

Pascal Dorien was living in Bel Air — the Baghdad of Haiti, some people called it, but that would be Cité Pendue, an even more destitute and brutal neighborhood, where hundreds of middle-school children entering a national art contest drew M-16s and beheaded corpses, and wrote such things as “It’s not polite to shoot at funeral processions” and “I’m happy to have turned in my weapons. What about you?” Bel Air was actually a mid-level slum. It had a few Protestant and Catholic churches, vodou temples, restaurants, bakeries, and dry cleaners, even Internet cafés. For a while, there were no gang wars; there was just one gang, whose headquarters were in a large empty warehouse, painted with murals of serpents, lions, and goats, and Haile Selassie and Bob Marley. The two dozen or so young male inhabitants of the warehouse called it Baz Benin, for reasons that only the person who came up with the tag knew for sure. That person, Piye, was killed when a special-forces team shot several bullets into the back of his head as he was lying in bed one night. The shooting was in retaliation for a series of fatal kidnappings, some of which the Baz Benin men had committed and some of which they had not. (The men of Baz Benin gave themselves the monikers of Nubian royalty, which also happened to suggest, in Creole, menacing acts—piye, for example, means “to pillage.”)

Pascal’s parents were shop owners and restaurateurs in Bel Air. They had a slightly larger yard than most of their crammed-in neighbors, so they had closed it off with sheets of rusty corrugated metal, and there, at four long wooden tables beneath a string of light bulbs which dangled from a second-story clostra-block window, they served up to thirty customers per night, if the turnover was fast. They sold rice and beans, of course, and fried plantains and cornmeal, but their specialty, for a long time, was fried pigeon meat.

Pascal’s parents had moved to Bel Air at a time when the neighborhood was inhabited mostly by peasants, living there temporarily so that their children could finish primary school. But as the trees in the provinces vanished into charcoal and the mountains gave way, washing the country’s topsoil into the sea, they, like the others, stayed and raised their two sons and at least a thousand pigeons, which, over the years, they sold both alive and dead.

Pascal’s father had been a pigeon breeder since he was a boy in Léogâne. He’d stopped briefly in the early eighties, when some soldiers came and collected his birds because it was rumored that he was breeding carriers to send messages to armed invaders in

the Dominican Republic. But when the dictatorship finally collapsed — without any help from his pigeons — he started again. Then most of his customers were nervous young men who wanted to perform a ritual before their first sexual encounter: they'd slit the pigeon's throat and let it bleed into a mixture of Carnation condensed milk and a carbonated malt beverage called Malta. Sometimes their fathers would come with them, and, after the sons had held their noses and forced down the drink, the fathers would laugh and say, as the pigeon's headless body was still gyrating on the ground, "I pity that girl."

It was a ritual that Pascal's parents didn't approve of. But for each bird that was killed this way they were paid enough to buy two more. They quietly mourned the days when people had bought pigeons as pets for their children. Then they began missing the days of the fathers and sons, because suddenly their customers were beefy young men who had gathered themselves into what were at first called "popular organizations," then gangs. The gang members, who were also called chimès — chimeras, or ghosts — were, for the most part, former street children who couldn't remember ever having lived in a house, boys whose parents had died or been murdered during the dictatorship, leaving them alone in a lawless and overpopulated city. Later, these young men were joined by deportees from the United States and Canada and by some older men from the neighborhood, aspiring rap-musician types. The older local men were "connected" — that is, ambitious businessmen and politicians used them to swell the ranks of political demonstrations, giving them guns to shoot when a crisis was needed and having them withdraw when calm was required. Sometimes, before these demonstrations, so many men came for the milk-Malta-pigeon-blood mix that Pascal's parents were tempted to close the business for good. How had they become the people in whose yard pigeons were tortured and massacred? Finally, they released their last two pigeons. For a while, the birds kept coming back to nest, then someone in the neighborhood must have got to them, and Pascal's parents never saw that last pair again.

Still, with the money they'd made from the pigeons, Pascal's parents were able to expand their menu. They bought the house next door and added a few more tables. Pascal's father bought a pickup truck, which he drove back and forth between Léogâne and Port-au-Prince daily, packed with people and livestock. He was always at the restaurant, however, for the busiest time, from 7 p.m. till midnight, when the gang members, many of whom had by this time abandoned politics for the drug trade, took over the entire establishment. Watching these boys drift from being sellers to users of what they liked to call "the white man's powder," watching them grow unrecognizable to anyone but one another, Pascal's parents were disheartened and disgusted, but they kept the restaurant open, because, as they often acknowledged, the blight that had destroyed the neighborhood that had once been a kind of haven for the poor was allowing them to prosper, to send their children to school with the heirs

of the country's tiny middle class. Although they could not afford the luxurious extras — holidays at the resorts of Jacmel and Labadie, or summers abroad with émigré relatives — their children were making contacts that might one day help them get good jobs and marriages. In order for their children to leave one day without ever having to look back, the Doriens had to stay.

Jules, Pascal's older brother, had already fulfilled this promise. For a long time, he had dated a girl whose parents were in Montreal. The girl had vowed that as soon as her visa came through she would marry Jules, so that she'd be able to send for him once she got to Canada. In the meantime, the government had turned over again, and the United Nations had come to train yet another police force. Jules had joined up, even though he was scrawny — barely five feet tall — and had a disproportionately large head, a distinctive family trait that had gained him the nickname Tèt Veritab, Breadfruit Head. But Jules had found that he couldn't be a policeman and live in the room he shared with Pascal above his parents' restaurant in Bel Air. Every time a neighborhood gang member was arrested, Jules was blamed for it. So he had moved in with his girlfriend's aunt and uncle for a few months, then married and left the country. Pascal had stayed, of course, and once Jules was gone no one bothered him or his parents.

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When he wasn't helping out at the restaurant or going to computer programming classes at a vocational school, Pascal worked as a news writer for Radio Zòrèy, one of the country's most popular stations. Having grown up in Bel Air and witnessed the changes there first-hand, Pascal imagined himself becoming the kind of radio journalist who could talk about the geto from the inside. An idea came to him one night as he was walking from the small concrete-block kitchen his parents had built next to the street — to tempt passersby with appetizing smells — to the table where Tiye ("to kill"), a one-armed, bald-headed gang leader, was nursing a beer and a massive cigar. Tiye was wearing his plastic and steel artificial arm under a long-sleeved white shirt and was expertly raising and lowering his beer with the shiny metal hooks of the prosthesis. Surrounded by three eager "lieutenants," Tiye was laughing so hard about the way he'd once slapped a man, back when he'd had both his arms — sandwiching the man's head between his arms and pounding his ears — that he had to dab tears from his eyes. Pascal, eavesdropping, wished that he had a video camera, or at least a tape recorder. He wanted the rest of the country to know what made these men cry. They cannot remain chimès to us forever, he thought. His show at Radio Zòrèy, if he was ever given one, would be called "Ghosts." It would be controversial at first, but soon people would tune in by the thousands. A kind of sick voyeurism would keep them listening, daily, weekly, monthly, however often he was on. People would rearrange their schedules around it. They wouldn't be able to stop

discussing it. “What are the people in the slums up to now?” they’d say. Then they’d be encouraged to figure out ways to alleviate the problems. Also featured on the program would be psychologists, sociologists, and urban planners.

5 Pascal’s friend Max liked his pitch for the show. Max was a middle-class boy who lived in another type of neighborhood, one perched between affluence and despair. Max was not rich, like most of the children his mother taught at the Lycée Dumas, in the hills above Port-au-Prince, but he was also not historically poor, like Pascal; you could tell this from the small gold stud earring that he always wore in his right ear. Max had started at the station as an afternoon d.j. when Kreyòl rap—hip-hop from
10 the slums was just beginning to make it to the airwaves. Sometimes, Pascal would slip Max a CD from one of Baz Benin’s aspiring rappers, and Max would play it on his hour-long music program.

“I’m feeling everything you’re saying, but the management won’t buy it,” Max said. He was keeping Pascal company while Pascal translated that day’s newswires into
15 conversational Creole for the announcer to read. “Who’d sponsor a show like that?”

“The government should sponsor it,” Pascal said. “I’d be offering a public service.”

But, just as his friend had predicted, the station’s director turned him down. A few weeks later, while Pascal was typing that afternoon’s news script, he overheard the news manager, a stuttering man who had been an inept police spokesperson,
20 discussing a program called “Homme à Homme,” or “Man to Man.” The program would consist of a series of in-studio conversations between gang members and business leaders. “They’ll hash out their differences,” he heard the news manager say, “with the help of a trained arbitrator.”

The first program paired the owner of an ice factory that had been broken into at least once a week over the past six months with a gang leader from Cité Pendue who was believed to have organized the “raids.”
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“What do you expect?” the gang leader told the owner. “You’re chilling in all this ice while we’re in Hell.”

The arbitrator, a Haitian-American F.B.I. trained hostage negotiator, then suggested the obvious — that the businessman find some way to sell his ice at a lower price to the people who lived near his factory, and that the gang leader respect the property of others.
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Pascal was not at the station during the taping, but he heard part of the show on the radio at home. He could not hear the whole thing because he was helping at the
35 restaurant that night and the taunting of both guests on “Homme à Homme” by Tiye

and his crew was too loud. Many of the gang members had known about Pascal's plan — he had coyly approached some of them as possible guests for his show — and, as he served them their beers, they teased him, saying, "Man, they stole your idea." A few of them tried to grab him as he put the bottles on the table — as if to squeeze out the
5 anger that they knew was building inside him. The more they laughed, the angrier he got. They could see it in the layer of sweat that was gathering on his face. Tiye was still laughing when he said, "Pascal, bro, I didn't like the way that masisi said that the guys in Cité Pendue had to leave the ice alone. I should find him and kick his ass."

"That's right," one of the lieutenants chimed in.

10 "Pascal," someone else said. "You should kick the ass of the guy who stole your show."

Just then Pascal's cell phone rang. It was Max.

"Man," Max said, "that guy stole your idea, and when I tried to call him on it do you know that he fired me?"

15 "You shouldn't have said anything," Pascal answered. "Now that you've lost your job, I'll probably lose mine, too."

Tiye and his guys were chanting, "We've got to kick his ass."

"The truth is," Pascal told Max, while passing an empty tray to his exhausted father, who was piling the last of the night's food onto a plate for himself, a cigarette
20 dangling from his lips, "I've already put it out of my mind. 'Homme à Homme' is not the show I wanted to do. I wanted to do something closer to the skin, something more personal."

After he got off the phone, Pascal waited for Tiye and his crew to leave. His mother and the neighborhood girls she'd hired were working on the dirty dishes. He asked if
25 he could help, but they refused. His mother's stern face, darker than the bottom of the burned pot she was scrubbing, never really changed. It was as if the heat of the kitchen had melted and sealed it. Even if she never worked again for the rest of her life, whatever beauty she'd had when she first met his father would not come back.

That night, he persuaded his mother to go to sleep a little earlier than usual, before
30 going to bed himself. In his room, where two cots faced each other from opposite walls that he and his brother had painted bright red, he felt Jules's absence in his gut. If he were younger, he might have started crying, the way kids cry for their mothers.

Leaving had been easier for Jules than anyone had expected. Because gang members had threatened him when he was a policeman, he'd filed for political asylum in Canada as soon as his wife's papers came through. Now Jules was living in Montreal while Pascal was sleeping by himself in this ridiculously red room, his clothes hanging from nails that he and his brother had hammered into the walls. Jules called only once a week, on Sunday afternoons, though he could easily have called more often. Pascal and his parents all had cell phones now, and kept them charged and filled with usable minutes, waiting for him. Sometimes, as his mother fanned away the vapors from the food she was cooking, she'd let out a big sigh before saying, "I wonder what Jules is doing now." The truth was that Pascal was always wondering what Jules was doing. He was even thinking of asking Jules to find some way to send for him. If he were gone, he thought, his parents might finally give up the restaurant and move back to Léogâne, where they could breed pigeons again, freeing the birds in the morning and watching them return safely at dusk.

Pascal went to bed with all these thoughts swirling in his head, stirred up, he knew, by his disappointment over his show. Now it would be much harder for him to pitch the idea to another radio station. The programmers could always say, "But 'Homme à Homme' is already airing. We don't want to give these gangsters too much of a platform." He fell asleep thinking that he'd have to redefine his idea, sharpen it up a bit. Maybe he'd add music to it. Max could help with that. They could play throbbing, urgent-sounding, reggae-influenced hip-hop, and, in between songs, he would let his neighbors speak.

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He was still asleep the next morning when a dozen policemen with balaclava-covered faces, members of the special forces, knocked down the front gate of his parents' house, climbed up to his room, blindfolded him, and dragged him out of bed. He was not allowed to change out of his pajamas, even as his mother wailed uncontrollably and his father shouted that a great injustice was taking place.

By the time he arrived at the nearest commissariat, a small crowd of print, TV, and radio journalists — including his boss — were waiting for him. The night before, the police spokesperson, a shrill-voiced woman, explained, there had been a shooting at Radio Zòrèy. Four men with M-16s and machine guns had been seen jumping out of the back of a tan pickup truck. They had shot at the gates and windows of the three-story building, killing the night guard. The police had arrested Tiye, the notorious head of Baz Benin, and he had named Pascal as the mastermind of the operation, the person who had sent him and his men to do the job. Pascal was not allowed to speak at the press conference. He was simply forced to stand there, like a menacing prop,

surrounded by the still hooded special-forces team, with his chafed wrists handcuffed behind his back.

5 The box of a room where he was taken to be questioned was hot, with the stench of fresh vomit in the air. In addition to the rusty metal chair on which he was placed, with his hands still cuffed, it had a fluorescent light whose flickering beams penetrated the black cloth that covered his eyes.

During his questioning, he was repeatedly punched on the back of the neck.

“Do you know Tiye?” one of his interrogators asked, sucking on a cigarette and blowing the smoke in his face.

10 “Yes,” Pascal replied, coughing. His lungs seemed to be closing down. The constriction forced pieces of last night’s dinner onto the front of his pajama top and, when he was allowed to bend his neck, down to his lap.

The questions continued. “How do you know Tiye?”

15 “He lives in my neighborhood and often eats at my parents’ restaurant,” he stammered.

“You’re a big man, huh? Your parents have a restaurant in the slums. I’m hungry now. Feed me. Feed me.”

20 The officers were laughing even as he hiccupped and sobbed. To his ear, there was no difference between their laughter, their taunting, and that of Tiye and his crew. They could all have switched places, and no one would notice.

“How much did you pay the crew from Baz Benin to shoot at the station?” someone else asked.

“Nothing . . . I . . .”

“So they did it for free?”

25 They threw freezing water in his face. Panicked, he tried to rise from the chair, but several hands shoved him back down. Between the smoke, the vomit, and the water, he felt as though he were drowning.

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After the questioning, he was left alone in a dank cell. That afternoon, his mother and father came to see him. They were allowed to kneel next to him on the floor, where he was lying in a fetal position, and remove his blindfold.

5 “Pascal, chéri.” His mother wept quietly, while his father supported her with one hand beneath her armpit and the other firmly pressed against her back.

“Pascal, could you have done such a thing?” his father asked. He sounded stern, as though scolding his son.

10 Pascal shook his head. His throat ached, and he could taste the vomit still lingering in his mouth. His father, he knew, needed a denial from him in order to proceed with his fight.

“They’re not beating me too badly,” he said, to fill the silence. “Not yet, anyway. You see I have no blood on me.”

The mother raised his filthy pajama top to look for cuts, wounds.

15 “The lawyer we got for you,” his father said, “her cousin is a judge. She says she’s going to try to move things along very fast.”

Years earlier, under the dictatorship, Pascal’s father had had a facial tic — a quick batting of his eyes and an involuntary twitching of his mouth. Now it had returned. Pascal had not seen it in such a long time that he had almost forgotten about it.

20 “They’ll probably take you to the court, to Parquet, this afternoon,” his father continued, despite the spasms in his face. “Then you might possibly go to the Pénitencier, to jail, for a few days, until we get you out.”

25 From Montreal, Jules had told his parents what to say and do. Jules had called the lawyer, who’d successfully represented many of his old police buddies in corruption cases, and was paying her himself. He had also phoned many of his police friends and his former bosses, including the secretary of state, on whose security detail he had briefly worked. Then he had called Tiye’s people, telling them that Tiye must have misunderstood. Pascal would never have asked them to shoot up the radio station. If they had meant to do him a favor, they’d failed.

30 Everyone Jules was able to reach, including Tiye’s second-in-command, told him to stay calm. The case against Pascal was a lamayòt, a vapor. Nothing was going to stick. Give it a few more hours. Let it cool off.

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Pascal was on a fast track, it seemed. After his parents left, a black-robed magistrate came in and informed him of the charges against him. Later that afternoon, more charges were filed. Now he was said to be not only the mastermind of the radio-station shooting but someone the police had been seeking for a long time. In him they'd found a scapegoat for a whole tally of unsolved crimes.

Because of the additional charges, the lawyer asked for more money. They should consider paying off a judge, she said. Twenty thousand dollars. American.

"This is a kind of kidnapping," Jules hollered on the phone from Montreal. Jules had not eaten all day. In despair, he was trying to deprive himself as well. He was expecting his brother to rot in an overcrowded cell at the Pénitencier or simply to disappear before he got there. Pascal's parents were preparing to sell their business to buy Pascal's release. That evening, having slept through the dinner hour in his cell, with his face pressed against a cool groove on the floor, Pascal saw a line of black shiny boots marching toward him. He was blindfolded again and thrown into the back seat of a police jeep.

"Who does he know?" the officer who put him there asked. "What are they going to tell people?"

"That they made a mistake," another voice answered.

He was dumped in front of his parents' restaurant at ten that night.

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Tiye, it turned out, had made some kind of deal with the police for his and Pascal's release. Rumor had it that after he became the head of Baz Benin, Tiye had collected highly incriminating drug-related dirt on everyone, from the lowest street cop to Supreme Court judges. Whether it was true or not, it was said that he possessed a slew of records, from videos and audiotapes to copies of contracts and bank statements, which were being held by relatives of his in Miami. The day he was killed — or convicted of a crime — they were supposed to send the records to a certain reporter at the Miami Herald, who would publish everything.

Later that night, Jules cheered on the phone. "Manman and Papa will have to leave now," he said.

But Pascal wasn't sure where they would go. "Back to the countryside?" he wondered aloud to his brother. "To the hills? To you?"

These were all possibilities, Jules told him. “Urgent possibilities,” he added. “Home is not always a place you have trouble leaving.”

5 Pascal, now showered and clean, was lying in bed as his parents hovered, handing him water, juice, creams for his skin. It was nearly midnight. His mother had not cooked that evening, but her customers had still come for cigarettes and drinks and to offer their sympathies over Pascal’s arrest and their congratulations on his release.

When Pascal got off the phone, one of the girls from the kitchen came up to say that Monsieur Tiye was downstairs and wanted to see him.

“We’ll go first,” his father said, the tic returning in a milder version.

10 His parents filed out dutifully, their bodies tense with a new level of worry. What could Tiye want now? Did he want to be paid?

In the yard, Tiye and his lieutenants were already settled at a table, with drinks provided for them by the girls.

“No need to pay tonight,” the father said.

15 Tiye had a few extra guys with him for protection. They listened with rapt attention as he described what he’d been through. “I was afraid they were going to shoot me,” he was saying. “You know how they take some of the guys out to the woods in Titanyen and put them down. I was afraid that was going to happen to me.”

20 He said this casually, almost matter-of-factly, with a kind of amused air that indicated that, if this had happened, it would not have been a big deal. This was perhaps how Tiye and his guys faced the inevitable, Pascal thought. Crossing the yard on shaky legs, he realized that he shared this with them. This was perhaps what Tiye had tried to teach him by turning him in and then rescuing him. One day, they would all be shot. Like the night guard at Radio Zòrèy, like Tiye’s predecessor, Piye. Like
25 almost every young man who lived in the slums. One day, it might occur to someone, someone angry and powerful, someone obsessive and maniacal — a police chief or a gang leader, a leader of the opposition or a leader of the nation — that they, and all those who lived like them or near them, would be better off dead.

Pascal stopped at Tiye’s table and held out a hand to him.

30 “No hard feelings?” Tiye said, pounding his fist on his chest, near his heart, in greeting.

Pascal noticed, and not for the first time, that Tiye's gums were bright red, as though he had a perpetual infection or had been eating raw meat.

"Did they jack you up?" Tiye asked Pascal.

"Wasn't so bad," he said.

- 5 Tiye wasn't wearing his prosthetic arm, and the sleeve of his bright-yellow shirt sagged. With his good hand, he motioned for the guy who was sitting next to him to get up so that Pascal could sit down.

- Pascal looked again at the space where Tiye's missing arm would have been. He thought he saw something white, as though a polished piece of bone were protruding.
10 He tilted his head to see it better, while trying not to seem obvious. He almost checked his own body to see if anything was gone.

- In his dreams, Pascal had imagined beginning his radio program with a segment on lost limbs. Not just Tiye's but other people's as well. He would open with a discussion of how many people in Bel Air had lost limbs. Then he would go from limbs to souls,
15 to the number of people who had lost family — siblings, parents, children — and friends. These were the real ghosts, he would say, the phantom limbs, phantom minds, phantom loves that haunt us, because they were used, then abandoned, because they were desolate, because they were violent, because they were merciless, because they were out of choices, because they did not want to be driven away,
20 because they were poor.

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- It was his mother who brought the last beers to the table, and for the first time in his life he could see between her furrowed eyebrows a disdain for those she served. She avoided their eyes as she lifted the bottles from her metal tray and placed them
25 between the coconut-shell ashtrays on the hibiscus-patterned plastic tablecloth. Pascal waited for her to return to the kitchen before raising his drink toward Tiye and clinking the top of his bottle with his. Tiye's bottle struck his with force. Pascal saw a brief spark, and the top of his bottle broke apart, leaving a jagged gap in the glass. A shard landed on the table with a splash of beer; another fell to the hardened
30 clay floor at his feet.

Tiye flashed his bright-red gums and pointed his intact beer bottle in Pascal's direction. "You wanted to know what it's like for us," he said. "I just thought I'd give you a taste."

Tiye filled his mouth with beer and swished it around loudly, as if he were gargling with mouthwash.

“Don’t worry,” he added to Pascal, but also, it seemed, to himself. “As long as I’m here, nothing will happen to us tonight.”