Opening extract from

In Darkness

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NOW

I am the voice in the dark, calling out for your help.

I am the quiet voice that you hope will not turn to silence, the voice you want to keep hearing cos it means someone is still alive. I am the voice calling for you to come and dig me out. I am the voice in the dark, asking you to unbury me, to bring me from the grave out into the light, like a zombi.

I am a killer and I have been killed, too, over and over; I am constantly being born. I have lost more things than I have found; I have destroyed more things than I have built. I have seen babies abandoned in the trash and I have seen the dead come back to life.

I first shot a man when I was twelve years old.

I have no name. There are no names in the darkness cos there is no one else, only me, and I already know who I am (I am the voice in the dark, calling out for your help), and I have no questions for myself and no need to call upon myself for anything, except to remember.

I am alone.

I am dying.

In darkness, I count my blessings like Manman taught me.

One: I am alive.

Two: there is no two.

I see nothing and I hear nothing. This darkness, it's like something solid. It's like it's inside me.

I used to shout for help, but then after a while I couldn't tell if I was speaking through my mouth or just in my head, and that scared me. Anyway, shouting makes me thirsty.

So I don't shout anymore. I only touch and smell. This is how I know what is in here with me, in the darkness.

There is a light, except it doesn't work. But I can tell it's a light cos I feel the smooth glass of the lamp, and I remember how it used to sit on the little table by my bed. That is another thing – there is a bed in here. It was my bed before the walls fell down. I can feel its soft mattress and its broken slats.

I smell blood. There is anpil blood in this place, on me and all around me. I can tell it's blood cos it smells of iron and death. And cos I've smelled blood before. I grew up in the bidonville – it's a smell you get used to.

Not all of the blood is mine, but some of it is.

I used to touch the bodies, but I don't do that anymore. They smell, too.

*

I don't know what happened. I was in bed minding my own zafè, then everything shook and I fell and the darkness started. Or maybe everything else fell.

I'm in Canapé-Vert Hospital, this I know. It's a private hospital, so I figure the blancs must be paying for it. I don't know why they brought me here after they killed Biggie and put this bullet in my arm. Maybe they felt bad about it.

Yesterday – or possibly it was longer ago than that – Tintin came to see me. It was before the world fell down. Tintin must have used his pass – the one that Stéphanie got him – to get out of Site Solèy through the checkpoints. I wonder how Stéphanie is feeling now that Biggie is dead, cos she's UN and she shouldn't have been sleeping with a gangster. She must have really loved him.

Tintin signed my bandage. I told him it's only plaster casts that people sign, not bandages, but he didn't know the difference. Tintin doesn't know much about anyen.

Example: you're thinking that he signed his name on my bandage, but he didn't. He signed *Route 9*, like he writes everywhere. Tintin doesn't just tag. He likes to shout, Route 9, when we're rolling in the streets, too – Route 9 till I die, dumb stuff like that. I would look at the people we were driving past and say to him:

— You don't know who these people are. They might be from Boston. They might cap you.

— That's the point, he would say. I'm not afraid of them. I'm Route 9.

I thought Tintin was a cretin, but I didn't say so. Old people

like my manman say Route 9 and Boston used to mean something back in the day. Like, Route 9 was for Aristide and Boston was for the rebels. Now they don't mean anything at all. I was in Route 9 with Tintin, but I didn't write it anywhere and I didn't shout it out, either. If anyone was going to kill me, I wanted it to be for a good reason. Not cos I said the wrong name.

Anyway, when I was rolling with the Route 9 crew, I didn't want the Boston thugs to know me. I didn't want them to know me till I had them at the end of my gun, and they would have to give my sister back. I tried that in the end. It didn't work out how I wanted it to.

In the hospital, after Tintin wrote *Route 9* on my bandage, he shook my hand. It hurt, but he didn't notice.

— How are you? he asked me.

— I got shot, I said. How do you think I am?

Tintin shrugged. He got shot a couple of years ago, and Biggie and Stéphanie arranged for him to come here to get sewn up. For him, it obviously wasn't a big deal. But that's Tintin. He's, like, so full of holes, so easy to hurt, that he stops the world from hurting him by hurting it first. If he found a puppy, he'd strangle it to stop himself liking it. He knows I got shot, too, before, when I was young. But I don't remember that so well.

— Everyone in the hood be giving you props, blud, Tintin said in English. Tintin was one of those gangsters who talk all the time in English, like they're from the hood or something, the real hood, like in New York or Baltimore. You was *cold* out there. Vre chimère.

I didn't know what to say, so I just said:

— Word.

This is what American gangsters say when they want to agree with something. I said it so that I would still sound like a player even though I couldn't care less about that thug shit anymore, for reasons which you will learn for your ownselves. But that seemed to be OK, cos Tintin nodded like I had said something profound.

— Leave here, you'll get a block, gen pwoblem. Maybe be a boss one day your ownself, Tintin said. You killed those Boston motherfuckers stone dead.

Now I shrugged. I didn't want a block. I wanted all the dead people to not be dead anymore, but that's a lot to ask, even in Haiti, where dead people are never really dead.

Vre chimère.

A real ghost.

Chimère is for *gangster* in the Site. Chimère cos we melt out of nothing and we go back to nothing after. Chimère cos we die so young we may as well be ghosts already. You're thinking, strange thing to call yourselves; strange thing to have a name that means you're gonna die young. And yeah, it's a name that the rich people came up with, the people who live outside the Site, but we took that name and we made it our own. Same as *thug*. Same as *bandi*.

You wanna name me a chimère? Too late. I already named my ownself.

Anyway, now I think it's kind of a good name. Now, I think, maybe I *am* a real ghost. Not a gangster, but a dead person.

Sometime today or another day, I heard people shouting from far, far away in the darkness. It sounded like:

— . . . survived?

— . . . alive . . . in there?

— . . . wounded?

I shouted back. You can guess what I shouted. I shouted, yes. I shouted, help. I shouted those words in French and English. I shouted in Kreyòl to tell them there was an accident and I was hurt. Then I thought that was a dumb-ass thing to shout, cos this is a hospital, so of course I was hurt, and it must have been anpil obvious there had been an accident, with everything fallen down.

But nobody answered and the voices went away. I don't know when that was. I don't know when it's night and when it's day, or even if night and day exist anymore.

If I can hear people shouting, but they can't hear me, does that make me a ghost? I think, maybe yes. I can't see myself. I can't prove that I exist.

But then I think, no, I can't be a ghost. A ghost does not get thirsty, and as I'm lying here in the broken hospital it's like my mouth is bigger than me, bigger than the darkness. Like my mouth contains the world, not the other way round. It's dry and sore and I can't think of anything else. My thinking, cos of my thirst, is like this:

. . . WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER. Am I dead? WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER. What

happened? WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER. Is this the end of the world? WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER . . .

That is how my mouth swallows everything else. Maybe my mouth will swallow me, and then this will be over.

I decide to crawl, to measure the space of my prison. I know the rubble and the hand on my left – I don't need to go there again. I don't want to touch that clammy skin. In front of me, and to my right and behind me, is just darkness, though maybe I should stop calling it that cos there's no light at all; it's more blackness. I shift forward on my hands and knees, and I scream when my wrist bends a little and the wound opens. The scream echoes off the concrete all around me.

I shuffle, and I feel like I'm not a person anymore, like I've turned into some animal. I move maybe one body length and then I hit a wall of blocks. I reach up with my hands and stand up, and I feel that it goes up to the ceiling. Only the ceiling is lower than I remember, so that's not great, either. To my right, the same thing – a broken bed, then a wall of rubble. And behind me. I'm in a space maybe one body length in each direction.

I'm in a coffin.

I hold my half of the necklace, and it's sharp in my hand where the heart is cracked in two. I think of my sister, who had the other half of the heart and who I lost when I was a piti-piti boy.

I try to say the invocation, the words to the Marassa, cos

they might be able to bring my sister back to me, but I'm too thirsty and I don't remember them.

Listen.

Listen.

You're the voices in the dark, so the world can't all be gone. There must be people left.

You're the voices in the dark, so listen, mwen apè parlay. I'm going to speak to you.

I'm going to tell you how I got here, and how I got this bullet in my arm. I'm going to tell you about my sister, who was taken from me by the gangsters, by the chimères. This was 2,531 days ago, when my papa was killed. At least, I think it was. I used to know how many days cos I marked them in my head. Now I don't know if it's two or three days I've been in the darkness, so I don't know how long ago my papa was chopped to piti-piti pieces and my sister was taken. But I know this: it hurts every day as much as the last, as much as the first.

It hurts now, even, and you would think I have other things to worry about, what with being trapped with no water and no food, and no way out.

Maybe, maybe, if I tell you my story, then you'll understand me better and the things I've done. Maybe you'll, I don't know, maybe you'll . . . forgive me. Maybe she will.

My sister, she was my twin. She was one half of me. You have to understand: a twin in Haiti, that's a serious maji; it's something powerful. We were Marassa, man. You know

Marassa? They're lwa, gods, the gods of twins – super-strong, super-hardcore, even though they look like three little kids. They're some of the oldest gods from Africa. Even now in vodou, the Marassa come right after Papa Legba in the ceremony. Marassa can heal you, can bring you good luck, can make people fall in love with you. Marassa can see your future, double your money, double your life. People from where I come from, they believe human twins can do the same and can talk to each other in silence, too, cos they share the same soul.

So you see? Me and my sister, we were magic. We were meant to be born. We were special. We shared the same soul. People gave us presents, man – total strangers, you know. People would stop us in the street, want us to give them our blessing.

We shared the same soul, so when she was gone I became half a person. I would like you to remember this, so that you don't judge me later. Remember: even now, as I lie in this ruined hospital, I am only one half of a life, one half of a soul. I know this. That is why I have done the things I have done.

But you don't know them yet, of course – the things I've done, the reasons why I am half a person, the reason why I was in this hospital when everything fell down. You don't know the hurt I've caused.

So I'm going to tell you everything.

First, I must explain the blood.

Some of it is mine. My bandage got all torn up when I was crawling around, looking for my half of the necklace, and I

cut myself on some broken glass, I think. I already got shot, you know that, and there's blood coming from there, too. The way the hospital fell down, it hasn't been so convenient for my healing.

I can't explain all of the blood, though. I think some of it comes from the dead bodies. This was a public ward before the ceiling and the walls fell down. There was a curtain around my bed that the nurses could pull if I wanted to use the toilet, but that was it for privacy. Those bodies are the other people who were in here. When the walls fell down, they fell down on them. I can tell cos there's a hand near me, and I reached out and touched it, and followed it to the wrist and then the arm, feeling to see if it was a man or a woman. I don't know why. And I couldn't tell, anyway, cos after the arm there was no shoulder, just rubble.

Me, I was lucky. I was on the far end of the ward and the walls didn't come down here.

Though maybe I'm not so lucky, cos I'm still trapped.

Maybe I'll just die more slowly.

After I've thought about dying for a long time, I stop, and I eat the blood from the floor.

I figure it's food and WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER, WATER at the same time. I mop it up with my fingers and lick them. It's disgusting but, like I said, some of it's mine, and it makes the hunger in my stomach cool down a bit, and my mouth gets a bit smaller, like maybe the

size of a city. Only now that I've eaten the blood I'm not thinking so much about my mouth; I'm thinking more about how hungry I am.

In Site Solèy when you're hungry, you say you got battery acid in your stomach, that's how bad it burns. In Site Solèy you can buy a cake made from mud and water, baked in the sun with fat. Right now, I think, in Site Solèy they know nothing about hunger. If you gave me a mud cake, I would kiss you.

But then I get to thinking. If I'm hungry, that means I can't be dead. Does a ghost eat blood? I don't think so. A zombi, maybe.

I hope I'm not a zombi. I hope I'm not . . .

No.

I dig my fingernails into my palm. I don't believe in zombis and the darkness can't make me. Zombis scare me. And cos I'm scared, I say some words from a song to myself. They're from *MVP Kompa* by Wyclef Jean, which was the song that was playing in Biggie's car when I first met him.

Wyclef Jean was from Haiti, but now he's a high roller in the US – big rapper, producer, businessman. Biggie was always listening to his music. Wyclef was a hero to him – a kid from Haiti who had made it in the music world. I guess Biggie thought that might happen to his ownself one day, which shows you how stupid Biggie could be.

Anyway, there's this bit in the song where Wyclef Jean says that his friend Lil' Joe has come back as a zombi. It's midnight and Lil' Joe is supposed to be dead, but he's not. He's back

and he's a zombi, and he has all his zombi friends with him. Wyclef sings this chorus where he tells everyone to catch the zombis, to grab them. And it's good in the song cos you can catch zombis, you can hurt them and they can't hurt you.

I like that idea, with the dead hand next to me.

So in the darkness I shout out to any zombis that I'm gonna catch them. I shout it till my throat hurts even more with dryness and thirst. And yeah, it makes me feel a bit better.

Yeah.

I don't believe in zombis. I don't believe in all that vodou shit. That's kind of a lie, though, cos I saw a houngan turn into Papa Legba right before my eyes. So, yeah, maybe I do believe in vodou. But that doesn't mean I have to believe in zombis, does it?

No.

Anyway, I think, what did vodou ever do to help me?

Vodou, it's the old religion of Haiti. The slaves brought it over from Africa. In vodou, you got lwa, who are like gods, but sometimes they can be ancestors, too. Haitians, they believe that the lwa can come down and possess their bodies during ceremonies, talk through them. We call it *mounting* – the lwa mounts you and uses your body. See? It's not like in the Kretyen religion. We talk to our gods; our gods talk through us. Manman talked to our gods, I should say. Me, I didn't have a lot to do with them, apart from when me and my sister used to pretend in the ceremonies Manman organized. They didn't seem very interested in me, either.

Manman, though, she loved all of it, and she believed in it

all, even if she knew me and my sister were frauds, were bullshit. She had a houngan she went to. That's a kind of priest who knows all the songs to bring down the lwa, and the foods they like to eat, and the veves – the symbols to paint on the ground to draw them to you. Like, if you want to be possessed by Baron Samedi, the lwa of death, you got to give him whiskey and cigars, stuff like that.

Right now, I'd be happy if Baron Samedi came for me and took me away from this place to the land under the sea where the dead go. At least then I wouldn't be thirsty and hungry anymore.

But Baron Samedi is not coming.

Manman used to go to the houngan, but none of that stopped us losing the farm and ending up in Site Solèy. None of that stopped my papa being chopped up with machetes, my sister Marguerite being stolen.

Biggie said his houngan took a bone from Dread Wilmè after Dread was shot by the UN soldiers. He said the houngan ground that bone up and sprinkled it on Biggie, and that meant bullets couldn't touch him, cos Dread died for Haiti, like Toussaint. So Biggie was proof against bullets, immortal, cos he had Dread's bone powder on him. That's what he thought, anyway. I even saw the bone dust in a jar when Biggie took me to see the houngan. Sure, I saw Biggie live through shit that no person should be able to. But I also saw Biggie take a full clip from a machine gun and those bullets tore him to dog food in the end, bone powder or no bone powder.

I don't see what I got to thank vodou for. Anyway, Dread

Wilmè didn't die for Haiti. He died cos they shot him. I don't think he wanted to die at all.

I don't want to die, either.

I was born in blood and darkness. That's how Manman told it, when I joined Route 9, when I started to roll with Biggie.

— He was born in blood and darkness, and that's how he'll die, the houngan told her.

Maybe she was right. Maybe I will die in blood and darkness. Maybe she would be happy if she saw me here.

Probably not.

The year I was born, it was when Manman had just moved to Port-au-Prince. They told her there'd be jobs there, electricity, running water. Well, she got the electricity from a line someone hooked onto the public cable, but the only running water was the sewer in the middle of the road and there were no jobs, not for anyone. Me, I was brought into the world as a symbol; I was marked from the beginning. There were some, even before the world fell down, who believed I was meant to do something special. It started right from the time I was born.

This was 1995. That makes me 15 now. See? I can do math, just like I can read. My papa taught me both, before he was killed. After that, Dread Wilmè put me in school, gave us a home to live in, too, cos Manman was Lavalas to the bone. Sometimes, I think, if it wasn't for Dread Wilmè, none of this shit would have happened. But then I say to myself, no. Dread

Wilmè was not there when your papa died and they took your sister away. He tried to help.

Anyway, Manman was at a Lavalas rally. She had a great big belly and in that belly was us. She said she could hardly stand up she was so big. She was frightened by what might come out. But she went to the rally anyway cos she thought Lavalas would change everything in Haiti.

This was Aristide's new party, the ones who were going to keep him in power. Manman loved Aristide – he was a communist and that meant he believed everyone should have ègal money, ègal houses and jobs. At that time, Aristide had been in power for about five years and no one in the Site had any jobs, but Manman said that was cos it was hard for Aristide. The Americans and the French had made such a mess of the country it was going to take him a long time to sort it out. Me, I think maybe Aristide was just a liar, but I didn't say that to Manman – she would have been anpil upset to hear me say so, even later, when everything had gone to shit and it was obvious to everyone Aristide was not such a great guy.

Papa was somewhere else, working, I think. So Manman went to the rally alone, even though she was eight months pregnant and big-bellied like a swollen, starving donkey. That's what she said, not me.

Aristide was standing on a chair at the back of this little meeting hall. He used to be a preacher, so he was accustomed to shouting at people. He was saying:

— Ever since it was discovered by Christopher Columbus, this nation has been enslaved. Columbus was a slave-driver. The

French and then the Americans are his successors – and they more than equal him in cruelty and injustice. But we do not bear their yoke lightly! For five hundred years they have robbed us, but for five hundred years we have defied them!

He said:

— The Americans would like the people of Haiti to vote in a new government. They would like to get rid of me, as I have become inconvenient for them. They would like to control our companies and make us slaves again for their own profit.

People cheered. My manman cheered. She had worked in an American company and they had paid her piti-piti money, and then they fired her when she missed a day cos she was sick. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, how can I know this? How can my manman have remembered Aristide's words? And I answer you – she didn't. But Aristide wrote them down in a book, and I have that book still. Manman threw it away, and I picked it up out of the trash cos I thought it might have some power. Aristide signed it for my manman, you see. He put his name in it, and that's serious vodou.

I used to look at his signature and think how sad it was that a man with such good ideas turned into such a monster. Biggie was like that, too, I think. And me. I had a big idea to get my sister back, but all I did in the end was get a lot of people killed, get a bullet in my arm.

But I'm telling you about the day I was born – I'm sorry, I keep getting distracted. It's crazy – it's not like there's anything here to distract me.

So on his chair at the back of the church, Aristide said:

— Put Lavalas in power and we will throw the Americans into the sea. We will invoice France and America for all that they have stolen from us. They took our freedom, our labor, the fruits of our land. They must be held to account! Two hundred years ago, our coffee beans and sugar cane turned to gold in the coffers of merchants from Paris, while the French slave masters here in Haiti turned our people into animals, trammeled with chains, lashed by whips.

The people shouted:

— Yes! Yes! They made us animals.

Aristide laughed. He always knew how to make people shout and chant, though toward the end they were chanting for him to go away, to leave the country alone, to stop his chimères killing his enemies.

— And what happened when we had our independence?

— Tell us! Tell us!

— Once we had set aside their chains, once we had stayed their whips and stood up on our own two legs, beasts of burden no more, the French sent an invoice to *us*, demanding that we pay for our freedom in taxes and in trees. We were forced to cut down our forests to provide France with wood for building, and the rains that followed washed away our farming land. Everything that was left is being taken from us even now.

Aristide touched the cheap wooden table that served as an altar.

— The colonial powers have been enjoying a banquet at our expense, he said. They sit at the table, which is dressed with indigo cloth exported from Haiti, set with bowls of

sugar taken from Haiti, and cups of coffee robbed from Haiti. And where are the Haitians?

— Where are they? Where are they? called the people in the church.

— The Haitians are under the table, eating the crumbs like mice! The rules of the UN, of the IMF, are devised to keep the mice under the table, to stop them from joining the banquet. But we must not be made into animals again. We must upset the table! We must rise up!

At this, Aristide put his palms under it and threw over the wooden table.

— We must overturn the table! he shouted, as it clattered to the ground.

Everyone cheered, cos all the people in the Site loved Lavalas and Aristide. They loved the idea of receiving money and land from the rich. Later, of course, they just started to take it. And that's when all the trouble began.

But this was before all that. So, everyone was cheering, when suddenly there was a shaking and the power went out and the lights stopped. This happened a lot in Port-au-Prince – it still does. On that night in 1995 there was no moon and it was very dark. People started to scream. Manman knew it was an earthquake and, like the others, she panicked a bit at first, turning to run out into the street, but then the trembling stopped and she heard Aristide call out:

— It's OK! Nen inquiet!

He took a lighter from his pocket and lit a small candle. Then he showed the congregation where there were more

candles in the church. Soon people began to calm down.

But Manman was not feeling so good. She stood there in the darkness, with only the candlelight flickering, and she felt a great pain in her stomach. She had a sick feeling in her spirit. She knew something bad was happening. When she had been to the houngan some months before, when she knew she was pregnant, he drew a veve in the ground and called up Papa Gede, and Papa Gede said the baby in her belly had a fierce soul and would begin and end in darkness and blood, but it would live forever, too.

At that moment, the earth shook again – an aftershock – and Manman was afraid the beginning and the end of her baby would come at the same time. She screamed. She looked down and her legs were wet; she thought her waters had broken. But when she touched her fingers to her thighs she found them sticky with blood. She felt faint and she sank downward to the ground – which was just earth, the church built right over it.

— Souplè, she called. Souplè, mwen ansent.

Please. Please, I'm pregnant.

Someone caught her. Someone else said something about a doctor. But then there was a commotion and Aristide was suddenly there, standing over her, in his glasses and his western suit. He smiled down at her, and he knelt on the ground. With gentle hands, he helped her to lie on her back.

— In my time as a priest, he said, I did this many times. In rural places.

Manman stared up at the roof of the church, and she saw that there was a hole in it. Through it, the stars shone out

of the blackness, as if to say that darkness is never complete, that there is always hope.

She felt a tearing and she screamed again and again, and soon the screaming was a symphony, higher pitches joining her voice. She hauled herself up on her elbows to see first the big flaque of blood between her legs, and then Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the Prime Minister of Haiti, holding two babies, one in each arm.

He had delivered her children.

— A girl and a boy, he said. Twins! The Marassa Jumeaux made flesh. This is a sign. These are the first babies born in a free Haiti. They will never be slaves. They're like a new Adam and Eve.

Everyone cheered, even my manman, though at the back of her mind she was thinking of the houngan. He'd said I – we – would be born in blood and darkness, and that had turned out true. But he'd said we would die in blood and darkness, too.

Years later, when Manman told the story, I said to her:

— Manman, everyone dies in darkness. Most people, anyway. And in the Site, a lot of people die in blood, too.

She said:

— I know.

But it didn't make her any less sad.

It's so hot in here, it's like I'm in an oven, like someone is baking me. Some giant, maybe, so I can be his dinner.

Me, I'm trying not to think about food and drink, but have

you ever tried to not think about something? It's a joke. The more you don't think about it the more you do think about it.

So, I'm making a meal in my imagination. I lay it out in front of me, and in the absolute blackness it's easy, cos you don't even have to close your eyes to picture anything you want. Actually, that's half the problem, cos that's how you stop knowing what's real anymore and go shit-crazy. But, yeah, there's a steak in front of me and chips and a big glass of Coke.

I've only ever had steak once. My papa brought it home one day. I never knew how he got it. He just came home all proud and smiling – he had a good smile, my papa, a bright one – and he laid this bag of steaks on the table. They were sweating blood; it was coming right through the plastic of the bag.

— For dinner, he said to my manman.

She gave him this look, like, what, are you serious? Where did you get them? She could say a lot with one look, my manman. He just laughed.

— Only the best for my lady and my twins, he said.

Before we ate the steaks, he took me outside and we threw a ball back and forth, back and forth. It was lame really, but it was fun, too.

Now I take a bite of my steak. In my imagination I have overcooked it a little, but it's all good – it gives a little crust to the meat. I have put anpil salt on my chips, so I drink a great gulp of my Coke, and that's good, too. Then I stop, cos I hear something. It's a scrabbling sound, but it's too small to be people digging, too delicate.

I turn toward it very slowly.

Skish, *skish*, *skish*. *Tatatatatatata*. *Skish*, *skish*, *skish*.

My hand snaps out toward the sound and I feel the smooth swish of a tail, hear something fast and skitterish disappear into the darkness.

Rats.

I take a long, slow breath. I can hear a gnawing sound now, or maybe I'm just imagining it. I need to get out of here. For a moment I'm on the verge of real panic. I start praying, like, get me out of this fucking place right now; there are rats eating the dead people, there are rats eating the dead people. Suddenly I can't breathe, but then I think about Marguerite, my sister. I force myself to think about Marguerite.

Marguerite had curly hair and a smile as big as the moon, and she was my best friend. We were twins, but we didn't look the same. I was big and strong, and she was a small thing, like a ghost already.

Marguerite, she had this necklace. I am holding half of it in my hand now. I should explain – it was a silver necklace with a heart pendant. The heart you could pull in half, and it would go into two jagged pieces. Papa got it for her from some mystery place. As soon as she got it she broke the heart in two and gave one half to me.

— Maybe you should keep it, give it to a boy one day, I said to her.

— We are twins, she said. We are the same person broken in half. So you have half my heart.

So I kept it and always carry it with me, even now, as I lie trapped in the darkness.

Marguerite was my twin, but she wasn't like me, not at all. I was into machines; anything that had an engine, or electrics, or gears, I wanted to take it apart and see what made it go. I collected stuff from the street, from the garbage, from everywhere. My papa said I would be an engineer one day, but I don't think even he really believed it.

Marguerite, she was different. She looked different, too. She had this tiny constellation of freckles on her nose, these enormous gray eyes. She was something too beautiful for the Site, everyone could see it. Looking at her, you felt like someone should come along and put her in a bulletproof case and just keep her safe, keep her happy. But then, you'd think, well, being in a case wouldn't make her happy. Cos she loved *everything*, man. She wasn't like me, with my bikes and my radios and my wires. She would walk around and it was like everything was fresh to her and new-made and wonderful, even the rats.

Yeah, even the rats. She loved those things, just like she loved the sky, and the sun, and bits of rubbish floating down the street when they made pretty patterns in the air. She saw some beauty in those filthy creatures that the rest of us could not recognize. Once, Manman found a nest of baby rats in one of the walls. This was when we were seven or something, I guess. Before Marguerite could stop her she killed the mother rat, whacked it dead with a broom. She wanted to kill the babies, too, but Marguerite would not let her.

— No, Manman, she said. I want them.

No one ever refused Marguerite anything. There was anyen that the people of the Site would not do for her, especially the older ones. It was this glow that she had inside, this way of lighting up like a lamp when she saw something that made her happy. So Manman let her gather up the nest, carefully, and take it to a place in the corner of our dirt yard, where she made a wooden box and filled it with newspaper, and that made her happy. She would just lie on the ground, right in the dirt, on her front with her elbows propped up, and I would watch her as she watched the rats. She brought them food; I don't know where she found it, we never even had food for ourselves, not really. But the stuff Marguerite found was not food a person would eat – it was always moldy stuff, old, perished. The rats didn't care; they loved it.

One day, though, the box was gone.

— The rats, are they OK? I asked.

— Yeah, she said. It was time for them to go and explore.

— Oh, I said. OK.

And she looked at me with those eyes like the ocean at dusk.

— I'm going to explore one day, too, she said. I'm going to get out of this place, and I'll take you and Manman and Papa with me.

You know what? I believed her. You get me? I believed that shit. Cos when Marguerite said something, you listened. She was that beautiful, see, and that special, you just knew that whatever she wanted to be, she could be. She was like . . . like someone who had lived many times before, and knew how to be grateful. That sounds stupid, but it's true. It's like she had

a soul that was much too big for her; it filled her to the brim till there was no more space, so then it flowed out through her eyes. It made her care for people, for animals, too.

Tintin was also like that – sort of, anyway. But with Tintin, what was inside was rotten, and it made him crazy, made him hurt other people.

But I'm talking to you about Marguerite. It wasn't always rats with her, you have to understand.

This other time, not so long afterward, I was with her and we were walking to the sea to try to find Papa, see if he would take us out on his boat. He did that a couple of times; he would let us drop lines into the water, and we would wait for the fish to bite, and as we did we would look back at Site Solèy, rising up squalid from the ocean, and it would seem smaller and like a place you *could* escape from.

Papa would say:

— The sea, it's a kind of freedom. But you two must do your schoolwork, OK? Then maybe you can have a better freedom.

Marguerite would say:

— Yes. See those big houses on the hill, for the rich? I'll have one of those one day. I'll have a swimming pool and a car, and you'll all live with me.

And we believed her. We believed in her dream. Of course we did. When Marguerite said something, it was real.

So, that day, we were walking to the sea. We were on one of the wider streets; there was more room to avoid the sewage, and there were even a couple of carts with colorful umbrellas, selling fruit, but we weren't the kind of people

who could afford fruit. The sun was high above us and it was brutal hot, like a hammer on the skin. We saw this old guy who had a monkey on a chain – it leaped at us and screamed as we went past. Marguerite squealed and grabbed my hand, and the old guy cursed and pulled the monkey back – but not before we'd seen its big white eyes, the teeth in its wide-open mouth.

— I bet you wouldn't feed that monkey if you found it, I said.

— The monkey's OK, she said. It just doesn't enjoy being chained like that.

Marguerite was famous for that kindness. She'd take a pigeon that had broken its wing and she'd make it better, no matter that Manman said pigeons were rats with wings.

That was Marguerite. You could stab her and beat her and steal her money, and she'd say that she understood, that you were hungry, that you didn't know any better. Not that anyone would do such things to her – she was like an angel in the Site. Grandmothers would touch her for luck, I'm not fucking kidding. Really, we both should have been lucky. We were Marassa – I was just as much a twin as her, just as much maji. But ain't no one ever touched me and looked happy about it, I'm telling you.

After the monkey, we walked for another block. Then we heard a sound. It was a crying sound, low and miserable. We both looked around. Marguerite spotted it before me and she walked over to this trash heap that was right at the side of the street. I followed her and suddenly we were looking down at a baby.

— Wow, I said.

This baby, it was just lying in the trash, crying, but in a kind of weak way. It was moving its limbs, too, but sluggishly, slowly. It had an enormous head, all swollen and sore-looking.

— It's alive, said Marguerite.

That sounds a kind of stupid thing to say, but the way she said it had all this wonder in it. You have to imagine her saying it in this hushed voice and that there are, like, angels flying around and violins playing.

Course, this baby being alive *was* a big deal. Truth is, it wasn't that uncommon to see babies in the trash in the Site, but mostly they were dead when you saw them. You'd clock them sometimes, from the corner of your eye when you were walking by, or when you were throwing something in the trash, and you'd try not to look. You didn't blame the mothers. I didn't blame the mothers anyway, though I think Marguerite did. Me, I know it's hard enough to feed yourself if you live in the Site. Gen surprise that not many women want to feed a baby, too.

It was a crazy thing, those dead babies. Sometimes you'd go back the next day, or whatever, and they would be gone. Just disappeared. No moun knew what happened to them. Some people said that Dread Wilmè stole those babies away and ground them down in a big pestle and mortar, used them to make a dust that protected him. They said that that was why he was always coming up alive, always indemne, no matter how much the UN and the other gangs tried to kill him. They said Dread Wilmè used some serious black maji, and there

wasn't anyen that could give as much power and protection as a ground-up baby.

I should explain something here. Thing is, people like to say bad stuff about vodou. The Kretyens, they have often made out that vodou is violent and dangerous and evil, when really it's a religion like any other and it can be beautiful. So when I say this about the babies, I don't want you to get the wrong idea. It's not like it's normal in vodou to grind babies up into powder. It's pretty far from normal, in fact. It's fucked up. But where I come from, it's the same as anywhere else: there are always some people who are ignorant and superstitious. Those people, they thought the babies could be used for black maji, and that was why the babies would disappear.

Anyway. This baby. No one had made it disappear. This baby was alive.

— What's wrong with it? I said.

— Her, said my sister.

— What?

— It's a her.

I looked at the baby. I couldn't see how she knew what it was. All I could see was it was ugly, with that big head like a great boil full of pus. Noisy, too. It was still crying. I turned to her, like, huh?

— Pink clothes, said Marguerite. Dumb-ass.

— Oh. Yeah.

Marguerite bent toward the baby and I grabbed her arm, asked her what she thought she was doing.

— She's sick, said Marguerite. Hy— hydro— something. Her head is full of water.

— Serious? How do you know that?

Marguerite shrugged.

— From Manman, I think. She touched the baby's face. I'm going to find someone to help her. Someone from outside the Site.

I stared at her.

— You're kidding?

But Marguerite wasn't the type for kidding. She picked up the baby and, for a moment, it stopped crying. It looked up at her with its piggy eyes stuck deep in that fat head. Then it started to cry again.

— Hush, said Marguerite. Hush.

She carried the baby and I followed behind, of course I did. You didn't have any choice but to follow Marguerite. I don't know if I can really explain that without you seeing her. It was like . . . It was like her personality went in front of her, bright, like a reverse shadow. You felt the force of her from meters away.

So I followed her, and I guess we both knew where we were going. It was the only place we could go. At that time, the Site was not closed off. I mean, there were no checkpoints, no MINUSTAH troops to stop you leaving – those are the soldiers from the UN who came to bring peace to the Site by making it into a prison. It was still closed off in a way, though, you understand, cos it wasn't like you could just walk out and get a job and not be a slum-rat anymore. There's no McDonald's in Haiti, there's no Burger King, nowhere that a person with no

real education can get a job. Mostly, if you went out, you got picked up by the police, or a gang. The police would return you to the Site, but a gang might just kill you, or worse.

And yet . . .

If you did want to leave you could – if you were determined. You just walked to the end of the street and you kept on walking till you were past the shacks and the mud. So that's what we did, me and Marguerite, her carrying this little baby, its swollen head bobbing, crying all the way.

I said:

— I'll carry it. I mean, I'll carry her for a bit.

But Marguerite shook her head.

That walk, it must have taken a couple of hours. We didn't have any water with us, nothing, and it was hot. Even thinking about it is making me feel thirsty, and I have more than enough reason to feel thirsty already, what with being trapped underground in a baking oven.

Anyway, the sun was battering down on us, like a sledgehammer. We were sweating, and anpil times we had to stop and sit down. But you know what? I never once said to Marguerite we should stop. She had this look in her eye, see. People didn't ask her to stop.

We passed the long wall with the painting on it. Everyone knew this wall. Someone did it years and years ago during the break-bones time, when Aristide was gone and the Lavalas were trying to bring him back and the attachés were shooting protesters in the streets of Site Solèy. It's of a load of kids playing, and underneath there are some slogans:

Aba lavichè. *Down with poverty.*

Pa fe vyolans. *Don't commit violence.*

Aba kidnaping. *Down with kidnapping.*

Nou vle lape. *We want peace.*

Nou gen dwa pou nou edike tout moun. *We want to educate everyone.*

These slogans are a big joke, cos there's only poverty in the Site, and violence is everywhere. Peace is the biggest joke of them all. The education thing is pretty funny, too – me and Marguerite, we were pretty rare cos we could actually read that wall.

The only thing on the wall that had actually happened was that the kidnappings had stopped. The kidnappings belonged to the break-bones time, when the attachés would come into the Site and take Lavalas supporters away. No one ever saw them again.

Eventually we saw the runway, and we knew we were close then. We turned onto the big road that led from the airport to the town. Marguerite looked around, then sat down in the dirt below a billboard with an advert for Coke on it, with these people on a beach, taking bottles from a cooler full of glistening ice. I thought that was unbelievable. Absolutely fucking unbelievable.

Cars were going past, some of them beat-up taxis, some of them private vehicles. A few, coming from the airport, on our side of the road, were bringing people in – aid workers, adventurous travelers, diplomats, UN with blacked-out windows, air con.

Marguerite, she scooted till she was as close to the road as she dared. Then you know what she did; you know it already. She lifted that baby and she held it up. She fixed her eyes on those cars going past, the ones going to and from the airport, and she just sat there. After a while, I could see the muscles trembling in her arms.

— Hey, let me, I said.

Then she looked at me. She nodded, and I took the baby from her. I held it up so the people in those cars would see its head. I managed, like, ten minutes, man. Marguerite, she could hold it for an hour. She took it back, and that's just what she did. She didn't move for one minute, not to go pee, nothing. It was so hot, man, but she didn't move. Her skin was all honey in the sunlight, frizzy hair on her head like heat haze, so you didn't know where Marguerite ended and the light began. She just sat there, so beautiful, perfectly still, and she held up that baby.

And nothing, anyen at all, happened.

Nothing.

The cars, they just kept chugging by, clouds of dust with wheels, and the smell of diesel was a live creature in our nostrils, breathing black air. The sun kept beating down like a weapon, deadly. I was worried we were going to die out there, that we'd run out of water in our bodies and go like raisins, that someone would find us there with that big-headed baby and they'd have anyen idea what the hell had happened. I was so thirsty, I thought I was going to die.

I know what real thirst feels like now.

The sun began to go down, and we were handing the baby

back and forth when I saw that Marguerite was crying. But I didn't say anything. I'm a boy – what do you want from me? I didn't touch her, either. She had holes in her; the world could get in. She wasn't protected enough to be touched – she would just melt down in tears, I knew it, and that would be it, the day would be over. So I just looked away and said I'd hold the baby for a moment.

I guess we were both looking down when the car stopped, so we heard it before we saw it, the crunch of the tires as it pulled off the road and onto the dirt, the clunk of the door opening. Then there was this woman coming toward us, quite old I thought then, but I guess she was kind of young, really. She had on a T-shirt, with *Médecins Sans Frontières* on it. She had blonde hair, too – I'd never seen women with blonde hair before. And blue eyes! She crouched down beside us and someone in the car shouted to her, but she waved back at them and said something short, something angry.

She peered at the baby. Me and Marguerite, we kind of averted our eyes, like we might ruin this if we said anything, like this woman was a wild animal who could be scared away.

— She has hydro-encephalitis, the woman said in French. By her accent, she was from somewhere else, though. She looked at Marguerite. Do you know what that is?

Marguerite shrugged.

— She's sick, she said. My sister's voice was kind of croaky and dry, cos she was thirsty. Will she die?

— That depends, said the woman. Not if she's treated. Is she yours?

Marguerite blinked. We were, like, seven.

— No!

— Your sister?

— No.

The woman ran her hand through her hair. It was loose, but some of it was tied in this clip that looked like a bird. I thought that was amazing, the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. There was a fine down of blonde hair on her ears; I loved her ears. Manman, she would talk about the lwa Erzili Danto and how she was the most beautiful woman, the most beautiful goddess, how anyone who looked at her would fall in love with her. I thought this woman must be Erzili Danto in that case, or possessed by her, or something.

— Then what . . . ? she said, hesitant.

— We found her in the trash, I said.

The woman stared at me, then put her head in her hands and kicked the dirt. Some of it went in my face, but I didn't say anything.

— Fuck, she said.

From the car behind her came this man's voice, pretty loud now. It sounded like he really wanted her to get in the car. The woman turned around and shouted something back, and she was doing this twisty thing with her hands.

— Fuck, she said again. Wait.

She went to the car, and for a moment we thought, yes, she's going to take the baby. But she came back with two little bottles of water. She handed them to us and we opened them straight away, drank them down.

Till then I didn't know water had a taste. I thought it was like air: flavorless. But this water that the woman gave us, after we had been walking and sitting in the sun all day, it tasted of a thousand things – sunshine, shadows, bananas, mangoes.

I finished my bottle and saw that Marguerite had, too. We put them down.

— Thank you, we said.

The woman nodded. I thought she was going to turn and leave, that she had given us water and that was all we could hope for. I think I would have cried if I wasn't such a boy.

Then the woman held out her hands.

— Give her to me, she said. Quickly.

Marguerite handed over the baby and the woman glanced all around, like someone was going to jump out and grab her, like anyone in Port-au-Prince cared about a sick baby, unless they were going to grind it up for vodou or something. She glanced back at us and made this funny expression that was halfway between a smile and a frown. She got in the car, closed the door, and it peeled off in a cloud of that diesel smell. Then it was gone. Just like that. We never even knew if the baby survived or not.

Marguerite stood up, brushed some dust from the seat of her pants, then staggered and swayed. I caught her just before she fell, before she fainted. She was like a thing made to resemble a person, but with all the bones taken out, just soft stuff put in instead, like a toy animal. I thought I'd better get her to the shade, to some water.

— OK, she said. OK, let's go find Papa.

That was Marguerite.