



The Book of the Dead

Short Story by Edwidge Danticat

An artist considers how much the stories we tell about our lives matter.

NOTICE & NOTE



As you read, use the side margins to make notes about the text.

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- 1 **M**y father is gone. I am slouched in a cast-aluminum chair across from two men, one the manager of the hotel where we're staying and the other a policeman. They are waiting for me to explain what has become of him, my father.
- 2 The manager—"Mr. Flavio Salinas," the plaque on his office door reads—has the most striking pair of chartreuse¹ eyes I have ever seen on a man with an island-Spanish lilt to his voice.
- 3 The officer is a baby-faced, short white Floridian with a pot belly.
- 4 "Where are you and your daddy from, Ms. Bienaimé?" he asks.
- 5 I answer "Haiti," even though I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never visited my parents' birthplace. I do this because it is one more thing I have longed to have in common with my parents.
- 6 The officer plows forward. "You down here in Lakeland from Haiti?"
- 7 "We live in New York. We were on our way to Tampa."

¹ **chartreuse:** pale yellowish green.

8 I find Manager Salinas’s office gaudy. The walls are covered with orange-and-green wallpaper, briefly interrupted by a giant gold-leaf-bordered print of a Victorian cottage that somehow resembles the building we’re in. Patting his light-green tie, he whispers reassuringly, “Officer Bo and I will do the best we can to help you find your father.”

9 We start out with a brief description: “Sixty-four, five feet eight inches, two hundred and twenty pounds, moon-faced, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair. Velvet-brown eyes—”

10 “Velvet-brown?” says Officer Bo.

11 “Deep brown—same color as his complexion.”

12 My father has had partial frontal dentures for ten years, since he fell off his and my mother’s bed when his prison nightmares began. I mention that, too. Just the dentures, not the nightmares. I also bring up the claw-shaped marks that run from his left ear down along his cheek to the corner of his mouth—the only visible reminder of the year he spent at Fort Dimanche, the Port-au-Prince prison **ironically** named after the Lord’s Day.

13 “Does your daddy have any kind of mental illness, senility?” asks Officer Bo.

14 “No.”

15 “Do you have any pictures of your daddy?”

16 I feel like less of a daughter because I’m not carrying a photograph in my wallet. I had hoped to take some pictures of him on our trip. At one of the rest stops I bought a disposable camera and pointed it at my father. No, no, he had protested, covering his face with both hands like a little boy protecting his cheeks from a slap. He did not want any more pictures taken of him the rest of his life. He was feeling too ugly.

17 “That’s too bad,” says Officer Bo. “Does he speak English, your daddy? He can ask for directions, et cetera?”

18 “Yes.”

19 “Is there anything that might make your father run away from you—particularly here in Lakeland?” Manager Salinas interjects. “Did you two have a fight?”

20 I had never tried to tell my father’s story in words before now, but my first sculpture of him was the reason for our trip: a two-foot-high mahogany figure of my father, naked, crouching on the floor, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his short stubby fingers and the wide palms of his hands. It was hardly revolutionary, minimalist at best, but it was my favorite of all my attempted representations of him. It was the way I had imagined him in prison.

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21 The last time I had seen my father? The previous night, before falling asleep. When we pulled into the pebbled driveway, densely lined with palm and banana trees, it was almost midnight. All the restaurants in the area were closed. There was nothing to do but shower and go to bed.

ironically

(ī-rŏn' īk-ə-lē) *adv.* in a way that shows a contrast between what is expected and what occurs.

ANALYZE DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

Annotate: Mark descriptions of the sculpture in paragraph 20.

Analyze: What seems important in this symbolic representation of the father? How does Annie think about her father?

22 “It is like a paradise here,” my father said when he saw the room. It had the same orange-and-green wallpaper as Salinas’s office, and the plush green carpet matched the walls. “Look, Annie,” he said, “it is like grass under our feet.” He was always searching for a glimpse of paradise, my father.

23 He picked the bed closest to the bathroom, removed the top of his gray jogging suit, and unpacked his toiletries. Soon after, I heard him humming, as he always did, in the shower.

24 After he got into bed, I took a bath, pulled my hair back in a ponytail, and checked on the sculpture—just felt it a little bit through the bubble padding and carton wrapping to make sure it wasn’t broken. Then I slipped under the covers, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep.

25 I pictured the client to whom I was delivering the sculpture: Gabrielle Fonteneau, a young woman about my age, an actress on a nationally syndicated² television series. My friend Jonas, the principal at the East Flatbush elementary school where I teach drawing to fifth-graders, had shown her a picture of my “Father” sculpture, and, the way Jonas told it, Gabrielle Fonteneau had fallen in love with it and wished to offer it as a gift to her father on his birthday.

26 Since this was my first big sale, I wanted to make sure that the piece got there safely. Besides, I needed a weekend away, and both my mother and I figured that my father, who watched a lot of television, both in his barbershop and at home, would enjoy meeting Gabrielle, too. But when I woke up the next morning, my father was gone.

27 I showered, put on my driving jeans and a T-shirt, and waited. I watched a half hour of mid-morning local news, smoked three mentholated cigarettes even though we were in a nonsmoking room, and waited some more. By noon, four hours had gone by. And it was only then that I noticed that the car was still there but the sculpture was gone.

28 I decided to start looking for my father: in the east garden, the west garden, the dining room, the exercise room, and in the few guest rooms cracked open while the maid changed the sheets; in the little convenience store at the Amoco gas station nearby; even in the Salvation Army thrift shop that from a distance seemed to blend into the interstate. All that waiting and looking actually took six hours, and I felt guilty for having held back so long before going to the front desk to ask, “Have you seen my father?”



29 I feel Officer Bo’s fingers gently stroking my wrist. Up close he smells like fried eggs and gasoline, like breakfast at the Amoco. “I’ll put the word out with the other boys,” he says. “Salinas here will be in his office. Why don’t you go back to your room in case he shows up there?”

² **syndicated:** carried by individual television stations rather than broadcast on a network.

30 I return to the room and lie in the unmade bed, jumping up when I hear the click from the electronic key in the door. It's only the housekeeper. I turn down the late-afternoon cleaning and call my mother at the beauty salon where she perms, presses, and braids hair, next door to my father's barbershop. But she isn't there. So I call my parents' house and leave the hotel number on their machine. "Please call me as soon as you can, Manman. It's about Papi."

31 Once, when I was twelve, I overheard my mother telling a young woman who was about to get married how she and my father had first met on the sidewalk in front of Fort Dimanche the evening that my father was released from jail. (At a dance, my father had fought with a soldier out of uniform who had him arrested and thrown in prison for a year.) That night, my mother was returning home from a sewing class when he stumbled out of the prison gates and collapsed into her arms, his face still bleeding from his last beating. They married and left for New York a year later. "We were like two seeds planted in a rock," my mother had told the young woman, "but somehow when our daughter, Annie, came, we took root."



32 My mother soon calls me back, her voice staccato³ with worry.

33 "Where is Papi?"

34 "I lost him."

35 "How you lost him?"

36 "He got up before I did and disappeared."

37 "How long he been gone?"

38 "Eight hours," I say, almost not believing myself that it's been that long.

39 My mother is clicking her tongue and humming. I can see her sitting at the kitchen table, her eyes closed, her fingers sliding up and down her flesh-colored stockings legs.

40 "You call police?"

41 "Yes."

42 "What they say?"

43 "To wait, that he'll come back."

44 My mother is thumping her fingers against the phone's mouthpiece, which is giving me a slight ache in my right ear.

45 "Tell me where you are," she says. "Two more hours and he's not there, call me, I come."

46 I dial Gabrielle Fonteneau's cellular-phone number. When she answers, her voice sounds just as it does on television, but more silken and seductive without the sitcom laugh track.

47 "To think," my father once said while watching her show, "Haitian-born actresses on American television."

48 "And one of them wants to buy my stuff," I'd added.

³ **staccato:** characterized by sharp, distinct sounds.



49 When she speaks, Gabrielle Fonteneau sounds as if she’s in a place with cicadas, waterfalls, palm trees, and citronella candles to keep the mosquitoes away. I realize that I, too, am in such a place, but I can’t appreciate it.

50 “So nice of you to come all this way to deliver the sculpture,” she says. “Jonas tell you why I like it so much? My papa was a journalist in Port-au-Prince. In 1975, he wrote a story criticizing the dictatorship, and he was arrested and put in jail.”

51 “Fort Dimanche?”

52 “No, another one,” she says. “Caserne. Papa kept track of days there by scraping lines with his fingernails on the walls of his cell. One of the guards didn’t like this, so he pulled out all his fingernails with pliers.”

53 I think of the photo spread I saw in the *Haitian Times* of Gabrielle Fonteneau and her parents in their living room in Tampa. Her father was described as a lawyer, his daughter’s manager; her mother a court stenographer. There was no hint in that photograph of what had once happened to the father. Perhaps people don’t see anything in my father’s face, either, in spite of his scars.

54 “We celebrate his birthday on the day he was released from prison,” she says. “It’s the hands I love so much in your sculpture. They’re so strong.”

55 I am drifting away from Gabrielle Fonteneau when I hear her say, “So when will you get here? You have instructions from Jonas, right? Maybe we can make you lunch. My mother makes great *lanbi*.”⁴

56 “I’ll be there at twelve tomorrow,” I say. “My father is with me. We are making a little weekend vacation of this.”

• • •

⁴ **lanbi:** Creole for “conch,” a type of shellfish.



NOTICE & NOTE MEMORY MOMENT

When you notice the narrator has interrupted the forward progress of a story by bringing up something from the past, you've found a **Memory Moment** signpost.

Notice & Note: Mark the details that seem most meaningful to the narrator in paragraphs 57–60.

Infer: Why might this memory be important?

mesmerize

(məz'mə-rīz) v. to completely capture the attention of; to hypnotize.

VOCABULARY

Oxymoron: Mark the phrase in paragraph 68 that pairs two words that seem like opposites.

Infer: What does this phrase tell you about the relationship between Annie's parents?

eradicate

(ĭ-rād ĭ-kāt) v. to uproot or eliminate.

57 My father loves museums. When he isn't working in his barbershop, he's often at the Brooklyn Museum. The ancient Egyptian rooms are his favorites.

58 "The Egyptians, they was like us," he likes to say. The Egyptians worshiped their gods in many forms and were often ruled by foreigners. The pharaohs were like the dictators he had fled. But what he admires most about the Egyptians is the way they mourned.

59 "Yes, they grieve," he'll say. He marvels at the mummification that went on for weeks, resulting in bodies that survived thousands of years.

60 My whole adult life, I have struggled to find the proper manner of sculpting my father, a man who learned about art by standing with me most of the Saturday mornings of my childhood, **mesmerized** by the golden masks, the shawabtis,⁵ and Osiris, ruler of the underworld.



61 When my father finally appears in the hotel-room doorway, I am awed by him. Smiling, he looks like a much younger man, further bronzed after a long day at the beach.

62 "Annie, let your father talk to you." He walks over to my bed, bends down to unlace his sneakers. "*On ti koze*, a little chat."

63 "Where were you? Where is the sculpture, Papi?" I feel my eyes twitching, a nervous reaction I inherited from my mother.

64 "That's why we need to chat," he says. "I have objections with your statue."

65 He pulls off his sneakers and rubs his feet with both hands.

66 "I don't want you to sell that statue," he says. Then he picks up the phone and calls my mother.

67 "I know she called you," he says to her in Creole. "Her head is so hot. She panics so easily. I was just out walking, thinking."

68 I hear my mother lovingly scolding him and telling him not to leave me again. When he hangs up the phone, he picks up his sneakers and puts them back on.

69 "Where is the sculpture?" My eyes are twitching so hard now that I can barely see.

70 "Let us go," he says. "I will take you to it."

71 As my father maneuvers the car out of the parking lot, I tell myself he might be ill, mentally ill, even though I have never detected anything wrong beyond his prison nightmares. I am trying to piece it together, this sudden yet familiar picture of a parent's vulnerability. When I was ten years old and my father had the chicken pox, I overheard him say to a friend on the phone, "The doctor tells me that at my age chicken pox can kill a man." This was the first time I realized that my father could die. I looked up the word "kill" in every dictionary and encyclopedia at school, trying to comprehend what it meant, that my father could be **eradicated** from my life.

⁵ **shawabtis:** figures buried with ancient Egyptian mummies meant to represent servants for the afterlife.

Don't forget to
Notice & Note as you
read the text.



72 My father stops the car on the side of the highway near a man-made lake, one of those artificial creations of the modern tropical city, with curved stone benches surrounding stagnant water. There is little light to see by except a half-moon. He heads toward one of the benches, and I sit down next to him, letting my hands dangle between my legs.

73 “Is this where the sculpture is?” I ask.

74 “In the water.”

75 “O.K.,” I say. “But please know this about yourself. You are an especially harsh critic.”

76 My father tries to smother a smile.

77 “Why?” I ask.

78 He scratches his chin. Anger is a wasted emotion, I've always thought. My parents got angry at unfair politics in New York or Port-au-Prince, but they never got angry at my grades—at all the B's I got in everything but art classes—or at my not eating vegetables or occasionally vomiting my daily spoonful of cod-liver oil. Ordinary anger, I thought, was a weakness. But now I am angry. I want to hit my father, beat the craziness out of his head.

79 “Annie,” he says. “When I first saw your statue, I wanted to be buried with it, to take it with me into the other world.”

80 “Like the ancient Egyptians,” I say.

81 He smiles, grateful, I think, that I still recall his passions.

82 “Annie,” he asks, “do you remember when I read to you from ‘The Book of the Dead?’”

83 “Are you dying?” I say to my father. “Because I can only forgive you for this if you are. You can’t take this back.”

84 He is silent for a moment too long.

85 I think I hear crickets, though I cannot imagine where they might be. There is the highway, the cars racing by, the half-moon, the lake dug up from the depths of the ground, the allée of royal palms beyond. And there is me and my father.

86 “You remember the judgment of the dead,” my father says, “when the heart of a person is put on a scale. If it is heavy, then this person cannot enter the other world.”

87 It is a testament to my upbringing that I am not yelling at him.

88 “I don’t deserve a statue,” he says, even while looking like one: the Madonna of Humility, for example, **contemplating** her losses in the dust.

89 “Annie, your father was the hunter,” he says. “He was not the prey.”

90 “What are you saying?” I ask.

91 “We have a proverb,” he says. “‘One day for the hunter, one day for the prey.’ Your father was the hunter. He was not the prey.” Each word is hard won as it leaves my father’s mouth, balanced like those hearts on the Egyptian scale.

92 “Annie, when I saw your mother the first time, I was not just out of prison. I was a guard in the prison. One of the prisoners I was questioning had scratched me with a piece of tin. I went out to the street in a rage, blood all over my face. I was about to go back and do something bad, very bad. But instead comes your mother. I smash into her, and she asks me what I am doing there. I told her I was just let go from prison and she held my face and cried in my hair.”

93 “And the nightmares, what are they?”

94 “Of what I, your father, did to others.”

95 “Does Manman know?”

96 “I told her, Annie, before we married.”

97 I am the one who drives back to the hotel. In the car, he says, “Annie, I am still your father, still your mother’s husband. I would not do these things now.”

98 When we get back to the hotel room, I leave a message for Officer Bo, and another for Manager Salinas, telling them that I have found my father. He has slipped into the bathroom, and now he runs the shower at full force. When it seems that he is never coming out, I call my mother at home in Brooklyn.

contemplate

(kŏn ʼtĕm-plāt) v. to consider something carefully and at length.

UNDERSTAND CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Annotate: Mark details in paragraphs 89–96 that concern a key historical event.

Analyze: Why is the father’s role in this historical event significant?

99 “How do you love him?” I whisper into the phone.
100 My mother is tapping her fingers against the mouthpiece.
101 “I don’t know, Annie,” she whispers back, as though there is a chance that she might also be overheard by him. “I feel only that you and me, we saved him. When I met him, it made him stop hurting the people. This is how I see it. He was a seed thrown into a rock, and you and me, Annie, we helped push a flower out of the rock.”

• • •

102 When I get up the next morning, my father is already dressed. He is sitting on the edge of his bed with his back to me, his head bowed, his face buried in his hands. If I were sculpting him I would make him a praying mantis, crouching motionless, seeming to pray while waiting to strike.

103 With his back still turned, my father says, “Will you call those people and tell them you have it no more, the statue?”

104 “We were invited to lunch there. I believe we should go.”

105 He raises his shoulders and shrugs. It is up to me.

• • •

106 The drive to Gabrielle Fonteneau’s house seems longer than the twenty-four hours it took to drive from New York: the ocean, the palms along the road, the highway so imposingly new. My father fills in the silence in the car by saying, “So now you know, Annie, why your mother and me, we have never returned home.”

107 The Fonteneaus’ house is made of bricks of white coral, on a cul-de-sac with a row of banyans⁶ separating the two sides of the street.

108 Silently, we get out of the car and follow a concrete path to the front door. Before we can knock, an older woman walks out. Like Gabrielle, she has stunning midnight-black eyes and skin the color of sorrel,⁷ with spiraling curls brushing the sides of her face. When Gabrielle’s father joins her, I realize where Gabrielle Fonteneau gets her height. He is more than six feet tall.

109 Mr. Fonteneau extends his hands, first to my father and then to me. They’re large, twice the size of my father’s. The fingernails have grown back, thick, densely dark, as though the past had nestled itself there in black ink.

110 We move slowly through the living room, which has a cathedral ceiling and walls covered with Haitian paintings—Obin, Hyppolite, Tiga, Duval-Carrié. Out on the back terrace, which towers over a nursery of orchids and red dracaenas, a table is set for lunch.

111 Mr. Fonteneau asks my father where his family is from in Haiti, and my father lies. In the past, I thought he always said a different province because he had lived in all those places, but I realize now that he says this to keep anyone from tracing him, even though twenty-six years and eighty more pounds shield him from the threat of immediate recognition.

ANALYZE DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

Annotate: Mark the figurative language used to describe the father in paragraph 101.

Infer: What message about the importance of family does this figurative language develop?

UNDERSTAND CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Annotate: Mark details in paragraph 110 that reflect Haitian culture.

Analyze: What does the prominence of these cultural details represent for the Fonteneaus? What might it represent for Annie’s father?

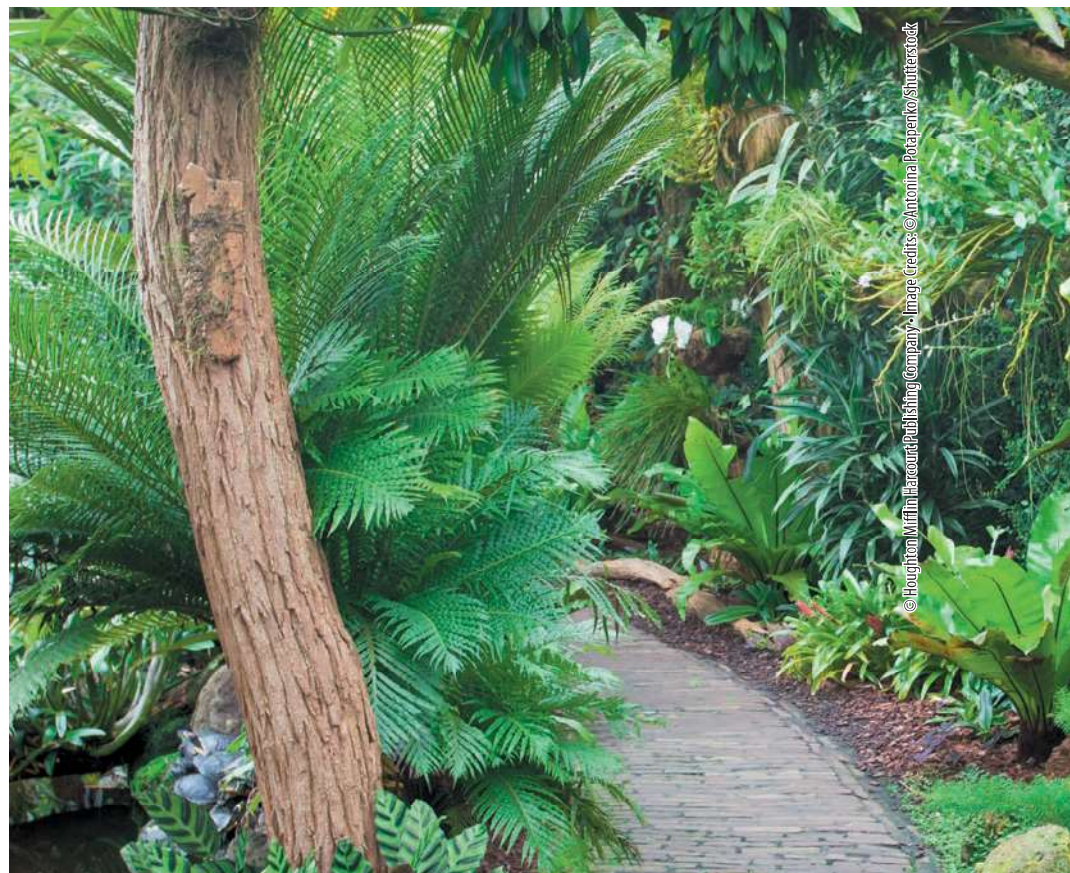
⁶ **banyans:** tropical fig trees.

⁷ **sorrel:** light reddish brown.

spontaneously

(spŏn-tā' nē-əs-lē) *adv.*
impulsively; in an unplanned way.

- 112 When Gabrielle Fonteneau makes her entrance, in an off-the-shoulder ruby dress, my father and I stand up.
- 113 “Gabrielle,” she says, when she shakes hands with my father, who blurts out **spontaneously**, “You are one of the flowers of Haiti.”
- 114 Gabrielle Fonteneau tilts her head coyly.
- 115 “We eat now,” Mrs. Fonteneau announces, leading me and my father to a bathroom to wash up before the meal. Standing before a pink seashell-shaped sink, my father and I dip our hands under the faucet flow.
- 116 “Annie,” my father says, “we always thought, your mother and me, that children could raise their parents higher. Look at what this girl has done for her parents.”
- 117 During the meal of conch, plantains, and mushroom rice, Mr. Fonteneau tries to draw my father into conversation. He asks when my father was last in Haiti.
- 118 “Twenty-six years,” my father replies.
- 119 “No going back for you?” asks Mrs. Fonteneau.
- 120 “I have not had the opportunity,” my father says.
- 121 “We go back every year to a beautiful place overlooking the ocean in the mountains in Jacmel,” says Mrs. Fonteneau.
- 122 “Have you ever been to Jacmel?” Gabrielle Fonteneau asks me.
- 123 I shake my head no.
- 124 “We are fortunate,” Mrs. Fonteneau says, “that we have another place to go where we can say our rain is sweeter, our dust is lighter, our beach is prettier.”
- 125 “So now we are tasting rain and weighing dust,” Mr. Fonteneau says, and laughs.



126 “There is nothing like drinking the sweet juice from a green coconut you fetched yourself from your own tree, or sinking your hand in sand from the beach in your own country,” Mrs. Fonteneau says.

127 “When did you ever climb a coconut tree?” Mr. Fonteneau says, teasing his wife.

128 I am imagining what my father’s nightmares might be. Maybe he dreams of dipping his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and finds that what he comes up with is a fist full of blood.



129 After lunch, my father asks if he can have a closer look at the Fonteneaus’ backyard garden. While he’s taking the tour, I confess to Gabrielle Fonteneau that I don’t have the sculpture.

130 “My father threw it away,” I say.

131 Gabrielle Fonteneau frowns.

132 “I don’t know,” she says. “Was there even a sculpture at all? I trust Jonas, but maybe you fooled him, too. Is this some scam, to get into our home?”

133 “There was a sculpture,” I say. “Jonas will tell you that. My father just didn’t like it, so he threw it away.”

134 She raises her perfectly arched eyebrows, perhaps out of concern for my father’s sanity or my own.

135 “I’m really disappointed,” she says. “I wanted it for a reason. My father goes home when he looks at a piece of art. He goes home deep inside himself. For a long time, he used to hide his fingers from people. It’s like he was making a fist all the time. I wanted to give him this thing so that he knows we understand what happened to him.”

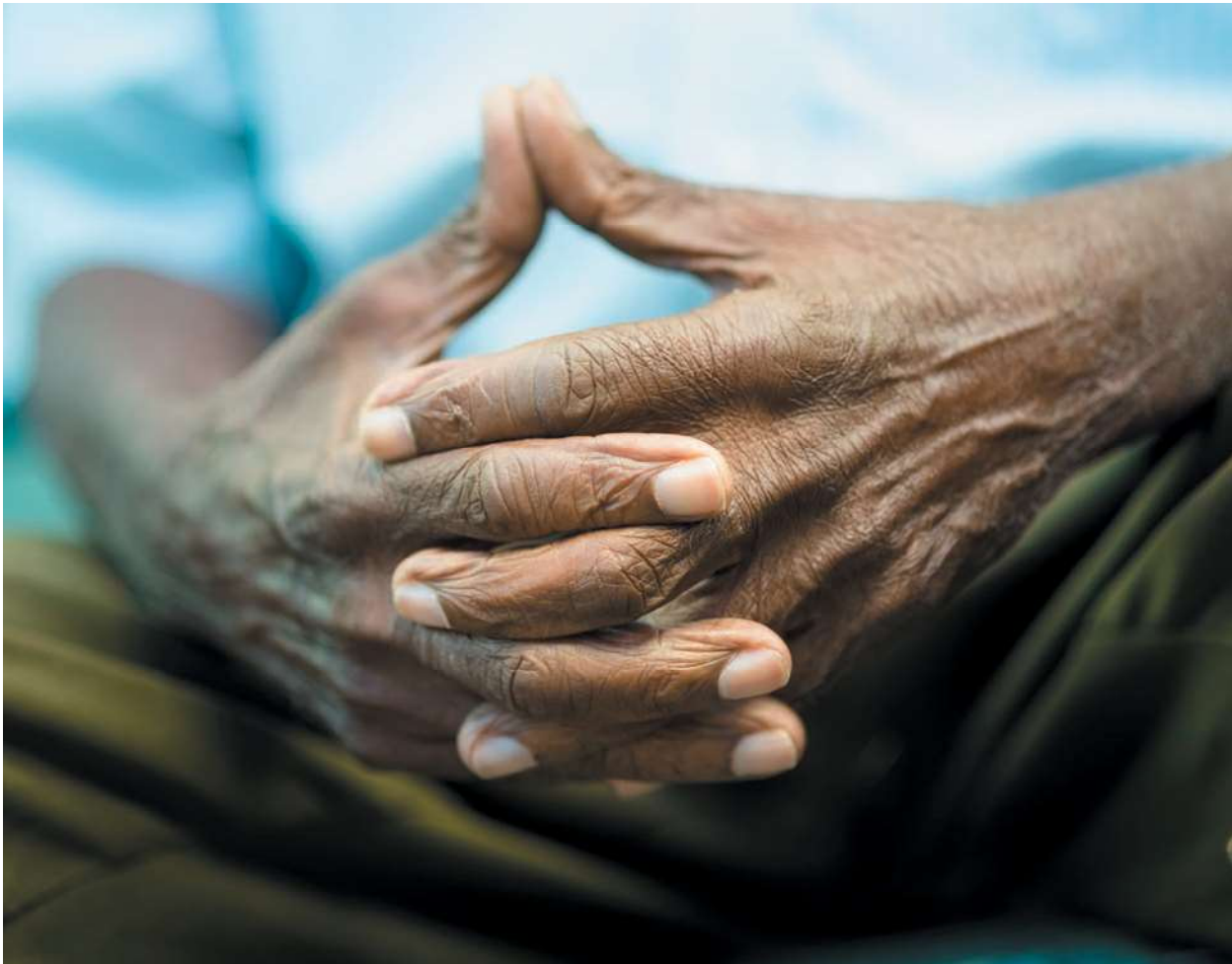


- 136 “I am truly sorry,” I say.
- 137 Over her shoulders, I see her parents guiding my father through rows of lemongrass. I want to promise her that I will make her another sculpture, one especially modeled on her father. But I don’t know when I will be able to work on anything again. I have lost my subject, the father I loved as well as pitied.
- 138 In the garden, I watch my father snap a white orchid from its stem and hold it out toward Mrs. Fonteneau, who accepts it with a nod of thanks.
- 139 “I don’t understand,” Gabrielle Fonteneau says. “You did all this for nothing.”
- 140 I wave to my father to signal that we should perhaps leave now, and he comes toward me, the Fonteneaus trailing slowly behind him.
- 141 With each step he rubs the scars on the side of his face.
- 142 Perhaps the last person my father harmed had dreamed this moment into my father’s future—his daughter seeing those marks, like chunks of warm plaster still clinging to a cast, and questioning him about them, giving him a chance to either lie or tell the truth. After all, we have the proverb, as my father would say: “Those who give the blows may try to forget, but those who carry the scars must remember.”

ANALYZE DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

Annotate: Mark the proverb quoted in paragraph 142.

Analyze: What theme does this proverb express?



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