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'New York Was Our City on the Hill'

By **EDWIDGE DANTICAT**

IF you are an immigrant in New York, there are some things you inevitably share. For one, if you're a new immigrant, you probably left behind someone you love in the country of your birth. In my case, I was the person left in Haiti when my mother and father escaped the brutal regimes of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier in the early 1970's and fled the extreme poverty caused by the Duvaliers' mismanagement and excesses.

The plan was for my parents to send for me and my younger brother, André, who were 4 and 2 years old at the time of their departure, when they found jobs and got settled in New York. But because of United States immigration red tape, our family separation lasted eight years. The near decade we were apart was filled with long letters, lengthy voice messages on cassette tapes and tearful phone calls, all brimming with the promise that one day my brother and I would be united not only with our parents but with our two Brooklyn-born brothers whom we didn't know at all.

Still André and I were constantly reminded by our Aunt Denise and Uncle Joseph, who were caring for us in an impoverished and politically volatile neighborhood in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, that we were lucky our parents were in New York. If we dared to disagree with that idea, the Faustian bargain our parents had faced would be clearly laid out for us. They could have stayed behind with us and we could have all gone without a great many necessary things, or they could have gone to New York to work so that we could have not only clothes and food and school fees but also a future.

As my Uncle Joseph liked to say, for people like us, the malere, the poor, the future was not a given. It was something to be clawed from the edge of despair with sweat and blood. At least in New York, our parents would be rewarded for their efforts.

If living in one of the richest cities in the world did not guarantee a struggle-free life, my brother and I didn't realize it. New York was our city on the hill, the imaginary haven of our lives. When we fantasized, we saw ourselves walking the penny-gilded streets and buying all the candies we could stuff into ourselves. Eventually we grew to embrace the idea that New York was where we were meant to be, as soon as the all-powerful gatekeepers saw fit to let us in, and if we could help it, we would never leave once we were again at our parents' side.

Our parents might have had utopian fantasies of their own when they sold most of their belongings to pay for passports, visas and plane fares to New York. I can't imagine making the choices they made without being forced, mapping out a whole life in a place that they'd seen only in one picture, a snow-covered street taken by my mother's brother, who lived there.

Later my parents would tell me that what kept them trudging through that snow to their factory jobs was their visions of their two New York-born children playing with the children they'd left in Haiti and the future that we might all forge as individuals and as a family.

When I finally joined my parents in Brooklyn, in 1981, at age 12, I became acutely aware of something else that New York immigrants shared. If they were poor, they were likely to be working more hours than anyone else, for less money, and with few if any benefits.

For years my father had worked two minimum-wage jobs to support two households in two countries. One job was in a textile factory, where my mother also worked, and another in a night car wash. Tired of intermittent layoffs and humiliating immigration raids, my father finally quit both jobs when André and I arrived so he could accompany my brothers and me to and from school.

That same year, our family car also became a gypsy cab, a term that, when I first heard and researched it, led me to think that we were part of a small clan of nomads whose leader, my father, chauffeured other people around when he was not driving us.

Though my brothers and I weren't aware of it at the time, our financial situation was precarious at best. Once my parents paid the rent and utility bills and bought a week's worth of groceries, there was little left for much else. My father never knew from day to day or week to week how much he would collect in fares.

Winter mornings were more profitable than summer afternoons. But in the winter, our needs were greater: coats and boots for four growing children, and regular hospital trips for my youngest brother, Karl, who was prone to ear infections and, as one doctor pointed out to us, might have suffered through 25 different colds one long winter.

We had no health insurance, of course, and each of Karl's visits to the doctor, or those for my brother Kelly - the only child I knew who got migraines, which we later discovered were a result of some kind of pressure on his optic nerve - were negotiated down at Cumberland Hospital's payment services department when my father took in my parents' joint tax return.

I remember going to the same hospital's women's clinic with my mother for one of her regular checkups when I was 16. She had a headache, her blood pressure was high, and the doctor told her that she'd have to be hospitalized that day if she wanted to avoid a stroke.

"Doctor, I have children at home and work tomorrow," my mother said, before signing papers declaring

that she'd been advised of the treatment for her condition but had refused it. On the bus home, I watched her carefully, fearful that she would keel over and die for our sake, but she made it home, and despite the persistent headache, she went to work the next day.

I don't know what a catastrophic illness might have cost our family financially. But it was something my parents always had in mind. My father tried to pay all his bills religiously so that if we ever needed a bank loan for a sudden emergency, we would have no trouble getting it.

What we would eventually need a loan for was our house, which my parents purchased 18 years ago in East Flatbush. The day we moved in was one of the scariest and most exhilarating of our lives. My parents invited groups of church friends over to celebrate and bless our new home, but at the same time, they warned my brothers and me that the biggest battle they'd face from then on would be to try to keep it. The mortgage was nearly double the amount they'd paid in rent, and some months my father drove his cab both at night and during the day to make the payment, which he then took to the bank, in person, during the final hours of the grace period.

It is the burden of each generation to embrace or reject the dreams set out by those who came before. In my family it was no different. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, and when I wasn't accepted by a Brooklyn high school specializing in the health professions, my father met with the principal and persuaded him to reverse the decision.

When I decided, after a brief school-sponsored internship at Kings County Hospital Center, that medicine was not for me, my parents were disappointed, but accepted my decision. My brother André has never forgotten the day he turned 14 and my father took him to the post office to buy a money order for the application fee for his first summer job. And over time we have all nearly wept when tallying small loans and advances from Mom and Dad on salaries spent way before they were collected.

Over the years, I have also come to understand my parents' intense desire to see my brothers and me financially stable. They had sacrificed so much that to watch us struggle as they had would have been, to quote a Creole expression, like *lave men siye atè* - washing one's hands only to dry them in the dirt.

These days, if you're an immigrant in New York, you might not consider yourself an immigrant at all, but a transnational, someone with voting privileges and living quarters not just in one country but in two. This was my parents' dream until they reached middle age and realized that with their decade-long friendships and community ties in Brooklyn, they didn't want to live anywhere else.

Last year, when my father became ill with pulmonary fibrosis - a result, some doctors say, of environmental pollution, to which he was especially vulnerable from working such long hours in his cab - he began to have long talks with my brothers and me, fearing that as the disease progressed, it might become harder and harder for him to speak. While I was writing this, we talked a little about how New York had changed from the time he arrived.

The most striking difference, he observed, is that these days, like most New Yorkers, he has to worry about terrorism, both becoming a victim and being blamed for it. He also worries about the high cost of everything from food to housing, about doors closing behind him, and thousands of families never having the kind of opportunities that we've enjoyed. When he first got to New York, all he did was work nonstop and pray to see his children and grandchildren grow up. Looking back, it feels like a simpler time, but maybe it wasn't. Then and now, he whispered wistfully, one can only hope that the journey was worthwhile.

On Nov. 3, after this essay was submitted, my Uncle Joseph died at age 81. More formally known as the Rev. Joseph N. Dantica, he died in Miami after fleeing gang violence and death threats in Haiti. He was detained by Department of Homeland Security officials after requesting asylum in the United States and died in their custody. The department said the cause was pancreatitis.

Edwidge Danticat is the author of the novels and story collections "Breath, Eyes, Memory," "The Farming of Bones," "Krik? Krak!" and "The Dew Breaker."

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