Breath, Eyes, Memory

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDWIDGE DANTICAT

Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Edwidge Danticat was raised for several years by her aunt and uncle while her parents, André and Rose, immigrated to New York to begin laying the foundation for a new life for their family. At 12, Danticat moved to Brooklyn (much like Sophie in *Breath Eyes Memory*), where she coped with the teasing and bullying she faced at school by writing the story of her journey to New York—and her childhood in Haiti—for publications that featured writing by teens. Danticat graduated from Clara Barton High School in Crown Heights, then attended Barnard College where she studied French Literature. She attended the prestigious and experimental Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at Brown University. Upon graduating in 1993, she reworked her master's thesis into her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Published to both acclaim and controversy, the book became an Oprah's Book Club selection in 1998, catapulting Danticat to fame in the literary community. Danticat has taught creative writing at NYU and the University of Miami, published work in outlets such as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*, received nominations for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and been awarded a MacArthur "Genius Grant." The author of upwards of 15 works of fiction, memoir, and children's literature, Danticat's latest book, published in 2019, is called *Everything Inside*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Set in the 1980s and early 1990s, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* makes reference to many sociopolitical events and struggles both in Haiti and within the Haitian diaspora in Brooklyn. In Haiti, Sophie, her family, and their neighbors live in fear of the *Tonton Macoutes*—a paramilitary force formally known as the VSN, or Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale. Their nickname references a mythological bogeyman in Haitian culture, Uncle Gunnysack (or Uncle Bogeyman), who captures naughty children in a sack. The VSN, referred to as the *Macoutes* throughout the novel, were authorized by the Duvalier dictatorial dynasty to commit terrible acts of violence in order to control and suppress uprisings against the regime. The *Macoutes* used machetes and guns to commit rape, murder, and other acts of terrorism, and remained active even after the anti-Duvalier protest movement of the mid-1980s, which overthrew the decades-long regime and ended with Jean-Claude Duvalier's exile from the country in 1986. The novel suggests that Sophie is the product of her mother's violent rape at the hands of a *Macoute*, and yet Danticat invokes the practice of mothers "testing" their daughters' virginities as a kind of echo of the state-sanctioned violence, control, and surveillance of Haiti's political atmosphere during the days of Sophie and Martine's youths. In America, Sophie must suffer the violence of her mother's testing—as well as her classmates' cruel taunts about her accent and her "HBO" or "Haitian Body Odor," as well as their prejudiced accusations that "only the 'Four Hs' got AIDS—Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Haitians."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Edwidge Danticat, one of the most celebrated voices of the Haitian diaspora, has used her acclaim and prominence to lift up the voices and stories of many other Haitian writers through her work editing anthologies like *Haiti Noir* and *The Butterfly's Way: Voices form the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States*. Other novels that engage with the sociopolitical issues in Haiti and within the diaspora include Marie Vieux-Chauvet's incendiary *Love, Anger, and Madness*; Jacques Stephen Alexis's *In the Flicker of an Eyelid*; Elsie Augustave's debut novel *The Roving Tree*; and Myriam J.A. Chancy's experimental, nonlinear book *The Loneliness of Angels*. Breath, Eyes, Memory also deals extensively with the long-lasting effects of sexual abuse and trauma in young women's lives, a theme that is explored in books like Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*. Additionally, some of the books and authors Edwidge Danticat credit with having inspired the novel include Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Breath, Eyes, Memory
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** Providence, Rhode Island
- **When Published:** 1994
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Haiti and Brooklyn, New York
- **Climax:** In order to break free from her mother, Martine's, "testing" of her virginity, Sophie Caco mutilates herself using a pestle from the kitchen of their shared home and elopes with her boyfriend, Joseph.
- **Antagonist:** Martine Caco
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Nom de Plume. The novel's protagonist, Sophie Caco, is named in honor of the Cacos—a group of rebels who fought against the United States' occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. The Cacos were actually named for a Haitian bird called a Taco, which eats lizards—and they nicknamed their tormentors in the U.S. Army and Marines *zandolits*, or lizards. Danticat created a bright red bird called the Caco for the purposes of the novel, in order to honor her grandfather's struggles and exploits during this difficult time in Haitian history.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Part One of the novel, Sophie Caco, who has spent the first 12 years of her life growing up in the Haitian village of Croix-des-Rosets under the care of her mother's sister, Tante Atie, is suddenly summoned to New York to join her mother, Martine, in Brooklyn. Sophie is resentful of the fact that she has to leave Haiti—even as escalating violence threatens its urban and rural areas alike, and even as Tante Atie seems to struggle more and more each day with her unrequited love for Sophie's schoolteacher, Monsieur Augustin. While other people tell Sophie that a daughter belongs with her mother, Sophie feels more like Tante Atie's child—and even has nightmares in which her mother, whose face she only knows from pictures around the house, tries to kidnap her or physically restrain her. Sophie makes a Mother's Day card with a little dried **daffodil** attached to the edge for Tante Atie—but even though she repeatedly tries to give it to her aunt, Tante Atie insists the card should be for Sophie's real mother.

On the day of Sophie's departure from Haiti, Tante Atie rides with her to the airport, where a violent protest is taking place. Sophie is seated on the plane next to a hysterical little boy, whose "*trés* corrupt" father has just been murdered outside the airport in the midst of the demonstrations. After falling asleep in the midst of the chaos onboard the airplane, Sophie arrives in Brooklyn. Martine is elated to see her, but Sophie is nearly catatonic with shock. As Sophie adjusts to her mother's bleak apartment in a gritty but vibrant neighborhood, she also learns that Martine suffers from horrible **night terrors**, violent visions which stem from a rape Martine suffered when she was a teenager—a rape which resulted in Sophie's conception. Sophie meets her mother's boyfriend, Marc, and nervously prepares to start school. As the start of the school year approaches, Martine asks Sophie if she is a "good girl"—meaning, if she has had any boyfriends—and darkly tells Sophie about how, when Martine and Tante Atie were girls, Sophie's Granmè Ifé used to "test" their virginity by routinely placing her fingers inside of them.

In Part Two, Sophie, now 18, moves with her mother to a house in a different part of Brooklyn. Martine, a nurse, works dreadfully long hours at two separate jobs, leaving Sophie—about to enter college—to her own devices much of the time. Sophie strikes up a friendship with Joseph, a musician who lives next door. Joseph is Martine's age, but there is an undeniable tension between him and Sophie, and soon Sophie begins allowing Joseph to take her out on the town at night to jazz clubs and bars. Sophie tentatively brings up the subject of having a boyfriend with her mother, but Martine's reaction tells Sophie that she will never be able to have romance in her life as long as she lives under her mother's roof—even though Joseph tells Sophie that he loves her and wants to marry her.

One night, when Sophie comes home late from an evening out with Joseph, she finds her mother waiting for her. Martine tells Sophie that she knows about Joseph, then drags her upstairs where she violently "tests" her in the same way Granmè Ifé tested Martine and Tante Atie. Sophie "doubles," or dissociates, during the testing, but doesn't tell Joseph what has happened to her. Joseph tells Sophie that he's leaving New York to live full-time in Providence, Rhode Island, and asks her one last time to marry him—Sophie rejects him, but when she returns home, she is lonely, upset, and full of longing for Joseph. While her mother is out on a date with Marc, Sophie takes a pestle from the kitchen upstairs to her room, where she plunges it into her vagina, mutilating herself and breaking her hymen, which effectively destroying her "virginity" by Martine's standards. When Martine returns home and tests Sophie, she believes Sophie has had sex. She flies into a rage and banishes Sophie from the house. Sophie limps next door, where she tells Joseph that she's ready to marry him.

In Part Three, Sophie, now the mother of an infant daughter named Brigitte, spontaneously travels to Haiti in the middle of August. She has returned to her grandmother's village of La Nouvelle Dame Marie to reconnect with her roots, get some answers about her past, and escape for a while from her marriage to Joseph—which is suffering problems due to Sophie's intense pain and revulsion surrounding sex. Sophie reconnects with Granmè Ifé and Tante Atie. In Sophie's absence, Tante Atie has embedded herself in a deep friendship (and possibly a romantic relationship) with a local woman named Louise, a merchant determined to sell her prize pig for money to secure passage to America. Sophie doesn't expressly tell her grandmother or her aunt the reasoning behind her visit for a while—but when Granmè Ifé confronts her about her marriage, Sophie admits she's having problems and claims that the testing her mother subjected her to has ruined her life. Sophie asks Granmè Ifé why mothers continue testing their daughters. Granmè Ifé says that mothers just want their daughters to be safe, pure, and happy—but also apologizes for the pain she has, through perpetuating the practice of testing, caused for Sophie.

Soon, Granmè Ifé receives a cassette tape from Martine. On the tape, Martine (who has not spoken to Sophie for years), reveals that Joseph has called her in a panic, looking for Sophie.

Granmè Ifé makes a cassette to send back to Martine in which she reveals Sophie's whereabouts. A few days later, Martine arrives in Haiti, hoping to reconnect not just with her mother and her sister, but with Sophie too. Sophie witnesses her family members breaking down—Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé are locked in constant tension as Tante Atie tries to spend more and more time out drinking with Louise, angering Granmè Ifé, while Martine enters Sophie's room at night to weep over Brigitte's sleeping body. Granmè Ifé, in a betrayal of Tante Atie, purchases Louise's pig in order to make Louise leave Haiti. Alongside this familial conflict, the violence in La Nouvelle Dame Marie escalates as the *Tonton Macoutes*—a lawless paramilitary force, one of whose members raped Martine years ago—murder a beloved villager. Eventually, Sophie realizes that she must leave Haiti and return home with her mother.

In Part Four, Sophie and Martine return to New York together, resolving to start their relationship from scratch and come clean with all their secrets. Sophie stays at Martine's apartment for the night before returning to Providence. Sophie reveals that she is bulimic, and Martine reveals that she is pregnant. Sophie is shocked to learn that her mother has been sleeping with Marc all these years and urges her to get married. Martine, however, says she isn't even sure she's going to have the baby—she's seriously considering an abortion. Sophie urges her mother not to do anything rash and returns to Providence, promising to visit with Brigitte and Joseph the following weekend.

Back in Rhode Island, Sophie meets with her sexual phobia support group and her therapist, Rena, who offers her advice on how to handle the news of her mother's pregnancy. Rena suggests that both Sophie and Martine's views of love, sex, and conception have been warped by the sexual violence they've been subjected to throughout their lives, and tells Sophie that the only way for either of them to heal is to directly confront their shared and separate traumas. After a visit to Brooklyn, Martine tells Sophie that she's planning on getting an abortion—she claims the fetus inside of her is evil and has been talking to her in the voice of a man. Sophie is concerned about her mother but doesn't try to dissuade her from getting the procedure—she simply asks Martine to call her after it's done.

One afternoon, though, Sophie comes home from therapy to find a message from Marc on the answering machine telling her to call him. When Sophie gets in touch with Marc, he informs her that Martine has committed suicide, killing herself and the unborn baby by stabbing herself in the stomach 17 times. The devastated Sophie packs and heads straight to Brooklyn; she and Marc board a plane to Haiti to bring Martine's body home. Back in La Nouvelle Dame Marie, Granmè Ifé claims she intuited that Martine was both pregnant and dead before she heard news about either thing. She and Tante Atie mourn Martine's loss beside Marc and Sophie. Sophie, overwhelmed with emotion during her mother's burial, flees into a cane field, much like the one in which her mother was raped as a teenager. She thinks about the generations of pain and trauma that have formed the women of Haiti—their suffering has nearly broken them, but it has also made them stronger. Sophie realizes at last that she can be free of her burdens without surrendering her family or her history, and allows Granmè Ifé to comfort her in a rare moment of vulnerability.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sophie Caco – The protagonist of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie Caco grows from a girl of 12 to a mother in her early 20s over the course of the novel. Born in the Haitian village of Croix-des-Rosets and raised there for the first 12 years of her life by her mother's sister, Tante Atie, Sophie's life is turned upside down when her mother, Martine, who has been living in New York since Sophie's infancy, summons her to America. Sophie is reluctant and frightened to leave the only home she's ever known, but bravely journeys to Brooklyn, where she finds herself friendless and bullied at school, overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of her new neighborhood, and tasked with keeping her mother afloat in the midst of Martine's lingering psychological trauma and violent **night terrors**. As Sophie grows older, she learns more about her mother and comes to understand how violence has shaped her life, and the lives of the Caco women for generations. She finds out that she is the product of a violent rape, and hears her mother's stories of the invasive vaginal "testing"—meant to determine purity and virginity—to which Granmè Ifé subjected both Martine and Tante Atie throughout their childhoods. When Martine, suspicious of Sophie's burgeoning romantic feelings for their next-door neighbor Joseph, begins subjecting Sophie to the same kind of testing, Sophie realizes that she must escape her mother's care. She mutilates herself with a pestle from the kitchen, elopes with Joseph, and within a couple of years gives birth to a daughter, Brigitte. Sophie remains traumatized by the violent way in which she destroyed her own "virginity," and experiences "doubling" or dissociating during sex with her husband, which leads to an emotional breakdown. She flees to Haiti with Brigitte in tow, hoping to reconnect with her roots and learn the truth about her family's legacy of violence and obsession with virginity, knowing that if she doesn't soon confront that legacy, she will never be able to heal from it—or prevent her daughter from inheriting it. Quiet but headstrong, capable and adaptable, Sophie projects strength and poise even in her darkest, most fragile moments. Torn between wanting to be a perfect daughter and wanting to live her life for herself, Sophie's search for a deeper understanding of herself, her family, and the meaning of home encompasses all of the novel's major themes.

Martine Caco – Sophie's mother. After giving birth to Sophie in

her teens, Martine left for New York in order to pursue a better life for herself and her daughter, promising to send for Sophie when the time was right. When Sophie is finally summoned to Brooklyn, she is 12, and leaving the familiarity and comfort—but also the violence and strife—she's come to know in Haiti is a jarring adjustment. Sophie adjusts to living with Martine, whom she is supposed to love but views only as a stranger. Sophie cares for Martine through Martine's chronic **night terrors** and joins her at her job during her long hours as a nurse. In effect, Sophie sustains Martine emotionally as Martine continues to reckon with the enduring trauma of the rape that created Sophie in the first place. Martine's personality becomes increasingly controlling as Sophie grows older, turns 18, and begins exploring her feelings and sexuality—she starts testing Sophie's virginity, just as her own mother, Granmè Ifé, tested her, insisting that there are some secrets Sophie cannot and will not keep from her mother. After Sophie mutilates her own vagina, leading Martine to believe she has lost her virginity, Martine kicks Sophie out of the house, and the two don't speak for many years. When they reunite years later in Haiti, Sophie has grown up and developed a sense of sympathy for her mother's difficult lot in life. Martine and Sophie decide to start from scratch and begin a new chapter in their relationship. However, when Martine tells Sophie that she is pregnant once again with the child of her longtime boyfriend, Marc, her rapidly-destabilizing mental state begins to worry Sophie. Martine, convinced that she is unfit to carry or raise another child, begins experiencing auditory hallucinations in which her fetus speaks to her, and eventually kills herself and the unborn baby by stabbing herself in the stomach 17 times. Martine's death leaves Sophie devastated—but as she returns to Haiti to bury her mother's body, she experiences a newfound sense of freedom, wholeness, and understanding about the difficult world and painful lineage from which both she and her mother come. Neurotic, hardworking, and obsessed with sexual and emotional purity, Martine is the novel's primary antagonist.

Tante Atie – Sophie's aunt and Martine's sister. As Sophie's primary caregiver throughout her childhood, Tante Atie is kind and generous, but stokes longing, pain, and trauma of her own that she does her best to hide it from her niece. Rejected by the only man she ever loved, abandoned by her sister, and burdened by memories of her mother, Granmè Ifé's, invasive testing, Tante Atie is often uncertain of how to handle deep emotions and hard situations—for instance, she doesn't tell Sophie that her mother has sent for her to come live in New York with until just a few days before Sophie's departure, and even then admits that if the secret hadn't been exposed by Madame Augustin, she wouldn't have told Sophie the truth until it was time to leave for the airport. Though *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is Sophie's coming-of-age story, Tante Atie—who learns how to read, love, and cope with loss over the course of the novel—also grows emotionally throughout the book. She learns through her tenuous relationship with Louise and her complicated emotions towards her mother, her sister, and Sophie (whom Tante Atie views not as her own daughter, but as her "child"), that betrayal, tenderness, violence, and care can all coexist in the complex relationships among women who are part of the same line of deep generational trauma.

Granmè Ifé – Martine and Tante Atie's mother and Sophie's grandmother. A wise old woman obsessed with death and dying, Granmè Ifé has dressed only in black for the many years since her husband's death. Additionally, she is preoccupied with making plans for her future funeral, determined to be ready for death whenever it comes for her. Granmè Ifé is kind and doting towards Sophie, but later in life, Sophie learns that Granmè Ifé used to "test" the virginities both Martine and Tante Atie by physically violating them when they were girls, causing them both extreme physical and emotional pain. This pain that has trickled down to Sophie through inherited generational trauma and the repetition of ritual, as Martine begins to subject a teenage Sophie to the same testing. Granmè Ifé is a born storyteller who uses Haitian tales and folklore to educate—and intimidate—her daughters and her granddaughter, reminding them of the dangers of being careless with their hearts or bodies while at the same time reminding them of the rich heritage and tradition from which they come. Sensitive to the world around her—and possibly slightly clairvoyant—Granmè Ifé carries with her the burden of knowing what she's passed on to the younger generations of women in her family, as well as the sorrows of having been complicit in their suffering.

Joseph – A soulful musician who starts out as Sophie and Martine's next-door neighbor and eventually becomes Sophie's husband and the father of her daughter, Brigitte. Joseph originally comes from Louisiana—he speaks a version of Creole, like Sophie, and splits his time between New York and Providence, Rhode Island when he's not out on the road touring. Joseph is kind, patient, and truly in love with Sophie, but at the same time, he doesn't understand the full extent of her trauma, and often coerces her into sex in spite of her openness about her physical and emotional revulsion towards the act. Joseph is a complicated character: though he discounts his wife's pain, he does seem to want to help her heal, and it's possible he just doesn't know—or isn't able to give her—what she needs.

Marc – Martine's long-term boyfriend. A Haitian lawyer who insists on introducing himself by his full name—Marc Jolibois Francis Legrand Moravien Chevalier—Marc keeps the "old ways" in spite of having lived in Brooklyn for so many years. When Sophie arrives in New York, Marc and Martine have already been together for an indeterminate amount of time, and though Marc keeps pictures of Martine in his office and often takes her and Sophie out to dinner, Martine never talks about her romantic feelings for Marc, and never shares with Sophie any plans for marrying or moving in with him. By the time Sophie is an adult, Marc and Martine are still together,

though they still don't cohabitate or have any plans for marriage. When Sophie finds out that Martine is pregnant with Marc's baby, she is shocked to realize that her mother and Marc sleep together. She is sad when she realizes her mother has maintained a sexual relationship with Marc by "doubling" or dissociating because Martine feels regularly submitting to sex, in spite of the pain it causes her, is worth having someone sleeping next to her to help ward off her **night terrors**. Marc is an upstanding man, a proud member of the Haitian community in Brooklyn, and outwardly kind—but there is an undercurrent of control in his relationship with Martine, and Sophie resents him for not taking better care of her mother or preventing Martine's eventual suicide.

Louise – A woman who lives in La Nouvelle Dame Marie. She is Tante Atie's best friend and letters teacher, and quite possibly her lover. Louise is desperate to make it to America, and is constantly trying to pawn off her prize pig for 500 *gourdes* so that she can book passage on a boat to Miami. Though everyone around her warns Louise that the trip is dangerous by boat, Louise is determined to leave Haiti the cheapest way possible, as soon as she can. Eventually, Granmè Ifé, off-put by the closeness between Louise and Tante Atie and desperate to become Tante Atie's priority once more, purchases Louise's pig in order to make her leave Haiti. After securing the money, Louise leaves the village without giving Tante Atie so much as a goodbye.

Davina – A member of Sophie's sexual phobia support group. Davina, a middle-aged Chicana woman who was raped by her grandfather for 10 years, hosts the support group in a specially-designated room of her house, to which Buki and Sophie have their own keys. Davina is spiritual and generous, and helps Buki and Sophie to try and view themselves as beautiful, strong survivors.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Monsieur Augustin – Sophie's schoolteacher. Monsieur Augustin, as a younger man, once loved Tante Atie, but abandoned her for his current wife, leaving Tante Atie devastated.

Madame Augustin – Monsieur Augustin's wife. A somewhat smug woman who hates Tante Atie, and purposefully spills the beans about Sophie's mother having summoned her from America in order to make things more difficult for Tante Atie.

Brigitte – Sophie's infant daughter. A calm, happy six-month-old child, Brigitte sleeps peacefully each night. Brigitte and gives Sophie hope that her and Martine's traumas might end with them.

Eliab – A young boy who lives in La Nouvelle Dame Marie. He often runs errands for the women of the village, including Granmè Ifé and Tante Atie, in exchange for pennies and coins.

Man Grace – Louise's mother.

Dessalines – A coal vendor at the market in La Nouvelle Dame Marie. Dessalines is killed by a group of *Tonton Macoutes*.

Chabin – The albino lottery man in the village of Croix-des-Rosets.

Rena – Sophie's therapist. A Santeria priestess, Rena is straightforward, aggressive, and determined to get Sophie to confront the painful traumas and uncomfortable truths about her relationship with her mother that are holding her back from healing.

Buki – A member of Sophie's sexual phobia support group. An Ethiopian college student, Buki was subjected to female genital mutilation at the hands of her grandmother when she was a young girl. She is still trying to heal from the physical and emotional wound of that trauma.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, AND GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

In Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, three generations of mothers and daughters wrestle with the generational trauma that has been handed down again and again and has come to define all their lives. The Haitian practice of manually "testing" young women for virginity is a mother's burden—and, in the case of the Caco women, a daughter's unraveling. As Sophie Caco, her mother Martine, her Tante Atie, and her Granmè Ifé confront their family's—and their culture's—dark inheritance, Danticat ultimately suggests that unless female pain, trauma, and cruelty are directly confronted, these practices will continue to harm and oppress generations of women and girls.

Over the course of the novel, Danticat explores how generational trauma affects four women who are members of the Caco family—Granmè Ifé, her daughters Martine and Atie, and Martine's daughter, Sophie. When readers first meet Sophie, she is a bright and happy girl living in the Haitian village of Croix-des-Rosets with her Tante Atie, who is looking after her—until Sophie's mother Martine, who has gone on to New York, sends for her. "A child belongs with her mother," one of Sophie's neighbors says, congratulating Sophie on getting the chance to journey to America. But as Sophie travels to New York and the novel begins to unfold, Danticat shows how just being with one's mother, without together facing the generational, structural, and emotional traumas of family and

culture, is simply not enough.

Upon arriving in New York, Sophie meets the mother she has not seen since she was an infant—and learns several secrets that reveal the generational trauma festering within the Caco family. Sophie realizes that Martine is battling deep, intense traumas that take the form of violent **night terrors**, and then shoulders the burden of rousing her mother from her nightmares. Sophie also learns that her mother was, as a girl, subjected to "testing" at the hands of her mother Granmè Ifé—and Tante Atie was as well. As Martine describes her own mother testing the vaginas of her and her sister with her fingers to see if they were still virgins, a fuller portrait of the generational trauma passed down through the family emerges. Finally, Martine tells Sophie that her violent nightmares are the lingering results of a rape she suffered as a girl—the rape that resulted in Sophie's birth. Though the 12-year-old Sophie is overwhelmed and apparently numb to many of these realizations—and what they mean for her own future—Danticat shows her readers just how deep the traumas in the Caco family are.

As Sophie grows into her late teens and begins covertly developing a relationship with a next-door neighbor, an older musician named Joseph, Martine starts testing Sophie nightly. Sophie learns to "double," or dissociate, in order to escape the trauma of the tests—and yet she and her mother never discuss what is happening, and neither does Martine apologize for hurting Sophie physically or emotionally. Martine is just doing to Sophie what her own mother did to her—she doesn't see how the generational trauma and cycles of abuse are trickling down, and she can't recognize that she is inflicting upon her own daughter the same feelings of shame and violation that she herself has suffered for years as a result of her own violent rape.

When Sophie returns to Haiti as an adult—with her own infant daughter Brigitte in tow—she confronts Granmè Ifé about the legacy of testing, and the women discuss it in earnest for the first time. Granmè Ifé insists that the practice represents mothers trying to look after and do right by their daughters, but at the same time, she confesses to Sophie that her heart "weeps" for what "we"—perhaps meaning the untold numbers and generations of Haitian women before them—have done to Sophie, and to countless girls like her. In confronting one of the core generational traumas at the heart of her existence, Sophie is able to begin to heal—though judging from Sophie's conversations with her therapist, Rena, about her reluctance to confront her own emotions about her trauma or discuss them with her husband, Joseph, Sophie still has a long way to go.

The novel ends with Martine's death by suicide—a result, Rena suggests, of her inability to confront the traumas inflicted upon her by her rapist and her own mother alike. But Danticat also suggests that Sophie, at least, is ready to look their legacy in the face, confront the trespasses that have been done unto her, and begin the process of liberating herself from the spiral of generational trauma by confronting her pain. Martine's death is a tragedy, but it is also a turning point for the Caco women, and it suggests that there is hope for Sophie's daughter, Brigitte, and all the women in the Caco line still to come.

VIRGINITY AND VIOLENCE

"I have heard it compared to a virginity cult, our mothers' obsession with keeping us pure and chaste." So says Sophie Caco at a crucial point in the novel as she reckons with the legacy of violence that defines the lives of Haitian women. Throughout *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the loss of virginity is seen not as a rite of passage or an entry into womanhood, but as an act of theft, violence, and disgrace. As Edwidge Danticat explores the link between virginity and violence, she argues that in an effort to save their daughters from the violence of men—and the world more largely—mothers who "test" their daughters' virginities actually end up inflicting a larger, more insidious type of physical, emotional, and sexual violence upon their daughters.

In a society where purity is seen as a mandate, where sex is hardly ever spoken of, and where religion, tradition, and a history marked by colonial violence permeate all facets of life, an "obsession" with virginity emerges. Sophie's estimation of her family's culture as a "virginity cult" is extreme, but not inaccurate: there is a singular, obsessive focus on a girl's virginity or lack thereof; there is a code of silence and shame which makes speaking out against testing impossible; and there is the fact that the very perpetrators of testing's violence—mothers—are themselves victims of the same trauma. Throughout the novel, Danticat unleashes both deep empathy and wild rage against the cycle of abuse that maintains the violent practice of testing, ultimately showing how the physical and emotional scars of testing are equal to those of rape—and the trauma that follows victims of testing throughout their lives is destructive and inescapable.

Shortly after her mother begins testing her, Sophie, unable to take the humiliation and pain, decides to put an end to things by mutilating herself with a pestle from the kitchen, breaking her hymen and severing her relationship with her mother Martine, who believes Sophie has lost her virginity. Sophie's reclamation of her own freedom is much more violent than the act of losing one's virginity through intercourse, but Sophie feels that in order to truly get free of the violence of testing, she has to commit an even greater act of violence against herself—one that leaves no doubt that Sophie has been forever changed, whether or not it happened at the hands of a man. The climactic act of violence Sophie inflicts upon herself forever alters her body, leaving her with chronic pain that makes actual intercourse with her husband, Joseph, physically difficult—multiplying and compounding the emotional difficulty that sex carries after so many months of her mother's tests.

Later on in the novel, when Martine becomes pregnant with another baby, she feels so betrayed by her own body—and so unable to accept the willing conception of a child through loving sex, given the violent conception of her first child—that she commits suicide by stabbing herself in the stomach 17 times. Martine's violent act against herself parallels, albeit more intensely, Sophie's own mutilation of herself earlier in the novel. Both women's acts center around a sense of self-hatred—and a fear of sex and all things associated with it—which mirrors the violence and violation of the testing they were submitted to as girls.

Danticat shows how Sophie, a victim of testing, and Martine, a victim of both testing and rape, each struggle with trauma, shame, and self-hatred. After meeting in Haiti for the first time in several years, Sophie and Martine decide to give their relationship a new start. As the two talk more than they ever have, they find a set of startling similarities in their own experiences of pain, trauma, and self-inflicted violence—all stemming back, Danticat suggests, to the rhetoric around virginity and violence with which they were both raised. Both Sophie and Martine suffer disordered eating—both women are described as bony and rail-thin, and Sophie confesses to her mother that she is bulimic. Both women find that they must "double," or dissociate, during sex with their respective partners—they feel a duty to submit to the act, but they are totally disconnected from sexual pleasure due to the violence of their pasts and the "virginity cult" that defined their childhoods.

Though the book never explicitly touches upon it, it is also worth examining the unspoken connection between the compulsive ritual of testing among the Haitian women in the novel and the lingering violence of colonialism. Colonizers throughout history have used the rape of a colonized society's female members as a method of controlling both men and women within that society. It is possible, then, that the compulsive need to "test" girls was born of the oppressed society's desire for some semblance of control in the face of colonialist violence. "If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced." Granmè Ifé uses this as her explanation when Sophie asks her why generations of mothers test their daughters, creating an endless cycle of pain. The "disgrace" and injustice of colonialism is pain enough—in testing their children, perhaps Haitian mothers, throughout the generations, have been attempting to exert some control over the disgraces inflicted upon their families.

"You must know that everything a mother does," Granmè Ifé tells Sophie, "she does for her child's own good." Though testing is intended as an act of care and protection, Danticat shows how placing such an intense, unyielding focus on virginity—along with the physical violation of the tests themselves—actually leaves the same violent imprint on the lives of girls who are tested as those who are raped. In making parallel the self-harm, anxiety, and depression that Martine and Sophie experience, Danticat suggests that testing is equivalent to rape—and that a mother's compulsive monitoring of a girl's virginity is an act just as violent as having one's virginity stolen by someone else.

HOME

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie Caco leaves her home in Haiti at the age of 12 to join her mother in New York. "Home" becomes a complicated concept in the novel as the overwhelmed, disoriented Sophie struggles to adjust to life in Brooklyn, all the while missing the family and friends she left behind. As the novel progresses and a return to Haiti becomes more and more vital, necessary, and inevitable for Sophie, Edwidge Danticat argues that perhaps a real, physical sense of "home" doesn't exist—instead, home consists of the metaphorical, existential places one can never return to, try as one might.

Throughout the novel, as Sophie—reluctantly, at first, and later restlessly—roams around in search of a place to call home, Danticat shows how the "homes" people long to return to are often less about a physical place and more about a feeling or a state of mind. For Sophie, home is the innocence and peace of her childhood—a time before she encountered the trauma, violence, and despair of womanhood. Early in the novel, Sophie's childhood in Haiti is presented as relatively idyllic—even in the face of poverty and violence in her own village and the country more largely, Sophie has a close and loving relationship with her Tante Atie, a sense of gratitude for their relative economic stability, and pleasurable, comforting small moments throughout each of her days. When Sophie moves to New York to be with her mother, Martine—who has been there, saving money and working, since Sophie's infancy—Sophie's life is uprooted swiftly and unceremoniously, and her arrival in a gritty, dingy neighborhood of Brooklyn overwhelms and disorients her. Sophie's notion of "home" is disrupted early on in the novel, and Haiti—her first home—becomes a place from which she is stripped away without her consent. This inspires an intense longing in Sophie that never goes away, no matter how she tries to tamp it down and move forward with greeting the "challenge" of her new life—a longing which comes to shape her fractured definition of what it means to feel at home somewhere.

In the second part of the novel, Sophie is 18 and well-adjusted to life in Brooklyn—she is not as happy as she could be, and often feels constrained by her mother's expectations of her, but New York is more or less her home. After Sophie falls in love with Joseph, an older musician who lives next door, things at home go from tenable to miserable as Martine begins "testing" Sophie's virginity each night. Sophie, realizing that she does not feel safe in her mother's house anymore, violently severs herself from her mother by mutilating her own vagina with a

pestle from the kitchen. She flees next door to Joseph, accepts his longstanding marriage proposal, and moves with him to Providence, Rhode Island. When she was brought to New York from Haiti, Sophie was told that her true home was with her mother, because daughters always belong with their mothers. For a while, this seemed true enough, and Sophie grew to accept her mother as a proxy for home. Wherever Martine was, home was there, too. However, as Martine turns suspicious and violent towards Sophie and begins sexually violating her on a regular basis, Sophie realizes that this definition of home doesn't work, either, and seeks to make a new home with Joseph far away from her mother.

Toward the end of the novel, Sophie is dissatisfied in her marriage with Joseph—who insists on having regular sex with her even though she dissociates during the act due to physical and emotional trauma. She decides to take a spontaneous trip to Haiti to visit Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé, bringing her infant daughter, Brigitte, along with her. Sophie is only in Haiti for a few short days, but the time she spends there feels vital, grounding, and informative. Sophie learns about the generational trauma the women within her family suffer, and she even reconnects with Martine—the two resolve to begin their relationship fresh. When Sophie returns home to a worried Joseph, who asks her about the trip, she refers to Haiti as "home"—a word choice that perturbs Joseph. Joseph reminds Sophie that she has never called Haiti home in the time he's known her—home for Sophie, he reminds her, has always been her mother's house, the one place she "could never go back to." This final twist in Sophie's journey to find "home" shows that home, for Sophie—and, Danticat suggests, for many—is not defined by any one physical place. When Sophie was a teenager, Haiti was her home because it was the place she could never return to; as an adult, that place has become her mother's house, because she was similarly barred from returning there. Now that Sophie has reconnected with Martine and spent a night in her childhood home in Brooklyn, she has realized—perhaps unconsciously—that "home" is constantly in flux, and the places people think of as the homes where they belong are often the places where they feel most forbidden from going, or where they're most acutely unable to recapture the security of their youth.

At the end of the novel, when Sophie returns to Haiti a second time to bury her mother, villagers and neighbors in La Nouvelle Dame Marie greet her as though she has "lived there all [her] life." Sophie has returned physically to the "home" she's been longing to get back to since her girlhood—but Sophie, now a wife and a mother with "very American" thoughts and tendencies, is forced to realize that her idea of home is unfixed and unmoored. Sophie, whose "homes" have now encompassed Haiti, Brooklyn, and Providence, realizes that there is no physical place that will make her feel the security she felt in her youth: she must learn to make a new home, within—and for—herself.

MEMORY, STORYTELLING, AND THE PAST

Toward the end of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie Caco states that she comes from a place "from which you carry your past like the hair on your head." For the Caco women—and, Danticat suggests, for Haitian women more generally—the lessons, traumas, and stories of the past are as inseparable from a woman's journey as the hair rooted in her scalp. Over the course of the novel, as the jumble of stories and parables that defined Sophie's youth mingle with the painful tales from her female relatives' pasts, Danticat suggests that while one can indeed seek to be liberated from their past, one must never *forget* that past—memory is a heavy burden, but a necessary one.

Throughout the novel, Danticat uses stories, fables, and folktales—often violent or disturbing in nature—to show how the women of Haiti try to keep the past alive. Though the past is full of unpleasantness and violence, the Caco women and their friends and neighbors cling to its stories desperately, unwilling to forget the collective past that has shaped them. Edwidge Danticat relays a combination of original tales and Haitian folklore throughout the novel—stories which all feature, at their hearts, lessons about the follies of girls and the pain of becoming a woman. In one story, a little girl agrees to accompany an attractive red bird to a distant land, only to realize the bird wants to feed her heart to a foreign king. In another, a woman who cannot stop blood from spontaneously spurting out of her skin visits the *Vodou* goddess of love, who tells her that in order to stop the bleeding, she must renounce her humanity and become a butterfly—a fate to which the woman quickly agrees. The literal stories of the past that populate the novel are often violent as well—from Martine's story of her rape at the hands of a paramilitary soldier (or *Tonton Macoute*), to the stories and memories Granmè Ifé and Tante Atie trade with Martine via cassette tapes mailed to and fro, to Sophie's musician husband Joseph's artistic preoccupation with slave songs and spirituals that tell stories of hope in the face of violence and despair. All these stories, which in many ways define Sophie's life, add up to a horrible weight—but ultimately, as Sophie chooses to carry them with her through her life, Danticat shows that bearing that weight is worth the struggle. Though Sophie inherits pain and trauma from the women who came before her, she also inherits a sense of solidarity, purpose, and wisdom. "Young girls," Tante Atie says at one point in the novel, "they should be allowed to keep their pleasant stories." Women, on the other hand, must shoulder the pleasant, the unpleasant, and everything in between in order to be the arbiters of their familial and their cultural pasts.

Breath, eyes, and memory are, to Sophie and the women in her family and her community, one "place"—a place from which the

past must be dragged onward through life. Breath represents vitality, eyes represent witnessing, and memory represents the duty of carrying the past forward into the future. Sophie knows that the temptation to answer "Yes" to the common Haitian question, "*Ou libere*," or "Are you free," is strong within her—but at the same time, she knows that to truly liberate herself from the burdens of her past, her family, and her people's stories would be to discard and discount them. By the end of the novel, in spite of all the painful stories from the past she has had to remember and carry with her, Sophie realizes that doing so is a kind of gift. "There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: '*Ou libere?*' Are you free, my daughter?" As Sophie mourns her mother, Granmè Ifé speaks to her this sentence, which is in many ways like a story or riddle in and of itself. Sophie's grandmother is trying to remind her that even in the midst of great pain, the stories and memories of one's mothers, elders, and ancestors must be remembered.

In a final moment of pain and revelation towards the end of the novel, Sophie at last understands that the women in her life, particularly those in her family, are just like the women in the stories she grew up hearing. Sophie is like her mother, and her mother is like the women in the folktales—therefore, she sees that stories, the past, and cultural memory are all connected to the present as living, breathing things. Sophie is ultimately able to free herself from much of the pain with which her mother left her—but she also realizes that being liberated doesn't mean forgetting who she is, where she comes from, or the stories and legacies of her culture.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DAFFODILS

Daffodils are, throughout the novel, a symbol of the strength and sacrifice it takes to thrive in a place in which one is not meant to be. According to Edwidge Danticat herself, one of the first fully-formed images that came to her as she began writing *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was that of the dried daffodil hanging off of the Mother's Day card Sophie Caco makes for her Tante Atie. When Danticat realized that daffodils "wouldn't generally grow in Haiti," she was tempted to pick a different flower—but then, the thought occurred to her that daffodils could function as a potent symbol for the resilience of Sophie and women like her—women uprooted through diaspora, transplanted from their homes and challenged to thrive in a strange new place. The daffodils Danticat writes about in the novel grow, unexpectedly and improbably, in the villages of Haiti, where they adapt, hybridize, and take on a burnt orange color. Daffodils are Sophie's favorite flower, and she often dresses in daffodil-colored or daffodil-printed clothes. Tying in with the novel's overarching theme of home, daffodils represent the power that women—specifically Haitian women—have to adapt and remake themselves even in impossible circumstances.

DREAMS AND NIGHT TERRORS

Sophie and Martine's night terrors represent the haunting, persistent nature of violent trauma. When Sophie arrives in New York to start a new life in America with her mother, Martine, she realizes on her first night in her mother's Brooklyn apartment that Martine suffers from debilitating night terrors which leave her screaming, thrashing, kicking, and biting in her sleep. Martine comes to rely on Sophie to wake her from the dreams, calling Sophie a life-saver and thanking her for always sticking close by. Though Martine doesn't tell Sophie why she's plagued by such dreams at first, Sophie eventually learns that she was the product of rape, and that Martine vividly relives the violent assault at the hands of a Haitian paramilitary, or *Tonton Macoute*, every night of her life. Martine's night terrors aren't just hers once Sophie arrives—Sophie takes it upon herself to comfort her mother each night, and Sophie's sleep, too, is affected by the nightmares; as she grows older, she admits to often having bad dreams herself. Both women's dreams and night terrors, then, abstractly symbolize the novel's theme of mothers, daughters, and generational trauma—and, more literally, they represent the lingering physical and psychological effects of violence, especially violence of a sexual nature. Martine's night terrors eventually grow so bad that they are, Danticat suggests, a large part of the reason why she takes her own life. Sophie worries that her infant daughter, Brigitte, will inherit her and her mother's insomnia, but is relieved that Brigitte is, for the most part, a good sleeper. Danticat further symbolically ties peaceful sleep to mothers, daughters, and trauma when Joseph tells Sophie, after she leaves for Brooklyn and later Haiti to bury Martine, that Brigitte has become a cranky sleeper in her mother's absence, suggesting that there is a link between peaceful sleep and an absence of trauma, violence, or pain inflicted on a child by its mother.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Soho Press edition of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* published in 2015.

Chapter 1 Quotes

[Tante Atie] took the card from my hand. The flower nearly fell off. She pressed the tape against the short stem, forced the baby daffodil back in its place, and handed the card back to me. She did not even look inside.

"Not this year," she said. [...] "It is not mine. It is your mother's. We must send it to your mother.

Related Characters: Tante Atie, Sophie Caco (speaker), Martine Caco

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sophie tries to give her Tante Atie a Mother's Day card—Danticat suggests, through these lines, that Tante Atie (Sophie's aunt) is the recipient of the Mother's Day cards Sophie makes in school each year. This year, though, Tante Atie refuses the card and instead insists on sending it to Sophie's real mother, Martine, who has been living in New York for the last 10 years of Sophie's life. This passage signals the guilt Tante Atie feels over usurping her sister as Sophie's primary caregiver—even though Martine left Atie in charge of Sophie when she left for America. It also foreshadows major changes coming for both Sophie and her Tante Atie—little does Sophie know that Martine has sent for Sophie to come to America, and now Tante Atie realizes she must begin preparing Sophie to reunite with a mother she barely knows in a country she's never seen. The daffodil hanging off the card is a major symbol throughout the novel of resilience and adaptation—in this passage, it foreshadows how both Sophie and Tante Atie will soon have to be strong and adaptable just like the flowers they both love.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Tante Atie told me that my mother loved daffodils because they grew in a place that they were not supposed to. They were really European flowers [...] meant for colder climates. A long time ago, a French woman had brought them to Croix-des-Rosets. [...] A strain of daffodils had grown that could withstand the heat, but they were the color of pumpkins, [...] as though they had acquired a bronze tinge from the skin of the natives who had adopted them.

Related Characters: Sophie Caco (speaker), Martine Caco , Tante Atie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This passage expounds upon the significance of daffodils as a major symbol within the novel. Daffodils grow in Haiti despite their incompatibility with the climate—they therefore represent the need to adapt even in the most difficult situations, and offer some hope that such difficult changes and concessions are possible. Daffodils were carried from their "home" to a new land, where they took root and flourished in spite of being unsuited to their new surroundings. As Sophie prepares to travel to America to live with her estranged mother, Martine she realizes she must be like a daffodil—able to grow strong, change, and adapt, even when forcefully taken from her home. This passage also shows just how strong and impactful storytelling and the past is within Sophie's life. The stories her Tante Atie tells her give her strength and hope, and help her to feel connected to her home, her family, and her culture—even when she's facing a huge and uncertain journey.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"*Ou byen?* Are you all right?" I asked her.

She shook her head yes.

"It is the night," she said. "Sometimes, I see horrible visions in my sleep. [...] Don't worry, it will pass," she said, avoiding my eye. "I will be fine. I always am. The nightmares, they come and go."

Related Characters: Martine Caco , Sophie Caco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

When Sophie arrives in New York to live with her mother, Martine, she quickly realizes that while her mother is supposed to be the one taking care of her, Sophie herself is, in actuality, going to need to be the one to take care of her

mother. Martine is nervous, fragile, and, as Sophie discovers on her first night in her mother's Brooklyn apartment, plagued by "horrible visions." Sophie doesn't yet know the source of these visions, or night terrors—but this passage gives several clues about their nature. When Martine tells Sophie about her night terrors, she says they "will pass," but has trouble meeting Sophie's eyes. This suggests that Martine is lying—the night terrors, Sophie will come to realize, occur every time Martine falls asleep, without fail. There is another reason Martine can't look Sophie in the eye as she awakens from her dream—as Danticat will soon reveal, Sophie's arrival has actually exacerbated Martine's nightmares. Martine was the victim of a violent rape when she was a girl, and Sophie herself is a product of that rape. Sophie is therefore a physical reminder of the violence Martine suffered back in Haiti, a manifestation of the trauma Martine has had to suffer for so many years.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"You're a good girl, aren't you? [...] You understand my right to ask as your mother, don't you? [...] When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside. Your Tante Atie [...] used to scream like a pig in a slaughterhouse. The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure."

Related Characters: Martine Caco (speaker), Granmè Ifé, Tante Atie, Sophie Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

As Sophie's first summer in New York comes to an end and she prepares to start the school year, her mother, Martine, asks her if she's going to be a "good girl" and stay away from the American boys at school. Martine asserts that it is her "right" to know certain intimate detail about her daughter, and explains that this right is part of a long legacy of mothers "testing" their daughters' virginities by physically violating their "private parts." Though Martine describes a horrible, traumatic invasion of privacy as she tells Sophie about the testing, Martine nonetheless asserts that mothers have a right to do such terrible things to their daughters in the name of keeping them "pure." This passage is one of the first examples that Danticat uses to explore the legacy of generational trauma in mothers and daughters—how women pass along the horrors of their own youth, often doing so in the name of fulfilling the moral expectations of their cultures. As the novel progresses, Danticat will delve further into the destructive, destabilizing nature of inherited trauma, but by presenting Martine's seemingly clear belief that she has a right to violate her daughter's body in order to determine her purity—a responsibility to do so, even—she suggests a correlation between virginity and violence.

Chapter 11 Quotes

As she tested me, to distract me, she told me, "The *Marasas* were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two. [...] What vail lovers they were, those *Marasas*. Admiring one another for being so much alike... When you love someone, you want him to be closer to you than your *Marasa*. Closer than your shadow. [...] You would leave me for an old man who you didn't know the year before. You and I we could be like *Marasas*. You are giving up a lifetime with me. Do you understand? There are secrets you cannot keep."

Related Characters: Martine Caco (speaker), Joseph, Sophie Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83-84

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation, spoken by Martine in order to "distract" Sophie as she "tests" her daughter's virginity for the first time (by inserting her finger into Sophie's vagina), represents a turning point in the novel, and offers a stream-of-consciousness look at the mechanisms of generational trauma, virginity's connection to violence, the failed concept of a "home," and the power of storytelling and memory. All of the novel's major themes are encompassed in this paragraph as Martine almost desperately tries to justify what she's doing and convince Sophie to stay under her care forever, even as she performs an act of sexual violence so profound and destabilizing that she knows she is only pushing Sophie further away and into the arms of an "old man [she] didn't know the year before."

This passage also deals with the novel's repeated motif of "doubling"—something Danticat will reveal in more depth as the book goes on. Both Sophie and Martine will eventually realize that, during acts of sex and intimacy, they're forced to dissociate in order to cope with the physical and emotional pain they feel—pain that exists because they were both subjected to the trauma and violence of virginity

testing. Sophie and Martine "double" their consciousness during sex in order to escape from the physical act, but the doubling Martine describes in this passage is just as fraught—she suggests that when a woman wants to find her mirror image in a lover, the impulse is vain, but that the twin bond between mothers and daughters is somehow pure, sacred, or even holy. This idea ties in with the theme of mothers, daughters, and generational trauma, providing another view of the interconnectedness women within the same family share, and makes clear that Martine is unable to process the trauma she herself holds inside her—or even conceive of a healthy relationship, be it familial, filial, or platonic.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ The story goes that there was once a woman who walked around with blood constantly spurting out of her unbroken skin. This went on for twelve long years. […] Finally, the woman got tired and said she was going to see Erzulie. […] After her consultation, it became apparent to the woman what she would have to do. If she wanted to stop bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human being. She could choose what to be, a plant or an animal, but she could no longer be a woman. […]

"Make me a butterfly," she told Erzulie.

Related Characters: Sophie Caco (speaker), Martine Caco , Joseph

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As Martine continues to "test" Sophie's virginity night after night by physically violating her genitalia, Sophie's mental state starts to weaken. She becomes ashamed of herself, withdrawn, and fearful—she rejects her boyfriend, Joseph, because she is afraid that Martine's abuse will worsen if she finds out that they have continued their relationship against her wishes. One night, while Martine is out of the house, Sophie takes a pestle from the kitchen up to her bedroom and thinks of this story she heard in her youth. The story represents the difficult choice Sophie must make. Sophie is, effectively, the woman with blood spurting out of her skin: traumatized by her mother's violent testing and full of shame over what's happening to her, she knows she can't go on in her current state. She also knows that in order for things to change, she must make a huge sacrifice—one that will prevent her from being the girl she has been all her life, or having any kind of relationship with her mother. In the end, Sophie realizes she must painfully transform herself by mutilating her vagina with the pestle, which will cause Martine to think she's lost her virginity and finally stop the traumatic "testing" process. But she also believes that in doing so, she stands to liberate herself and, like a "butterfly," float away from her troubles. Sophie's story will not be as neat as that of the woman in the folktale—but she knows, in this moment, that she must do whatever she can to escape her current predicament.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ "Some people need to forget. […] I need to remember."

Related Characters: Sophie Caco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Sophie returns to Haiti—now a grown woman with her daughter in tow—her cab driver from the airport commends her on her ability to speak Creole, and her desire to return to a place that most people try to forget. Sophie's answer—that what she needs is to remember her past rather than abandon it—speaks to several of the novel's major themes. Even though generational trauma is the source of much of Sophie's pain, she knows that she must confront the past in order to heal from it. She doesn't want to make the mistakes her mother, grandmother, and all the ancestors who came before them have made—she is therefore determined to make her aunt and grandmother "remember" their pasts and answer for them, as well. Sophie's return to Haiti also ties in with the novel's theme of home, and the impossibility of ever truly returning there. Haiti was Sophie's home for the first 12 years of her life, and it is her ancestral home more broadly—she believes, perhaps, that in returning here, she can escape her present circumstances, heal the past, and find some of the happiness and innocence she experienced in childhood. Sophie, though, will soon learn that there is no real way to return to the home one has lost—home is not a fixed place, but rather an emotional state that comes to exist, over a lifetime, only within one's own mind and memory.

❝ "Who would have imagined it?" [Tante Atie] said. "The precious one has your *manman's* black face. She looks more like Martine's child than yours."

Related Characters: Tante Atie (speaker), Brigitte, Martine Caco , Sophie Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Tante Atie looks at Sophie's infant daughter, Brigitte, for the first time—and is stunned by what she sees. As she remarks that Brigitte looks "more like Martine's child" than she does Sophie's, Danticat engages with the theme of mothers, daughters, and generational trauma. Sophie's great fear as a mother is the fear of passing down the trauma that has, for generations, trickled down through the women of her family. Sophie has been trying to work on her own trauma and ensure that she doesn't unwittingly bring such misery into Brigitte's life—but when Tante Atie makes this statement, Danticat seems to suggest that there are never any guarantees regarding the painful legacy one may or may not inherit. Sophie hopes to shield her daughter from the pain she herself suffered—but in this passage is reminded that mothers, in trying to shield their daughters from pain, can actually end up traumatizing them further, or in new and unexpected ways.

Chapter 18 Quotes

"Your husband? Is he a good man?"

"He is a very good man, but I have no desire. I feel like it is an evil thing to do."

"Your mother? Did she ever *test* you?"

"You can call it that."

"That is what we have always called it."

"I call it humiliation," I said. "I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here."

Related Characters: Sophie Caco, Granmè Ifé (speaker), Joseph

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121-122

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sophie confronts Granmè Ifé directly, and for the first time, about the "humiliation," trauma, and pain that the practice of virginity "testing" has caused—not just for Sophie herself, but for all of the women in their family. Sophie is full of anger as she thinks about the violence that has been done unto her—and, of course, to all the women in her family—by her mother, the very woman who was supposed to protect her. All of the Caco women have faced this violent betrayal, but Sophie is the first to confront, name, and condemn what has happened to her—even as she admits that the shame she feels is so great that it prevents her from being a full participant in her marriage and her life more broadly. Granmè Ifé's language, on the other hand, is much more curious and resigned—she knows that testing is an ancient practice, and sees it as an unavoidable part of life as a woman. This demonstrates the generational divide between Sophie and Granmè Ifé—to Sophie, the pain of testing is a great injustice, but to her grandmother it is merely a fact of life and a defining characteristic of home, family, and womanhood.

Chapter 19 Quotes

I had spent two days in the hospital in Providence and four weeks with stitches between my legs. Joseph could never understand why I had done something so horrible to myself. I could not explain to him that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom.

Related Characters: Sophie Caco (speaker), Joseph, Martine Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127-128

Explanation and Analysis

As Sophie reflects on the violent way in which she "took" her own "virginity" by mutilating her vagina with a pestle, she admits that the "horrible" act must be alienating and incomprehensible to some people. Sophie, however, defends what she did to herself in spite of the physical and emotional pain it added to her life. Convincing Martine that she was no longer pure was the only way to free herself from the virginity "testing" that Martine inflicted on her—and yet Sophie was unable to actually go through with the act of losing her virginity while still under her mother's roof, because to do so would be a profound betrayal. Sophie had to get away from her mother, from Martine's testing, and from the restrictive boundaries that defined her life—even if extreme and even violent measures were the only thing that would free her. Her husband, Joseph's, inability to understand Sophie's actions demonstrates the many barriers between them—differences of culture, gender, and perspective—and suggests that Sophie is, in

many ways, still imprisoned and isolated by the horrible trauma of her life with her mother.

Chapter 21 Quotes

"They train you to find a husband. [...] They poke at your panties in the middle of the night, to see if you are still whole. They listen when you pee... If you pee loud, it means you've got big spaces between your legs. They make you burn your fingers learning to cook. Then still you have nothing."

Related Characters: Tante Atie (speaker), Sophie Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tante Atie laments the unfairness, violence, and suspicion that all Haitian women face from a very young age. Tante Atie—husbandless, lonely, addicted to alcohol, and duty-bound to serve the mother who violated her repeatedly throughout her youth—is angry with the lot she has in life and frustrated with how her mother (and, by proxy, all the ancestors who came before her) failed to prepare her for life. Tante Atie feels that all of the preparation for becoming a good wife—having her virginity "tested" constantly, being made to learn how to cook and clean, being taught that her worth was intimately tied to her value as a submissive provider—has profoundly derailed her. Tante Atie's frustrations mirror Sophie's anger over the violence that was inflicted upon her throughout her youth. Both of them suffered in the name of becoming good wives, only to find themselves profoundly unprepared, physically and emotionally, to inhabit their own bodies, let alone fulfill the marital duties they were warned they'd have to perform from a young age. The paradox of how both Atie and Sophie were raised emerges in this passage—they were warned of the evils of surrendering their purity to a man, but at the same time, raised to be little more than subservient wives.

Chapter 22 Quotes

"If it is a boy, the lantern will be put outside the shack. If there is a man, he will stay awake all night with the new child. [...] If it is a girl, the midwife will cut the child's cord and go home. Only the mother will be left in the darkness to hold her child. There will be no lamps, no candles, no more light."

Related Characters: Granmè Ifé (speaker), Sophie Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Granmè Ifé, observing some lights shining on a distant hill, tells Sophie about what the lights signify: a baby is being born. As she continues to explain what the changes in light over the next couple hours will mean regarding the birth, Danticat uses the metaphor that emerges to show just how undervalued girls and women are in Haitian society. Lights guide the way of Haitian males from the moment of their birth—but baby girls and their mothers are left alone in darkness with only each another to cling to. There is nothing worth celebrating or marking about the birth of a baby girl, and newborns and new mothers alike are left cold, alone, bloody, and abandoned to make their way through the harsh night. This passage speaks to the generational trauma which afflicts the mothers and daughters within *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and shows the painful, inescapable nature of the cyclical violence, inattention, and cruelty towards women that permeate Haitian society.

Chapter 23 Quotes

"Now you have a child of your own. You must know that everything a mother does, she does for her child's own good. You cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself." [...] [Granmè Ifé] walked into her room, took her statue of Erzulie, and pressed it into my hand. "My heart, it weeps like a river," she said, "for the pain we have caused you."

Related Characters: Sophie Caco, Granmè Ifé (speaker), Brigitte

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156-157

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Granmè Ifé and Sophie speak, yet again, about the practice of virginity "testing," and its lamentable consequences for the girls and women subjected to it. Danticat shows how indefensible the practice is by having Granmè Ifé at first try to defend or explain it—and then completely fall apart, admitting to the shame she feels over her own complicity in a system which brutalizes young girls physically and emotionally, inside and out. One part of Granmè Ifé truly believes that in testing their daughters, mothers are trying to look out for them and protect them

from a violent, misogynistic world—another part of her, much deeper down within her soul, understands that the pain caused by testing is profound, inexcusable, rampant, and perhaps unsolvable. All she can do in this moment is apologize to Sophie on behalf of all the Caco women who have come before her—in one breath acknowledging the weight of generational trauma while also admitting that there is, in a very real sense, no way to put a stop to the future suffering of Haitian girls and women all across the country and the diaspora.

Chapter 26 Quotes

"The new lady," [Eliab] said, "does she belong to you?"

"Sometimes I claim her," I said, "sometimes I do not."

Related Characters: Sophie Caco, Eliab (speaker), Joseph, Martine Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

After Sophie has been in Haiti for a while, her mother sends a cassette to Granmè Ifé—on it, she states that Sophie's husband, Joseph, is concerned about her, since Sophie told no one where she was going or why. Granmè Ifé replies to Martine's message, telling her of Sophie's whereabouts, and soon after Martine arrives in Haiti to visit her relatives and collect Sophie. As Martine lays eyes on her mother for the first time in years, she doesn't know whether or not she should "claim" her. Martine is the source of so much of Sophie's pain, trauma, and suffering—at the same time, she knows that who she is inextricable from her mother, and that they are part of the same legacy, tradition, and background. Sophie admits that sometimes she does claim her mother—in other words, sometimes she's able to accept who her mother is to her and why—but also says that at other times, she's unwilling to internalize or accept the role her mother has played in her life.

"I did it," she said, "because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing her that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day."

Related Characters: Martine Caco (speaker), Granmè Ifé, Sophie Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172-173

Explanation and Analysis

When Sophie asks Martine to explain, once and for all, why she "tested" Sophie's virginity even after seeing the ways in which testing negatively impacted Tante Atie and Martine herself, Martine answers as truthfully as she can. She explains that she used the "excuse" of her mother having done it to her to justify doing it to Sophie. Danticat uses this statement, an admission of guilt, to show how generational trauma persists through the years, preying upon its own victims and turning them into perpetrators. Martine understood what testing would do to her daughter—but perhaps out of vengeance, anger, or simply helplessness, inflicted it upon Sophie anyway. Sophie's journey to Haiti is, in large part, a search for answers as to why the women in her family perpetrate and perpetuate violence against one another—here, she forces her mother to admit that while there is no "excuse" for what the women in their family have done to one another, the testing continues out of a combination of spite, desperation, and learned adherence to the "old ways," however painful they may be.

Chapter 29 Quotes

After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had "caught" from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own. [...] I looked back at my daughter, who was sleeping peacefully. [...] The fact that she could sleep meant that she had no nightmares, and maybe, would never become a frightened insomniac like my mother and me.

Related Characters: Sophie Caco (speaker), Brigitte, Martine Caco , Joseph

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

As Sophie, freshly returned from Haiti, drives her daughter, Brigitte, back to their home in Providence, Rhode Island,

she looks back on her sleeping daughter. Sophie hopes that Brigitte's peacefulness while dreaming is a sign that she has not inherited the trauma, pain, and fear that have defined the lives of so many Caco women. Sophie is hyperaware of the ways in which trauma is passed on—wittingly or unwittingly—from generation to generation, and is terrified of imbuing her daughter's life with the same pain and suffering that Martine brought into hers. Sophie hopes that she can break the cycle of generational trauma and mother her daughter in a way that protects and prospers her, but cannot escape the lingering fear in the back of her mind that there is no way to escape this pain or prevent it from trickling down no matter how hard one tries.

Martine's night terrors, and Sophie's own trouble sleeping, are symbolic of their larger spiritual and psychological unrest as a result of the violence and trauma they've faced. Brigitte's calm signifies that, for now, there is no trauma keeping her from dreams—but Sophie knows that in spite of how hard she tries, she can only keep her daughter safe and pure for so long. This is the closest Sophie comes in the entirety of the novel to understanding the desperation and helplessness that is, perhaps, behind the proliferation of "testing" throughout generations of women—a desire to keep one's daughters safe, pure, and untouched, even by using extreme or violent measures.

Chapter 30 Quotes

"My grandmother was preparing her funeral," I said. "It's a thing at home." [...]

"You called it home?" [Joseph] said. "Haiti."

"What else would I call it?"

"You have never called it that since we've been together. Home has always been your mother's house, that you could never go back to."

Related Characters: Joseph, Sophie Caco (speaker), Martine Caco , Granmè Ifé

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sophie refers to Haiti as "home" for the first time. Joseph, her husband, points out that home as always been, to Sophie, the one place she's been forbidden from returning—her mother's house in Brooklyn. This passage clarifies Edwidge Danticat's larger argument about the nature of home. She suggest that home, for most people—and especially for members of a diaspora—is a fluid state of mind rather than a physical place. Home isn't somewhere to which a person can return, because it's something that doesn't really exist—home is a sense of innocence and happiness that can never be reclaimed once one has lost it. Sophie is forced to confront her ideas of what makes a home—whether "home" for her is the innocence of her youth in Haiti, the relationship she had with her mother before the introduction of the violent virginity "testing," or some other state of purity, innocence, and safety that she can't reclaim.

Chapter 31 Quotes

"Because of you, I feel like a helpless cripple. I sometimes want to kill myself. All because of what you did to me, a child who could not say no, a child who could not defend herself. It would be easy to hate you, but I can't because you are part of me. You are me."

Related Characters: Buki, Sophie Caco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sophie reads aloud the letter written by one of her fellow sexual phobia support group members, Buki, to her grandmother. Buki, whose grandmother ritually mutilated her genitals at a young age, has a great deal of rage towards her grandmother—but at the same time understands that her grandmother is both a part of her DNA and the woman who has (for better or worse) shaped her life. Buki's feelings towards her grandmother echo many of the emotions Sophie has been struggling to wrangle—let alone admit to herself—for most of the novel, and though she did not write these words, as Sophie speaks them aloud, she feels a reckoning with her own past, a kinship with Buki, and an understanding of the paradox of the abused going on to abuse the next generation. Sophie cannot bring herself to hate her mother because her mother, like Buki's grandmother, is "part of [her]"—at the same time, however, the trauma Sophie's mother has inflicted on her is very real, and must be confronted.

Chapter 32 Quotes

"Your mother never gave him a face. That's why he's a shadow. That's why he can control her. I'm not surprised she's having nightmares. [...] You and your mother should both go there again and see that you can walk away from it. Even if you can never face the man who is your father, there are things that you can say to the spot where it happened. I think you'll be free once you have your confrontation. There will be no more ghosts."

Related Characters: Rena (speaker), Martine Caco , Sophie Caco

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis

Sophie's therapist, Rena, urges Sophie not to make the same mistakes her mother Martine has made—lest she suffer the same consequences her mother suffers each and every day. Rena says that in failing to confront the trauma of her past, Martine has allowed it to take control over every aspect of her life. This, Danticat suggests, is the seed of generational trauma, and the crux of why the women of the Caco family have been unable to escape the suffering passed down to them by their mothers. Rena is telling Sophie that she has a chance to make a real change and rid herself of her "ghosts"—she even suggests that Sophie can help Martine heal, change, and move on as well. For the women of the Caco family, however, the duties of remembering the past are so profound that they shoulder trauma, pain, and suffering too. Rena is trying to tell Sophie she doesn't have to live this way—words that will soon be echoed by Granmè Ifé, in a much different setting, after Sophie has witnessed the death of her mother and learned the hard way how profoundly and entirely the refusal to confront one's trauma can derail a life.

Chapter 35 Quotes

"There is a place [...] where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her. There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: *'Ou libere?'* Are you free, my daughter?"

My grandmother quickly pressed her fingers over my lips.

"Now," she said, "you will know how to answer."

Related Characters: Sophie Caco, Granmè Ifé (speaker), Martine Caco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

After burying Martine, Sophie flees her mother's gravesite and runs into a cane field nearby, where she begins beating the stalks until her hands bleed. Her ancestors have died in cane fields, her mother was raped in a cane field, and Sophie herself, in a way, began in a cane field (she was conceived as a product of her mother's rape). As Sophie lashes out against the site of so much suffering, Granmè Ifé approaches to comfort her. She tells Sophie, in calming, florid language, that while it is important to remember and honor the past, Sophie can—and must—liberate herself from it if she wants to survive. To carry the weight of the past, and all the suffering that has occurred in the "place" it represents, is an unbearable load for anyone—especially Sophie, herself a survivor the pain, despair, and violence brought on by generational trauma. Granmè Ifé releases Sophie from shouldering the burden of that trauma, urging her not to forget the stories of the past or the mothers who have come before her, but to allow herself to move on.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

As Sophie Caco walks home from school one Friday, she admires the Mother's Day card she has made for her Tante Atie. It is small and made of cardboard, but Sophie has dangled a flattened dry **daffodil** from its edge. As Sophie approaches the house, she puts the card into her pocket and greets Tante Atie, who is embroidering on the porch of their home. When Tante Atie asks Sophie how school was, Sophie says she wishes Tante Atie would come to the reading classes the school hosts for parents. Tante Atie insists she doesn't want to learn how to read—"The young," she says, "should learn from the old."

The opening moments of the novel introduce Sophie's close relationship with her aunt, Tante Atie, who has raised her like a mother would. They also establish the central idea of generational inheritance, specifically that of trauma. The young in this novel learn from the old—but what they learn is often painful.

Once, Tante Atie says, she wanted to go to school, she says, but that time has passed—all that is important now, she believes, is that Sophie doesn't have to work in the sugar cane fields, where Tante Atie and Sophie's mother, Martine, and Tante Atie "practically lived when they were children." Sophie thinks of the horrible stories about the fields Tante Atie has told her over the years—including the one about how Sophie's grandfather died of heatstroke in the middle of a workday.

Tante Atie's recollections demonstrate the hard past from which Sophie's family has emerged, and establishes a legacy of violence, loss, and trauma.

Sophie and Tante Atie spot the albino lottery man, Chabin, coming up the road. He asks the two of them if they're planning on playing. Though Tante Atie plays the lottery every week, she never wins—nonetheless, she pays Chabin to play the number 31—Martine's age—twice.

Tante Atie clearly misses her sister, using her age as a good-luck charm in the lottery as a way of honoring her and bringing her into Sophie's day-to-day life.

After Chabin walks away, Sophie watches a group of children across the street playing in a pile of leaves in the yard of Madame and Monsieur Augustin's house. Tante Atie scoffs at the children, stating that they should be raking the leaves instead in order to make their mothers proud—especially with Mother's Day just around the corner, on Sunday. Sophie asks if the upcoming holiday makes Tante Atie sad—Tante Atie replies only that Sophie is "wise beyond [her] years, just like [her] mother."

Though Sophie chooses to honor Tante Atie each year on Mother's Day, Tante Atie knows she is not really Sophie's mother. This passage suggests they'll both have to reckon with the reality of that fact sooner rather than later.

Sophie, who has been planning on sneaking the card for Tante Atie under her pillow, instead pulls the card from her pocket and gives it to her aunt. Tante Atie doesn't look inside the card, insisting that Sophie must send it to Martine. Sophie, however, only knows her mother from a picture that sits on top of the night table on Tante Atie's side of the bed. Dismayed to find that Tante Atie doesn't want the card, Sophie tears the **daffodil** off of it and puts it into her pocket. While Tante Atie goes inside to prepare a dessert for a potluck that evening, Sophie sits on the porch and sulks, watching the children across the street playing with leaves and daffodils.

This passage implies that Sophie gives a personalized Mother's Day card to Tante Atie each year on the holiday. Tante Atie's sudden refusal of the card again foreshadows that things are about to change for them both. The symbol of daffodils, which represent resilience and adaptation, also foreshadows how strong Sophie and her aunt will need to be in the coming days.

That night, on the way to the potluck, Sophie apologizes for upsetting Tante Atie with the card. Tante Atie replies that Sophie has never upset her—which is why "this whole thing is going to be so hard." Sophie asks Tante Atie what she means, but Tante Atie will not respond. Together, they head to the potluck at the Augustins' house across the street.

Tante Atie all but admits that something bad is going to happen soon, but is clearly too afraid to tell Sophie exactly what's approaching. It's clear that although Tante Atie and Sophie share a close bond, whatever is on the horizon could threaten their relationship.

As Madame Augustin passes out tea to her guests, she asks Tante Atie how Martine is doing, and remarks that she saw Tante Atie receive a big package in the mail the other day. Madame Augustin asks if the package was a gift for Sophie, but observes that it was just Sophie's 12th birthday two months ago. Sophie becomes suspicious, curious why Tante Atie wouldn't have shown her a big package. Usually, all that Martine sends from New York are cassette tapes, which Sophie and Tante Atie listen to together. Madame Augustin continues prying, asking if perhaps Tante Atie is preparing for a journey to New York. Tante Atie insists she isn't leaving.

The antagonism between Madame Augustin and Tante Atie is deep-rooted and dangerous, and in this passage Madame Augustin purposefully taunts and antagonizes Atie—not realizing or simply not caring that she's involving the innocent Sophie in her own vendetta.

At last, Madame Augustin says she has already gotten "good information" that Tante Atie received a plane ticket in the mail. Another neighbor asks if Martine has sent for Sophie. Madame Augustin congratulates Sophie, telling her that going to New York will be "the best thing that is ever going to happen" in her life. Sophie sulks for the remainder of the party. After everyone else has left, Monsieur Augustin, Sophie's teacher, walks her and Tante Atie home. At their door, Monsieur Augustin squeezes Tante Atie's hand and kisses her cheek, congratulating her on the good news and reminding her that "a child belongs with her mother."

Even though everyone else is happy that Sophie is getting the chance to go to America—and all seem to believe that children belong with their biological mothers—it's clear from Sophie's love of her Tante Atie that Sophie is already where she belongs, and that traveling to America is going to represent a major disruption in her life.

As Monsieur Augustin returns home, Tante Atie watches closely through their lit windows as Monsieur and Madame Augustin undress and ready for bed, laughing and talking as they do. Tante Atie begins crying, then turns and ushers Sophie inside their own home. Inside, Tante Atie tries to apologize to the furious Sophie, explaining that Martine arranged the plane ticket through backchannels with no prior notice. Tante Atie urges Sophie to be excited about going to New York—even though she herself is sobbing. After the two of them climb into their shared bed and Tante Atie cries herself to sleep, Sophie sneaks the Mother's Day card from her clothes and tucks it under Tante Atie's pillow.

Tante Atie once loved—and perhaps still loves—Monsieur Augustin, a fact which adds to the many small tragedies that make up her life. Atie is clearly devastated to have to send Sophie away, but at the same time feels she must relinquish Sophie to her true mother—even though Sophie, as her preoccupation with the card makes clear, views Atie—not Martine—as her true mother.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Tante Atie prepares a treat for breakfast: cinnamon rice pudding. Sophie is still so upset that she barely feels like eating, but sits down at the table anyway. Usually, over breakfast, Tante Atie tells funny stories about their family's past, often including Tante Atie and Martine's mother, whom Sophie calls Granmè Ifé, at their center. But this morning Tante Atie cannot summon a funny story, and the two eat in silence.

Storytelling is, for Sophie and her family, a way of remembering and honoring their historical roots, and of building relationships and fostering love. The absence of storytelling on this fateful morning shows that there is a fracture in the family precipitated by Sophie's departure.

After the meal, Tante Atie tells Sophie that she has to tell her some things about Martine, and about their family's history. Tante Atie reveals that after Sophie joins her mother in New York, Atie is going to leave Croix-des-Rosets and join Granmè Ifé in her village—Atie and Sophie are both going to be with their mothers for the first time in years. Tante Atie assures Sophie that Martine never wanted to abandon her—and that both Martine and Tante Atie have had to live lives over which they have little control. Tante Atie makes Sophie promise that she will behave herself in New York and never try to fight with Martine. Sophie agrees to the promise.

Tante Atie knows that Sophie is facing a difficult transition and probably feeling a lot of anger about being uprooted from her home to go live with a woman she doesn't even remember. Tante Atie therefore wants to give both Sophie and Martine the best start possible by telling Sophie good things about her mother and reassuring her of Martine's love, though Sophie has never experienced it firsthand.

Tante Atie touches the collar of Sophie's bright yellow dress, remarking upon how many articles of yellow-hued clothing Sophie has. Sophie says she likes dressing like a **daffodil**, and Tante Atie tells her that Martine always loved daffodils, too, because the flowers, native to Europe, once transplanted to Haiti "grew in a place that they were not supposed to." Tante Atie takes Sophie's Mother's Day card from her pocket and gives it back to her, urging Sophie to give it to Martine once she arrives in New York.

Tante Atie further encourages Sophie with positivity by comparing her to a daffodil. Much like this resilient flower that is able to grow, thrive, and adapt even in difficult conditions, Sophie will have to be courageous and adaptable in her transition from living with Tante Atie in Haiti to living with Martine in the U.S.

CHAPTER 3

Before Sophie leaves Haiti, Tante Atie brings her to La Nouvelle Dame Marie—Granmè Ifé's village—to receive her grandmother's blessing. The two of them walk up the rough roads to Granmè Ifé's house, passing cane fields full of workers, thatched huts full of women cooking, and a farm owned by a woman named Man Grace. As Tante Atie and Sophie walk up to the house, Granmè Ifé hurries to embrace them, promising to cook them all the things they like best.

Though generational trauma is passed down through mothers and daughters, this passage shows how blessings, happiness, and encouragement can also be handed down through generations, even in difficult times.

That night, over supper, Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé talk about all the good fortune Sophie will have in New York. Sophie's grandmother urges her to remember that Martine was—and is—her "first friend." That night in bed, though, Sophie resists falling asleep, afraid of having one of her **nightmares** about her mother stealing her away.

Even though Sophie's aunt and grandmother try to comfort her and get her excited about New York, she has a bad feeling about reuniting with her mother and about living in a new place. Nightmares are an ongoing symbol of lingering trauma throughout the novel, and the fact that Sophie is having a nightmare leading up to her departure foreshadows future emotional pain for her in the U.S.

Sophie and Tante Atie's visit to La Nouvelle Dame Marie is short—the next day, they leave to return to Croix-des-Rosets. Granmè Ifé says it's good that their trip has been quick—if they were to stay too long, she says, she might suffer from chagrin (which she sees as a "genuine physical disease") upon parting from them. On the van ride back to Croix-des-Rosets, Sophie asks if chagrin can kill a person, and if there's any way to keep it from visiting. Tante Atie says there's no way to prevent chagrin—and that, in fact, when one is suffering heavy burdens in life, it means they have been "chosen to carry part of the sky" atop their heads.

This passage shows that Granmè Ifé, and all of the women in Sophie's family, associate emotional pain with real physical distress and illness. Even though Sophie comes from a place where pain is taken seriously, however, the novel is about to open up issues in which women's pain is discounted and shoved aside, leaving them to carry their heavy burdens alone and in misery.

CHAPTER 4

During Sophie's last week in Croix-des-Rosets, she goes to school each day and cleans the yard each afternoon while Tante Atie works almost nonstop, leaving before dawn and coming home late at night after Sophie is already in bed. That Friday afternoon, though, when Sophie comes home from school, the thoughts of leaving she has been suppressing all week rise to the surface when she sees a large, brand-new suitcase sitting in the middle of the living room. Tante Atie explains that she has been working extra-hard all week to be able to afford the suitcase and some other gifts for Sophie to take to New York.

Tante Atie really wants to give Sophie every possible advantage as she moves to New York. This suggests that Tante Atie is both hopeful and fearful about what life in America will be like for Sophie—it's clear that, like Sophie, she views Haiti as Sophie's true home since that is where her culture is based and is where she and her family have been raised for generations.

Tante Atie begins preparing a special tea, pouring milk from a silver kettle that usually sits displayed high on a shelf. As Tante Atie pours, Sophie sees a note stuck to the bottom of the kettle—it reads "*Je t'aime de tout mon coeur*," or "I love you with all my heart," and it is signed by Monsieur Augustin. As Sophie and Tante Atie drink their tea, they both begin crying. Tante Atie urges Sophie to be strong, and gives her one of her presents: a saffron-colored dress embroidered with tiny **daffodils**. That night, Sophie has horrible **nightmares** of Martine, with daffodils in her hair, trying to wrestle Sophie to the floor.

Tante Atie pushes aside her own painful memories and associations to make things nice for Sophie. Tante Atie treats Sophie like a mother should treat her child: with respect, love, and intense care. Though Tante Atie tries to give Sophie physical reminders of the love and strength at the core of their relationship, Sophie's bad dreams seem to foretell the hardship awaiting her in America.

In the morning, Tante Atie helps Sophie get ready for the airport and don her new **daffodil** dress. As the two sit down to breakfast, Sophie sees that it is drizzling outside. She asks if she has to leave even if it's raining, but Tante Atie says that nothing can stop Sophie's journey now. Tante Atie pulls the now-very-wrinkled Mother's Day card from her pocket and gives it back to Sophie one more time, insisting with finality that Martine will love it. Sophie tells Tante Atie what the poem written inside says: "*My mother is a daffodil, limber and strong as one. My mother is a daffodil, but in the wind, iron strong.*" Tante Atie says that the poem is beautiful—but not meant for her.

Sophie wears her daffodil dress—and reads Tante Atie the daffodil poem—in an attempt to remind both herself and Tante Atie of how strong they are, and of the fact that they're capable of pulling through this sadness.

Chabin, the lottery man, pokes his head in the open front door and tells Tante Atie that she has won 10 *gourdes*, or Haitian dollars, in the lottery. Tante Atie clutches her new bills and claims that Martine brings her luck. As the rain lets up, the van taking Sophie and Tante Atie to the airport arrives. They head out to meet it in spite of not having touched their breakfasts. Inside the cab, the driver compliments Tante Atie's clean yard. "My child," she replies, "she cleans it."

The fact that Tante Atie refers to Sophie as her child—but not her daughter—shows that while she loves Sophie like her own, she doesn't feel entitled to keep her, and knows she must relinquish Sophie to someone who might love her less simply because Martine is Sophie's mother by blood.

CHAPTER 5

Sophie is mesmerized as the van speeds through the streets of Port-au-Prince—she has never been to the city before. Tante Atie tells Sophie a story about how she and Martine used to save up all year for a Christmas Eve trip into the city to shop, eat, and flirt with tourists. As the car slows down, Tante Atie realizes they are stuck in traffic because of some "trouble" up ahead. At the airport, Sophie and Tante Atie see that army trucks have surrounded a car that is engulfed in flames. Students are throwing rocks at the car, and soldiers are shooting bullets and tear gas as well as pistol-whipping and punching them. Tante Atie begs Sophie to understand that she is leaving a world of violence for a better one, but Sophie says all she knows is that she is leaving Tante Atie.

Even as Sophie looks upon the extreme violence that is a part of life in Haiti, she feels sad to be leaving because she does not want to abandon her home or her aunt. Sophie can't see the ways in which she might have a better life in America, because all she can feel is the acute emotional loss she is going through.

Inside the crowded airport, a breathless flight attendant approaches Tante Atie and Sophie, identifying Sophie as Sophie Caco. She promises to take good care of Sophie, but says they must go now—the van was late, and the flight is about to leave. Tante Atie and Sophie have a rushed goodbye, as the driver, too, urges Tante Atie to leave the airport before more violence occurs. Sophie follows the woman through the airport, looking back at Tante Atie one last time.

Sophie is quickly rushed through her goodbye with Tante Atie, unable to fully thank her aunt for all she's done for her. Sophie and Tante Atie don't know when they'll see each other again, but aren't afforded the luxury of an emotional farewell in the midst of the chaos and violence at the airport.

Sophie follows the attendant down the crowded plane's central aisle. The woman seats her near a window, and when Sophie looks out, she sees smoke. The woman brings a hysterical little boy to sit by Sophie. The woman tries to calm the boy down, but he spits in her face. When Sophie reaches over to stroke the boy's head, he bites her hand. The boy climbs from his seat onto another passenger's lap, banging his head against one of the plane's windows. Eventually, with the help of the passenger, the attendant manages to wrestle the boy into his seat. The flight attendant tells the man that the boy's father, some "*très* corrupt" government official, just died in the fire out front. As the plane takes off, the sound of the engine drowns out the boy's sobs.

While Sophie is calm and seemingly shell-shocked as she boards the plane, her seat companion is, perhaps, physically expressing the pain, suffering, and fear that Sophie wishes she herself could project. This passage also shows just how dangerous things are in Haiti, cementing her neighbors' belief that Sophie is lucky to have the chance at a life in America.

CHAPTER 6

When the plane touches down in New York, the flight attendant shakes Sophie and the boy next to her awake, then leads them off the plane and into the airport to collect their luggage. She brings them through some glass doors, where lots of people are waiting with balloons and flowers for their loved ones. A woman rushes forward, crying, and embraces the little boy, sobbing about how "they've killed [her] brother." Martine approaches and scoops Sophie up in her arms. She sets Sophie down and hands the flight attendant some money, thanking her for bringing Sophie to New York. Though Sophie tries to wave goodbye to the attendant, she has already turned her back on them.

Sophie's introduction to New York is jarring and unsentimental. She realizes that the woman who seemed to be caring for her and the little boy next to her was simply being bribed, and is confronted again with the traumatic fallout of the boy's father's murder. Sophie has been uprooted from all that she knew, and the adjustment is giving her emotional whiplash.

Martine is overjoyed to see Sophie. She can't stop looking at her or touching her, and begs Sophie to speak just so she can hear her voice. Sophie, however, is cold, tired, and nearly-catatonic. Martine tells Sophie that they're going to head home, where Sophie can sleep. After helping Sophie into her peeling, dented old car and waiting for the engine to warm up for several minutes, Martine begins driving the two of them towards home.

Though Martine is happy to see Sophie and reconnect with her, Sophie is too traumatized by the events of the past week—let alone the past few hours—to feel any joy or react positively.

During the long car ride, Martine asks Sophie questions about life in Haiti and about Tante Atie. She asks if Tante Atie ever went to night school, like she once said she wanted to, but Sophie says she never went. Martine laments that as girls, she and Tante Atie used to imagine themselves growing up to become the first female doctors from their whole village. As Martine pulls off the highway and into a dingy Brooklyn neighborhood where boys are throwing bottles at one another in the street, Sophie becomes apprehensive, but continues answering her mother's questions about Croix-des-Rosets. She listens while her mother explains that once, Tante Atie was betrothed to Monsieur Augustin, until the "fickle" man left her for another woman.

Martine is clearly excited to have Sophie in New York, talking to her as if she's a familiar old friend while the stunned, confused Sophie only half-listens. Sophie is frightened—and slightly despairing—as she realizes that the gritty, ugly neighborhood Martine is driving through is her new home. This perhaps suggests that the distinction between countries like Haiti and the U.S. aren't as clear-cut as Sophie's neighbors would like to imagine—although there is immense violence and poverty in parts of Haiti, it's clear that this New York neighborhood isn't exactly a bastion of safety and prosperity.

As Martine and Sophie enter Martine's graffiti-covered apartment building, they step over a homeless man. In spite of the bleak surroundings, Martine is cheerful and continues talking to Sophie about how Sophie is going to work hard in America and make something of herself. If she can do so, Martine says, the entire family will have succeeded—Sophie can be the one to "raise [their] heads."

Martine clearly hopes that Sophie will adjust easily to life in America, start to thrive, and make their whole family proud. Sophie, though, is so overwhelmed that she can't even process much of what Martine is saying to her.

Inside the apartment, decorated mostly in bright-red hues, Sophie looks through Martine's nursing books while Martine readies Sophie's room. When Martine comes back out, she is holding a large doll, and tells Sophie that the two of them will show Sophie to her room. The room is wallpapered in blue, and there are water stains on the ceiling. Nevertheless, when Martine asks Sophie if she likes the room, she says she does. Martine plays with the doll's hair, and explains the doll has been a "friend" to Martine in Sophie's absence—but now that Sophie is here, she doesn't need it anymore.

The atmosphere in Martine's apartment is creepy, unsettling, and very different from anything Sophie has ever known. The red decorations stand in stark contrast to Sophie's love of yellow, and the fact that Martine seems to have been drawing comfort from a doll in place of a daughter all these years is disturbing to say the least.

Martine draws Sophie close and explains that Sophie will never be alone—Martine is always just a few feet away now, and will sleep in the living room while Sophie takes the bedroom. She asks if Sophie wants to eat, talk, or play, but Sophie says she simply wants to go to bed. Martine starts unbuttoning Sophie's dress, but Sophie insists on doing it herself. Martine sees the Mother's Day card poking out of Sophie's dress and takes it. She reads the poem inside and asks if it's for her—Sophie replies that Tante Atie told her to give to Martine. Martine says she once loved **daffodils** as a girl, but hasn't seen any in New York. Sophie says there are still plenty of daffodils back in Haiti.

The fact that Martine says there are no daffodils in New York symbolizes her failure to adapt or thrive in America—she has been unable to locate symbols of resilience and adaptation in the physical environment, and similarly unable to cultivate strength within herself.

Sophie has trouble falling asleep. In the middle of the night, she hears her mother screaming "as though someone [is] trying to kill her." Sophie runs into the living room to find her mother thrashing alone on the sheets of the sofa bed, clearly in the middle of a **night terror**. Sophie shakes her mother awake, and Martine explains that sometimes she has "horrible visions" in her sleep. Sophie climbs into bed with Martine and comforts her until she falls asleep. Once Martine is asleep again, Sophie gets out of bed to go to the bathroom. In the mirror, she hardly recognizes her own face, which seems to have changed and aged in just one day.

Not only is the physical environment of Martine's apartment grim and frightening, but the emotional atmosphere, too, is unsettled and off-putting. Sophie must wake her mother from a violent nightmare, assuming the role of caretaker in spite of the fact that she is the one who needs attention, mothering, and help adjusting to her new world. Nevertheless, Sophie is determined to overcome her fears and reservations in order to thrive—just like a daffodil.

CHAPTER 7

Martine takes Sophie to Haiti Express, a neighborhood business where people can send mail, money orders, and cassette tapes to their families back in Haiti. Everyone at the shop knows who Sophie is, and they all welcome her warmly. Sophie follows Martine along on the rest of her shopping at the beauty store and a clothing shop, where Martine purchases some modest clothing for Sophie to wear to school. Sophie is dreading going to school—Martine has told her stories about Haitian children being bullied for "HBO—Haitian Body Odor" or accused of having AIDS.

Though the bustling, bright Haitian neighborhood in which Martine lives is happy and friendly, Sophie still fears the teasing she knows she's bound to suffer at school. Having been forcibly separated from her aunt, grandmother, and native land, this place doesn't feel like home—not yet.

Sophie is both overwhelmed and enchanted by the hustle and bustle along Flatbush Avenue as she catches snippets of games and arguments in Creole, admires all the small businesses, and marvels at the overhead subway tracks. Martine leads Sophie through the streets until they reach a building with a sign out front that reads "MARC CHEVALIER, ESQUIRE." Martine rings the bell, and a well-dressed Haitian man—Marc—answers the door. He excitedly welcomes Martine and Sophie into his handsome office. Martine kisses him on the cheek and chats with him in Creole. Marc introduces himself to Sophie as Marc Jolibois Francis Legrand Moravien Chevalier, but Sophie can barely focus on the introduction—on Marc's desk, there is a picture of him and Martine together.

Sophie is shocked by the fact that her mother seems to have a boyfriend. The novel will soon expand upon this fact—but given that Sophie has been raised by a single woman in an environment that prizes purity, Martine's relationship is a huge and possibly unwelcome surprise to Sophie.

That night, Marc drives Sophie and Martine out to a Haitian restaurant in Asbury Park to treat them to dinner. At the crowded restaurant, a group of men talk Haitian politics, lamenting the past and present struggles and abuses of power that have market Haiti's sociopolitical atmosphere. Sophie is comforted rather than off-put by the arguments—for some Haitians, "arguing is a sport." As Martine looks at the menu, Sophie notices Marc looking back and forth between the two of them—Sophie knows what Marc won't say, which is that there is no resemblance between the two of them.

At the Haitian restaurant in New Jersey, Sophie starts to feel a little bit more at home, comforted by the familiar food, conversation, and language—but Marc's look reminds her that she is a stranger here, and possibly an outsider even among her own people.

When the food arrives, Marc complains about the quality of the meal—but Sophie stuffs herself as if she has "been on a hunger strike." She tries to ignore the plain truth before her: that her mother now has two lives, and Marc is part of her present one while Sophie is "a living memory form the past."

Sophie feels acutely out of place. She thinks she has been supplanted by Marc—to Martine, Sophie is essentially a small stranger who has invaded Martine's newfound American life.

Marc asks Sophie what she wants to be when she grows up, and she says she wants to be a secretary. Marc urges her to reconsider—she could be a doctor or an engineer. When Marc asks Sophie if she has any boyfriends, Martine answers on Sophie's behalf, stating that Sophie will not be allowed to date until she's 18, unlike other "wild" American girls.

This passage foreshadows Martine's meddling in Sophie's personal life, and her desire to dictate what Sophie does and does not feel, want, or need.

CHAPTER 8

It is summer, and school doesn't start for two more months. Sophie accompanies Martine to her job at a local nursing home each day, watching soap operas in the lounge while her mother works. She also goes with Martine to her night job—working as a private nurse for a very sick old woman. Sophie feels terrible for her mother, whose **night terrors**, hard work, and obsession with skin-lightening cream have weathered her young face beyond her years. Martine tells Sophie that she wants Sophie to work hard in school so that when she's grown, there will be certain things she "won't have to do."

Sophie is trying her best to adjust to life in America, but finds herself saddened and intimidated by her mother's hard life and serious emotional problems, and the role she herself has had to assume as a caretaker and constant companion.

Martine asks Sophie what she thinks of Marc, and Sophie says she thinks Marc is "smart." Martine tells Sophie the story of how she met Marc—when she was getting her green card through an amnesty program, she needed a lawyer, and found Marc's name in a Haitian newspaper. Marc and Martine became friends, and Marc, old-fashioned but kind and generous, took her out frequently to restaurants and even once brought her to Canada. Sophie asks Martine if she is going to marry Marc, but Martine says she has no idea.

Martine's relationship with Marc seems very proper and almost professional. Sophie wonders about the nature of their relationship—and its future—but can't really get a straight answer from her mother about what Marc's intentions with her are , or vice versa.

Martine turns the question around on Sophie, asking if Sophie has ever liked a boy back in Haiti. Sophie says she hasn't. Martine tells Sophie that when school starts, she needs to ignore boys and stay "good." Sophie knows that by "good," her mother means that she needs to stay a virgin and not let anyone touch her. Sophie promises her mother that she has always been "good," and will stay that way. Martine tells Sophie that when she herself was a young girl, Granmè Ifé used to "test" Martine and Tante Atie to see if they were still virgins by putting her finger in their "very private parts." Martine recalls how Tante Atie used to "scream like a pig in a slaughterhouse" during the testing—but Granmè Ifé, Martine says, was raised to believe that it was her responsibility to keep her daughters pure.

This passage marks the first time in the novel that anyone mentions testing—a violent, invasive practice by which mothers insert their fingers into their daughters' vaginas in order to "test" their virginities, with the intention of keeping them pure until marriage. The blithe, blasé way in which Martine talks about the practice of testing—even as she acknowledges how emotionally and physically painful it was for Tante Atie—suggests that Martine is not opposed to the practice, and may even be threatening the young Sophie with subjecting her to it if she doesn't behave like a "good girl."

Martine continues her story, telling Sophie that Granmè Ifé stopped testing her early because one day, when she was not much older than Sophie, a man pulled her off the side of the road into a cane field and raped her. Sophie doesn't want to hear the story her mother is telling. Martine tells Sophie that though she never saw her rapist's face, she knows now, by looking at Sophie, that the old adage is true: "A child out of wedlock always looks like its father."

The second major revelation to come from this conversation is that Sophie is the product of a violent rape, one that Martine must relive each night in her night terrors. This further establishes Martine's preoccupation with sex and purity, and suggests that because of her own trauma, she is inherently suspicious of men and doubts Sophie's ability to remain pure, regardless of whether or not Sophie herself pursues love or sex.

CHAPTER 9

Six years have passed—Sophie is now 18, and about to start college in the fall. Martine is still working two jobs, but the two of them have saved up enough to move to a one-family house in a nicer, quieter part of Brooklyn near where Marc lives. Martine has a garden now, but tends only hibiscus—never **daffodils**. The new living room is still decorated entirely in red.

As Edwidge Danticat shows how the passage of six years' time has affected Martine, Sophie, and their relationship, she uses the fact that they do not tend daffodils as a shorthand for their difficulty in adapting, thriving, and growing together. Martine continues decorating her living spaces in red—the color of love and lust, but also of blood and violence.

Martine is proud of Sophie for having made it into a good college—but Sophie is resentful of Martine for sending her to a strict Haitian Adventist school for so many years and allowing her to incur the teasing of other neighborhood kids. Nevertheless, Sophie is able to speak French and English fluently in addition to Creole, and has spent the last six years studying hard.

Sophie has followed her mother's orders carefully for the last six years, doing everything Martine has asked of her and more. This positions Sophie as ready to rebel for the first time in her life, and foreshadows the strife to come in their relationship.

Sophie has also fallen in love. Just as Tante Atie always warned her that love, like rain, would "drown you" if you weren't careful, Sophie has quickly fallen head over heels for an older man named Joseph—a jazz musician who looks a little bit like Monsieur Augustin, and who lives next door to Sophie and her mother. Martine has always warned Sophie to stay away from "American boys," and other than Marc, has kept her away from men.

This passage makes even more clear just how ready Sophie is to break free and go against her mother's wishes. Sophie is experiencing romantic feelings for the first time in her life, though she knows how dangerous it would be to tell her mother about them or act on them in any way.

Whenever Joseph greets Sophie or Martine—who are almost always together when they walk in the public—Martine clutches Sophie close, as if to "rescue [her] from his stare." Sophie, though, is flattered by Joseph's attention, and enjoys exchanging "conspiring" looks with him. One day, when Joseph comes by to use the phone while Martine is at work, he and Sophie formally meet—and begin flirting right away. Joseph admires Sophie's slight accent. When he asks where she's from and she tells him she's from Haiti, he says he's from Louisiana, but they both speak a form of Creole. Joseph explains that he stays in Brooklyn occasionally but spends most of the year in Providence or out on tour as a musician. Before leaving, Joseph tells Sophie he works from home, and invites her to "drop by."

Even though Sophie tries to stay away from Joseph, there is a clear connection between them—one that he can't help but pursue, and she can't help but admit. Martine has been with Marc for many years, and now Sophie—a young woman of 18, legally an adult—feels she, too, should get to experience a romance for the first time in her life.

Sophie is too shy—and too scared of her mother—to take Joseph up on his invitation, but they meet again when Joseph brings Sophie a sandwich, again while Martine is at work, to thank her for letting him use the phone. The two of them talk, and Sophie admits to Joseph that though she's going to study to be a doctor, she isn't really passionate about the career choice. Joseph asks Sophie what she wants to do, but she's forced to admit she doesn't really know who she is or what her dreams are. Joseph tells Sophie it's okay to "flow wherever life takes you," but Sophie tells Joseph that his statement is "very American." Joseph tells Sophie he's not American, he's African American—which means that he and Sophie are "already part of each other." Sophie blushes and chokes on her sandwich.

Sophie and Joseph find that they have more and more things in common, and Joseph flusters, entices, and impresses Sophie with his "American" nature, his soulfulness, and his kindness. As their connection develops, it becomes clear that they share an attraction that runs deeper than just the physical.

Sophie begins going over to Joseph's apartment every day while her mother is working, even though she knows the wrath she'll incur if she's caught. She listens to Joseph play music, and the two of them talk about their lives. Joseph tells Sophie about his music career and his experimentation with slave songs and spirituals, and Sophie tells Joseph about her journey from Haiti to New York. They grow closer and closer each day, and one afternoon, Joseph tells Sophie that he wants to marry her in spite of the resistance they'll surely face from her mother because of his age. Sophie, however, doesn't see Joseph as old, even though he's her mother's age—he feels like an ally and a friend.

Sophie knows how much she stands to lose should she and Joseph get caught—but she can't stay away from him, unable to resist the feeling of being seen, heard, and understood by someone other than her mother for the first time in her entire life. Sophie has been taught that being a "good girl" means staying away from men, predators who only want one thing, but her relationship with Joseph is complicating the things that her mother has taught her in an attempt to keep her pure and safe.

One night, after a performance, Joseph shows up at Sophie's house to take her out to dinner. Sophie calls Martine at her night shift to make sure she's not coming home, then goes out with Joseph. When he returns Sophie to her doorstep that night, she tells him that she fears he won't respect her if she admits how much she likes him—she knows "what all men want." Joseph insists that all he wants with Sophie is to pursue happiness and love. That night, in bed, Sophie can hear the sounds of Joseph's music coming through the window, and feels an illicit "rush."

Even when Sophie confronts Joseph directly about her fears of intimacy and the conflicting things she's been taught, Joseph responds by making clear that he really does love Sophie—not just for her looks or her body, but for her soul.

CHAPTER 10

The next night, Martine comes home from work early and tells Sophie she wants to take her out, claiming that the two of them haven't spent enough time together lately. On the subway, as the train sails over the East River, Martine says she wishes that Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé would come to America. Sophie asks Martine if she'll ever go back to Haiti, and Martine says she'll have to return to help her mother make preemptive arrangements for her final resting place one day—but there are "ghosts" in Haiti, and Martine is not looking forward to going back.

Martine and Sophie experience a rare and calm moment of togetherness. As Martine opens up to Sophie about her hopes, her fears, and her "ghosts," Sophie believes that the moment is ripe for her, too, to open up about her innermost feelings.

Sophie changes the subject and asks her mother if it's okay to like someone now that she's 18. Martine begins asking who Sophie likes, and Sophie invents a fake boy named "Henry Napoleon." Martine recognizes the surname—the name of a wealthy Haitian family—and becomes excited, demanding to meet the boy. Sophie quickly says that Henry and his parents are in Haiti but assures Martine she can meet them when they return.

Sophie's attempt to level with her mother and talk to her as an equal fails as Martine rabidly seizes on the idea of Sophie having a love interest and demands to know every detail. Sophie panics and lies, determined to keep her mother from suspecting that she is being romantic or sexual with a man, which would be unacceptable in Martine's eyes.

After telling her mother about her love interest, Sophie decides she needs to be extra careful around Martine. She cooks Martine's favorite dishes, using a mortar and pestle to grind spices specially for each meal. Sophie gets good grades in school and works hard not to act wistful or distracted when Joseph is away on a gig. Martine continues asking about "Henry," and Sophie keeps lying, stating that he's away. Meanwhile, she receives postcards from Joseph nearly every day, and is careful to check the mail before her mother so that the letters remain secret. Nearly every night, Martine awakes with **nightmares**, and credits Sophie with saving her life when she wakes her up each night.

Sophie continues to care for her mother and, by Martine's own admission, keep her alive—but at the same time, slowly feels more and more stifled as she weighs the prospect of a future chained to her mother against a future of love, freedom, and equality with Joseph.

CHAPTER 11

When Joseph gets back from his tour, Sophie goes out to hear him play the first night he returns. After the show, Joseph takes Sophie out on the town, and they stay out until dawn—Sophie isn't worried, though, because of how late her mother comes home. Joseph brings Sophie to her front door, and she lets him kiss her for the first time.

Sophie and Joseph's relationship continues to change and grow, even as Sophie becomes increasingly aware of just how opposed Martine is to the idea of Sophie having a boyfriend.

Joseph goes out on another short tour, and when he comes back, he asks Sophie to marry him in earnest. She is unable to give him an answer, knowing her mother would never allow such a thing. The next day, though, when Sophie and Martine go on another train ride, Sophie tells her that "Henry Napoleon" is never coming back. Martine darkly tells Sophie that there are certain secrets she can't keep—"not from [her] mother anyway."

As it becomes clear that Martine is no longer buying any part of Sophie's story about "Henry Napoleon," Sophie notices Martine seeming to want to threaten Sophie and control her every move. This suggests that Martine will soon try to exert authority over Sophie's body and sexuality in the same way that her own mother did to Martine and Tante Atie.

The next night, when Sophie comes home late from a night out with Joseph, she walks in to see her mother sitting up in the living room, waiting for her with a belt in her hand. Martine demands to know where Sophie has been, and when Sophie will not answer her, she drags Sophie upstairs, makes her lie down on the bed, and "tests" Sophie's vagina with her fingers. Sophie tries to distract herself from the horrible act by praying and looking back on happy memories. During the test, Martine tries to distract Sophie in her own way: by telling her a story about the *Marasas*, figures of Haitian legend who were lovers and mirror images of one another. Martine condemns the vain *Marasas*, and warns Sophie that if she runs off with a man, she will be "giving up a lifetime" with her mother.

Sophie's secret is at last found out—and Martine makes good on her threats to ascertain all of Sophie's "secrets" by testing her. Sophie is intensely traumatized by the experience of being "tested"—and by Martine's unhinged monologue about the evil of finding one's "mirror image" in a lover, even as she wishes aloud that Sophie would stay with her forever and essentially be her *"mirror image." Martine is enacting upon Sophie the very violence her own mother enacted upon her, perpetuating the generational trauma that has permeated the Caco family for untold years.*

Martine leaves Sophie alone in the bedroom after the test. Sophie hears her mother's words echoing in her head—"There are secrets you cannot keep"—as she thinks about how much she feels like her mother's doll. Sophie realizes that she hasn't seen the doll in a long time, and figures that her mother has thrown the doll away "because she no longer [has] any use for it."

Sophie realizes that, like her mother's doll, she is becoming a useless burden to her mother. She begins to fear what will happen to her when her mother no longer has a need for her, either, equating her own worth with what practical use she can provide for others. Sophie's unhealthy outlook on relationships in this passage foreshadows future struggles with her self-image and relationships.

CHAPTER 12

Sophie does not tell Joseph what her mother has done to her before he leaves for Providence for five weeks. The virginity testing continues while Joseph is away—Martine must keep working night shifts and cannot keep an eye on Sophie, so she tests her each morning when she returns home. After Joseph returns from Providence, Sophie tries to avoid him. One night, he comes to the house and tells her he is moving to Providence for good, and she coldly rebuffs him.

Sophie is so ashamed by her mother's testing that she tries to hide it from the one person who could help her. It is clear that Sophie has reached a turning point—she must decide whether she is going to let her mother continue to abuse and shame her, or whether she is going to try to escape the generational trauma being perpetuated against her day after day.

Sophie goes inside, but after a few minutes, she begins to hear Joseph's saxophone playing and becomes deeply sad. Martine is out with Marc, and Sophie wanders into the kitchen, takes the pestle from a cabinet, and brings it up to bed with her. As she clutches it to her chest, she thinks of a story she was once told about a woman who, for 12 years, walked around with blood spurting out of her skin, unable to control or treat her disease. After consulting with Erzulie, the vodou goddess of love, the woman realized that if she wanted to stop the bleeding, she'd have to give up being a human being and turn into a plant or an animal. Erzulie transformed the woman into a butterfly, and she never bled again.

The story of the bleeding woman serves as a metaphor for Sophie's own entrapment in a shameful, painful situation. Sophie knows that to free herself from her mother's testing, she must transform. As she holds the pestle to her chest, she contemplates mutilating herself—unlike the woman in the story, Sophie must bleed to be free.

With the story of the bleeding woman in mind, Sophie takes the pestle, places it between her legs, and shoves it into her vagina. She can feel her flesh tear, and watches as the sheets turn bloody. She stuffs the sheets into a bag and replaces them, then lies on the bed and waits for Martine to come home. When Martine arrives home to test her, Sophie pushes aside the horrible ache within and lets her. Upon feeling that Sophie is no longer a "virgin," Martine throws Sophie's belongings at her and orders her to go and try her luck with the man who has ruined her.

Sophie knows that in order to free herself from her mother, she must do something painful and drastic. By mutilating her vagina and breaking her hymen, Sophie knows that she will transform herself from pure to impure in her mother's eyes, since Martine's concept of virginity is based solely on whether or not a girl's hymen is intact. In performing this gruesome act, Sophie essentially closes off the person she once was in order to provoke her mother's rejection of her, and thus free Sophie from her horrific abuse.

Sophie waits until Martine is asleep, then packs her things and runs next door to Joseph's. Limping, she enters his apartment and tells him she is ready to get married right away. Sophie takes comfort in the fact that she is bound for a place called Providence—"a place that destiny [is] calling [her] to."

Sophie has disentangled herself from her mother, and is now free to be with Joseph. She carries the physical and emotional wounds of what she's done to herself, however, as the price she's paid to secure her own liberation.

CHAPTER 13

A couple of years later, Sophie is in a van on the way to La Nouvelle Dame Marie. She tries to ignore the lecherous, sexual, and yet poetic compliments her driver showers upon her and take in the sights, sounds, and smells of the village around her instead. Once they arrive at their destination, the driver takes his shirt off to combat the heat, and asks Sophie to undress, too. She replies that she is a married woman, and the driver admits he'd already figured as much because of the young child Sophie has with her. The driver compliments Sophie's Creole and tells her she's a good person for not forgetting where she comes from.

Sophie's driver's surprise about her return to Haiti from America shows just how easily people can forget where they come from. Sophie, though, is clearly on a journey not to forget, but to remember and reconnect with the place she was torn from at such a young age.

Sophie's daughter, Brigitte, wakes from her nap and yawns. Another woman disembarks from the van and pays the driver. A young man with a kite has been waiting for the women, and he takes her luggage out of the back and carries it. No one is there to receive Sophie, however. As the driver goes over to a stand to buy a drink, Sophie realizes he is purchasing it from Louise, Man Grace's daughter. Sophie watches as a female merchant drops her basket. The other women around her shout out "*Ou libere*," asking the woman if she is free from—and unharmed by—her heavy load.

The image of the merchant woman dropping her load—but perhaps being freed rather than inconvenienced by the mistake—foreshadows Sophie's need to liberate herself from her own heavy, tiresome burdens.

Sophie feeds Brigitte under the shade of a tree as some *Macoutes* use the van as a spot to sit and eat lunch. Louise approaches Sophie and asks her if she wants to buy a pig. Though Sophie insists she has no use for a pig, Louise begs her to take a look at the animal, which she is selling for 500 *gourdes*. Sophie changes the subject, asking if Louise has seen her Tante Atie. Louise says that she and Tante Atie are "like milk and coffee, lips and tongue [...] two fingers on the same hand." Louise says she knows who Sophie is—Tante Atie is always talking about her. Louise also says that she's been teaching Tante Atie to read, but the only thing Tante Atie can spell is Sophie's name. Sophie says she hopes Tante Atie will recognize her, and Louise promises her she will.

A lot has changed since Sophie left, though a lot of villagers still yearn to flee Haiti for America. Sophie is realizing that new relationships have been forged in her absence, and is surprised by the closeness that is evident between Louise and Tante Atie. Sophie begins to wonder if she has lost her place or her relevance at home in light of all that's changed.

Louise admires Sophie's ability to pay for the journey from America to Haiti, and admits that she herself wants to travel to the States—which is why she is selling her pig in hopes of earning passage on a boat. Sophie warns Louise that trips by boat are dangerous, but Louise says that it's bad luck to talk of sad things in front of a baby. She asks how old Sophie's daughter is, and Sophie answers that Brigitte is 20 weeks old. Louise says the birth must have been difficult, as Sophie is very thin and "bony." Sophie admits that labor was like passing a watermelon.

Everything around love, sex, and birth is difficult for Sophie. That fact that she freely admits how difficult labor was to a total stranger, lamenting all that her body has been through, suggests that her mother's abuse still lingers with her years after it took place.


Louise fetches Sophie a cola from her own stand and gives it to her, but asks Sophie to pay her later. As Sophie drinks the refreshing liquid, she looks out onto the street and sees Tante Atie approaching. Sophie, overjoyed to see Tante Atie for the first time in years, introduces her to Brigitte. Upon looking at the baby's face, Tante Atie remarks that "she looks more like Martine's child" than Sophie's.

As Tante Atie proclaims how much Brigitte looks like Martine, Sophie begins to fear that perhaps her daughter isn't safe from an inheritance of the Caco women's generational traumas.


CHAPTER 14

Tante Atie and Sophie walk down the road. Tante Atie carries Brigitte, showing her off to the neighbors and villagers she meets. Tante Atie says she can hardly believe Sophie is a mother—she remembers holding Sophie in her arms when Sophie was Brigitte's age, and feeling like she might break her. Sophie insists that Brigitte is a "true Caco woman," and is stronger than she looks. Tante Atie asks if Brigitte has met Martine, but Sophie says that they haven't spoken since Sophie left home—Martine will not answer her letters or pick up the phone when she calls. Tante Atie laments the schism between Martine and Sophie—especially since "Martine's head is not in the best condition." As they pass Man Grace's farm, Tante Atie laments that ever since Grace died, Louise has been unable to sleep alone.

As Sophie reveals that she and her mother haven't spoken in years—in spite of Sophie's repeated attempts to swallow her own pride and reach out to Martine—it becomes clear that Martine truly views Sophie's independence as a betrayal. Martine is unable to cope with the idea of her daughter as a wife—or a mother—and will not agree to accept or even meet the woman Sophie has become.


At Granmè Ifé's house, Sophie is surprised to see things mostly unchanged. She greets her grandmother, whose eyes fill with tears as she embraces Sophie and meets Brigitte. Sophie happily tells her grandmother that Brigitte's middle name is Ifé. As Granmè Ifé looks into the child's face, she says she can "visit with all [her] kin" simply by looking at Brigitte.

The fact that Granmè Ifé sees generations of Caco women in Brigitte's face suggests the hopeful idea that more than just trauma can be transmitted through generations of women—perhaps strength, love, and wisdom can be passed down as well.

CHAPTER 15

That night, at supper, Granmè Ifé asks Tante Atie if she is going to Louise's tonight for a reading lesson. She says Tante Atie should be taking official reading classes, but Tante Atie says they're too far to walk to at night, whereas Louise's is close by. The two bicker back and forth about Tante Atie's lessons until Tante Atie, unable to take any more of her mother's criticism, stands up from the table and begins washing dishes. Granmè Ifé says that if Tante Atie is going to leave, she should at least read to them before she goes. Tante Atie goes to get her notebook from her room, then returns to the yard and reads the poem Sophie wrote many years ago about her mother being a **daffodil**. Afterwards, Tante Atie tells Sophie that she has never forgotten those words.

This passage shows that even in the light of her mother's criticisms and her own personal roadblocks and shortcomings, Tante Atie—like a daffodil—has learned to grow, thrive, and be kind to herself. Sophie's words, and the image of daffodils as a symbol of strength and capability, have stuck with her and empowered her throughout the years. It seems that although Tante Atie and Martine were similarly traumatized as children, Tante Atie has been able to cope with her pain more effectively than her sister has.

Sophie lies alone in Martine's old bedroom, listening to her grandmother's snores from the next room and missing Joseph. She asks Brigitte rhetorical questions about whether Brigitte will remember this trip when she's older, whether she'll resent Sophie for "severing" her from her father, and whether she will inherit "some of Mommy's problems." Sophie wishes she could tell Brigitte a comforting bedtime story, like Tante Atie used to tell her, but can't think of any.

Sophie has a young daughter to care for—but she is clearly very afraid of passing down her "problems" to Brigitte. This fear is so acute that it effectively paralyzes Sophie, rendering her unable to do all the things she wants to do for her daughter. This highlights the ways in which the elder Caco woman have, perhaps, done generations of daughters a disservice due to this very fear.

When Sophie gets up to open her window, she sees Tante Atie, apparently drunk, stumbling up to the house from her lesson. Sophie gets back into bed and listens as Granmè Ifé wakes up and scolds Tante Atie for coming home drunk—she claims that if Sophie sees Tante Atie in such a state, Sophie won't respect her. Tante Atie protests that Sophie is not a child anymore and says she doesn't "have to be a saint for her."

When Sophie overhears Tante Atie's refusal to act other than she is for Sophie's sake, Sophie understands—and perhaps laments—that her own mother was never able to strip away her own obsession with perfection and purity in order to have a moment of real connection with her daughter.

CHAPTER 16

In the morning, Sophie wakes with the dawn, then washes herself in the small bath house out in the yard. She appraises her body, ashamed of how heavy she still feels nearly six months after giving birth. She goes inside and gives Brigitte a sponge bath, then looks out the window to see Granmè Ifé taking her turn in the bath house. Seeing a large hump on her grandmother's back, Sophie thinks of how, years ago, Martine developed lumps in her breasts and had a double mastectomy.

This short, lyrical chapter shows Sophie thinking about the bodies of her mother, grandmother, daughter, and herself. It hints at the passage of other things through generations of women—not just trauma—but also centers bodies and physical forms as inextricable, for better or worse, from femininity.

CHAPTER 17

After breakfast, Sophie leaves Brigitte with Tante Atie and follows Granmè Ifé to the market. As she shadows her grandmother through town, Sophie is impressed with the efficient, no-nonsense way she shops. At the market, Sophie spies Louise at her cola stand, selling drinks to a few *Macoutes*. One of them makes a lewd gesture at Sophie, and she quickly looks away. As Granmè Ifé and Sophie pass Louise's stand, Louise asks if they want to buy her pig. Granmè Ifé shrugs her off, but Louise pays the kite boy Sophie saw at the marketplace the day before to watch her stand while she continues hounding them. As they walk through the market, Sophie notices a *Macoute* picking a fight with a coal vendor named Dessalines. Sophie cannot look away even as the fight escalates and a group of *Macoutes* kick the coal vendor to the ground.

The Macoutes' *tyranny continues to be a serious threat not just to women, but to villagers of all kinds. Sophie's shock at witnessing such violence firsthand renders her unable to look away, perhaps showing just how different her relatively sheltered life in New York has been from her family's life in Haiti. Her reaction also implies that something in her is curious about the violence her own mother suffered at the hands of a* Macoute *so many years ago.*

After the violence at the market, Granmè Ifé and Sophie head for home. Sophie asks why her grandmother spoke so callously to Louise, but Granmè Ifé won't give her a straight answer—all she says is that since Tante Atie moved to the village from Croix-des-Rosets, the two of them haven't gotten along. Sophie assures Granmè Ifé that Tante Atie loves her and just wants to take care of her, but Granmè Ifé believes that Tante Atie is with her out of duty and not love.

This passage seems to suggest that Granmè Ifé knows that Tante Atie loves Louise—perhaps romantically or sexually—and would rather be with her all the time. She seems to resent Atie for wanting to get away from home, much like Martine felt threatened by Sophie's relationship with Joseph.


CHAPTER 18

After Granmè Ifé and Sophie return from the market, Tante Atie decides to go out. Granmè Ifé warns her about the violence at the market and tells her that they attacked a coal vendor named Dessalines. Tante Atie, however, insists her trip to the market can't wait, and goes anyway.

Tante Atie is so desperate to get out of the house that she doesn't even care about the violence happening in town, suggesting that her experiences have led her to become desensitized to trauma.

Granmè Ifé and Sophie spend the afternoon cooking and playing with Brigitte. The kite boy from the market comes by their yard, and Granmè Ifé, addressing him as Eliab, offers him some water before he heads out again. By suppertime, Tante Atie still hasn't returned home. They eat without her, and after the meal, Sophie feels heavy and guilty. Eliab and two friends come back, and Granmè Ifé gives them some food to eat.

Tante Atie's frequent and prolonged disappearances show that she is unhappy being stuck in the village of her youth with only her mother for company—she longs for more, just as Sophie herself did when she began her relationship with Joseph.

As the boys eat, Granmè Ifé asks Sophie why she came to Haiti with no warning—and why she didn't bring her husband. Sophie confesses that she is having some trouble with her marriage. Her grandmother asks her if she is unable to "perform," and Sophie admits that sex is very painful for her. Though Joseph is a good man, she says, she has no desire for him, and feels sex is "evil." Her grandmother asks her if Martine ever tested her. Sophie condemns the practice of testing, stating that she hates her body and is unable to feel truly connected with her husband as a result of enduring it.

Sophie answers her grandmother's questions by admitting, angrily and frankly, that her entire life has been derailed by the process of testing—and that she is unable to function because of the violence perpetrated against her in her youth. Although Granmè Ifé did not directly hurt Sophie, it's clear that Sophie blames her somewhat for her trauma, since the abuse her grandmother inflicted on Martine ultimately led Martine to inflict the same brutality on Sophie.

That night, in bed with Brigitte, Sophie listens through the window as Granmè Ifé tells Eliab and the neighborhood boys a story about a lark who, upon spotting a pretty little girl, convinced her over the course of several days to fly away with it, only to reveal that it was bringing her to a faraway land where she'd be fed to a king who eats little girls' hearts. The girl avoided capture by claiming she'd left her heart at home, forcing the bird to return to the village, and hiding from it amongst her family.

All of the stories that Sophie has been told or overheard throughout her life are stories of men seeking to perpetrate violence against women, or to steal their purity and their very hearts. It makes sense, then, that the Caco women have long been obsessed with ensuring their daughters' virginities, since their society seems to value this expectation above all else.

CHAPTER 19

The next morning, Tante Atie proudly announces that she and Louise are going to the city for the day to formally register their names in the archives, so that in the future, their descendants will be able to look them up and see that they lived in the village of La Nouvelle Dame Marie. Granmè Ifé insists that there is no need for "a woman [...] worth remembering" to do such a thing, but when Louise arrives to pick Tante Atie up, Tante Atie goes with her, arm in arm.

Stories and legends from the past and reverence for one's ancestors are an important part of Haitian culture. Tante Atie and Louise, both childless women, want to make sure that they are remembered even though they don't have daughters to pass down their stories.

Sophie uses her camera to take some pictures of Granmè Ifé, but the old woman does not like being photographed. Sophie goes inside to put Brigitte down for a nap and get some pictures from her wallet to show her grandmother, but as she looks at an old photograph of her and Joseph, she remembers the pain of their wedding night, which took place several weeks after she left Martine's. The night was painful, and Sophie felt like she was being torn open all over again—yet she felt sex was her duty to her husband now that he had become "the only person in the world watching over [her.]"

Sophie's desire to take pictures of her grandmother shows that she wants to reframe her memories of home and make new ones as well—even though Sophie clearly has a complicated relationship with memory and trauma, and is easily triggered into reliving some of the most painful moments of her past.

After Brigitte's nap, Sophie takes her outside to sit on the porch. She watches as Eliab flies a kite in the yard along with some others. Just as Eliab gets his kite up into the sky, another kite—with glass attached to its tail—swoops onto his and fells it. Eliab sits down on the ground and cries.

Eliab's kite being knocked out of the sky by another boy's represents Sophie's attempts to heal being smashed down by her own painful memories and recollections.

CHAPTER 20

That night, Louise comes over for supper, bringing with her a smaller pig as a gift to Granmè Ifé and Tante Atie. The two of them have successfully registered their names in town—and have brought back a package from the Poste and Télégramme bureau which bears the address of Martine's Nostrand Avenue apartment. Tante Atie rips the envelope open and puts it into the cassette player—as it starts, Sophie hears her mother's voice for the first time in years. On the tape, Martine reports that she has been in touch with Sophie's husband, Joseph, who is very concerned about her whereabouts—Sophie has left home with Brigitte but hasn't told him where she's gone. Sophie, ashamed, tries to stop the tape. Tante Atie tells Sophie that it's time Sophie and her mother reconciled.

Sophie realizes that although she tried to escape to Haiti to avoid the demands of her marriage and get away from confronting her traumas and fears, her time is up. Others are now suspicious of her reasons for leaving the U.S., and it is only a matter of time before she must reckon with her past. This realization suggests that it is impossible to recreate the idealized innocence of one's childhood home—although Sophie has returned back to where she grew up in hopes of outrunning her adult problem's, it's clear that the feeling of comfort and security she seeks more complicated than returning to a physical place.

CHAPTER 21

After dinner, Granmè Ifé takes Martine's tape into the other room to finish it while Tante Atie reads Sophie and Louise some poetry from her notebook. After Brigitte falls asleep and Louise leaves, Tante Atie and Sophie stay up talking. Tante Atie admits that she feels like "nothing" in her mother's village, and Sophie says she wishes she had never left Tante Atie. Tante Atie says there's no purpose in trying to rearrange one's own life. She says she herself is frustrated with how her life has turned out—as the eldest daughter, it's her responsibility to care for her mother, but she resents her mother for obsessing over her virginity, testing her, and training her to find a husband, then leaving her with "nothing."

Tante Atie's frustrations are evident in this passage as she vents her anger about the paradox that has defined her life. Both she and Martine were subjected to virginity testing in order to make sure that they were "pure" enough for marriage—her and her sister's whole lives were geared towards preparing them to be wives, and yet both of them have been left with nothing but trauma and loneliness as a result.

The next morning, Louise comes to the house in tears, crying that the *Macoutes* killed Dessalines the coal vendor—and that anyone could be next. Sophie thinks about the dangerous *Tonton Macoutes*, named after a Haitian bogeyman of legend who carried a straw knapsack filled with scraps of children. The *Macoutes* don't hide in the night like bogeymen, though—they roam the streets, enter people's homes, rape women, and commit murder with impunity. Sophie believes her own father may have been a *Macoute*, judging by her mother's story of how her rapist attacked her in a field and threatened to shoot her if she looked right at his face.

This passage shows how the traumas that haunt the women of Haiti are not just personal, but political as well. The constant threat of rape and violence creates an atmosphere of fear, panic, and suspicion, which trickles down into the way women treat one another. They attempt to safeguard each other, yet so often fail to do so and bring about more suffering in the process.

Sophie continues thinking about her mother's rape—and about how, in its wake, Martine went mad, succumbing to violent nightmares which made her tear her sheets and her own flesh. Even after Sophie's birth, Martine tried to kill herself several times—as a result, Tante Atie started taking care of her, and Martine soon got a visa and left Haiti.

Sophie has come to learn about her mother's dark past and her own painful origins—she was conceived as a product of Martine's rape. This passage seems to suggest that with the violent way she came into the world, Sophie has been predestined to experience yet more trauma and violence in her life—yet another consequence of generational trauma.

That night, in her bedroom, Sophie overhears Louise and Tante Atie talking on the porch. Tante Atie is sad, and says looking at Sophie's face makes her feel pain. When Tante Atie comes back inside, Granmè Ifé reprimands her for staying outside with Louise, and Tante Atie says she wishes "a good death would save [her] from all this." Granmè Ifé slaps Tante Atie, and Tante Atie goes back outside.

Though details of Tante Atie's relationship with Louise are never fully revealed (it's unclear whether they are just friends or something more), it's obvious that the two single, childless women are trying to seek comfort with one another in order to stave off the pain, sadness, and suicidal ideation that is so often the result of the kinds of trauma they've both known.

Sophie goes out to check on Tante Atie, and Tante Atie warns her that Granmè Ifé is going to send word to Martine that Sophie has come to Haiti. Sophie replies that her mother doesn't really care about her—she hasn't replied to any of her letters over the years. Tante Atie warns Sophie that Martine will come—and she and Sophie will have to settle their quarrel before Granmè Ifé dies.

Tante Atie knows how painful the rift between Sophie and her mother is—but seems here to suggest that there's nothing for them to do but repair it and move on. Sophie has been able to break free from Martine physically, but Tante Atie suggests that true freedom will only come from reconciliation.

The next morning, while Sophie plays with Brigitte, Granmè Ifé records her response to Martine. Granmè Ifé calls to Sophie and asks if she wants to say anything on the tape, but Sophie says she and her mother have said all they need to say to each other. As distant bells toll out for Dessalines's funeral, Tante Atie drunkenly stumbles into the house and naps for a hours before heading out again. She doesn't return until the early morning hours, when Louise helps her straggle home.

Sophie and Granmè Ifé, separately and in their own ways, try to keep their family together. But in spite of their efforts, external corruption, destruction, and violence threaten to tear the foundations of their clan apart forever.

CHAPTER 22

The next morning, Granmè Ifé powders her face with ashes and goes to the cemetery to pay her final respects to Dessalines. As Tante Atie and Sophie watch her go, Sophie asks Tante Atie about her relationship with Louise, and whether she'll be sad when Louise leaves. Tante Atie states that she will miss Louise "like [her] own skin."

Tante Atie seems to know that in spite of how much she loves Louise, she will leave Atie for a better future in a heartbeat. Louise's notion of home, then, does not seem to align with that of the Caco women—whereas Atie and her kin value shared cultural roots and family and community bonds, Louise seems only to idealize the relative prosperity and safety that the U.S. promises, even if that means making the journey alone.

That afternoon, Eliab brings Granmè Ifé back home. Tante Atie is out with Louise, and doesn't come home for supper. As Granmè Ifé and Sophie eat in the yard, Sophie's grandmother points out two spots of light on a distant hill. She explains that a baby is being born. If the baby is a boy, the lights will stay on, and the father will stay up all night with the child. If it is a girl, however, the lights will go out, and the mother will be left alone in the darkness with her child. Sophie waits with bated breath for over an hour, even as her grandmother drifts off to sleep—eventually, the lights go out.

This passage serves as a sad, painful metaphor for the ways in which Haitian society isolates, undervalues, and mistreats its women. While the birth of a baby boy is a joyous occasion marked by light and company, the birth of a baby girl results in the newborn and her mother being left alone in the dark with only one another. Gender roles are clearly strictly enforced by Haiti's social customs, and this difference in the valuation of male babies versus female babies will only continue and worsen as they grow up into men and women, respectively.

CHAPTER 23

By morning, Tante Atie still hasn't come home. Granmè Ifé is worried, and Sophie and Brigitte go outside with her to sit on the porch and wait for Tante Atie's return. Eventually, Tante Atie and Louise come walking up the road. Louise goes into the yard, fetches the pig she gave as a gift, and walks away with it. Granmè Ifé explains that she told Tante Atie that if Louise did not come claim the pig, she'd kill it. Sophie offers to buy the pig, but Tante Atie warns her that any money Louise gets will bring her closer to taking a boat to Miami.

Tante Atie is clearly afraid that if Louise gets the money she needs, she will leave immediately. In expressing this vulnerability to Granmè Ifé, she's unwittingly—and unknowingly—hastening Louise's departure, since Granmè Ifé will likely go to drastic measures to separate Atie and Louise given her disapproval of their relationship.

Tante Atie, whose calf has been bothering her, procures from her bag a jar of leeches. She applies them to her calf, and they suck the blood out of the lump on her leg. The outdated ritual makes Sophie dizzy and nauseous.

Sophie is disconnected from the old ways of her culture, and this instance serves as a reminder of how "American" she's become. Although she once dreaded leaving Haiti and struggled to acclimate to living in New York, it's clear that the U.S. is now her home.

Sophie offers to make dinner that night, and Tante Atie tells Sophie she'll take her to a smaller market where there's less chance of violence. On the way, the women stop at a cemetery, where Tante Atie points out the graves of their ancestors. She explains that their family name, Caco, is taken from the name of a scarlet-colored bird whose feathers look like fire. At the market, Tante Atie's inspiring story is contrasted by a dark one Sophie overhears about a woman who takes off her skin at night to fly away from home—but returns one night to find that her husband has peppered it so that she cannot put it back on. Eventually, the husband kills her.

Though Tante Atie tells one story which demonstrates the bravery, resilience, and fire of the Caco women, a competing story reminds Sophie of how women and girls are seen as things to be preyed upon in Haitian society more largely. Every story Sophie can remember is about some calamity or violence being inflicted upon or threatened against a young woman, making it clear that the oppression and trauma she and the women in her family have experienced is systemic to the culture.

Sophie cooks a large dinner, surprised by how her instincts take over and allow her to make the dish from memory. Granmè Ifé and Tante Atie both compliment Sophie on the delicious meal. After dinner, Tante Atie goes off to her lesson with Louise, and Granmè Ifé says she can hear footsteps on the road. She says the footsteps belong to a young woman who has been out with her boyfriend—she is on her way home to be tested by her mother. The words chill Sophie to the bone.

Granmè Ifé talks casually about the ritual of virginity testing—but for Sophie, testing was (and is) the biggest trauma of her life, and any mention of it perturbs and destabilizes her.

Sophie thinks about the "virginity cult" of Haitian mothers' obsession with keeping their daughters pure. She remembers that her mother always listened to the sound of her urine hitting the toilet bowl—if it was too loud, it would mean Sophie had been "deflowered." Sophie thinks of a story she once heard about a rich man who married a poor black girl, choosing her over prettier girls due to her virtue. He bought white sheets and a white nightgown for their wedding night so that he could display them the morning after—but during sex, the girl did not bleed. In order to maintain his pride, the man cut the girl between her legs—but the girl could not stop bleeding, and died. The man paraded her blood-soaked sheets during her funeral procession.

Again, Sophie recounts a violent, traumatic folktale about a woman's virginity being leveraged against her. The fact that the girl in the story doesn't bleed during sex hearkens back to Sophie's own destruction of her "virginity" by mutilating her vagina with the pestle, highlighting that though virginity is in many ways a false concept used to control women, whole aspects of Sophie's culture are constructed around its preservation.

Sophie thinks back on her memories of being tested, and how she learned to "double" while her mother tested her—she fled her body, focusing on pleasant memories or dreams. Even after the testing ended, Sophie found herself continuing to double during sex with Joseph.

Sophie's "doubling" is a defense mechanism that also recalls her mother's speech about the Marasas. *Doubling, or dissociating, is both a vain evil and a lifesaving mechanism for Sophie.*

On the porch, Sophie confronts Granmè Ifé about the process of testing, and her grandmother explains that a daughter's purity is her mother's responsibility—a daughter's disgrace ruins the whole family. Sophie asks why Granmè Ifé tested her daughters even though they hated it, and she says it was her duty. Sophie tells her grandmother that the testing is "the most horrible thing that ever happened" to her. Her grandmother tells her to have "patience"—soon Sophie's struggles with her husband will go away.

Even though Sophie is open with her grandmother about how being subjected to virginity testing has derailed her life, Granmè Ifé tries to maintain that it is not that big a deal, and that all women must learn to get used to it as a simple fact of life. Her blasé attitude toward testing highlights how traumatic acts of abuse can be perpetuated through an entire family line if each successive generation is willing to downplay their own mistreatment.

Sophie brings Brigitte inside to put her to bed, and Granmè Ifé follows her. She tells Sophie that as a mother, she must understand that a mother does everything she does for a child's own good, and must "liberate" herself from the pain her mother caused her. Moments later, though, Granmè Ifé confesses that her heart "weeps like a river" for the pain that generations of testing have caused Sophie.

In this passage, Granmè Ifé reverses the position she took just moments earlier and admits that she is aware of the pain that she, and all the women who came before her, have caused for the young women and daughters in their family. It's clear, then, that her casual acceptance of testing is a coping mechanism she has learned to adopt over the years, likely to mask the trauma to which she herself was subjected.

CHAPTER 24

Three days later, Martine arrives in a cart being pulled by Eliab and another boy. Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé approach her, and Sophie watches from afar as the three women reunite. It has been two years since Sophie has seen Martine, and she is disturbed by how her mother's skin-lightening cream has changed her complexion. When Granmè Ifé remarks upon Martine's light skin, Martine says that the cold air in New York has turned her into a ghost. Granmè Ifé says that the sun will darken her in no time, but Martine says she hasn't come for long—she is just here for three days.

Martine's time in America has changed her both physically and emotionally. She has tried to alter her appearance—a behavior that is common in survivors of intense, traumatic violence. In returning Haiti, however, she realizes she is unable to truly outrun her past.

Granmè Ifé orders Sophie to walk towards Martine and embrace her. Sophie cannot bring herself to do so, and Martine walks towards her instead, kissing her on the cheek. Martine coos over Brigitte, and Sophie robotically lets her mother hold the baby—but asks why her mother never answered any of her letters. Martine says she simply couldn't find the words. Now, though, Granmè Ifé has charged Martine with coming here to patch things up with Sophie—plus, Joseph begged Martine to find Sophie and bring her home. Sophie tells her mother that she cannot make plans for Sophie, but Martine stonily says she already has. As Brigitte pulls at Martine's earrings, Martine tells Sophie that now that Sophie is a woman with her own house, the two of them can start over.

Sophie has been trying to reconnect with Martine for years to no avail. Now that they are forced together, Martine blithely states that it's time for them to start over after all—but of course, this reunion is on her terms, not Sophie's. Though Martine never respected Sophie enough to let her grow, now that Sophie has struck out on her own, Martine feels forced to respect her autonomy—a baffling paradox that no doubt rattles Sophie.

CHAPTER 25

Inside, Martine unpacks her suitcase and hands out the things she has brought: spices, diapers, and clothes. Martine suggests Granmè Ifé move out of the village and into a more convenient town, but Granmè Ifé only wants to go to a notary to make sure that her land is left to the right people.

Granmè Ifé feels that home, tradition, and togetherness are important, and is loath to uproot her family. By contrast, Martine, now "Americanized" just like Sophie, values convenience and ease over hard work and tradition.

That night, Sophie lies in bed, listening to Martine and Tante Atie talking and reminiscing outside on the porch about the stories their mother used to tell them, the pains they suffered as girls, and the difficult, unforgiving place from which they come—in an instant, Martine says, everything can be lost.

Discussing suffering and pain are different from confronting them—though Martine and Tante Atie can name the things that happened to them in the past and lament their difficult youths, neither of them has yet really reckoned emotionally with the traumas they've endured.

CHAPTER 26

The next morning, Martine and Granmè Ifé go to the notary. Tante Atie is not home, and so Sophie asks Eliab to go to the market and buy her some milk. He asks if "the new lady [...] belong[s] to [Sophie]," and Sophie answers that sometimes she claims her mother—but sometimes she does not.

Sophie's ambivalence about "claiming" her mother as part of her reflects her competing feelings of hatred and love for Martine, as a result of the trauma Martine has inflicted upon her.

Martine and Granmè Ifé return to the house, and Granmè Ifé excitedly says that her land has been divided equally among the four of them. Granmè Ifé asks where Tante Atie is, hoping to share the good news with her, but when Sophie says Tante Atie is out, Granmè Ifé laments that "the gods will punish [her]" for her daughter's ways. That night, Tante Atie returns, and they all eat dinner together, but Tante Atie leaves the table early to go to her room. Granmè Ifé suggests Martine take Tante Atie back to New York, where she might be happier, but Martine replies that Tante Atie wants to stay with her mother. Granmè Ifé says, again, that Tante Atie is only staying with her out of duty.

Tante Atie's life, and her relationship with Granmè Ifé, reflect the contradictory feelings Sophie has about her own mother. Martine permanently damaged Sophie, but she also loved and raised her. Granmè Ifé did the same thing to Atie, who stays close by her but seems to do so more out of fear, coercion, and duty than out of sincere love and devotion.

That night, after Sophie goes to bed, Granmè Ifé and Martine stay out in the yard and discuss death. Sophie's grandmother believes she will know when her time is about to come, and though she feels fine now, she's eager to begin making funeral preparations. She suggests Martine, too, start thinking about what her wishes are for her own funeral—Sophie, she assures her daughter, will come around and do whatever Martine wants. Late that night, Sophie hears her mother come into her bedroom. Sophie pretends to be asleep, but clenches her legs together. She listens as Martine stands over Brigitte and weeps.

Sophie is clearly still traumatized by and afraid of her mother—as soon as Martine enters her room, Sophie clams up almost as a physical reflex, even as it becomes clear that Martine has not come to the room to prey upon Sophie but rather to mourn all she has lost in betraying her daughter.

In the morning, Martine comes into Sophie's room to say hello to her and Brigitte. Sophie asks if her mother still has trouble sleeping, and Martine says she does, adding that the **nightmares** are even worse in Haiti. Sophie feels a rush of sympathy for her mother, and admits to her that she always felt guilty for Martine's nightmares because she believed her own face—a reminder of the rape—brought them on. Martine, too, admits that at first, Sophie's face did trigger her. But now that Sophie is a woman, her face has changed.

For years, Martine and Sophie have never directly confronted one of the most painful truths of their relationship: that Martine has always viewed Sophie as a painful reminder of Martine's rape, the most violent episode in her entire life—and perhaps always will.

Sophie asks Martine, flat out, why she put her through the virginity testing. Martine says that if she answers, Sophie must promise to never ask her again. Sophie agrees. Martine explains that she has "no greater excuse" than the fact that her mother did it to her. Martine admits that "the two greatest pains of [her] life" are related, and says that the only good thing about being raped was that it made the testing stop. She says, in closing, that she still lives both things every single day. After that, Martine and Granmè Ifé head out into town, returning later with a pan of bloody pig meat.

This passage demonstrates the illogical yet undeniable nature of cyclical trauma and generational pain: Martine has no answer for why she did what she did to Sophie, other than that her own mother did it to her. In an attempt to expunge her own trauma, or as a spiteful act against her healthy daughter, or as a simple continuation of tradition, Martine perpetuated the very violence that derailed her own life.

Tante Atie has a "glazed look" that night as she eats the fried pork—she has had to accept the fact that Louise is gone, disappeared "into thin air." In the end, Granmè Ifé bought Louise's large pig to send her away to the U.S., and Louise left without even bidding Tante Atie farewell.

Tante Atie has been abandoned by her one friend, left alone with the mother who abused her for years as her only company in the world.

CHAPTER 27

The night before returning to New York, Sophie asks Tante Atie if she and Brigitte can sleep in her bedroom. Tante Atie is distraught over Louise's departure and Granmè Ifé's betrayal, and Sophie tries to comfort her by telling her Louise would've gotten the money somehow—sometimes, Sophie says, we cannot control the people we love. Tante Atie tells Sophie that children are life's only rewards, and calls Sophie her own child.

This passage seems to suggest that much of Tante Atie's depression is due to the fact that Sophie—who was effectively her child, though not her biological daughter—was ripped away from her at a young age for reasons beyond her control.

The next day, Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé accompany Martine, Sophie, and Brigitte to the market to meet the van that will take them to Port-au-Prince. The women all say goodbye to one another tearfully—Tante Atie reminds Sophie to treat Martine well, and Granmè Ifé marvels once more at all "the faces" that live in Brigitte. As the van pulls away, the village fades into a blur; Sophie is not sure when or if she will see the women of her family again.

Granmè Ifé's ability to see generations of Caco in Brigitte's face is an externalized metaphor of generational trauma, since the resemblance between Brigitte and the women in her family likely reminds Granmè Ifé that Brigitte could go on to experience the same trauma and pain that Sophie, Martine, Tante Atie, and Granmè Ifé herself have experienced.

CHAPTER 28

The van ride to the airport is rough and rocky, and yet Brigitte sleeps calmly through most of it—even when she wakes, she is quiet and good. Martine marvels at the child's disposition, telling Sophie that "it's as if she's not here at all." Inside the crowded airport, Martine bribes the ticket counter to switch her and Sophie's seats so that they're next to each other.

Martine is so unused to the idea of peaceful sleep that Brigitte's ability to sleep quietly and calmly actually disturbs her. It's clear that she has become so accustomed and desensitized to her own trauma that anything else seems alien.

On the flight, Martine is nauseous and ill, claiming that her "discomfort with being in Haiti" has made her sick. She calls out Sophie's own reluctance to eat, however, prompting Sophie to confess that she is bulimic. Martine doesn't know what the disease is, and Sophie explains it to her mother. Martine remarks that the disease is "very American," and wasteful to boot. Martine recalls that when she first arrived in New York, she ate every meal as if it were her last—and had trouble convincing herself to eat differently as time went by.

The revelation about Sophie's bulimia shows just how much she has internalized the violence Martine perpetrated against her. Sophie's eating disorder likely stems from latent feelings of shame about her body and her sexuality due to Martine's abuse, as well as a desire to reclaim a sense of control over her own life by controlling her eating habits.

After they land in New York, Martine asks Sophie to spend the night with her in Brooklyn before heading on to Providence—Sophie agrees, and they take a cab to Nostrand Avenue. The apartment is still decorated all in red, and when Martine checks her messages, they are all from Marc. Sophie goes upstairs to her room to find that her things are gone. Martine apologizes for burning Sophie's belongings in a fit of anger, but Sophie insists she doesn't need her old things anymore.

Even though Sophie notices that her things are gone, she doesn't feel particularly sad about their absence. Her possessions represent her connection to the past—and suggest that perhaps Sophie is reaching a point where she's ready to let go of more than just material things.

Martine makes spaghetti for dinner, and confesses that after Sophie left, she ate only spaghetti for a long time—everything Haitian, she says, reminded her of Sophie. After dinner, Martine gets ready to go out for a little while. Sophie asks if she's going to see Marc, and if she's ever going to marry him, but Martine says to do so this late in her life would be "senseless."

Even though Martine and Marc have been together for many years, there's a part of Martine that's afraid to legitimize their relationship or admit to needing (or perhaps even wanting) him to stick around. Although Marc is a good man, it's clear that Martine is still associates men with violence, pain, and loss due to her rape.

One Martine is gone, Sophie picks up the phone and calls Joseph. She tells him she's back from Haiti and staying in Brooklyn for the night. Joseph is relieved that Sophie and Brigitte are okay—though he is slightly angry and anxious about Sophie's having left. Sophie promises that she's coming home soon. Joseph tells her that she needs to stick with therapy and work through her problems rather than running away from them—he promises to wait until she's ready to have sex, and assures her that he'll be patient.

This passage makes it clear that Joseph understands why Sophie did what she did in running away—but wants desperately to work with her to heal the scars of her past. Sophie is clearly struggling to do just that—but running away from her problems hasn't quite helped, either.

Joseph asks if Sophie and her mother have worked things out, and Sophie vaguely states that the two of them talked. Joseph asks several questions about Brigitte and how she's been. Joseph clearly misses the two of them and offers to drive down to get them right away, but Sophie insists on making her own way back.

Sophie knows that because she was the one to leave, she should be the one to make the journey home—there are parts of Sophie, clearly, that still cling to ritual and metaphor despite her alienation from her native culture.

Martine comes home from seeing Marc, explaining to Sophie that she had something important to tell him. Sophie asks if Martine's news was good or bad, and Martine replies that that "depends on how you look at it."

This passage foreshadows that something momentous is about to happen in Martine's life—and that she is unsure of how to feel about whatever it is that's coming for her.

CHAPTER 29

The next morning at breakfast, Sophie eats heartily, and Martine praises her for eating so well. Sophie asks her mother about where she went last night, and what news she gave Marc. Martine replies that she is pregnant. Sophie is stunned that Martine and Marc have been having sex, and asks if the two of them are going to get married. Martine says she has no idea why Marc would marry her—she is missing her breasts, and she is "not an ideal mother."

Sophie's ability to eat a whole meal without restricting herself or purging afterwards seems to portend healing and recovery. At the same time, Martine's news complicates things. Sophie is forced to contend with her mother not only as a sexual being, but as a woman who might be able to love a second child better than she ever did Sophie herself.

Sophie asks Martine what she plans to do, and Martine admits that she has no idea. She is frightened, she says, and her **nightmares** are worse than ever. She worries that because she was not a very good mother to Sophie, she should not be a mother to another child—but Sophie urges Martine to see that she has a "second chance." She suggests Martine see a psychiatrist, but Martine is afraid of confronting the past—and says she'd kill herself if anyone made her relive the day of her rape. She already feels, through her nightmares, like she's being raped each night.

Sophie seems to actively want Martine to have the chance to do right by another child—even as Martine admits that going through another pregnancy might actually kill her. Martine's allusion to killing herself here suggests that she has had suicidal ideations before, and that she may be willing to act on those thoughts in the future.

Martine confesses to Sophie that when she was pregnant with her, she took herbs, teas, and tinctures to try and abort the pregnancy, and even beat her stomach with wooden spoons. Sophie, however, was brave even in the womb—and Martine says that she can feel this baby, too, already fighting to live. Martine, however, is considering aborting the child—but every time she thinks about it seriously, her **nightmares** get worse and her stomach acts up.

The revelation that Martine tried to abort Sophie—repeatedly and unsuccessfully—sheds light on a new facet of violence and mistrust in their relationship. It's clear that even before Sophie was born, Martine viewed her daughter as a tangible reminder of being raped.

Sophie asks Martine if Marc has helped ease the **nightmares** at all, and Martine basically admits that she has traded enduring painful sex in order to have someone sleeping next to her each night to wake her from her nightmares. Martine predicts that if her nightmares ease up, maybe she'll be able to have the child—but if they don't, she worries she'll "wake up dead" one morning.

The sad, painful admission that Martine has been submitting to sex—in spite of the pain and fear it causes her—just so that she can have someone beside her at night to ward off her nightmares shows just how inescapable sexual trauma is, and how profound and continuous the violence of assault can be.

Sophie offers to stay with Martine longer, but Martine urges her to get back on the road to Providence—Marc, she says, will come care for her. Sophie urges her mother to marry Marc, but Martine is afraid that Marc will one day grow sick of her **nightmares** and leave. Sophie continues pressing Martine to decide what to do, and Martine, frustrated, tells Sophie what Sophie "want[s] to hear": that she'll have the baby.

Sophie wants to help her mother through this difficult time, but Martine is determined to refuse help and reject any kind of confrontation with the reality of her own pain and suffering.

On the drive back to Providence, Sophie thinks back to the first year of her own marriage—she had suicidal thoughts all the time, and each night woke up in a cold sweat, worrying she'd "caught" her mother's **night terrors**. Sophie snaps herself out of her memories and looks back at Brigitte, who is asleep in her car seat. Sophie hopes that Brigitte's peaceful sleep means that she has not inherited Martine and Sophie's nightmares.

If night terrors are, throughout the novel, a symptom and a symbol of sexual trauma's lingering manifestation in one's life, peaceful sleep is the symbol of a trauma-free existence: the very thing Sophie is hoping to give her daughter.

CHAPTER 30

As Sophie pulls into the driveway of her and Joseph's home in Providence, he runs out of the house to meet them. He lifts Brigitte from the car and carries her inside, leaving Sophie with the luggage. Inside, Joseph tells Sophie that he is happy to see her, but that he wants to kill her at the same time. He admits that he missed her, and asks about the trip. Sophie explains that she was, among other things, helping Granmè Ifé make preemptive funeral arrangements, explaining such an obsession with arranging death is "a thing at home." Joseph is surprised to hear Sophie refer to Haiti as "home"—usually, home is what she calls Martine's house, the one place to which she could never return.

In referring to Haiti as "home," Sophie shocks and confuses Joseph, who points out that Sophie always saw her true home as the one place to which she was forbidden to return. This passage contains the crux of Danticat's argument about the nature of home as a place one can never return to once they've left—a state of innocence that one can never get back to no matter how hard one tries.

Sophie sprawls out on the couch, and Joseph sits beside her and kisses her ear. He tells her he's determined to get through their problems together. He asks Sophie if she left impulsively or had been planning to go—Sophie doesn't answer, and instead says the two of them "weren't connecting physically." Joseph asks Sophie if she found an aphrodisiac in Haiti. Sophie replies that she needs understanding, not an aphrodisiac. Joseph tells Sophie that though she's usually "reluctant to start" making love, she "seem[s] to enjoy it" after a certain point.

Even though Joseph clearly loves Sophie, it's also evident that he doesn't understand her. It seems that the patience he professed to have early on in their relationship has long since waned, and he has failed to intuit Sophie's trauma surrounding sex.

That night, Sophie and Joseph get into bed, but Sophie cannot sleep. She calls her mother, but Martine hurries off the phone, explaining that Marc is at the apartment. After hanging up the phone, Sophie tells Joseph that her mother is pregnant. Joseph seems to think the news is great, and tells Sophie she'll finally have a "kindred spirit" in her new sibling.

Even though Sophie understands the threat and danger implicit in her mother's announcement, Joseph is blind to all the trauma, pain, and suffering the pregnancy stands to resurface in both Martine and Sophie's lives.

The next day, Sophie takes Brigitte for a checkup at the pediatrician. The pediatrician asks if Brigitte was exposed to any areas with malaria, but Sophie insists she was very careful and boiled all of Brigitte's bathing and drinking water. The pediatrician warns Sophie against bringing Brigitte—strong as she may be—back to Haiti.

Sophie has bought into the rhetoric that the women of her family are strong enough to withstand anything—but her American doctor reminds her of what a myth that is. Sophie is in danger of treating her daughter like she's stronger than she is—and unwittingly, perhaps, passing down a bit of the trauma she herself inherited from her family's older generations.

That night, Sophie eats the dinner Joseph has cooked for her and does not purge. She calls her mother to ask how Marc is, and how the baby is. Martine begs Sophie not to call the fetus a baby, as she hasn't decided what to do about it. Martine confides in Sophie that she sees her *violeur*, or rapist, everywhere. As Sophie talks to her mother, Joseph moves his hands under her nightgown and onto her breasts. Martine admits that she went to an abortion clinic, but the meeting with the doctor only made her **night terrors** intensify. Sophie promises to come visit over the weekend.

Martine confiding in Sophie about the deep sexual traumas her pregnancy is bringing up for her is contrasted against Joseph's instigation of sexual activity with the uninterested Sophie. This to underscores just how misunderstood and discounted women's trauma can be, even (or especially) by those closest to them.

As soon as Sophie hangs up, Joseph pulls her to him and begins kissing her. Sophie begins "doubling." She lets Joseph peel off her clothes, but lets her mind wander elsewhere. She imagines lying in bed with her mother, helping her fight off her **nightmares**. Sophie feels an odd gratitude that she and Martine can at last be friends—she is starting to believe that they are twins, like the *Marasas*.

Though Martine once suggested that Sophie only wanted a man to be her Marasas, *Sophie now believes that perhaps her mother was truly her twin or soulmate all along. Thus, it seems that Sophie has come to empathize with her mother despite the abuse she wrought on Sophie, and can see that they are not so different, after all.*

After Joseph finishes, he rolls off of Sophie and tells her she was "very good." She tells him that she kept her eyes closed the whole time to stop her tears falling. After Joseph falls asleep, Sophie goes to the kitchen, eats all of the leftovers from dinner, and then goes to the bathroom to purge the food.

Sophie is unable to connect sexually with her husband—she feels only pain and trauma during their sexual encounters. Joseph, however, pushes this fact aside and convinces himself that Sophie is getting better, ignoring the worsening of her eating disorder and other anxieties.

CHAPTER 31

There are three members in Sophie's sexual phobia support group, all of them introduced by their shared therapist, Rena. The other members are Buki, an Ethiopian college student who is a survivor of female genital mutilation, and Davina, who was raped by her grandfather for 10 years. The group meets at Davina's house, where she has a whole room set aside for their meetings. For each session, the women wear long white dresses Buki has sewn for them, sit on heart-shaped pillows made by Davina, and recite affirmations meant to strengthen their self-confidence and transform their pain into something that makes them stronger, more empathetic, and more capable.

This passage shows that Sophie has taken steps to address, confront, and try to heal from the trauma of her past, seeking support from women who have been through similar ordeals and offering them her solidarity and understanding in return.

During one session, after Buki breaks down reading a letter she has written to her grandmother—the woman who mutilated her but also raised her—Sophie finishes reading the letter aloud, and finds that she and Buki share a lot of the same feelings toward their abusers. At the end of the session, each woman writes their abuser's name on a piece of paper and drops it into a flame. Together, they release a balloon in the yard as a symbol of their healing. The meeting helps Sophie feel closer to healing—and determined to be a better mother than her own.

Sophie, like Buki, is unable to summon within herself any hatred for her mother—she knows that even though her mother violated and hurt her, she would not be who she is without her. Sophie's complicated emotions about her mother connect to the ways generational trauma works—bound by their love for each other and their shared experiences of violence, the women in Sophie's family are unable to escape one another.

When Sophie gets home from the meeting, Joseph is excited because Brigitte has said her first word: "Dada." He also reports that Martine and Rena called, Martine to report something "urgent" and Rena to make sure Sophie is coming to her visit the next day. Worried, Sophie calls Martine, but Martine says she just had an "urgent" desire to hear Sophie's voice. She asks Sophie again if she's coming this weekend, and Sophie says she is. Martine says she's looking forward to the visit, then hangs up.

Martine's erratic behavior and dependence on Sophie foreshadow that something terrible is coming. Still, Sophie keeps trying to convince herself that everything is all right, and that she and her mother are still connecting and growing.

CHAPTER 32

Sophie's therapist, Rena, is a "gorgeous black woman" and Santeria priestess who once lived and worked in the Dominican Republic. In her weekly session with Rena, Rena asks Sophie about her "disappearing act" and her trip to Haiti. Sophie tells Rena about her trip, and includes learning about how every woman in her family has, for generations, had their virginities "tested." Rena asks Sophie if she has ever hated her mother—Sophie avoids answering the question, insisting that she wants to accept the change in her relationship with Martine.

Rena is a hard-driving, no-nonsense woman who desperately wants Sophie to take ownership of her actions, confront her past, and answer for her emotions. Sophie, however, wants to suppress all of these things, and is ignorant of the continued damage and trauma that failing to identify, name, and face her pain could do to both her and Martine.

Sophie tells Rena about her mother's pregnancy, and Rena asks Sophie if it makes her angry to hear about her mother doing "the very thing that [Martine] didn't want [Sophie] to do" by having sex and getting pregnant out of wedlock. Sophie claims she doesn't feel any anger towards her mother anymore—she just feels sorry for her. Rena asks Sophie about her father, but Sophie says she doesn't want to think of the man as her father, or think about him at all. Rena points out that Martine's failure to confront her rapist is what has allowed his ghost to "control" her.

Rena knows that the ways in which Sophie and her mother conceive of sex, love, and intimacy have been warped by the violence to which they've both been subjected. Rena doesn't want Sophie to allow violence to control her in the way it has controlled Martine—she urges Sophie to see that if she doesn't start looking her own pain as well as her mother's in the face, it very well may start to define Sophie's life too.

When Sophie tells Rena that she is going to visit Martine and Marc the following weekend, Rena asks Sophie to picture her mother as a sexual being. Sophie does so, but can only imagine her mother in pain, trying to be brave. Rena points out that that's what sex is like for Sophie. Rena suggests that Sophie and Martine return to Haiti, together, and visit the cornfield that was the site of Martine's rape—only through confrontation can they free themselves of their "ghosts."

Rena knows that there is no "home" to which Sophie and Martine can both return—their past is full off too many scars and "ghosts." At the same time, Rena believes in confronting the past and acknowledging the things that bar one from returning "home" in order to heal, move on, and find new senses of belonging and security.

CHAPTER 33

Martine greets Sophie, Joseph, and Brigitte on the stoop outside her house, welcoming them warmly and introducing Marc to Joseph. Inside, Marc cooks fish in a skillet while Martine shows Joseph the house. In the backyard, as Marc and Joseph chat about work and music, Martine tells Sophie slyly that she has made a decision about what to do. Before Martine can tell Sophie what her decision is, the men rope the two of them into their conversation, and they all begin discussing what it means to have African heritage. Joseph and Martine sing some spirituals together; Martine sings one about feeling like a "motherless child a long ways from home."

As Martine offers up her song, it becomes evident that she, too, feels far from home and disconnected from her roots. Martine is highly unstable right now, and though Sophie senses the difficulty her mother is going through, she doesn't know how to help her. Sophie has always had to step up and care for her mother—but now, Martine's problems are bigger than Sophie can even begin to handle.

The day ends before Sophie and Martine have a moment alone to discuss Martine's decision. That night, on the ride back to Providence, Joseph tells Sophie that he understands Martine a little better—she didn't like him, he says, because she didn't want to give up "a gem" like Sophie. By the time they get home, there are two messages from Martine on the machine, so Sophie calls her back. Martine tells Sophie that she has decided to get an abortion—she heard the baby speak to her in a "man's voice," and now wants to "get it out." Sophie begs her mother not to do anything rash. Martine tells Sophie not to worry, and promises to call her the next day.

Though Martine is clearly experiencing hallucinations, hallmarks of her fragile, fractured mental state, Sophie wants to respect her mother's agency and doesn't intervene in her decision-making. This move will have devastating consequences for them both, but in the moment, Sophie believes she's doing what's best for her mother by allowing Martine to take control of her own body for the first time in her life.

CHAPTER 34

In another session with Rena, Sophie confesses that she is worried about her mother. She tells Rena that while Martine has been pretending to be happy, in actuality she is aborting the baby after hearing it say things to her. Rena asks if Martine has always heard voices, and suggests Martine have an exorcism or some other kind of "release ritual." Rena asks if Martine has told her "lover" about the abortion. When Sophie balks at the word, Rena chastises her and explains that perhaps, because both she and Martine cannot conceive of Martine willingly wanting sex or a child, both of them feel an increased aversion to happiness. Rena begs Sophie to get Martine help, explaining that it's dangerous for things to continue on as they are.

Rena knows that Sophie—and her mother—are in need of a reckoning with their pasts, with their values, and with the traumas that have been passed onto them both. If the women don't confront their pasts and begin to heal, Rena suggests, the center will not hold, and both women will spin out of control. Rena wants to help Sophie put a stop to the trauma, violence, and pain that keep cycling through her family, but Sophie perhaps feels that such powerful forces cannot be stopped.

After the session with Rena, Sophie goes by Davina's house and uses her key to the group's special room to sit in the dark, drink some tea, and meditate. On the way out, she sees the balloon they all released together stuck in a tree and half-deflated.

The balloon Sophie and her friends released symbolized healing and redemption in the moment. The fact that it is now stuck and deflated suggests that Sophie's worst fears are true, and she will never be able to move on from the trauma of her past.

CHAPTER 35

When Sophie arrives home, Brigitte is sleeping in Joseph's arms. He puts her down in the bedroom, then comes back into the room and plays Sophie a message off the answering machine. It is from Marc, for Sophie, urging her to call him about Martine. Marc's voice is quivering. Sophie immediately panics, telling Joseph that her mother was planning on having an abortion today. Joseph urges Sophie to keep calm and call Marc, but when she does, she gets only his machine. The next morning at 6:00, Marc calls back—sobbing, he tells Sophie that Martine is dead.

Sophie has, since reconnecting with her mother, been optimistic about the fact that the two of them could become friends, even in spite of Martine's problems and their difficult history—but receiving the news of her mother's death, Sophie realizes all of her wishful thinking was a fallacy.

Sophie asks Marc to tell her what happened, and Marc explained that in the middle of the previous night, he woke up to find Martine out of bed. He went back to sleep, not thinking anything of it, but several hours later when she was still not back, he went to look for her in the bathroom. He found her on the floor, covered in blood, with a "mountain of sheets" laid out on the floor—Martine had stabbed herself in the stomach, with an "old rusty knife," 17 times. Martine died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, after telling the paramedics that she could not carry the baby.

Martine's brutal suicide shows, once and for all, just how tortured she was by the idea of bringing life into the world—and how badly she wanted to punish herself for engaging in sex, conceiving a child, and possibly bringing another life into such a cruel, harsh world.

Sophie screams at Marc for sleeping through her mother's suicide, but Marc protests that he tried to save her and then asks where Sophie was when her mother needed her most. Sophie hangs up the phone and falls into Joseph's arms. Moments later, she runs upstairs and begins packing for New York, while Joseph agrees to stay behind with Brigitte.

Marc attempts to absolve himself of blame in Martine's death by suggesting that Sophie should have stood closer by her mother and helped her through her issues. Though he's likely only speaking out of grief, he still fails to express that as the daughter, Sophie should have been the one to receive her mother's care, not the other way around.

At Martine and Marc's house, Sophie finds an odd air of calm—but is disturbed by the trail of blood left behind on the stairs. Marc tries to talk to Sophie about the plans for Martine's burial in La Nouvelle Dame Marie, but Sophie is determined not to breathe a single word to Marc.

Sophie is furious with Marc both for failing to take adequate care of Martine, and for attempting to implicate her in her mother's choice (or compulsion) to commit suicide. It seems that Rena's counseling has had a positive impact on Sophie's mindset, as she now exhibits emotional fortitude and refuses to accept the blame for other people's destructive actions.

That night, Sophie calls Joseph and tells him she needs to go to Haiti—alone—to bury her mother. That night, in her mother's apartment, Sophie fights off "evil thoughts." In the morning, Marc suggests she pick out an outfit for her mother to be buried in—she picks out a bright-red suit. Marc balks at the choice, but Sophie is firm. After a viewing at a local funeral home, Sophie calls Joseph one last time before getting on the plane to Haiti. She asks if Brigitte is sleeping, and he says that she's not sleeping so well without Sophie.

Martine's obsession with the color red—a sensual color, but also the color of violence and bloodshed—stands in direct contrast to Sophie's preoccupation with the color yellow, the color of sun, warmth, and resilient daffodils. Despite this difference, Sophie wants to honor her mother's love of red, and the color's association with both love and violence—two things her mother passed on to her.

Marc accompanies Sophie to Haiti. They do not sit together on the plane, though they ride in the hearse together from Port-au-Prince to La Nouvelle Dame Marie. At the market in the village, Marc is wide-eyed and frightened of the *Macoutes*—but the villagers greet Sophie "as though [she has] lived there all [her] life."

The last time Sophie returned to Haiti, she was determined not to forget her origins—now, she is recognized as one of her own people, while Marc finds himself an outsider in his own country.

As Sophie approaches Granmè Ifé's house, she sees her grandmother sitting on the porch. She wonders if Granmè Ifé has been sitting there since she got the telegram warning her of the news—but as she hugs her grandmother, she tells Sophie that she knew of Martine's death in her bones before the letter came, and even sensed her pregnancy. Tante Atie, dressed all in black, embraces Sophie too. That night, Marc, Sophie, Granmè Ifé, and Tante Atie have a private wake. As they sing mourning songs, Sophie realizes that the "mother-and-daughter motifs" of the stories she grew up with don't come from the women in her family—rather, they are something "essentially Haitian." That night, Sophie sleeps alone in her mother's bed.

Sophie is beginning to see the paradox of the place she comes from: though Haitian society discounts and undervalues women, there is a matrilineal streak to the ways families continue on, and Sophie is part of a rich tradition and legacy. It's clear that women hold some sort of reverential power in Haitian families in spite of the attendant pain, suffering, and trauma passed down through each generation.

After collecting Martine's body at the funeral home and looking at her face one last time, the group follows her coffin up the hill and through the market to the cemetery. A small procession joins them, and by the time they reach the gravesite, many villagers and mourners shake gourd rattles, blow conch shells, and beat drums as the priest sings a funeral song. As the rites end and men begin shoveling dirt into Martine's grave, Sophie runs away from the cemetery, tearing her dress as she speeds down the hill. She runs into a cane field, attacking the sugar cane with her shoes until her hands bleed. Soon, she hears her grandmother's voice shouting for her, and Tante Atie's voice echoing the call: "*Ou libere?*"

Sophie's relationship with Martine was many things—most of them complicated, difficult, and even painful—but as she buries her mother, she breaks down in anger and sadness over how Martine's life ended. Sophie is furious with how the women in her family are made to grow up and live, and sad that she could never help her mother to move on from the pain that would eventually consume her.

Sophie reflects on the place she comes from, and the stories the women there tell their children—stories that "frighten and delight them." Sophie thinks of the lanterns in the hills, and the beloved faces that "recreate the same unspeakable acts that they themselves lived through." Here, **nightmares** are passed down "like heirlooms," and the past is something women carry through the ages. Sophie thinks of all the tales of butterflies, birds, and women who could not stop bleeding. She decides that her mother was the woman from the latter tale, a woman just like Sophie herself.

Sophie knows that the place she comes from—both the physical place and the emotional realm—is dangerous, cruel, and painful, especially for women. At the same time, Sophie doesn't know how she can possibly separate herself from the legacy of her ancestors.

In the cane field, Granmè Ifé approaches the distraught Sophie and tells her of a place "where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her." In this place, she tells Sophie, if one listens closely in the night, one can hear one's mother telling a story. At the end, she will always ask the same question: "*Ou libere?*" Granmè Ifé calms Sophie, assuring her that now, she knows how to answer.

The novel's final passage shows that while Sophie fears abandoning her family's legacy and her mother's story, even her grandmother knows that it is time for Sophie to free herself from the burdens of the past and live for herself.

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