

Getting Somewhere

The first house the real estate agent wanted to show us was on Key Biscayne¹, over the Causeway² from Miami, but Jeffrey, my husband, said he didn't want to see it because the Key only had a public golf course, but then he said all right, he'd look at *Paraiso*³ – a house with a name! Was it gorgeous? At first glance his jaw dropped so low I had to give him the elbow
5 before Marilyn, the agent who wore Armani⁴, could see. Totally drop dead, so you could sit at the pool and, right ahead of you, there was the ocean. The house? I still can't believe it's ours.

But that's not the story.

This is what happened in 2002. Can you believe it was so long ago? I was driving my car, a BMW convertible [...]. I was going over the Rickenbacker Causeway that's named for somebody
10 and the news was on [...], and I was thinking, *I am so sick of all this violence stuff*, because a little more than a month ago it had been the first anniversary of 9/11⁵. [...]

So I was over the Causeway and all of a sudden it's like everybody goes crazy. Cars are swerving, the giant Winn-Dixie⁶ truck in front of me slammed on its brakes so I slammed on mine. I couldn't see what was going on, [...] – but then I realized something was wrong for this
15 kind of sudden traffic chaos. [...]

Very, very carefully, I inched the front wheels toward the left and moved up a teeny bit, so maybe I could see something beyond the truck. *Nada*⁷. But all of a sudden there are people running across the road – black people, really black – coming up from the shore onto the Causeway. And I get from the way they're running and how many there are that it's not an
20 accident or some kind of protest. They're wet. And so thin, not in a good way, like an African supermodel. Scrawny, and most of the men were shirtless. You could see their ribs, knots of bone on their shoulders. And the women – hardly any had shoes, or maybe they'd been wearing flip-flops and lost them. And there were some kids too, terrified looks on their faces, and a little girl with a white hair bow on one side. She kept patting the other side of her head, unable to
25 believe the other bow was actually lost. More kept coming, like they were using the Causeway just to run away from wherever their boat left them. [...]

That's when I put it all together. The runners were Haitians trying to sneak into the States, except something had happened to their boat. You heard that a lot in South Florida. Maybe it fell apart or the currents took it to where they could be spotted. They were running as fast as
30 they could because the sirens were so close. Across and down on the other side of the Causeway near the tollbooths⁸, around where the road met the land. They needed to spread out and go... Who knew where they could get to that would be safe? They must've known America was no refuge for them, but in their hearts they believed it was. [...]

I opened my car door and got out, and stood on the metal thing beneath it that you kind of
35 swing your legs over getting out. And then I saw, oh shit, a couple of cops had gotten on the bridge and were holding up traffic. I guessed they were doing it so that more cops could come

¹ *Key Biscayne*: ø syd for Miami Beach, Florida

² Rickenbacker Causeway, bro, som forbinder Key Biscayne med fastlandet Florida

³ (spansk) Paradise

⁴ dyrt italiensk tøjmærke

⁵ 11. september 2001, hvor USA blev udsat for en række terrorangreb

⁶ amerikansk supermarkedskæde

⁷ (spansk) Nothing

⁸ betalingsanlæg

and grab the Haitians. Refugees, that's what they were called. I'd been thinking immigrants, but that was like the island in New York that wasn't where the Statue of Liberty was. Ellis Island⁹. [...]

Weren't their grandparents, like mine, coming to America to escape something terrible? [...]

40 All of a sudden I was yelling out loud, "Fuck this!" [...] I turned and saw a couple of Haitians behind me, about two cars back. I waved them over.

A man and – oh my God, I couldn't believe it – a pregnant woman who must've been at least in her sixth month. She wore cutoffs, khaki, and a T-shirt so faded I couldn't even make out what the design or writing was. They looked at me for like half a second, and then were about to turn away even though I was gesturing *Come here, come here*. Could my hair have been such a mess from blowing in the wind that I looked witchy and was scaring them? They just stood there, trans-something¹⁰, whatever the word – who could think? – paralyzed-like, and then... they were running toward my car.

Then another two came, a man and a boy, maybe ten or eleven years old. So fast I couldn't believe it. I got the pregnant woman in the front passenger seat and the others in the back. Another guy came, close to old and so bony every rib showed. It was only then, *Duh*¹¹, I realized they weren't speaking English. Okay, except not Spanish either. Right, because Haitians speak some kind of French. But I got back into my seat and shook my head at the old guy and tried anyway. "*Sólo cuatro*¹²." Because it was a 328i¹³ and even if you didn't use seat belts there wasn't enough room, but he climbed over the door into the back. I motioned at them to get down, then kind of hunkered down myself¹⁴ for a second to show them. They got it.

Now what? [...]

So I held the button to get the top up and yelled "*tête*¹⁵" to them, which I was 100 percent sure was the French word for it, and patted the top of my head. Because this had to be a total trauma for them and it would be awful if they also got a concussion. I actually didn't have to give the demo because they all seemed to get it, and the pregnant woman in the front gave me a look that maybe said *Like we don't know?*, which I hoped wasn't the case because I didn't want her thinking I was condescending to blacks. I turned on the AC, closed the windows and said to her *Je m'appelle Karen*¹⁶ and she said something with an *M*, maybe Miriam. [...]

65 Anyway, my good deed paid off because as the left lane really started moving, I spotted two Miami cops waving *Move it* to get us all off the Causeway. [...]

I got past the two cops, onto Twenty-Sixth. That was when I started to hyperventilate. I so much wanted to pull over and cup my hands over my mouth so I could get carbon dioxide. But I couldn't pull over because I had all these people whose lives were depending on me plus a baby who wasn't yet born. [...]

70 As I turned onto Brickell¹⁷, I said in a very loud voice, "To Petite Haiti". There's a Haitian neighborhood in Miami called "Little Haiti", not that I knew where it was exactly or if *petite* was the right word for it in French or Haitian.

I wasn't sure whether they'd understood, but Miriam reached up from being practically down on the floor and patted the side of my leg. She said, "Okay," and then a bunch of other

⁹ *Ellis Island*: ø, hvor indvandrere til USA blev modtaget 1892-1924

¹⁰ (her) *transfixed*: lammet

¹¹ (her) of course

¹² *Sólo cuatro* (spansk): Only four

¹³ BMW

¹⁴ *hunkered down myself*: dukkede mig

¹⁵ (fransk) head

¹⁶ *Je m'appelle Karen* (fransk): My name is Karen

¹⁷ Brickell Avenue, gade i finans kvarteret i Miami, Florida

stuff that of course I didn't understand. Her voice was soft and deep, like you could record it and play it as spa music.

Once I announced where I was taking them, I realized I had to find it. I made another left and finally got to 1-95 going north, because I knew that if you got to the Design District, you
80 wouldn't be far from Little Haiti. [...]

I always forget the names of the roads that go through the Design District, even though now they've become like Rodeo Drive or Madison Avenue, with Prada and Tod's and Givenchy¹⁸. But I kept driving on [...]. Then I started to see more and more black people, not like American blacks who come in so many colors that it's stupid to call them black, so I probably should start saying
85 African American. Except these people were Haitian. Or Haitian Americans. So finally I saw a man and a woman walking together. They had an air about them like they were going somewhere but weren't in a huge hurry, and they were talking to each other in the matter-of-fact, nice but not lovey-dovey¹⁹ way married people who really like each other talk. She was wearing navy cotton gauze²⁰ pants and a lovely, crisp white shirt, cuffs turned up twice, which in
90 my opinion is the only way to do it. So I pulled up the car right next to them and stopped. I rolled down my window. At the same time I was motioning *Up* to my passengers.

The couple turned and stared and either they'd heard about what was going on from the news or they just knew that these things happen. And I knew I picked the right people because the man had a cell phone, which wasn't a given in 2002, especially in poorer neighborhoods. I
95 remember reading in the *Miami Herald*²¹ about how poor people need cell phones too, though I don't always finish every article I start. The woman was beaming at the refugees and motioning that they should get out of the car.

Anyway, in two seconds he was on the phone talking to someone and she had an arm around the boy, and amazingly the oldish man who'd been crouched down so long didn't even seem
100 stiff. People were suddenly pouring onto the street, surrounding the Haitians who'd been with me. I hadn't even noticed them coming over. Just as I reached across the floor of the car to where Miriam had been sitting, to get my handbag, and I was opening it to get my wallet, I realized all five were already gone.

Gone. The woman turned to me and said, "They wanted me to thank you." I thought she'd
105 have an accent, but she didn't.

"Oh, sure." I smiled at her, but honestly I felt like crying because I never got a chance to say goodbye. Of course, I didn't know them, and maybe the pregnant one's name wasn't even Miriam, but I felt like I knew them. Like I knew the father and the boy had a good relationship. I swear, I'm not making that up. "Can I give you some money for them?"

110 She shook her head. "No. I don't know where they went. People will take care of them. Don't worry."

"Is there a group that helps... immigrants?" She nodded. I took all the cash out of my wallet and gave it to her. "Can I - ?"

She handed me back a ten, like a mother who wouldn't want a kid to go out without any
115 money. She closed my fingers over it, then held my hand between both of hers. "Thank you," she said. "I'll never forget you."

Usually, that kind of stuff embarrasses me. If I have to say something back, it's like the worst, because I hate mush²². But the words rushed out. "I'll never forget you either. You're a good person, and so is the man - "

¹⁸ *Prada and Tod's and Givenchy*: designerbrands

¹⁹ romantisk

²⁰ *navy cotton gauze*: mørkeblåt bomuldsstof

²¹ *Miami Herald*: avis

²² for meget sentimentalitet

120 "My husband."

"Yes. You both were so kind to stop and help like that," I said back, sincerely, wanting to stay with her, even though I knew I'd completely missed my hairdresser appointment and Marco wasn't great about being late, but that's why God made me a generous tipper.

125 "You were more than kind," she said back, and she did sound a little bit French or Haitian when she said that. Anyway, we wound up kissing each other, the two-cheek Euro²³ kiss.

I think of them, the Causeway people and the good people, a lot. More than you'd believe. Sometimes I smile. Sometimes my eyes fill up. Can you believe it's been fifteen years?

(2018)

²³ European