despair, you told me weeks later when I said I didn't know how to write this essay. And in that I saw a miracle: your own journey, your own revolution, unraveling beside me and mine and also separate, a whole country and sea away. You chose hope, and the night is quiet and I write while you sleep—and this moment with all its weight and responsibility, this turning point in the world and our lives, is ours, and these words are for you.

—D

Message to My Daughters

EDWIDGE DANTICAT

Soon after the one-year anniversary of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by the Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, I was in Haiti, at the southernmost end of the country's border with the Dominican Republic, where hundreds of Haitian refugees had either been deported or driven out of the Dominican Republic by intimidation or threats. Many of these men and women had very little warning that they were going to be picked up or chased away and most of them had fled with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

It was a bright sunny day, but the air was thick with dust. As some friends and I walked through the makeshift resettlement camps on the Haitian side of the border, in a place called Pak Kado, it felt as though we, along with the residents of the camps, were floating through clouds. Around us were lean-tos made of cardboard boxes and sheets. Dust-covered children walked around looking dazed even while playing with pebbles that stood in for marbles, or while flying plastic bags as kites. Elderly people stood on the edge of food and clothes distribution lines, some too weak to wade into the crowd. Later the elderly, along with pregnant women and the disabled, would be given special

consideration by the priest and nuns who were giving out the only food available to the camp dwellers, but the food would always run out before they could get to everyone.

A few days after leaving Haiti and returning to the United States, I read a Michael Brown anniversary opinion piece in *The Washington Post* written by Raha Jorjani, an immigration attorney and law professor. In her essay, Jorjani argues that African Americans living in the United States could easily qualify as refugees. Citing many recent cases of police brutality and killings of unarmed black men, women, and children, she wrote:

> Suppose a client walked into my office and told me that police officers in his country had choked a man to death over a petty crime. Suppose he said police fatally shot another man in the back as he ran away. That they arrested a woman during a traffic stop and placed her in jail, where she died three days later. That a 12-year-old boy in his country was shot and killed by the police as he played in the park.
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> Suppose he told me that all of those victims were from the same ethnic community—a community whose members fear being harmed, tortured or killed by police or prison guards. And that this is true in cities and towns across his nation. At that point, as an immigration lawyer, I'd tell him he had a strong claim for asylum protection under U.S. law.

This is not the first time that the idea of African Americans as internal or external refugees has been floated or applied. The six-million-plus African Americans who

migrated from the rural south to urban centers in the northern United States for more than half a century during the Great Migration were often referred to as refugees, as were those people internally displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Having now visited many refugee and displacement camps, the label "refugee" at first seemed an extreme designation to assign to citizens of one of the richest countries in the world, especially if it is assigned on a singular basis to those who are black. Still, compared to the relative wealth of the rest of the society, a particularly run-down Brooklyn public housing project where a childhood friend used to live had all the earmarks of a refugee camp. It occupied one of the least desirable parts of town and provided only the most basic necessities. A nearby dilapidated school, where I attended junior high, could have easily been on the edge of that refugee settlement, where the primary daily task was to keep the children occupied, rather than engaged and learning. Aside from a few overly devoted teachers, we were often on our own. We, immigrant blacks and African Americans alike, were treated by those who housed us, and were in charge of schooling us, as though we were members of a group in transit. The message we always heard from those who were meant to protect us: that we should either die or go somewhere else. This is the experience of a refugee.

I have seen state abuses up close, both in Haiti, where I was born under a ruthless dictatorship, and in New York, where I migrated to a working-class and predominantly African, African American, and Caribbean neighborhood in Brooklyn at the age of twelve. In the Haiti of the 1970s

and early '80s, the violence was overtly political. Government detractors were dragged out of their homes, imprisoned, beaten, or killed. Sometimes their bodies were left out in the streets, in the hot sun, for extended periods, to intimidate neighbors.

In New York, the violence seemed a bit more subtle, though no less pervasive. When I started riding the city bus to high school, I observed that a muffled radio message from an annoyed bus driver—about someone talking too loud or not having the right fare—was all it took to make the police rush in, drag a young man off the bus, and beat him into submission on the sidewalk. There were no cell phone cameras back then to record such abuse, and most of us were too terrified to demand a badge number.

Besides, many of us had fled our countries as exiles, migrants, and refugees just to escape this kind of military or police aggression; we knew how deadly a confrontation with an armed and uniformed authoritarian figure could be. Still, every now and then a fellow traveler would summon his or her courage and, dodging the swaying baton, or screaming from a distance, would yell some variation of "Stop it! This is a child! A child!"

Of course, not all of the police's victims were children. Abner Louima, a family friend, was thirty years old when he was mistaken for someone who had punched a police officer outside a Brooklyn nightclub, on August 9, 1997, sixteen years to the day before Michael Brown was killed. Abner was arrested, beaten with fists, as well as with police radios, flashlights, and nightsticks, and then sexually assaulted with

the wooden handle of a toilet plunger or a broom inside a precinct bathroom. After Abner, there was Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant, who was hit by nineteen of the forty-one bullets aimed at him as he retrieved his wallet from his pocket. Then there was Patrick Dorismond, the U.S.-born child of Haitian immigrants, who died trying to convince undercover cops that he was not a drug dealer.

These are only a few among the cases from my era that made the news. There was also sixty-six-year-old Eleanor Bumpurs, who, thirteen years before Abner's assault, was killed by police with a twelve-gauge shotgun inside her own apartment. I have no doubt there were many others. We marched for all of them in the Louima/Diallo/Dorismond decade. We carried signs and chanted "No Justice! No Peace!" and "Whose Streets? Our Streets!" even while fearing the latter would never be true. The streets belonged to the people with the uniforms and the guns. The streets were never ours. Our sons and brothers, fathers and uncles, our mothers and sisters, daughters and nieces, our neighbors were, and still are, prey.

My father, a Brooklyn cab driver, used to half joke that police did not beat him up because, at sixty-five years old, he was too skinny and too old, and not worth the effort. Every now and then, when he was randomly stopped by a police officer and deigned to ask why, rather than a beating, he would be given a handful of unwarranted traffic citations that would wipe out a few weeks' hard-earned wages. Today, one might generously refer to such acts as microaggressions. That is, until they turn major and deadly, until

other unarmed black bodies, with nowhere to go for refuge, find themselves in the path of yet another police officer's or armed vigilante's gun.

When it was announced that Darren Wilson would not be indicted for the killing of Michael Brown, I kept thinking of Abner Louima, whose assault took place when Michael Brown was just eighteen months old. Abner and I have known each other for years. Both our families have attended the same Creole-speaking church for decades, so I called him to hear his thoughts about Michael Brown's killer going free. If anyone could understand all those broken hearts, all the rage, all the desperation, the yearning for justice, what it is to be a member of a seemingly marooned and persecuted group, I thought, he would.

Abner Louima, unlike Michael Brown, had survived. He went on with his life, moved from New York City to south Florida, started businesses. He has a daughter and two sons. One son was eighteen years old when we spoke, the same age Michael Brown was when he died.

How does he feel, I asked him, each time he hears that yet another black person was killed or nearly killed by police?

"It reminds me that our lives mean nothing," he replied.

We are in America because our lives meant nothing to those in power in the countries where we came from. Yet we come here to realize that our lives also mean nothing here. Some of us try to distance ourselves from this reality, thinking that because we are another type of "other"—immigrants, migrants, refugees—this is not our problem, nor one we can solve. But ultimately we realize the precarious nature of citizenship here: that we too are prey, and that those who have been in this country for generations—walking, living, loving in the same skin we're in—they too can suddenly become refugees.

Parents are often too nervous to broach difficult subjects with their children. Love. Sex. Death. Race. But some parents are forced to have these conversations early. Too early. A broken heart might lead to questions we'd rather not answer, as might an inappropriate gesture, the death of a loved one, or the murder of a stranger.

Each time a black person is killed in a manner that's clearly racially motivated, either by a police officer or a vigilante civilian, I ask myself if the time has come for me to talk to my daughters about Abner Louima and the long list of dead that have come since. My daughters have met Abner, but I have never told them about his past, even though his past is a future they might have to face.

Why don't I tell them? My decision is about more than avoiding a difficult conversation. The truth is, I do not want my daughters to grow up as I did, terrified of the country and the world they live in. But is it irresponsible of me to not alert them to the potentially life-altering, or even life-ending horrors they might face as young black women?

The night President Barack Obama was first elected (would he too qualify for refugee status?), my oldest daughter was three and I was in the last weeks of my pregnancy with my second. When President Obama was inaugurated for the first time, I was cradling both my little girls in my arms.

To think, I remember telling my husband, our daughters will never know a world in which the president of their country has not been black. Indeed, as we watched President Obama's inaugural speech, my oldest daughter was shocked that no woman had ever been president of the United States. That day, the world ahead for my girls seemed full of greater possibility—if not endless possibilities, then at least greater than those for generations past. Many more doors suddenly seemed open to my girls, and the "joyous daybreak" evoked by Martin Luther King, Jr., in his "I Have a Dream" speech, a kind of jubilee, seemed to have emerged. However, it quickly became clear that this one man was not going to take all of us with him into the postracial promised land. Or that he even had full access to it. Constant talk of "wanting him to fail" was racially tinged, as were the "birther" investigations, and the bigoted commentaries and jokes by both elected officials and ordinary folk. One of the most consistent attacks against the president, was that, like my husband and myself, he was born elsewhere and was not *really* American.

Like Barack Obama's father, many of us had brought our black bodies to America from somewhere else. Some of us, like the president, were the children of such people. We are people who need to have two different talks with our black offspring: one about why we're here and the other about why it's not always a promised land for people who look like us.

In his own version of "The Talk," James Baldwin wrote to his nephew James in "My Dungeon Shook," "You were

born in a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being."

That same letter could have been written to a long roster of dead young men and women, whose dungeons shook, but whose chains did not completely fall off. Among these very young people are Oscar Grant, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Rekia Boyd, Kimani Gray, Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, Michael Bell, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and counting. It's sad to imagine what these young people's letters from their loved ones may have said. Had their favorite uncle notified them that they could qualify for refugee status within their own country? Did their mother or father, grandmother or grandfather warn them to not walk in white neighborhoods, to, impossibly, avoid police officers, to never play in a public park, to stay away from neighborhood watchmen, to never go to a neighbor's house, even if to seek help from danger?

I am still, in my own mind, drafting a "My Dungeon Shook" letter to my daughters. It often begins like this. *Dear Mira and Leila, I've put off writing this letter to you for as long as I can, but I don't think I can put it off any longer. Please know that there will be times when some people might be hostile or even violent to you for reasons that have nothing to do with your beauty, your humor, or your grace, but only your race and the color of your skin. Please don't let this restrict your freedom, break your spirit, or kill your joy. And if possible do everything you can to change the world so that your generation of brown and black men, women, and*

children will be the last who experience all this. And please do live your best lives and achieve your full potential. Love deeply. Be joyful. In Jubilee, Mom.

To my draft of this letter, I often add snippets of Baldwin.

"I tell you this because I love you and please don't you ever forget it," Baldwin reminded his James. "Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is no limit to where you can go."

"The world is before you," I want to tell my daughters, "and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in."

I want to look happily forward. I want to be optimistic. I want to have a dream. I want to live in jubilee. I want my daughters to feel that they have the power to at least try to change things, even in a world that resists change with more strength than they have. I want to tell them they can overcome everything, if they are courageous, resilient, and brave. Paradoxically, I also want to tell them their crowns have already been bought and paid for and that all they have to do is put them on their heads. But the world keeps tripping me up. My certainty keeps flailing.

So I took them to the border, the one between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where hundreds of refugees were living, or rather existing. There they saw and helped comfort men, women, and children who look like them, but are stateless, babies with not even a bedsheet between them and a dirt floor, young people who may not be killed by bullets but by the much slower assault of disease.

"These are all our causes," I tried to both tell and show

them, brown and black bodies living with "certain uncertainty," to use Frantz Fanon's words, black bodies fleeing oppression, persecution, and poverty, wherever they are.

"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read," James Baldwin wrote. Or you see. Or you weep. Or you pray. Or you speak. Or you write. Or you fight so that one day everyone will be able to walk the earth as though they, to use Baldwin's words, have "a right to be here." May that day come, Mira and Leila, when you can finally claim those crowns of yours and put them on your heads. When that day of jubilee finally arrives, all of us will be there with you, walking, heads held high, crowns a-glitter, because we do have a right to be here.