

Edwidge Danticat



A Taste of Coffee

I THINK THAT THE MOUNTAIN IS GOING TO KILL ME, THAT I WILL NEVER SEE the other side. We have been walking for four hours and suddenly I have a sharp piercing pain in my side. My cousin Nick is about thirty feet ahead, hiking at a steady gait, following my uncle Joseph who is struggling up a steep loma on a borrowed mule. We have been told that the mule knows the way, instinctively, has made the journey several times before, but I haven't, not for a while, not since I was eight years old.

Nick suddenly stops and pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. While lighting up, he turns around to check on me. I am doubled over, hugging my mid-section, where the pain has spread from my abdomen down to my thighs. I try some breathing exercises that I remember from medical shows on television. But it is hard to concentrate. All I can think of, besides the pain, is my brother André, who had emergency surgery for appendicitis a few weeks before in New York. What if the same condition has suddenly befallen me, here on top of a mountain deep in the Haitian countryside, where the closest village seems like a grain of sand in the valley below?

Nick walks over and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Tired?" he asks.

I want to tell him that I am more than tired, but I am saving all my strength to ward off the pain.

"I think I'm dying," I finally manage to say.

"No you're not," he answers, drawing on his cigarette. "I was just like you when I came back here for the first time in a while. All the walking is just catching up with your body. You'll be fine in a minute."

We stop to rest on a slickrock, too common on the eroded mountain range, take cover from the scorching midday sun under a small, arched, wind-deformed tree. Just as Nick has predicted, my pain slowly subsides while he finishes his cigarette. We watch as my uncle and the mule slowly descend through a rift on the mountainside, towards our ancestral village, Beauséjour, where my paternal great-grandparents are buried and where my aunt Ilyana still lives.

I have decided to come on this trip to relive a myth, to experience a family fable often recited in just a few words. *Nou se moun mòn*, my aunts and uncles—my father's siblings—like to say. "We are mountain people".

With that label comes mixed implications. Of course, mountain people are fit and robust—they have to be to travel such long distances to places of unmarked paths and slippery trails, places where neither cars nor bicycles could tread. However, mountain people are also considered unsophisticated, backwards, marooned from the larger society, exiled by destiny, if not by choice, from the urbanites of the island. I have come to revisit these mountains from which our family has sprung, and which have released us to different types of migrations. I have come to see just how far we have trekked in less than two generations, from Beauséjour peyizan (peasants) to Brooklynites, from the valley to skyscrapers. I have come to see an aunt whom I have seen only once before in my life, when I was eight years old, because she has literally refused to come down from the mountain.

After a brief rest, I reclaim my mountain legs and continue on. Along the way, Nick and I retell each other fragmented stories about our great-grandparents, vague tales that we had gathered from older family members. Both my great-grandparents had lived in Beauséjour their entire lives, never venturing further than Dabonne, the first big market town off the mountain. Together when they married, they owned twenty acres of land and thirty pigs. Of the twelve children that my great-grandmother had given birth to, only four had survived. My great-grandparents had spent their whole lives without such luxuries as electricity, telephones, medical doctors, or morgues. When their children had died at varying ages in childhood, they had buried them either the same day, or the day after, for lack of said morgue.

As we crossed an arch of rock that formed a slanted bridge to the descent of the mountain, Nick and I lament the fact that there was not more to say of our great-grandparents' lives beyond these inelaborate segments which could almost be true of anyone else who had lived here in these mountains.

Before I came on this trip, I asked my father if he remembered anything else.

"Not much," he said. "In those days, children didn't sit down and chit chat with adults. You weren't even allowed to look them in the eye."

As children Nick and I had both come here, along with my brother André, to spend a week with my aunt Ilyana, who is the last close family member still living in Beauséjour. Everyone else, including my grandparents, had sold their share of the land and pigs after my great-grandparents' death and had used the money to migrate, first to the Haitian capital and then to other parts of the world. Unlike Nick, who makes his home in Port-au-Prince, I don't remember the childhood journey to the mountain in exhaustive detail. I remember skipping over what seemed like moles then, compared to these endless series of cliffs and crags. I remember collecting dandelions as we passed the gardens of people who called us by name, people of whom there is no longer any trace. I remember plucking handfuls of vetiver and citronella, crushing them in my hand to inhale their fragrance. I don't remember the domes of bare rock. I don't remember my aunt Ilyana's house looking so isolated from up high. I don't remember the pain in my calves, the agony of every step.

When I say this to Nick, he replies, "Perhaps it is because you were lighter, because you were a little girl."

We meet up with Uncle Joseph on the descent as he stops for a rest of his own. He offers the borrowed mule to Nick who barely escapes a kick on the groin as he tries to mount the animal.

"This is why I have never been on one of those," I say.

"You've just never been tired enough," replies Uncle Joseph, who at seventy six years old, has been coming to Beauséjour from the capital a couple of times a year to visit with Aunt Ilyana and see after a small school that he has started here.

Uncle Joseph points out the one room school house down below. It looks tiny and blurry, no different than the cemetery near it, the cluster of tombs, where my great-grandparents are buried.

WE REACH MY AUNT ILYANA'S HOUSE BY MID-AFTERNOON. NESTLED BETWEEN a stream and a banana grove, it is a modest two-room home made of limestone walls and a tin roof. It has not changed very much since Nick, André, and I came here as children, except that the tin roof has been replaced a couple of times due to hurricanes. Aunt Ilyana lives alone now, but her ex-husband has his own place nearby and he visits often as does her adult son, my cousin Renel, who is a dentist in Port-au-Prince. Unlike my father, his brothers, and sisters, and Renel, who followed my grandparents to the city, Aunt Ilyana remained behind with her thirty eight year old daughter Marie Jeanne until Marie Jeanne had died the year before of AIDS — passed on to her by a philandering husband — and Aunt Ilyana had entombed her oldest child and only daughter in a beautiful turquoise mausoleum next to the house. In Marie Jeanne's mausoleum is reserved a place for Aunt Ilyana so mother and daughter can be together again in death as they had always been in life.

Aunt Ilyana is not home when we arrive. Her grandsons, Marie Jeanne's two teenage boys, who are visiting from the capital for the summer, give us some water and a large sisal mat to collapse on as we wait for her to return. We immediately crash on the front porch, in a cool spot close to the wooden railing at the other end of which the boys are pouring dried corn kernels into a grinder, turning them into bright yellow cornmeal. The boys are surrounded by twelve of Aunt Ilyana's prized hens and roosters who squawk loudly as handfuls of corn occasionally rain down on their heads.

Aunt Ilyana arrives an hour or so later. She looks much younger than her seventy-six years. Her skin is an even mahogany hue and her body looks taut and lean, almost muscular. She is wearing a dark green dress and a black head wrap. She kisses Uncle Joseph and Cousin Nick hello, but having not seen me in more than twenty two years does not recognize me. She lists the names of ten of my girl cousins while trying to guess who I am. Finally Uncle Joseph says, "It's Miracin's daughter,

Nounoune.” (In the family, I am most commonly known by my nickname, Nounoune.)

“Ah, Nounoune,” Aunt Ilyana takes my face in her firm large hands. “Miracin’s daughter.”

Aunt Ilyana and Uncle Joseph exchange family news while Nick and I join in the corn grinding. Occasionally Aunt Ilyana shouts questions to me about my parents and three brothers in New York. Has my father lost his hair? Has my mother lost weight, gained weight since she received the last family photographs? Were any of my brothers married?

I show her a few pictures that I brought for her, of my father and his receding hairline, of my plump mother, and my three brothers, two of whom had become fathers the previous year. With all the family news out of the way, there is nothing left to do but eat.

It is corn harvest season in the valley surrounding Aunt Ilyana’s house. So over the next three days, we will eat lots of corn. We grill them over charcoal and firewood sticks in the thatched cooking shack by the stream. We boil them smothered by banana leaves in an aluminum pot that seemed to have no bottom. We eat the sweet baby ones raw, right off the cob. From last year’s harvest, we have cornmeal paste, *mayi moulén*, for breakfast and a sweet corn flour puree, *labouyi*, for supper.

Things fall into a pattern quickly that afternoon as Uncle Joseph and Cousin Nick, who are staying at the school headmistress’ house nearby, spend their time visiting with parents and meeting teachers and I attach myself to Aunt Ilyana.

That night over a bowl of *labouyi*, Uncle Joseph tries to convince Aunt Ilyana to move to Port-au-Prince to be closer to him and his family.

“You’re an old woman,” he says. “Not that I’m wishing it, but if something happens to you, you will not be able to see a proper doctor. People die from simple illnesses here. When Marie Jeanne died, we were barely able to arrive in time for the funeral. If you die, not that I’m wishing it, it takes so long to get here that we may not be able to see you one last time. There is no chance that your brothers in New York, Nounoune, and the others will have time to come and say good-bye. You know yourself that a corpse can only last a day or two here.”

Having survived both throat and prostate cancer, Uncle Joseph is never afraid to talk about death. Mortality, for him, is always a looming fact.

“I myself have only a few years left,” Uncle Joseph says. “I am just doing the best I can with them.”

Uncle Joseph’s monologue is interrupted by two shots of gunfire from somewhere in the distance. Aunt Ilyana explains that it is the village chief, the only legal authority in the surrounding area, signaling that he is back home from a day trip, in case anyone needs to come see him. If he didn’t fire his gun once each time he left and twice when he came back, then he would have to send someone door to door, to let people know when he was there.

“Do you think life is easier for an old woman in the city?” Aunt Ilyana continues. “Here I can watch over the land and over Marie Jeanne’s grave and even if you don’t see me soon after I die, we will see one another *after*.”

Unlike Uncle Joseph who is a Baptist minister, Aunt Ilyana is not a particularly religious woman. Every once in a while she had a *pè savann*, a mountain priest, come over to the cemetery to say a mass over her grandparents' graves, but only because she thought they had worked hard their whole lives and would accept it as a sign of respect. However there were no masses said for Marie Jeanne who was also Baptist, like my uncle.

Glimpsing over at Marie Jeanne's mausoleum gleaming in the moonlight, I ask Aunt Ilyana why she didn't bury Marie Jeanne in the cemetery near Marie Jeanne's great-grandparents.

"That cemetery belongs to a lot of people," she says. "This place is just mine and hers and it's close to where we live. When I am gone, people are going to take over the family land that is left. They already want to take it from me because I am the only one in the family here, but this place I build for Marie Jeanne and me is big and heavy so maybe they will leave us alone."

The people Aunt Ilyana is talking about are her few neighbors, friends and foe, who, by her estimation, figure that because she has so many family members in the city and abroad she does not need the land to live.

Changing the subject, Aunt Ilyana turns to me and says, "I forgot to ask you. How is Miracin's other daughter, the one who once came here as a girl? I hear she is a journalist and flies everywhere in helicopters. What was her name again, Edwidge?"

Even though I have never flown in a helicopter, being my father's only daughter, and the only Edwidge in the family, I know she is talking about me.

My uncle raises his eyebrows in concern, as though this odd question is proof of Aunt Ilyana's hidden senility. Nick hides a smile under a cupped hand and looks at me to see how I will clarify this.

I simply say, "Aunt Ilyana, I am Edwidge, Nounoun. I am the same one who is here."

She seems unconvinced, so I search my memory for concrete evidence of that past visit with her. Aunt Ilyana and her husband were still together then, though sleeping in twin beds on opposite sides of their room. Marie Jeanne had been a shy, but hardworking young woman. She and Aunt Ilyana had spent almost every moment of their days together. They woke up at dawn and fetched water from the stream, made coffee for the household and everyone else who came by, sprinkled the yard with water, and swept it with sisal brooms that made a swooshing music, like a fan concert. I wandered around the yard all day, played hide and seek and hopscotch, jumping jacks with rocks, with the area girls while my cousin Nick, my brother André, and Aunt Ilyana's husband went to work in the fields. Twice a day Aunt Ilyana, Marie Jeanne, and I would bathe in the lower end of the stream, which was stinging cold in the morning and lukewarm in late afternoon. I was not allowed to do any more work than shell peas, sort out tiny pebbles from the newly harvested rice, or the bad corn kernels from the grinder batch. This because I was a city girl and the other types of work were considered too strenuous for me.

After assigning me the twin bed where her husband used to sleep, Aunt Ilyana goes out to the mausoleum to say good night to her daughter.

"We have visitors," she tells Marie Jeanne, "Miracin's daughter, Nounoune, the journalist, she has come to see us again."

THE NEXT MORNING, I HELP AUNT ILYANA MAKE HER COFFEE IN THE COOKING shed by the stream. I hold the swollen pouch, hanging from a rounded piece of coat hanger, while she pours scalding water over the coffee powder. Uncle Joseph, Nick, and I map out the day over coffee and cassava bread with Aunt Ilyana and her grandsons. There are more meetings for Nick and Uncle Joseph with a builder they had hired to add two more rooms to the schoolhouse before the fall. There are several teachers to interview for the new classes, and further curriculum planning sessions with the headmistress, a woman in her thirties who is raising three toddlers alone since her husband left for the Dominican Republic five years ago and never returned.

The school is Uncle Joseph's latest passion, the last thing he wants to accomplish, he says, before he dies. He has zealously collected money from friends, family members, and missionaries to build it so that some of the children of Beauséjour could at least learn to read and write.

We make our way en groupe to the schoolhouse. Aunt Ilyana watches closely while Uncle Joseph gives special instructions to the headmistress and the builder. The headmistress puts in a plea for a few more blackboards so that children on different levels could work independently. The schoolmistress asks the builder to assure her a tin roof that wouldn't leak. She didn't want to always have to stop classes and send the children home when it rained.

After the schoolhouse, we walk over to the cemetery. The tombs are elegant in their wear and tear, looking like massive marble sculptures among knee high weeds. Some of the names and dates, carved deeply on some tombstones and more superficially on others, have faded. There are no dates of birth for my great-grandmother Lovana Saint Lot. It is possible that her birth was never recorded at all in any public papers. It may have been simply a private joy shared by her loved ones and their friends who are no longer around to remember. My great-grandmother died during the American occupation of Haiti, during a year too redundant to forget, 1919. My great-grandfather's name was Osnac Dantica—the t was added to my father's birth certificate by mistake, giving my father and his forebears a singular variation of the family name. Osnac Dantica died soon after his wife, my aunt Ilyana tells us, but the year of his death has long faded from the tombstone.

The conversation that evening at supper turns quickly to those whose grave sites were nowhere near the mountains and would never be. My grandfather, Nozial, who had joined the Cacos, a nationalist militia which fought American marines during the occupation, decided after decades of fearing another invasion that he would be in a better position to battle for Haitian sovereignty if he

and his three sons were in the capital. His wife, Miranize, and two of the daughters soon followed. My grandparents' death in old age would force their sons and daughters to buy their first piece of property in the Haitian capital, a tomb in which to bury their parents.

Towards the end of the meal, with all the talk of the dead, I announce that when I die, I want to be buried in Beauséjour.

"Where would you find someone to carry you this far?" asks Aunt Ilyana. "First from New York, to Port-au-Prince, and then this two day road up the mountains. It would be a lot of carrying."

I assure her that there would be less carrying if I were cremated and my ashes scattered from the peak of one of the mountains.

"There is already enough dust in Haiti," she says. "You should be buried where you die."

Where I die will probably not be here in this place, unless the descent from the mountain proves as fatal as I believed the climb might be.

"Enough now," says Aunt Ilyana. "This is too much talk about dying."

IN HER ROOM, IN THE DARK, LISTENING TO AUNT ILYANA HOLD WHAT SOUNDS like entire conversations in her sleep, I realize that aside from blood, she and I share nocturnal habits. I too speak my dreams aloud to the point of jolting myself awake with the sound of my own voice. Usually I can only remember the very last thing I say, but remain with this feeling that I have been talking, laughing, and at times crying all night long.

Our last two days in Beauséjour would proceed like all family reunions are supposed to, with the awe of reconnecting with a loved one slowly replaced by subtle gestures, unexpected smiles and kisses, nods of recognition of carriage and demeanor that seem oddly familiar to one's own skin. Uncle Joseph and Cousin Nick lose themselves in the details of the school while Aunt Ilyana and I talk less and less, to avoid, I suspect, speaking of separation. There are already so many separations in our family, constant departures from people as well as places. *Nou se moun moun* could now also mean that we are nomads, constantly leaving and returning to these mountains either in actuality or in our dreams. However, we could not afford to curse or avoid these exits and migrations because they have earned us whatever type of advancement we seem to have made in life. Aunt Ilyana's son for example had to spend most of his life away from her in order to become a dentist. While her daughter Marie Jeanne who stayed behind died an agonizing and prolonged death, showing Aunt Ilyana that some departures were inevitable, which is why Marie Jeanne's children now live in the capital with their father's relatives and only visit Beauséjour in the summer.

THE NIGHT BEFORE WE ARE TO LEAVE, I AM LYING ON MY BACK IN THE BED where Aunt Ilyana's husband used to sleep listening to her chatter in her sleep. Mid-dreams, she laughs and makes promises and gives warnings, "Listen, don't go too far. Stay away from that water. The soup is too hot. Come back soon. I'll send you coffee."

She suddenly sits up in bed and scolds herself. "Ilyana, you are waking the girl." And then drifts into it again, this movie in her head. And in the dark, I imagine—I pray—that from here she can talk to all of us across these long distances, to my father, her parents, my brothers, and their children. And while I making this silent invocation, Aunt Ilyana awakens herself from yet another dream and whispers from across the room, "Nounoune, are you sleeping, Nounoune?"

I say, "No. But it is not you who is keeping me awake."

"Oh?"

It is the mountains maybe, it being so quiet here at night that you hear everything, the swing of every tree branch, the bubbling of the stream, the footsteps of night travelers and wandering animals. And I listen for everything because I know it won't always be so. I listen too closely and sometimes the listening gets too loud.

THE NEXT MORNING AS WE ARE PREPARING TO LEAVE, AUNT ILYANA PRESENTS ME with a three pound sack of coffee grains to bring to my father in Brooklyn.

"When he has a taste of this coffee," she says, "it will bring him home."

I marvel at the magic of this coffee of which Aunt Ilyana is so certain. What if such a thing did exist, an elixir against fading memories, a panacea to evoke images of spaces lost to us, to instantly return us to those spaces and them to us. I thank Aunt Ilyana for the coffee on my father's behalf by telling her a story, something I knew about him and she didn't. I tell her of going with my father to a Chinese herbalist who was treating him for psoriasis and of the Chinese herbalist telling my father to stop drinking coffee or he would never be cured. And of my father saying, "Doctor, there must be another way" because he would never give up coffee. And in one of those strange, crossed wire moments, I give Aunt Ilyana pause with my story, and she says that perhaps she shouldn't send the coffee to my father if it meant that he would have psoriasis forever. I must convince her to give me the coffee again and finally she does.

WE START OUT AT FIVE A.M. FOR OUR JOURNEY DOWN THE MOUNTAIN. OUR PLAN is to be halfway down by eleven a.m. before the sun gets too high in the sky, making it too hot to walk without fainting. We will stop briefly for lunch at the house of a friend of my uncle's and then hike the rest of the afternoon, which will mean that we will be in Port-au-Prince around seven or

eight in the evening.

The trip up took us two days, but Cousin Nick and Uncle Joseph assure me that it will be faster going down since we are not stopping for the night. Besides with gravity it is always easier to descend than to climb.

My way of saying good-bye is always the same. I pretend that later in the day or the next day or the day after I will see the person to whom I am bidding farewell. It is the only way I can endure separations, large and small, without becoming totally incapacitated with sadness. Aunt Ilayna's way is more abrupt and formal and perhaps healthier. We kiss each other on the cheek as she lists the names of all the family members in New York to whom I should give her regards. She and the boys walk with us for a mile or so and then they stop walking and we continue on.

The journey down is, as my cousin and uncle predicted, much easier. Rather than walk in a straight line, I zig zag through the difficult roads, which is my uncle tells me, the way the peasants climb and descend these mountains with relative ease. This is why they don't look as tired as I do when I finally reach Dabonne and climb with great relief into my cousin's truck. That and the fact that they are used to it, my uncle says. "If you did this often enough you too would get used to it."

I begin to worry about Aunt Ilyana on the ride back to the capital, imposing upon her life visions of comforts that are even lacking in mine. I imagine her having her own helicopter with which to travel to and from the market. I imagine her bypassing the stream baths for a Jacuzzi. I imagine her on vacation, visiting places different family members have offered to her, but which she has refused: the Statue of Liberty, Disney World, the Empire State Building. By our standards, she has seen very little of the world, but perhaps, I tell myself, her world is larger than all of these places. I remind myself that at least she has a simple life, which my younger cousins and I who live in the United States and elsewhere are always trying to achieve in purposeful and arbitrary ways, by not buying too many items of clothing, too many shoes, too much furniture, by delaying having children, so we can be responsible for no one but ourselves. At the same time, Aunt Ilyana's life seems far from simple. Her vocation is no less than to maintain our family's physical legacy, to guard the ancestral village, sustain a far away world to which we can return and find traces, however, remote and faint, of who we are.

When I find out that Aunt Ilyana is dead a few months later, I am babysitting my sixteen month old nephew Karl, who has recently learned to walk. It is no longer easy to keep him still on one's lap during serious conversations, as he wants to get as much use of his newly discovered mobility as possible by skipping from spot to spot, from my father's knees to mine, from the living room sofa to the window curtains, to the television set which we have placed on the floor and not on a teetering table with his safety in mind. Karl is also exercising his fresh vocal abilities by shouting nonsensical words and my father must compete with him as he says, "I had a call from Haiti just now and they told me Ilyana died."

The grief on my father's face is clouded by logistical figurations. It had taken two days for news of the death to travel to Port-au-Prince and then by telephone to us, which means that Aunt Ilyana's funeral has already been held. Attending the service, whichever kind had been chosen, is not even an option.

Karl shrieks with pride when he finally succeeds at turning on the television set by himself and I am grateful for the distraction, for having to run and save him from discoveries for which I do not think he is ready.

He squirms as I hold him in my lap and try to quiet him down and I find that in my efforts to keep him still—whispering his name in his ear, promising him sweets he'd never get, singing the alphabet song he loved so much—that he is the one who is momentarily saving my father and me from our sadness as our attention shifts back to him.

There is little to say, neither my father nor I can find the words, so I offer a confession instead. This revelation also seems to interest young Karl as he watches my trembling lips.

I tell my father that on the last day of my visit to Beauséjour Aunt Ilyana had given me three pounds of coffee for him, coffee which had been confiscated as "illegal agricultural transport" by customs officers at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York. I had not told him about the coffee before for fear that he would grieve over something he would never have.

"You should have told me," he says now, while reaching over and rescuing Karl from the tighter grasp of my grief. "We sure need that coffee now."

We certainly could have used it that day, Aunt Ilyana's magic elixir, both to help us remember and to forget.

When my father puts Karl back on the ground, he runs from us and immediately returns to the TV set which he turns on again with glee. He stands there and stares in awe at the faces on the screen then trots over to touch them. He seems heartbroken, it seems, to discover that the people are flat and cold and cannot respond to him. Then he steps back and walks back to my father, grabbing his knee and burying his face in his lap.

As my father's strokes young Karl's head, consoling his brief frustration, I realize that my way of saying good-bye would never again be the same. I can not pretend that later in the day or the next day or the day after I will see Aunt Ilyana. Some separations *are* impossible to endure without becoming totally incapacitated with sadness. However I am lucky to have had Aunt Ilyana to walk with me for a few miles, before *she* continued on.

