

BEHIND THE MOUNTAINS



EDWIDGE
DANTICAT

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2000

Ti liv mwen, my sweet little book. How wonderful to have your crisp white pages to write on during those quiet moments between my day and afternoon tasks. My teacher, Madame Auguste, gave you to me today before we started recitations. In front of the entire class, she said I deserved you because I had the best marks of all thirty-nine pupils last month. Madame Auguste is like that. Every now and then she will surprise the class with a kind gesture, such as a group outing or candies from the city, but this time she just chose me. She gave you to me.

It was Madame Auguste's opinion that I could use you in whatever way I wanted, keep you in the little cedar box you came in and never take you out at all, or only remove you from there on special occasions. She also said that I could keep you in a special place at home. For me

that would be under my pillow on the bed that Manman and I sleep in together.

“Celiane could also use her notebook,” she said, spelling out every word for the students to ponder, “to write down *pensées* or maxims that she likes so she can refer to them whenever it pleases her. She may use this book to jot down the pages of the texts she has to memorize for recitations in class, or she can simply use it to record her own ideas, thoughts of her own.”

Madame Auguste made such a speech of the whole thing to show me and the other pupils all the uses an empty notebook can have. But when she said I could use you to write down things about myself, I became very glad and decided that is exactly what I am going to do. I will tell you everything I can tell no one else, and you will keep quiet because you have no tongue and you cannot speak. My pen is your tongue and I am your voice so you will never betray my secrets.

I must go soon, sweet little book, to prepare for Manman’s return from the market. Manman goes to the market down the mountain in Léogâne on Wednesdays and Saturdays to sell peanut and coconut confections that

she, my older brother, Moy, and I make together. Manman will be back soon, at just about the time that Moy will be returning from the cornfields. Ever since Papa left for New York five years ago, it is Moy who looks after Papa's cornfields and Papa's two pride cows.

I must do my homework before Manman and Moy return. Then I must go to the fork in the road and help Manman carry the provisions she has brought home from the market. I wish I had gotten you sooner, sweet little book. But as Manman always says, you cannot chew before you have teeth. Maybe Madame Auguste was waiting for me to know how to use you before giving you to me. I will "chew on you" later.

LATER

I am writing behind our house, by the light of our kerosene lamp. Manman and Moy are asleep. I sneaked out to the cooking shed where the three large rocks we use to hold our pots are still warm from the fire Moy had made for Manman to prepare our supper. In spite of Moy having poured half a calabash of water on the cooking sticks, there are a few cinders left in the ashes, small pieces

of wood glowing red before collapsing into a heap of white soot.

I love to watch the ashes, especially at night. It's like finding stars on the ground, an extraordinary thing to observe in an ordinary place, the place where we cook our food.

Our house is not big, but we are very proud of it because my father built it himself many years ago. Papa was proud of this house, too, when he was here. He told everyone who made a compliment about the house, "I built it with my two hands."

Papa had refused help from his neighbors and friends because he wanted to prove to Manman's parents—Granmè Melina and Granpè Nozial—that he was worthy of her. This is why we have stayed here in this same house since Papa left even though he sends us money from New York and we could afford a place in the city, like Papa's sister, Tante Rose.

Our house has two rooms. The front room is for us to receive guests. It's also where Moy sleeps. The back room is for Manman and Papa, but now I sleep with Manman in her and Papa's bed. (When Papa was here, I slept on a sisal mat on the floor next to the bed.)

Our house is in a village called Beau Jour. It is a tiny village on top of a mountain. Beau Jour is on the middle mountain of a range of four mountains that we can see in every direction. I learned from my geography lesson that the name of this country, Haiti, comes from the Arawak Indian word Ayiti, which means mountainous land or land on high.

There is also a proverb that says, “Behind the mountains are more mountains.” This is certainly true because our house is on a mountain, but not the tallest one. Some mountains are bigger and taller still.

From our house, when it is not so dark like it is tonight, I can see a chain of mountains and braids of water running down the mountains to become waterfalls and rivers. In the daytime, when the sun is high in the sky, you almost cannot see the water at all, just a glow mixed in with the sun. It looks like the pictures of crystals and diamonds in the books Madame Auguste keeps in the schoolhouse. The mountains are more beautiful still at sunset. Then they look blue and gold, like one of the paintings that Moy’s artist friend, Bòs Dezi, makes to sell at the tourist market in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

I must admit that I am afraid of the dark, even though you would not know it because I am out here alone so late at night. My grandfather, Granpè Nozial, sometimes tells very scary stories about the night. One of the scariest stories is about a three-legged horse named Galipòt, who trots down the mountains at night looking for his fourth leg. The three-legged horse is named Galipòt because if you say the three syllables really fast, “Ga-li-pòt-Ga-li-pòt-Ga-li-pòt,” it makes the sound of three hooves hitting the ground. If you see Galipòt and run, he thinks you’re his fourth leg and he chases you.

I have never seen this horse myself, and most of the time I believe, as Papa used to say, that maybe these kinds of things only exist in the “streams of our dreams.”

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19

Last night I did not share the biggest news. Manman came home with a cassette from Papa. After supper, the three of us gathered in the front room to listen to the cassette.

Papa sends us cassettes and money from New York once a month. Papa sends the money to pay for my

schooling and for Moy's training to be a tailor. (Moy chose that himself rather than going to university in the city.) Moy uses a lot of his money to buy sketching paper. Even though Manman thinks he is making designs for shirts and pants for his tailor's classes, I have looked over his shoulder a few times and I have seen that he is really drawing shapes and faces like Bòs Dezi does before he makes one of his paintings. Sometimes Moy draws girls, too, but never anyone I know.

The money Papa sends us also pays for food and clothes and any extra things we need. Manman does not really have to sell dous at the market, but with Papa gone, she likes to keep herself busy and she likes for us to keep ourselves occupied, too. So she works at making and selling the confections and Moy works the cornfields and looks after Papa's cows even when Moy also has to go to tailor school.

Sometimes Moy comes home angry because his classmates tease him and say, "Your papa is in New York. Why must you work the fields?" Moy has gotten into fights because of this. Just last week he punched a classmate, who then hit Moy on the shoulder with a stick. I don't know all the details. That's all Moy was willing to say about it.

Manman is worried that Moy is becoming too difficult. She blames his behavior on the fact that Papa is gone. I don't think she is blaming Papa, just his absence. Whenever Moy gets into one of his fights, Manman always makes it clear to him that she is the granmoun, the adult, and that he is the child—Moy is nineteen and not a child, but to Manman he will always be one. You should see Manman standing on her toes to make herself the same height as Moy to scold him.

“Listen to me, Moy, the head that's accustomed to wearing a hat will always wear a hat,” she says to him.

I wasn't sure what she was trying to tell Moy then, but now I realize that maybe she was telling him that if he gets used to being in fights, he would always be fighting.

Manman likes to speak in pictures like that. They are called proverbs. I like proverbs because you have to stop and think to interpret them. They make a picture for you, and you must discover for yourself how to interpret it.

In any case, after supper we all sit in the front room with the cassette machine that Papa had bought for us before he left for New York. Manman brought new batteries from the market, which she puts in the machine before inserting the cassette.

Papa always begins his cassettes to us in the same way.

“Alo, Aline.” (That’s Manman.)

Then it’s, “Alo, Moy, alo, Celiane.”

Papa continues, “How are you, my precious ones? I am trying to see all three of you in my mind as I sit here. Aline, I see your face leaning close to the machine as if you would like to touch my voice. Celiane, I see you pulling at a little strand of hair on the left side of your face because you are waiting for Papa to say your name.”

Papa knows us well. It is true Manman was leaning forward as though she wanted to kiss Papa’s voice and I was doing the same, except I was also pulling on my hair. (I wonder if Manman tells Papa in secret that this is what we do while listening to his cassettes.) Moy was leaning back in his chair. He was trying to appear calm and unexcited.

Each month when Papa sends the cassettes, I worry that he will forget to mention my name, or forget to talk about the few things I had said to him in the last cassette we had all made for him together.

“Moy, I hope your lessons are going well,” Papa says.

Moy smiles, losing some of his reserve.

Papa tells Moy, “Manman says you are still taking time to look after the land the way Papa taught you. This makes Papa proud. You might not think it fashionable, but, Moy, everything you do now will be valuable to you in the future.”

Most of the time when Papa is talking in the cassettes, I think he forgets himself, forgets that he is talking to us and simply talks to himself, to console himself, to counsel himself just as he is counseling us, to make himself feel better just as he is trying to make us feel better.

It was my turn for Papa to speak to me.

“Celiane, Papa is glad that you got such good marks in school last month,” he says. “Papa will reward you by sending you a typewriter like you asked.”

I scream so loud that some birds stir in the almond trees in the yard; I scare them away with my voice.

Now comes the moment both Moy and I were expecting. This moment comes in all the cassettes.

“Aline,” Papa says, “after these words you can stop the cassette. The rest is for your ears alone.”

“Good-bye, Moy. Good-bye, Cécé,” Papa says before he speaks to Manman alone. “You are in all of Papa’s dreams and you have all of Papa’s love.”