What if you woke up one morning and found your e
by Edwidge Danticat

The Story So Far  It is February 1986, the dying moments of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s regime in Haiti. The streets are exploding; there are widespread riots; and 12-year-old Michel is hiding from mobs of people seeking vengeance toward those connected with Duvalier’s reign of terror. While he and his mother wait for the crowds to pass, Michel recalls times with his best friend, Romain, whose father is one of the doomed men the angry Haitians seek.

Mother and I cowered beneath her cot after a small rock pierced the sheet of plastic she’d draped over our bedroom window the week before as extra protection against the alley mosquitoes. She was winded from all the excitement outside, forcing air out of her lungs while trying to contain a sudden bout of hiccups. Keeping her eyes closed, she felt for the rosary around her neck and between hiccups and deep breaths whispered, “Jesus, Mary, Saint Joseph, please watch over Michel and me.”

The sound of a large crowd stomping through the alley between Monsieur Christophe’s water station and our house seemed to be what was making the cot rattle, rather than Mother’s and my shaking bodies. Above the echoes of drums, horns, bamboo flutes, and conch shells, we heard voices shouting, “Come out, macoutes! Come out, macoutes!” daring members of the Volunteers for National Security militia to appear from wherever they were hiding.

Overnight our country had completely changed. We had fallen asleep under a dictatorship headed by a pudgy thirty-four-year-old man and his glamorous wife. During the night they’d sneaked away—I had to see the television images myself before I could believe it—the wife ornately made up, her long brown hair hidden under a white turban, her carefully manicured fingers holding a long...
cigarette, the husband at the wheel of the family’s BMW, driving his wife and himself to the tarmac of an airport named after his dead father, from whom he’d inherited the country at nineteen, to an American airplane that would carry them to permanent exile in France. The presidential couple’s reign had ended, his having lasted fifteen years and hers the span of their six-year marriage. Their departure, however, orphaned a large number of loyal militiamen, who had guarded the couple’s command with all types of vicious acts. Now the population was going after those militiamen, those macoutes, with the determination of an army in the middle of its biggest battle to date.

My cousin Vaval, who’d left the house at dawn to catch a camion to the provinces but then had postponed his trip to come back and brief us on what was going on, told us how on his way to the bus depot he had seen a group of people tie one of these militiamen to a lamppost, pour gasoline down his throat, and set him on fire.

The flock making its way through the alley behind our house was probably on a similar quest for vengeance, most likely looking for a man called Regulus, who lived nearby. Regulus’s eighteen-year-old son, Romain, was my hero and the person whom at that time I considered my best friend.

It didn’t take long for the crowd to move past our house. I had to remind myself that these men and women, old and young, meant no harm to people like us, people like Mother, Vaval, and me. Vaval was so certain of this that he was standing out in front of the house watching the crowd, as though it was an ordinary parade going by. Mother, however, whose creed in life was something like “It’s harder for trouble to find you under your bed” (yes, I know there are many ways she could have been proven wrong), had thought that it would be best for us to hide. The rock coming through the window reinforced her case. I couldn’t help but be frightened. I was twelve years old, and, according to my mother, three months before my birth I had lost my father to something my mother would only vaguely describe as “political,” making me part of a generation of mostly fatherless boys, though some of our fathers were still living, even if somewhere else—in the provinces, in another country, or across the alley not acknowledging us. A great many of our fathers had also died in the dictatorship’s prisons, and others had aban-
Doned us altogether to serve the regime.

My mother’s hiccups subsided. Judging that the crowd had moved a safe enough distance from our house, she raised a corner of her skirt and used it to wipe the sweat from her forehead, crossed herself several times, then crawled out from under the cot. She waited for me to come out, then sat on the cot’s edge and dusted a film of white grime from her knees.

“I knew that girl was not sweeping all the way under the beds,” my mother said, quickly reverting to her normal griping self, perhaps to erase the image in my mind of her cowering with fear under the cot. The “girl” she was referring to was Rosie, a distant cousin my mother had summoned from the provinces to do such things as cook and wash and sweep under beds, when she’d promised Rosie’s poor peasant parents that she’d be sending her to school. In fact, the only education Rosie was getting was from talking to the people who came to buy colas at a busy intersection where my mother stationed her when Rosie wasn’t inside the house cooking, washing, and not sweeping under the beds. Being madly in love with Rosie—Rosie’s bloodline was separate enough from mine that I could have married her had I been older—I didn’t blame her at all for the dust balls under the cot, but I knew better than to defend her to my mother, who would have turned her anger at Rosie on me.

All the commotion with the departure of our despised leader and his wife and the crowd passing through the neighborhood had made me hungry. But what I wanted most to do was head over to Romain’s house and make sure he was okay. Like us, Romain and his mother had nothing to fear from our angry neighbors. It was Romain’s father, Regulus, they wanted.

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Unlike many of the older boys, Romain didn’t have many friends and didn’t seem to resent having to play with a runt like me. In fact, he even appeared to like it and came around to my house most Sunday afternoons to ask my mother if he could take me to a kung fu movie or for a bike ride on Champs de Mars plaza.

Our mothers had a falling-out one day—neither Romain nor I was ever able to find out from either of them what it was about—and I stopped visiting Romain’s house with my mother and he stopped coming around to ask my mother’s permission to take me places. Our outings became less frequent, but every once in a while we’d plot to meet somewhere and then proceed to a karate flick, especially if it was a new Bruce Lee.

Romain knew what it was like to be an only child. And maybe this is why he always watched out for me, stepped in if I was in a scuffle with some other kid from the neighborhood, slipped me some of his mother’s money now and then for candy and ice cream.

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cream, and invited me over to his house whenever his mother was away. His maid, Auberte, would prepare whatever I wanted to eat, whether it was good for me or not. While we ate Auberte’s delicious fried sweets, I would listen to Romain talk and talk, mostly quoting lines from books I’d never read and writers I’d never heard of. Even though I rarely understood everything he said, I was grateful that he was speaking to me, like a peer, like a man.

Looking back now, I realize how much I needed someone like Romain in my life. He must have felt this too. Come to think of it, aside from Rosie and Vaval, who were always too busy with my mother’s chores to spend much time with me, Romain was my only friend.

SKILL DRILL

CIRCLE THE BEST ANSWER FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING:

1. Haiti shares an island with _______.
   (A) Puerto Rico
   (B) Cuba
   (C) the Dominican Republic
   (D) Belize

2. Michel recalls the last days of _______’s regime.
   (A) François Duvalier
   (B) Jean-Bertrand Aristide
   (C) Maurice Chevalier
   (D) Jean-Claude Duvalier

3. Crowds of Haitians turned against the _______, or government henchmen.
   (A) mau-maus
   (B) macoutes
   (C) marauders
   (D) marmadukes

4. Haiti’s dictator had ended his ______-year reign and fled to France.
   (A) 10
   (B) 30
   (C) 15
   (D) 6

5. Michel and his mother hid _______ while angry citizens took to the streets.
   (A) in the attic
   (B) under a stalled truck
   (C) under a cot
   (D) in a steamer trunk

6. When Michel was about 8, he met _______, who became his best friend.
   (A) Vaval
   (B) Jean-Claude
   (C) Romain
   (D) Regulus

7. Michel’s mother complains that Rosie has not _______.
   (A) sold enough colas
   (B) agreed to attend school
   (C) swept under the bed
   (D) prepared dinner on time

8. Romain likes to tell Michel about _______.
   (A) his new BMW
   (B) the books he has read
   (C) exploits of the militiamen
   (D) the daily soccer scores

Your Turn! Write an account of an experience you have had that was like Michel’s, in that it was both exhilarating and frightening.