angry myself reading many things about Haiti. So my own personal barometer is this: Am I telling a nuanced and complex story? Am I telling my version of the truth, which I know may not be somebody else's. We're not a monolithic

group; no group is. Also, it's important to keep in mind the genre in which we are writing. Fiction is full of invented stories about exceptional people in exceptional situations. Those situations are not always cheery or celebratory. Also fiction is not journalism or sociology or anthropology. Every story is singular. The way we get depth is by putting a bunch of singular stories together to tell larger more complex and sometimes even contradictory stories. This is why I love editing and why it's been such a pleasure to edit both *Haiti Noir* and *Haiti Noir 2*, which will be published next January. In those books for example, you have eighteen writers's versions of Haiti. You get sadness. You get joy. You get lyricism. You get darkness. You get light. And yes you get the danger too. But what you don't get is, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie put it in her great TED talk, a single story.

Guernica: Many of your stories seem to arise out of painful episodes in your family's history. Do you find some catharsis in turning them into fiction? Does your family, once they've read them?

Edwidge Danticat: I get some catharsis from it, yes, but I don't think my family always feels like what I'm doing is cathartic for them. Even with the fiction, they feel exposed. With the first book, you learn all your lessons. It was difficult for my parents at first. When people at their church started reading my first book, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, it was uncomfortable for my parents because people immediately assumed that I was writing about myself and about them. After that book came out, my mother told me, "You know, people are going to think you're not a good girl." My parents also spent most of their adult lives under a dictatorship. To them being out there in the world talking about things was not safe. But as we all got older, there was a transition. They became happy that I was also telling people good things about Haiti. They saw it as a kind of service to the country and all was forgiven.

Guernica: In an essay in the collection *Create Dangerously*, you describe returning home to Haiti with the body of your cousin, Marius, and your aunt asking you not to write about it. Do you usually comply with those requests?

Edwidge Danticat: Sometimes family members will ask to be kept out of certain things that I'm writing, and I try to respect that. I'd much rather have relatives than a book. With my aunt, when I ended up writing about that incident we came to a kind of compromise. I changed the names. If it would have totally wrecked my relationship with my aunt, I would have used it in fiction, maybe, but I wouldn't have written about it in an essay. This is something I had to balance carefully when I

was writing the memoir. I've written essays where I mention things that I thought were very benign and those were the things that upset some family members. And sometimes the things you're expecting to upset them don't. When I was done with the memoir, I emailed the manuscript to my brothers and told them I'd take out anything they objected to. One of them said, "We don't like the way so much of it is about you." Even though it was more about my dad and uncle, I could see why he would think that. We'd all gone through these terrible things together and I was the only one telling the public story.

Guernica: Did you change things based on your brothers' notes?

Edwidge Danticat: I did adjust some things. But one of the greatest compliments I ever got came from my youngest brother when he read the finished book. He said, "It's all there. Just like it happened."

Guernica: You're a mother of young children now. Will your kids be off-limits, like with the White House Press Corps?

Edwidge Danticat: I think you mean the Little Haiti Press Corps. [*Chuckles.*] Some people get annoyed at women writers who even mention their children. Or there are all these theories about how many you can have, etc. I mention my children, first, because people often ask about the motherhood/writing balance thing and I also mention them because I can't tell you how much it meant to me when I was starting out to read about Toni Morrison and her two sons. It was very comforting to me that she was a mother of two and working full time and writing novels too. It made many things seem within my reach. So I'm not going to be putting my children on full blast all the time, but every once in a while they are called to participate in the family project that are these books. My oldest happens to be on the cover of *Claire of the Sea Light*. She's very proud of it. She won't know what a remainder table is though because now I feel like I'll have to buy every leftover copy of the book I ever see.

Guernica: And you'll be okay with her reading it, too?

Edwidge Danticat: I can't wait for both my daughters to be old enough to read all my books. I loved it every time I saw my parents acting like more than just my parents. And I'm looking forward to that with my daughters too. I am looking forward to having them discover me as someone completely other than their mother.

Guernica: Do you consider *Claire of the Sea Light* a novel, or a story collection?

Edwidge Danticat: I think of it as something in between. A kind of hybrid. Notice, we didn't write "A Novel" on the cover. I don't want people to think I'm trying to pass this off as something it's not. Many wonderful works of fiction have been written this way. Jean Toomer's *Cane* is one of my favorites. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, among others.

Guernica: This is the first book of fiction you've published since the earthquake—has your writing about Haiti changed since then?

Edwidge Danticat: The landscape has changed so much, the physical spaces. There is this split between the Haiti of before the earthquake and the Haiti of after the earthquake. So when I'm writing anything set in Haiti now, whether fiction or nonfiction, always in the back of my mind is how people, including some of my own family members, have been affected not just by history and by the present but also by the earthquake.

Guernica: *Claire of the Sea Light* is set pre-earthquake, but certain passages about the town and the country feel elegiac.

Edwidge Danticat: I started working on half the book before the earthquake and half of it after the earthquake. But at some point in the writing, even before the earthquake happened, this place I was writing about became a town on the verge of disaster. For a while, I had the year in the book explicitly. 2009. But eventually I took that out. I didn't want it to be some big revelation, a dramatic ta-da moment of the year before the earthquake.

Guernica: One of the aphorisms that Claire repeats seems particularly evocative of this seaside town: "Salt is life." Is that something you heard growing up in Haiti or something you invented for the story?

Edwidge Danticat: I might have heard it. But salt is a powerful symbol in Haiti, as elsewhere. Salt of the earth, for example is an American phrase isn't it? In Haiti, myth and legend has it that if you are turned into a zombie, if someone gives you a taste of salt, then you can come back to life. And in the life of the fishermen, there are so many little things about salt that I wanted to incorporate. The salt in the air. The crackling of salt in the fire. There's all this damage, this peeling of the fishing

boats from the sea salt. But there is also healing from it, sea baths that are supposed to heal all kinds of aches and wounds.

Guernica: This might be a bit forward for our first meeting, but do you know where you're going to be buried? Your characters often have very definite ideas about that. It occurred to me that it might be a personal preoccupation of yours.

Edwidge Danticat: It's always been something of an obsession of mine but has become more so since my eighty-one-year-old uncle died here in the United States, after never wanting to leave Haiti, except for short periods of time. When my uncle died, his body could not be returned to Haiti so he was buried in Queens, New York. He was always so sure that he was going to be buried in our family mausoleum in Port-au-Prince. He had also taken this very strong stand against leaving Haiti permanently. Someone has to stay, he always said. And he ended up being buried in Queens next to my father, who had been the one who left. Ultimately, we don't always get a say, but I'd like to be cremated, so that I can rest in many places. A little in Haiti. A little here.

Guernica: Gang violence seems to increasingly crop up in your work. It creates an important plot point in *Claire of the Sea Light*. Is it something you've set out to explore?

Edwidge Danticat: I wrote about gang violence in *Brother, I'm Dying* because it is in part what drove my uncle to leave Haiti and the neighborhood he had been living in for fifty years and to request asylum in the United States, something that led to his death. A group from the United Nations force, which is still in Haiti now, had basically invaded my uncle's house and occupied the roof and had shot at people from my uncle's roof, and when they retreated some of the people from the neighborhood wanted to kill my uncle because they thought he had willingly participated in the operation.

Living in a poor area, you are easily criminalized. The UN people might have just as easily killed my uncle too, the way they had killed innocent people who become their collateral damage in other operations in other poor neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince. But I wanted to write about the gang violence in both the memoir and in this book because even with all that had happened I couldn't totally demonize the young people who ended up joining the gangs, because some of them I had known since they were young. Many have since been killed in later operations like the one that happened from the top of my uncle's roof that day, but they were not ghosts but people to me. My

uncle had hired some of them who had been deported from the United States as English tutors or computer teachers for some of the kids in the school he had in the neighborhood. Some of these same young men who had threatened my uncle's life had been at my aunt's funeral not long before that. Some of their parents were parishioners in my uncle's church. I would see them during different visits. I can't tell you what they were doing elsewhere, but my uncle knew them as neighbors and tried to co-exist with them because—and maybe this was because he was a minister—he never stopped believing in redemption. He believed that no matter what people were calling these guys, there was goodness in them. So this part of it, the more intimate and less sensational part of gang life, from my limited exposure and from a bit of my uncle's perspective, is something I wanted to try explore in fiction, after writing about it in the memoir.

Sometimes fiction allows you to explore these types of complicated spaces more deeply. I didn't want to redeem the face of violence, but it is important for me to show that it is not always coming from one side. In *Claire*, Tiye and his people, for example, are not the only gangsters in the book. A lot of other seemingly good people also have a lot of blood on their hands.

Guernica: Since your uncle died seeking asylum, in the custody of Homeland Security, you've been very vocal about immigration reform and about asylum detention in particular. Are you feeling frustrated that President Obama, of whom you were an early supporter, hasn't been able to make more progress on these issues?

Edwidge Danticat: Yes, the fact that immigration reform has been so stalled is rather disappointing. On the one hand, you have the stalled reform and on the other hand all this draconian "show me your papers" legislation cropping up all over the country and some deplorable things happening in detention centers, where asylum seekers are still being treated deplorably and many of them are still dying the same way my uncle did. Last February, according to a group I am involved with called Americans for Immigrant Justice, several of their now clients, women who were seeking asylum, were taken into custody in Texas and placed in something called the icebox. They were put in cells with more than twenty-five people, cells with no chairs or beds, just a toilet. The lights were kept on twenty-four hours a day and the temperature was kept really low. It seems like in some quarters they want to make life so miserable for immigrants and asylum seekers that

they will “self-deport” or think twice about coming to this country before whatever version of immigrant reform passes.

Guernica: Do you wish that other writers were as willing to get involved in politics?

Edwidge Danticat: Albert Camus in his December 1957 lecture “*L’artiste et son temps*,” which was translated as “Create Dangerously” says, “The writers of today know this. If they speak up, they are criticized and attacked. If they become modest and keep silent, they are vociferously blamed for their silence.” I think everyone should just do what they’re comfortable doing. I wouldn’t want to diminish the fact that writing itself, whatever it is, can be a way of being involved. And I would never want to presume to tell others what to do.

Guernica: Relative to other “literary” writers, your books enjoy quite a bit of popular success. Do you attribute it to anything in particular?

Edwidge Danticat: Oprah! Everything changed when Oprah chose *Breath, Eyes, Memory* for her book club in the spring of 1998. I had published two books when she picked my first and that fall when I went on tour for my third—*The Farming Bones*—I could already see the difference in terms of a wider interest in my work. She introduced my work to people who might have never read me and a lot of those readers are still with me today.

Guernica: Are you working on something new now, while *Claire of the Sea Light* is launching?

Edwidge Danticat: The best advice I ever got as a writer was from my first editor at Soho Press, Laura Hruska. Rest her soul. This was when *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was in galleys. We had just gotten a paperback deal with Vintage, thanks to two wonderful editors there, Dawn Davis and Robin Desser, my current editor at Knopf. I was working as an assistant at Jonathan Demme’s film production company then, Clinica Estetico, which was just down the street from Soho Press. Laura came over and sat next to me in my little cubicle, and looked me straight in the eye and said, “Edwidge, you’re now going to have to start thinking about a writing career.”

Frankly, I hadn’t been fully thinking that way. I thought I’d write a couple of books then go on to do something else. Maybe work on films, which I have also been lucky enough to do. So Laura Hruska told me that I needed to start on something new right away, before the book came out, so that whether it got a really good or a really bad or an indifferent reception, at least I’d have another writing project already in the works to return to. I’ve always tried to follow that advice. So right

now, I'm about a hundred pages into my new book. I will have that to return to once Claire has begun to make her way into the world.

Book review - Michiko Kakutan, The New York Times

When Edwidge Danticat was 2 years old, she recalls in this deeply affecting memoir, her father, Mira, left her and her brother in Haiti to move to New York City. Two years later, when her mother followed him to America, she left Edwidge with 10 new dresses she'd sewn, most of them too big for the little girl and meant to be saved to be worn in the years to come. During the following eight years Edwidge and her brother Bob lived with her father's brother, Joseph, and his wife, Denise, in their pink house in Bel Air, a Port-au-Prince neighborhood caught in the crossfire between rival political factions and gangs.

Since Joseph and Denise did not have a phone, and access to call centers was too costly, the family stayed in touch by mail. Every other month Edwidge's father mailed a half-page, three-paragraph letter addressed to her uncle — “the first paragraph offering news of his and my mother's health, the second detailing how to spend the money they had wired for food, lodging and school expenses for Bob and myself, the third section concluding abruptly after reassuring us that we'd be hearing again from him before long.”

She later learned in a college composition class that her father's letters had been written in a so-called “diamond sequence, the Aristotelian ‘Poetics’ of correspondence, requiring an opening greeting, a middle detail or request, and a brief farewell at the end.” The letter-writing process had been such an “agonizing chore” for her father, she observes, that this “specific epistolary formula, which he followed unconsciously, had offered him a comforting way of disciplining his emotions.” He later said to his daughter, “What I wanted to tell you and your brother was too big for any piece of paper and a small envelope.”

In “Brother, I'm Dying,” Ms. Danticat brings the lyric language and emotional clarity of her remarkable 2004 novel “The Dew Breaker” to bear on the story of her own family, a story which, like so much of her fiction, embodies the painful legacy of Haiti's violent history, demonstrating the myriad ways in which the public and the private, the political and the personal, intersect in the lives of that country's citizens and exiles. Ms. Danticat not only creates an indelible portrait of her two fathers, her dad and her uncle, but in telling their stories, she gives the reader an intimate sense of the personal consequences of the Haitian diaspora: its impact on parents and children, brothers and sisters, those who stay and those who leave to begin a new life abroad. She has written a fierce, haunting book about exile and loss and family love, and how that love can survive distance and separation, loss and abandonment and somehow endure, undented and robust.

Ms. Danticat's father was a tailor's apprentice — expected to sew two dozen shirts a day, for which he received about 5 cents a shirt — who eventually went into business for himself. When cheap, used clothes from the United States (called “Kennedys” because they were sent to Haiti during the Kennedy administration) flooded the country in the 1960s, he went to work as a shoe salesman, making less than the equivalent of \$20 a month. Fear of being killed by the dreaded Tontons Macoutes (the violent enforcers of François Duvalier's murderous regime) would eventually lead him to start thinking about leaving Haiti for good. In America he and his wife settled in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and for 20 years he would drive a gypsy cab.

Despite his brother's entreaties to move, Uncle Joseph clung to his home in Bel Air, determined not to be driven out. After the rise of Duvalier dashed his own political ambitions, he'd become a devout Baptist and decided to build his own church. Nothing could persuade him to abandon his congregation: not a radical laryngectomy (for a cancerous tumor) that left him unable to speak, not his desire to spend more time with brother and family in New York, not the growing violence in the streets outside his church.

Only the burning and looting of his church and death threats from local gangs — who mistakenly believed he had allowed riot police to shoot people from the roof of his building — finally drove Joseph from his home. But while he amazingly managed to smuggle himself out of the neighborhood, where a gang leader vowed to “burn him alive” if he were found, his flight to America would quickly spiral into a nightmare. After making it to Miami and asking for asylum, Ms. Danticat writes, her 81-year-old uncle was put into detention by United States officials. Shortly after arriving at the Krome detention facility, he fell ill and was transported to a hospital. He died a day later.

Meanwhile, in New York, Joseph's brother, Mira was failing. Suffering from end-stage pulmonary fibrosis, he found it increasingly difficult to drive or walk or speak. Even as his daughter learned that she was pregnant with her first child — a daughter she would name Mira, after him — he struggled to get through each day. He lost more and more weight, and took to wearing a jacket even on the warmest days to hide how thin he'd become.

Though Joseph had never wanted to leave his beloved Haiti, he was buried in a cemetery in Queens, “exiled finally in death,” becoming “part of the soil of a country that had not wanted him.” Not that much later he would be joined by his brother, Mira. Two brothers who made very different choices in their lives — one who wanted to stay in the homeland he loved, the other who wanted to invent a new life for himself in the north — and who ended up, side by side, in a graveyard in one of New York's outer boroughs.

“I wish I were absolutely certain that my father and uncle are now together in some tranquil and restful place,” Ms. Danticat writes at the end of this moving book, “sharing endless walks and talks

beyond what their too few and too short visits allowed. I wish I knew that they were offering enough comfort to one another to allow them both not to remember their distressing, even excruciating, last hours and days. I wish I could fully make sense of the fact that they're now sharing a grave site and tombstone in Queens, New York, after living apart for more than 30 years."

Discussion Questions

1. Danticat tells us that she has constructed the story from the "borrowed recollections of family members....What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time." Discuss what this work of reconstruction and reordering means for the structure of the story she presents, as well as for her own understanding of what happened to the two brothers.
2. Consider the scene in which Danticat sees the results of her pregnancy test. How do her fears for her father affect her first thoughts of her child? She says to herself, "My father is dying and I'm pregnant." How does this knowledge change her sense of time? How does it affect her understanding of the course of her family's history?
3. As a child, Danticat was disturbed at how little her father said in the letters he sent to the family in Haiti. He later told her, "I was no writer....What I wanted to tell you and your "brother was too big for any piece of paper and a small envelope." Why, as a child, did she "used to dream of smuggling him words"?
4. How does young Edwidge retain her loyalties to her parents, even though they are absent from her life for so many years? Is there evidence that she feels hurt or rejected by their decision to leave for the States? How does she feel when they come back to visit Haiti with two new children?
5. Haiti's history is briefly sketched on in the chapter entitled "Brother, I'm Dying" and elsewhere. While many readers will know that Haiti was a slave colony, why is the fact of the American invasion and nineteen-year occupation less well known? Danticat's paternal grandfather, Granpè Nozial, fought with the guerrilla resistance against the Americans. How does the family's engagement with Haiti's political history affect Joseph's unwillingness to emigrate to the U.S.? Why does he refuse to leave Haiti, or even to remove himself from the dangers of Bel Air?
6. If so few words are passed between Danticat's parents and their two children in Haiti, how is emotion transmitted? Is there a sense, in the book, that Danticat is emotionally reticent even after her reunion with her parents? Why is she reluctant to tell her parents the news about her pregnancy? Why is it important that her father gave her a typewriter as a welcoming present?

7. Danticat found a scrap of paper on which she had written, soon after coming to Brooklyn, “My father's cab is named for wanderers, drifters, nomads. It's called a gypsy cab.” What does this suggest about how she understood, or thought about, her father's work and her family's status in America? What does it reveal about a young girl's interest in the power of words?

8. *Brother, I'm Dying* is Danticat's first major work of nonfiction. What resemblances does it bear, if any, to her works of fiction in terms of style, voice, content, etc.?

9. Danticat says of her story, “I am writing this only because they can't.” As a girl, Edwidge was often literally her uncle's voice, because after his tracheotomy she could read his lips and tell others what he was saying. Why is it important that she also speak for her father and her uncle in writing this memoir?

10. Consider the relationship between the two brothers, Mira and Joseph. There is a significant difference in age, and Mira has been away from his brother for decades, by the end of the story. Despite this, they remain close. What assumptions about kinship and family ties are displayed in their love for each other? Are these bonds similar to, or stronger than, ties you would see between American-born brothers?

11. When Danticat describes the death of her cousin, Marie-Micheline, or her uncle's list of the bodies he has seen on the street, or when she recounts the story of the men laughing as they kick around a human head, or the threat of the “gangs to decapitate her uncle Joseph, or the looting and burning of his home and his church, what is your response as a reader? How does this violence resonate against the warmth and love that are so clearly expressed by the feeling of Danticat's extended family members for each other?

12. How does Danticat convey a sense of the richness of Haitian culture? What are the people like? What are their folk tales like? How does their use of both Creole and French affect their approach to language and speech? How does she make us feel the effects of the violence and poverty that the Haitians endure?

13. Danticat's description of what happens to her uncle in U.S. custody is reconstructed from documents. How does Danticat control her emotion while presenting these events? How, in general, would you describe her writing style as she narrates these often devastating events?

14. Danticat relates her Granmè Melina's story about the girl who wanted the old woman to bring her father back from “the land of the dead: what is the effect of her decision to end the book with this story? How does the story reflect on the book as a whole, and on the act of writing?

15. As one reviewer put it, “If there's such a thing as a warmhearted tragedy, *Brother, I'm Dying* is a stunning example” (Yvonne Zipp, *The Christian Science Monitor*). Do you agree? If so, what elements in the writing and the story contribute to this effect?

**Discussion questions provided courtesy of Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC.*

Excerpt from Brother, I'm Dying

Beating the Darkness

On Sunday, October 24, 2004, nearly two months after he left New York, Uncle Joseph woke up to the clatter of gunfire. There were blasts from pistols, handguns, automatic weapons, whose thundering rounds sounded like rockets. It was the third of such military operations in Bel Air in as many weeks, but never had the firing sounded so close or so loud. Looking over at the windup alarm clock on his bedside table, he was startled by the time, for it seemed somewhat lighter outside than it should have been at four thirty on a Sunday morning.

During the odd minutes it took to reposition and reload weapons, you could hear rocks and bottles crashing on nearby roofs. Taking advantage of the brief reprieve, he slipped out of bed and tiptoed over to a peephole under the staircase outside his bedroom. Parked in front of the church gates was an armored personnel carrier, a tank with mounted submachine guns on top. The tank had the familiar circular blue and white insignia of the United Nations peacekeepers and the letters UN painted on its side. Looking over the trashstrewn alleys that framed the building, he thought for the first time since he'd lost Tante Denise that he was glad she was dead. She would have never survived the gun blasts that had rattled him out of his sleep. Like Marie Micheline, she too might have been frightened to death.

He heard some muffled voices coming from the living room below, so he grabbed his voice box and tiptoed down the stairs. In the living room, he found Josiane and his grandchildren: Maxime,

Nozial, Denise, Gabrielle and the youngest, who was also named Joseph, after him. Leone, who was visiting from Leogane, was also there, along with her brothers, Bosi and George.

"Ki jan nou ye?" my uncle asked. How's everyone?

"MINUSTAH plis ampil police," a trembling Leone tried to explain.

Like my uncle, Leone had spent her entire life watching the strong arm of authority in action, be it the American marines who'd been occupying the country when she was born or the brutal local army they'd trained and left behind to prop up, then topple, the puppet governments of their choice. And when the governments fell, United Nations soldiers, so-called peacekeepers, would ultimately have to step in, and even at the cost of innocent lives attempt to restore order.

Acting on the orders of the provisional government that had replaced Aristide, about three hundred United Nations soldiers and Haitian riot police had come together in a joint operation to root out the most violent gangs in Bel Air that Sunday morning. Arriving at three thirty a.m., the UN soldiers had stormed the neighborhood, flattening makeshift barricades with bulldozers. They'd knocked down walls on corner buildings that could be used to shield snipers, cleared away piles of torched cars that had been blocking traffic for weeks and picked up some neighborhood men.

"It is a physical sweep of the streets," Daniel Moskaluk, the spokesman for the UN trainers of the Haitian police, would later tell the Associated Press, "so that we can return to normal traffic in this area, or as normal as it can be for these people."

Before my uncle could grasp the full scope of the situation, the shooting began again, with even more force than before. He gathered everyone in the corner of the living room that was farthest from Rue Tirremasse, where most of the heavy fire originated. Crouched next to his grandchildren, he wondered what he would do if they were hit by a stray. How would he get them to a hospital?

An hour passed while they cowered behind the living room couch. There was another lull in the shooting, but the bottle and rock throwing continued. He heard something he hadn't heard in some time: people were pounding on pots and pans and making clanking noises that rang throughout the

entire neighborhood. It wasn't the first time he'd heard it, of course. This kind of purposeful rattle was called *bat teneb*, or beating the darkness. His neighbors, most of them now dead, had tried to beat the darkness when Fignole had been toppled so many decades ago. A new generation had tried it again when Aristide had been removed both times. My uncle tried to imagine in each clang an act of protest, a cry for peace, to the Haitian riot police, to the United Nations soldiers, all of whom were supposed to be protecting them. But more often it seemed as if they were attacking them while going after the *chimères*, or ghosts, as the gang members were commonly called.

The din of clanking metal rose above the racket of roofdenting rocks. Or maybe he only thought so because he was so heartened by the *bat tenèb*. Maybe he wouldn't die today after all. Maybe none of them would die, because their neighbors were making their presence known, demanding peace from the gangs as well as from the authorities, from all sides.

He got up and cautiously peeked out of one of the living room windows. There were now two UN tanks parked in front of the church. Thinking they'd all be safer in his room, he asked everyone to go with him upstairs.

Maxo had been running around the church compound looking for him. They now found each other in my uncle's room. The lull was long enough to make them both think the gunfight might be over for good. Relieved, my uncle showered and dressed, putting on a suit and tie, just as he had every other Sunday morning for church.

Maxo ventured outside to have a look. A strange calm greeted him at the front gate. The tanks had moved a few feet, each now blocking one of the alleys joining Rue Tirremasse and the parallel street, Rue Saint Martin. Maxo had thought he might sweep up the rocks and bottle shards and bullet shells that had landed in front of the church, but in the end he decided against it.

Another hour went by with no shooting. A few church members arrived for the regular Sunday-morning service.

"I think we should cancel today," Maxo told his father when they met again at the front gate.

"And what of the people who are here?" asked my uncle. "How can we turn them away? If we don't open, we're showing our lack of faith. We're showing that we don't trust enough in God to protect us."

At nine a.m., they opened the church gates to a dozen or so parishioners. They decided, however, not to use the mikes and loudspeakers that usually projected the service into the street.

A half hour into the service, another series of shots rang out. My uncle stepped off the altar and crouched, along with Maxo and the others, under a row of pews. This time, the shooting lasted about twenty minutes. When he looked up again at the clock, it was ten a.m. Only the sound of sporadic gunfire could be heard at the moment that a dozen or so Haitian riot police officers, the SWAT-like CIMO (Corps d'Intervention et de Maintien de l'Ordre, or Unit for Intervention and Maintaining Order), stormed the church. They were all wearing black, including their helmets and bulletproof vests, and carried automatic assault rifles as well as sidearms, which many of them aimed at the congregation. Their faces were covered with dark knit masks, through which you could see only their eyes, noses and mouths.

The parishioners quivered in the pews; some sobbed in fear as the CIMO officers surrounded them. The head CIMO lowered his weapon and tried to calm them.

"Why are you all afraid?" he shouted, his mouth looking like it was floating in the middle of his dark face. When he paused for a moment, it maintained a nervous grin.

"If you truly believe in God," he continued, "you shouldn't be afraid."

My uncle couldn't tell whether he was taunting them or comforting them, telling them they were fine or prepping them for execution.

"We're here to help you," the lead officer said, "to protect you against the chimeres."

No one moved or spoke.

"Who's in charge here?" asked the officer.

Someone pointed at my uncle.

"Are there chimeres here?" the policeman shouted in my uncle's direction.

Gang members inside his church? My uncle didn't want to think there were. But then he looked over at all the unfamiliar faces in the pews, the many men and women who'd run in to seek shelter from the bullets. They might have been chimeres, gangsters, bandits, killers, but most likely they were ordinary people trying to stay alive.

"Are you going to answer me?" the lead officer sternly asked my uncle.

"He's a bebe," shouted one of the women from the church. She was trying to help my uncle. She didn't want them to hurt him. "He can't speak."

Frustrated, the officer signaled for his men to split the congregation into smaller groups.

"Who's this?" they randomly asked, using their machine guns as pointers. "Who's that?"

When no one would answer, the lead officer signaled for his men to move out. As they backed away, my uncle could see another group of officers climbing the outside staircase toward the building's top floors. The next thing he heard was another barrage of automatic fire. This time it was coming from above him, from the roof of the building.

The shooting lasted another half hour. Then an eerie silence followed, the silence of bodies muted by fear, uncoiling themselves from protective poses, gently dusting off their shoulders and backsides, afraid to breathe too loud. Then working together, the riot police and the UN soldiers, who often collaborated on such raids, jogged down the stairs in an organized stampede and disappeared down the street.

After a while my uncle walked to the church's front gate and peered outside. The tanks were moving away. Trailing the sounds of sporadic gunfire, they turned the corner toward Rue Saint

Martin, then came back in the other direction. One tank circled Rue Tirremasse until late afternoon. As dusk neared, it too vanished along with the officers at the makeshift command center at Our Lady of Perpetual Help farther down the street.

As soon as the forces left, the screaming began in earnest. People whose bodies had been pierced and torn by bullets were yelling loudly, calling out for help. Others were wailing about their loved ones. Amwe, they shot my son. Help, they hurt my daughter. My father's dying. My baby's dead. My uncle jotted down a few of the words he was hearing in one of the small notepads in his shirt pocket. Again, recording things had become an obsession. One day, I knew, he hoped to gather all his notes together, sit down and write a book.

There were so many screams my uncle didn't know where to turn. Whom should he try to see first? He watched people stumble out of their houses, dusty, bloody people.

"Here's the traitor," one man said while pointing at him. "The bastard who let them up on his roof to kill us."

"You're not going to live here among us anymore," another man said. "You've taken money for our blood."

All week there had been public service announcements on several radio stations asking the people of Bel Air and other volatile areas to call the police if they saw any gangs gathering in their neighborhoods.

It was rumored that a reward of a hundred thousand Haitian dollars — the equivalent of about fifteen thousand American dollars — had been offered for the capture of the neighborhood gang leaders. My uncle's neighbors now incorrectly believed he'd volunteered his roof in order to collect some of that money.

Two sweaty, angry-looking young men were each dragging a blood-soaked cadaver by the arms. They were heading for my uncle.

My uncle stepped back, moving to the safer shadows of the church courtyard. Anne, once a student of his school, followed him in.

"Pastor," she whispered, "my aunt sent me to tell you something."

Anne's aunt Ferna, now thirty-seven years old, the same age Marie Micheline had been when she died, he recalled, had been born in the neighborhood. My uncle had known both Ferna and Anne their entire lives.

"What is it?" asked my uncle.

"Don't talk," said Anne. "People can hear your machine."

My uncle removed his voice box from his neck and motioned for her to continue.

"Pastor," said Anne, "my aunt told me to tell you she heard that fifteen people were killed when they were shooting from your roof and the neighbors are saying that they're going to bring the corpses to you so you can pay for their funerals. If you don't pay, and if you don't pay for the people who are hurt and need to go to the hospital, they say they'll kill you and cut your head off so that you won't even be recognized at your own funeral."

My uncle lowered the volume on his voice box and leaned close to Anne's ears.

"Tell Ferna not to worry," he said. "God is with me."

Because, just as he'd told my father, he would be leaving for Miami in a few days to visit some churches, he had eight hundred dollars with him that he planned to leave behind for the teachers' salaries. So when his neighbors crowded the courtyard telling him of their wounded or dead loved ones, he gave them that money. Because many were bystanders who had been shot just as he might have been shot inside the walls of his house, his church, they understood that it was not his fault. By the time it got dark, however, and Tante Denise's brothers urged him to go back inside so they could lock all the doors and gates, the two corpses had been dragged to the front of the church and

laid out. That afternoon, on the radio, the government reported that only two people had died during the operation. Obviously there were many more.

That night after dark everyone gathered in my uncle's room. He and the children crowded together on his bed, while Maxo and his wife, Josiane, Leone and her brothers stretched out on blankets on the floor. To avoid being seen, they remained in the dark, not even lighting a candle.

They could now hear a more familiar type of gunfire, not the super firing power of the Haitian special forces and UN soldiers but a more subdued kind of ammunition coming from the handguns and rifles owned by area gang members. Shots were occasionally fired at the church. Now and then a baiting voice would call out, "Pastor, you're not getting away. We're going to make you pay."

Using a card-funded cell phone with a quickly diminishing number of minutes, Maxo tried several times to call the police and the UN alert hotline, but he could not get through. He wanted to tell them that their operation had doomed them, possibly condemned them to death. He wanted them to send in the cavalry and rescue them, but quickly realized that he and his family were on their own.

At one point they heard footsteps, the loud thump of boots on a narrow ledge above my uncle's bedroom window. Maxo tightened his grip on the handle of a machete he kept under his pillow, just as his father had in his youth. Something heavy was being dragged across the floor above them, possibly the generator on which they relied for most of their electrical power.

It was quiet again. My uncle waited for the children to nod off before discussing strategy with the adults.

"They're mostly angry at me," he said. "They're angry because they think I asked the riot police and the UN to go up on the roof. Everyone who came tonight asked me, 'Why did you let them in?' as though I had a choice."

"Maxo," he said, putting as much command as he could behind his mechanized voice. "Take your wife and the children and go to Leogane with your aunt and uncles. If you leave at four in the morning, you'll be on one of the first camions to Leogane."

"I'm not going to leave you," Maxo said.

"You have to," my uncle insisted. He wanted to paint a painful enough picture that would force Maxo to leave, not just to save himself but the children as well. So he borrowed an image from his boyhood of the fears that a lot of parents, including his, had for their children during the American occupation.

"They're very angry with us right now," he told Maxo. "What if they bayonet the children right in front of us? Would you want to see that? Your children torn from limb to limb right before your eyes?"

Maxo paced the perimeter of the room, walking back and forth, thinking.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll make sure the children leave safely, then I'll come back for you. You call my cell phone as soon as you can and we'll meet at Tante Zi's house in Delmas."

"You should leave with us," Leone persisted.

I'll never know whether my uncle thought he was too old or too familiar to his neighbors, including the gang members, to be harmed in any way, but somehow he managed to convince everyone to leave. So when the sun rose the next morning, he was all by himself in a bullet-riddled compound.

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