

TapTap

By Pierre Richard Arty, MD

He is driving on Church Avenue in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York during the busiest time of the day. It is late afternoon, rush hour to millions of Brooklynites heading home. He is one of several *TapTap* drivers, often uninsured individuals who have taken upon themselves the responsibility to answer the need for a quick and hopefully safe transportation for the hundreds of people trying to get home after exiting from various subway stations. They are heading to a place where the inhabitants look like they do, speak the same language, cook and eat food that reaffirms who they are after being with outsiders for most of their day. He also knows that the buses that carry them home never arrive promptly. And even if they do, they are often overcrowded with strangers standing closer to one another than they would like to be, especially after a long day's work.

With these thoughts in mind, he is encouraged by the fact that he is performing a very important function. He knows that he does not have the license to do this and the police frequently stop his fellow *TapTap* drivers after their cars are filled with passengers. But no amount of summonses can stop these drivers from fulfilling their roles. Besides, it is good money. Why should the city make that money?

He has two children and a wife that he left almost four years ago in Cap-Haitien a town in the north of Haiti. He works hard so that he can save enough money to bring them to

America. The pictures of his children, a girl, age six, and the boy, age seven, are taped onto the dashboard of his car. He thinks of them throughout the day, but especially at night as he tries to sleep in the little apartment on Beverly Road, which he shares with several of his cousins from Trou-Du-Nord, a town Northeast of Cap-Haitien.

The furniture in his room includes a small television set on which he watches a Haitian news station, a radio and a rectangular table where he keeps an old Bible, forever opened to Psalm 23. In the shoebox next to the Bible is a photograph of his wife and children is placed next to his mattress. In the closet is the suit he wears every Sunday to attend the Catholic mass, a black pair of shoes, and one of the two pairs of jeans he owns. He is wearing the other pair along with some sneakers—*Karochu*, he calls them—that he had brought from a 99-cent store. Along with a few shirts and some undergarments, those are the only clothes that he has allowed himself to buy since he is so focused on sending every cent to his family. On weekends, he works as a waiter in a Haitian restaurant in Queens.

A few short blocks away on Nostrand Avenue is the barbershop he frequents even when he doesn't have the need for a haircut. It is there that he is able to get the news behind the news from the experts on Haitian politics, the local patrons. His only major expense occurred last month when he paid for a dental extraction

after experiencing intolerable pain from an impacted wisdom tooth. Since he didn't have any insurance to pay the dentist, he left with the understanding that he would make occasional payments until his bill was fully paid.

At night, when the mice allow him to sleep, he dreams of his *Haiti Cheri*, his darling Haiti. As he dreams, he feels the soothing sensations of her gentle breezes on his face and smells the aroma of fried fish being cooked on the white sandy beaches bounded by her beautiful clear blue sea. But he is only to be awakened in the early hours of the morning, needing to urinate and realizing that he is in a small room, alone in a foreign land wrestling with a strange language. The dream often evaporates before the taste of the salty fish leaves his mouth. Recently, he has been waking up more often than usual by the presence of an emptiness in his chest and tears under his eyelids. It is as if a hole was left in his chest where his heart should be.

More than once while lying on the mattress on the floor, he found himself wondering if in some way he wasn't experiencing a *folie* or obsession, in hoping that he could do something more for his family while in New York than if he had stayed *lacaye*, back home. He wanted to remove them from the dead-end poverty that is the very fabric of their existence.

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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 police one night. He knew that he was taking a chance in doing what he did, but he couldn't pass up this opportunity. The need was there and so was he.

This afternoon he seems to be having a bit more difficulty picking up passengers. Too often, some other *TapTap* driver is able to rush ahead of him and quickly pick up a potential passenger. This is not

good he thinks. If he doesn't begin to make some progress soon, he won't be able to return the car with the fifty dollar borrowing fee. 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 past 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 looks outside at the pedestrians to see if anyone notices this pungent smell, but people seem to be occupied with their own personal matters. He decides to stop the car and check the backseat to see if any passengers had accidentally left some food in the back. Getting out of the car and making his inspection, he finds nothing out of the ordinary in the back. But getting out of the car doesn't help either. The horrible odor is all around him and it is getting stronger. He gets back into the driver's seat wondering if a sewer cover was left open somewhere nearby. And again, another *TapTap* driver passes him to pick up a passenger that he had visually claimed as his from half a block away. "*Tonnere foutre!*" "Damn!" he hears himself shout as his right fist punches the car horn.

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 happenstance 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 mwen fatige avèk 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, *"anmwè,"* "help!" Thinking that these officers are the New York City police, he tries to evade them in a small and confined emergency room, all the while screaming *"anmwè ... anmwè!"* 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. ❖

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