The generosity of his parents, in-laws, and friends allowed him to collect enough money to leave the country for America, a country known for its opportunities.

By Pierre Richard Arty, MD

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the country for America, a country known for its opportunities. He left with tears in his eyes and a promise on his lips to reunite his family. On many nights while lying on his mattress, awake with his eyes closed, the whisper of a thought resonates inside his mind; that maybe he made a mistake.

In New York, he managed to get a driver's license and learned the route of the B35 bus all along Church Avenue, even beyond Utica Avenue, where most of the people from the Caribbean live. Although the car he is driving is not his own, he has an agreement with the owner to return the car with a full tank of gas and a fifty dollar bill upon completion of each of his regular evening tours. After a couple of months, he even learned how to detect the undercover police cruisers and would purposefully avoid picking up passengers when he saw them from a distance. He grew up hearing the many stories of people who had “disappeared” while in the custody of the Haitian secret police, the macoutes. With his family’s future at stake, he had no desire to disappear in America in the hands of these uniformed white men. There was also word out on the streets that the mayor, the magistrat of the land, someone named Giuliani, wasn’t one to play with. He had already heard of what had happened to one unfortunate Haitian man named Louima who wound up in the hands of the macoutes. His right palm slams on the car horn several times. While feeling frustrated, he notices an odor that is slowly surrounding him like a fog on a warm summer night. At first, it is just a hint, the kind he often makes a mental note of as he drives pass the landfill on the Belt Parkway near Starrett City, but quickly forgets. As he continues to drive, the odor appears to be getting worse, filling up every crevice of his car. He notices the driver passes him to pick up passengers in the opposite lane. This afternoon he seems to be pressing a reason with him as he feels his blood pressure rising to his head, punching at his temples.

While driving and now actively looking for potential passengers, he catches the reflection of his face in the rearview mirror. He is actively perspiring and the look of anger is clearly in his eyes. He tells himself that he has to calm down. As he takes another look at his face, trying to make it look calm, he notices his mouth and his mind takes him back to several weeks ago when he had visited the dentist. Slowly, the wall holding his mind begins to crack. For the first time in his life he seriously entertains a thought that a few days ago would not have made any sense, would even be comical, but now seems to explain everything: “could it be that … maybe … no that kind of thing can’t … YES! Of course! It’s my mouth … there’s something wrong with my mouth … my breath!”

The thought that his breath is the cause of this horrible stench that is getting progressively worse begins to eat at his mind, transforming it, hijacking and carrying it away to a dark and frightening place. Suddenly, the mental dam breaks and he sees the world differently, as if for the first time. The events of the past several hours take on a new meaning. “That’s why I haven’t gotten any passengers today,” he reasons to himself. It all makes sense. It is now perfectly clear to him that these people know what is going on but they are making believe that they don’t. “Why haven’t I noticed that before?” he wonders.

Somewhere in his mind, a remnant of rationalization tries to reason with him as he feels his blood pressure rising to his head, punching at his temples. These thoughts can’t be real he begins to think. “There must be another reason for this odor,” he thinks. His ears begin to hurt from the vibrations of his heartbeat pounding in his head, sounding louder than Haitian drums in the night. He begins to wonder if someone might have even placed a voodoo curse on him. As he continues to struggle with his inner demons, he is so lost in his thoughts that he doesn’t notice the light at the intersection that has just turned red. He is barely able to stop in time.

While impatiently waiting for the light, he notices one of the other TapTap drivers in the opposite lane picking up passengers. As he is
looking at the driver, his happen- stance look turns into a wide-eyed gaze as the man, who is busy watching the car in front of him, begins to momentarily scratch his nose with the tip of his pointer finger. That is all the evidence that he needs to allow the last vestiges of his sanity to burst behind a flood of lunacy. By that man’s incidental nose scratching, he knows that the world is aware that the horrible odor is coming from him. As his breathing becomes louder, he is certain that it is only a matter of time before the police apprehend him for this unforgivable crime and cause him to disappear, never to see his family or country again. The possibility of disappearing in a foreign country without anyone knowing what happened was worse than the language barrier that held him at a distance from everyone but fellow Haitians. “No” he thinks, “It can’t end this way.”

When the light turns green, he presses hard on the gas making the tires scream, causing pedestrians to look his way. He speeds off and quickly cuts into the opposite lane in order to pass the car ahead of him. He gets back into his lane as soon as he can and continues to drive the car wildly, crossing an intersection. He continues with this brazen driving into the opposite lane every now and then, catching the attention of passersby. “You crazy?” he hears them yell at him. “Madman … you gonna kill somebody,” someone else screams.

Coming to Nostrand Avenue, he sees the light going from yellow to red and he accelerates even more, crossing the intersection just as the light changes to red. His heart is racing now and his hands begin to tremble. He can feel his palms becoming sweaty, soaking the steering wheel with moisture. He is constantly looking at his rearview mirror, searching for anyone who may be following him. He is now heading towards the next intersection at New York Avenue and he notices the pictures of his children taped to the dashboard. “These are the reasons why I came to this country,” he thinks. “This is why I can’t disappear. “Ede ‘m Bondye mi yon fatiye avek lavi sa a.” “God help me, I’m tired of this life,” he cries out as tears begin to make their way down his dark brown cheeks. He begins to sob almost uncontrollably behind the wheel of the car while driving faster than he should on a city road. Suddenly, in the darkness of his mind a memory begins to shine some light. He remembers the hospital in the neighborhood that is known even in Haiti. He remembers stories of how people would come right off the airplane from John F Kennedy airport, head directly to Kings County Hospital and receive treatment for their illnesses. He had also heard the patrons at the barbershop joke about people who were treated at the “G” building, where “moun fou,” crazy people, are kept. “Maybe I am losing my mind,” he thinks.

Reaching Albany and Church Avenue, he quickly makes a left turn, heading for where he heard this “G” building was located. The tears flow freely now and he barely recognizes the man that occasionally glances at him in the rearview mirror. At Clarkson and Albany Avenue, he takes the red light, nearly colliding with a woman in a black Volvo. She curses at him as he speeds off, only to stop at the end of the block where a parking space is waiting for him.

After parking the car and placing the keys in his pocket, he runs across Albany Avenue into the entrance of the psychiatric emergency room. He then pushes the doors open and heads straight for the first person he sees in a white hospital scrub. He grabs the nurse forcefully by the arm and frantically begins to yell, “Help me, help me,” while crying uncontrollably and frightening her. By this time, two security officers who are posted at the entrance of the emergency room quickly approach this apparently dangerous intruder. He notices their approach and screams out, “annmwe,” “help!” Thinking that these officers were the New York City police, he tries to evade them in a small and confined emergency room, all the while screaming “annmwe … annmwe!” This only attracts more uniformed security officers into the now-established mêlée. As they try to talk to him, he becomes more agitated. Even if they were able to speak his language, it would have been futile. At this point, he believes that they are all a part of a conspiracy to kidnap him and his family will never hear from him again. He makes a feeble attempt to fight off the officers, which only results in being restrained and carried into a room, away from everyone. Now in this confined place, he continues to cry loudly in Creole, asking God for forgiveness for many imagined sins.

Later, he is found on his knees in a pool of tears when a Haitian psychiatrist eventually comes to speak to him. He is inconsolable and wishes only to end his life since he is a failure and believes the world knows it. The odor from his mouth is evidence of that, he says. He agrees to let the doctor give him some medication more out of respect than with a hope that it will make a difference in his outcome. The doctor says that the medication is for his nerves and soon he feels the penetration of a small needle in his right shoulder. In a few moments, he begins to feel groggy, then sleepy. His last thoughts before falling asleep are of his wife and children who are depending on him to send money home. ☼