CREATE DANGEROUSLY

The Immigrant Artist at Work

Edwidge Danticat

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CHAPTER 6

The Other Side of the Water

In the summer of 1997, I flew to Port-au-Prince from New York a few days after my cousin Marius had flown in the cargo section of a similar American Airlines jet from Miami. Once I'd slept past the first half hour after takeoff, I'd strapped on the free headphones and chosen from the in-flight radio selection a pop station playing a song by the rock group Midnight Oil.

> How can we dance when our earth is turning?
> How can we sleep while . . .

Across the aisle from me, a man in a wrinkled brown suit shuffled a few papers in and out of a large manila envelope onto the tray table in front of him. He wiped his brow with a monogrammed blue handkerchief and then rang the flight attendant call button. When a plump blond woman hurried over, he asked her for a glass of water. When she brought it to him, he asked her when we were going to land.

I recognized the man, who had been escorted by immigration officers past the security checkpoint, right through the gate and to his seat on the airplane. He seemed to be in his late forties, was russet brown and thin with a gaunt face, his jaws speckled

with the remnants of a beard that looked as though a shave had been attempted on it but had failed. He was a deportee.

While looking over at him, I thought of my cousin Marius, who in his own way had also been deported. I had foreseen the two of us, Marius and me, traveling on the same day and my New York flight arriving a few hours before his Miami one so that I could be there to greet him at the airport in Port-au-Prince, but the obstacles to Marius's flight had been abruptly lifted and some obstacles to mine had abruptly surfaced and Marius had gone ahead on his own, before me, to be buried.

Originally, Marius's departure had been delayed because the undertaker could not locate his papers. Before his mother called us in New York—from Haiti—to announce his death to my father and to ask for our help in getting the body sent to her from Miami, I hadn't seen or spoken to Marius in years. Only two years younger than he was, I had barely interacted with him when I was a girl because his parents had divorced when I was quite young and he lived mostly with his father, who'd rarely mingled with our family. My father could barely remember Marius at all, as he was still a boy when Papa left Haiti for the United States. A decade after I'd moved to the United States, I heard that Marius had taken a boat to Miami. A few days before my flight from New York to Port-au-Prince, his mother had called to tell us that he was dead.

Once he'd offered his condolences to Tante Zi over the phone, my father asked me to pick up the extension and tell her that I would take care of things, would get Marius's body sent to her in Haiti.

After offering my own condolences to a tearful and hiccupping Tante Zi, I asked her where Marius was living before he died.

She paused as if to breathe past a large lump in her throat, and then whispered, "Miami," sounding puzzled, as if wondering why I was making her repeat something she'd already repeated many times.

"Do you have the address of the place where he was living in Miami?" I asked.

"No," she said. But she did have the telephone number of Marius's roommate of two years. His name was Delens.

I would call Delens, I told her, and get back to her.

I dialed Delens's number soon after I hung up with Tante Zi and asked in Creole if I could speak with him. The young man who answered replied, "Would you mind speaking English? I grew up here. It's hard for me to speak Creole."

It turned out that he was Delens. I told him, in English, that I was Marius's cousin and was trying to help locate his body to send it back to Port-au-Prince. Could he help me?

He gave me the number of the Freeman Funeral Home, where Marius's body had already been placed while awaiting expatriation. He didn't have the amount of money the funeral home charged and Tante Zi didn't trust him enough to send it to him, accusing him of being responsible—in some way that he could neither comprehend nor explain—for Marius's death.

At the end of the conversation, I cautiously asked Delens in my most polite voice, "Can you please tell me what Marius died of?"

"*Move maladi ya*," he responded in perfectly enunciated, nonaccented Creole. The bad disease, a euphemism for acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS.

"When did it happen?" I asked. "When did he get it?"

"I don't know." He switched back to hip-hop-toned English. "Maybe he had it even before he left Haiti. I don't know. But he's been living wild here, man, made some stupid-ass mistakes."

"Did he leave anything behind?" I thought Tante Zi might want to know. Maybe he had some assets that could help mitigate the transportation and funeral costs. But I wasn't thinking only about money. Perhaps there were more personal effects, legal papers, letters, photographs, journals, keepsakes that later on might comfort his mother.

"He had nothing," Delens replied harshly. "He was living it up and wasted everything. All he had when he died was sixty dollars."

Rightly or wrongly, I couldn't accept that a thirty-year-old man had left nothing else behind. When I hung up and summarized the other end of the conversation for my father, he told me that Tante Zi believed that Marius had been poisoned by his roommate, but almost everyone in the family had different theories. There were those who thought he had committed suicide and others who were certain he'd died of a drug overdose. I didn't know what or whom to believe, but it really didn't matter. A grieving mother was waiting to be reunited with her son. And since she couldn't come to him, we had to find some way to bring him to her.

The funeral, if held in Miami, would cost three thousand dollars, Mr. Freeman told me when I called. But for Marius's body to be shipped back to Haiti, the price would go up to five thousand. He'd already had Marius for a day or two now and would be happy to ship him to the funeral home of our choice anywhere in the Haitian capital, but he needed "papers."

"What kind of papers?" I asked.

Because Marius had come to Miami by boat and had never received asylum or legalized his status some other way, he was undocumented.

"I have to get him exit papers from the Haitian consulate," explained Mr. Freeman. "The U.S. authorities will want to see these papers at the airport before he leaves and the Haitian authorities will want to see them when he arrives."

"He's a dead man whose cadaver needs to be shipped to the country where he was born. Why is it so complicated?" I asked.

"In part," he answered calmly, "because he's an alien."

Were we still aliens in death, I asked, our corpses unwanted visitors still?

Fortunately, Delens managed to find Marius's Haitian passport, so Marius would certainly be granted exit papers by the Haitian consulate, Mister Freeman assured me. It was simply a matter of time.

"But that's not the only thing," he continued in the same unruffled ministerial voice. "It's also complicated because of the disease he died of. There are some special procedures involved with these types of corpses."

Even though it was probably written in large bold letters on Marius's death certificate, no one wanted to name the disease that had killed him. It was as if in some bizarre way they were all respecting his dying wish. Silence at all costs.

The next day, I called Tante Zi and explained all that I'd learned about Marius's return to Haiti. Tante Zi was aware of the funeral home cost, she said; she just wanted to confirm that

Delens was telling the truth. She was ready to make a money transfer. She even had Mister Freeman's information.

"Marius should be home soon," my father told her.

Before she hung up, Tante Zi began sobbing again and then added, "Look how they took my boy from me and took everything he owned on top of it."

Marius had been sending her a few hundred dollars each month, Tante Zi said. There was no way he could have been broke. And he didn't die of the "bad disease" either. He'd called her once a week, every Sunday, and promised her he'd come back to see her as soon as his papers were in order. During those talks, he was always full of laughter and hope. He never sounded like a sick person.

My father abruptly interrupted Tante Zi's tearful recollection and told her to calm down, to make sure she had her head on straight so she could face what lay ahead.

"You haven't seen your son in years," he reminded her. "He's coming back to you in a coffin. *Met fanm sou ou.* Be the strong woman you have to be."

Tante Zi, who often openly said that she loved my father more than all her other siblings—just as she said of all her other siblings that she loved them more than the others—agreed.

"You're right, brother," she said, still sniffling in my ear on the other extension. "I'll have to pull myself together to face this."

"I am sorry I can't come there to be with you," my father, who was recovering from very early symptoms of the pulmonary fibrosis that would eventually kill him, said to Tante Zi.

"I understand, brother," she said.

Three days later, Marius's exit papers came in. After eight days in Mister Freeman's morgue, Marius was going home. In the meantime, my father had a sudden crisis with his health and I missed Marius's departure day. Marius's body was shipped to Port-au-Prince. I missed his arrival in and his wake and burial, too.

When I got to Haiti, I didn't immediately visit the family mausoleum where Marius was buried. I didn't have to. Tante Zi had had the entire funeral photographed and a small souvenir album made. The most eye-catching pictures were of Marius lying in his silver coffin in a dark suit and tie, his hands carefully folded on top of his belly. His dark bloated pancake face was sculpted around a half grin that makes it hard to imagine what he might have looked like under different circumstances.

I saw Tante Zi several times that summer in Haiti, once at the baptism of her newest granddaughter, the child of her only daughter, Marie. She also came to visit me at the seaside campus where I was working, helping to teach a college course to American students.

One afternoon when she came to visit, we sat on the warm sand under an almond tree as two of my Haitian cousins played soccer and water volleyball with some of the students in the course. We watched the calm turquoise sea and bare brown mountains in the distance, the clouds shifting ever so carefully above them, rationing sunshine and shade. I knew that Marius would come up at some point that afternoon, and he did.

"I know this is what you do now," Tante Zi said. "This thing with the writing. I know it's your work, but please don't write what you think you know about Marius."

The truth is that I knew very little about Marius. Even though we were cousins, the same blood, our adult lives—my adult life, his adult death—might never have intersected at all had I not been asked to help return his body home. In the end, there had been very little drama even in this returning of his body. It was all so sanitized, so over-the-phone, nothing *Antigone* about it.

This type of thing happened all the time, Mr. Freeman and Delens had each explained to me in his own way: faraway family members realize that they are discovering—or recovering—in death fragments of a life that had swirled in hidden stories. In Haiti the same expression, *lòt bò dlo*, the other side of the water, can be used to denote the eternal afterlife as well as an émigré's eventual destination. It is sometimes impossible even for those of us who are on the same side of *lòt bò dlo* to find one another.

"We have still not had a death," Marquez's Colonel says. "A person does not belong to a place until someone is dead under the ground." Does that person still belong if someone died there, but is not buried under that ground?

"You should be buried where you die," Tante Zi's older sister, Tante Ilyana, had said. But what if you are all alone where you die? What if all your kin is *lòt bò dlo*?

"People talk," Tante Zi went on. "They say that everything they say to you ends up written down somewhere."

Because she was my elder, my beloved aunt, I bowed my head in shame, wishing I could apologize for that, but noble silences

aside, this immigrant artist, like many other artists, is a leech and I needed to latch on. I wanted to quote the French poet and critic Stéphane Mallarmé and tell her that everything in the world exists to end up in a book. I wanted to ask her forgiveness for the essay that in my mind I was already writing. The most I could do, however, was to promise her not to use her real name or Marius's.

She was silent again, momentarily comforted by that tiny compromise. I changed the subject, asking if she wanted to go swimming. Just to relax her body a little, I said, before the return trip from the resort town where I was teaching, back to Port-au-Prince. I thought she would say no. She had turned me down before. Still I hoped that she might surprise me and say yes.

"I can't," she began, and then corrected herself. "I don't want to."

A large cloud lingered above, casting a hint of gray over us. But it was still sunny over the water, the waves glittering as though taunting the fogginess above.

"Some people come back from the other side of the water, don't they?" She said, her eyes still fixed on the water. "You're proof of that, *non*?"

She raised her hands high in the air, aiming them at the twinkling sea as if to both scold and embrace it.

"They do," I said.

"Why didn't Marius come back?" She seemed to be asking both me and the sea.

"I don't know," I said.

"It's stupid to even ask," she said, scratching the short gray hair under the white kerchief that covered her head. "How could any of us know the answer to something like that? Only the sea and God know. Right?"

"Right," I echoed, still treading carefully after her rebuke.

"I suppose I should be glad we didn't lose him at sea," she said.

With her eyes still on the water, she got up and peeled off her milky white clothes. Wearing only her red bra and dark panties, she walked toward the ocean for an afternoon swim.

Bicentennia

Two hundred years had passed since t
second republic was created. Back t
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