



# Damien

FICTION

ILDIKO TILLMANN



## ABSTRACT

Fictional short story set in contemporary Haiti.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Ildiko Tillmann**

SUNY Stony Brook, US

tillmannildi@gmail.com

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I work so I can become more.  
And never the less...

Her labor progressed fast. Carmine heard the midwife instructing her to breath and push at the same time, “Good, *cheri*, come on, push, push,” in Kreyol, her native tongue, forming words and sounds that surrounded the little boy on his way toward the light of this world. He was still oblivious, hesitant between the familiar, soft darkness of his mother’s body and the spacious heat of the room, but he was tempted by the commotion that filled the new space, intrigued by the noise and the fuss surrounding his arrival.

He heard the voices of women helping the midwife, the splash of water drawn from the communal well nearby, carried to the house in plastic containers and boiled on charcoal fires, he felt the sun-soaked scent of clean clothes waiting for him. He heard the women’s unspoken but clearly formed requests, their prayers to God, to the Virgin Mary, and to their son, Jesus Our Savior, but also to Papa Legba, *Vyè Legba*, whom even ardent followers of the Holy Faith knew for certain to be standing at the crossroads, granting or barring passage between the world that was visible and the one that was less so. The women were praying for the mother and the baby to be safe, to survive unharmed this ultimate token of giving, this uniquely female ordeal called birthing a child.

About an hour later, the little baby boy was in Carmine’s arms. His skin was dark, very much like hers, different from her husband’s or her other children’s. She could not help feeling charmed by that, feeling that the boy was only hers. “*Bebe mwèn*, flesh from my flesh, soul from my soul,” she whispered to him, “my beautiful little son.” A few minutes after the baby had been cleaned and placed back in her arms, her husband came to look at his newborn son, the third child he had with Carmine. Content, the husband acknowledged her efforts with a smile. Another boy... He felt like a man.

Carmine lay in the bed of their only bedroom, exhausted. She sent a silent prayer to the Virgin, and a grateful smile to the beautiful and strong *Ezilis*, goddesses of love and motherhood in her land, for delivering both her and her son safely. For not giving her complications during the process. For allowing her to have a roof over her head. For letting the little boy arrive without sentencing himself to a motherless life already at the outset.

She was listening to the sound of the raindrops hitting the corrugated metal roof, and to the distant voices of her older children, seeping in from other parts of the house. She rested her eyes on the small window facing the bed, on this rectangular shape cut in the grey stone wall, with an ornamental stone lattice design inside the opening. No window panes, not in her neighborhood. She heard the conversations of people on the street, discussing events, letting gossip run from house to house. She heard the goats bleating and the chickens cooing in the yard, the rooster ordering the hens around. She greeted the banana tree leaves waving outside, passing their shiny, dark-green, raindrop-filled messages around.

Carmine wondered how long this bliss would last, she wondered how much longer her husband would stick around, whether he would stay to witness and share with her the experience of their children growing up. Whether he would want to see this baby-boy become a man, see it from up and close, not from a distance, not from a different house living with a different woman, as so many other men do. The little boy started to fuss, cutting short the course of these pointless thoughts. He directed her back to motherly tasks. Carmine pulled the baby closer to her breast, fed him, and closed her eyes to catch some sleep.

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Damien was sitting in his car at the airport parking lot, waiting for the missionaries to be delivered to him by Josue, who worked at the airport as a licensed driver. As all official personnel, Josue was allowed to enter the inner circles of the arrival area, a space otherwise reserved for the chosen, for people free to leave the country and to return. Haitians who could afford to travel or were living abroad, and foreigners coming to work or to visit. The official drivers, whose job it was to make the arriving passengers feel warmly attended to, wore brown and yellow uniforms, which added a colorful local touch to the arrival scene.

Josue hustled his way through several clusters of welcomers and tried to position himself at a place where the American missionaries, a small group of three on a visit to an orphanage on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, could easily spot him. He held up a piece of cardboard with their names written on it, and did his best not to perspire heavily so he would not have to wipe his forehead all the time. He was determined to make a good impression, to defy the steady heat.

Unlike Josue, Damien was not simply a driver, he worked as a fixer. Haitians would not call him that, they would say he was an *ajan*, an agent, but for the foreigners and the expats he was a fixer; someone who made their transportation arrangements, organized their meetings, and generally served as the contact between them and Haitian officials, academics, journalists, artists, priests, or people with no title. He was their contact with 'the locals.' He translated during interviews and looked after everything the visitors were unable to look after by themselves. He was a person whom nature blessed with a calming, stable presence, and a smile that made people want to smile back.

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Damien was born in the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, in a house that would have appeared small and unlit to most foreign visitors he worked for. For him and his siblings, it was a nice home built of grey stone-bricks, proudly presided over by their mother, and occasionally visited by their father. The house had a corrugated metal roof through which one could hear the singing of raindrops, a loud pit-patting sound that had put Damien to sleep many times during his childhood. On rainy nights, when he was lying in bed with closed eyes, he let the flow of raindrops take him far far away. The sound of drums from the neighborhood and from inside his soul blended with the music of the rain and carried him towards the embrace of water, towards the sea and the waves, up to the sky and back to *Gine*, to an ancestral land in Africa, to a comforting home of endless wishful dreams.

The bed Damien was born in stood opposite a window, a rectangular hole cut into the wall of the house, with an interior stone lattice design that kept out the heat of the tropical sun. The window opened to banana trees, with leaves waving dusty-wet messages in the breeze.

Damien resembled his mother, Carmine, their skin the color of dark-roasted coffee. Mother and son were close, closer than any other members of their family. Damien was a sickly child, giving Carmine the secret worry that he would be stolen from her by evil souls, so she kept a close eye on him and made sure she prayed to the gods, claiming the boy for herself with determination. She argued with the ancestors when Damien was sick, and, to strengthen the weight of her argument, she lined up the Virgin by her side. She won all the battles, at least until now, as Damien was still gifting his smile to the living. A few years back Carmine had passed, she embarked on her journey to the place of the Eternal East, but she never left her son behind. The land where they lived was populated by visiting souls and spirits, by people and events beyond what the eyes could see. Carmine was now one of them.

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It was hot in Damien's Nissan Pathfinder and the A/C refused to work. The car was over 15 years old and some parts of it were affected by age beyond the hope of repair. Damien often dreamed about having a car which would not be giving him constant trouble. Even if not new, but say four or five years old... He had been working towards that dream over the past twenty years, but life seemed to want him to work harder to reach it. Just not yet, it appeared to be saying to him. Damien took comfort in the hope that the missionaries, as seasoned servants of the Lord and familiar with Haitian realities, would not be too irritated by having to sit in an un-airconditioned car.

The group he was waiting for, two men and a woman from a Catholic church in Austin, Texas, were coming to visit the orphanage that their American congregation financed. They were tasked with supervising conditions at the facility, and with overseeing the accounting, while also offering spiritual guidance to the children and the staff. They came to add their personal contribution to the project, and to make sure that the Haitian members of their flock would not wander astray, tempted by competing spiritual messages and false idols roaming the island. The orphanage was operated by Haitians, with a few rotating American volunteers added to the staff, and both the local and the foreign management were proud that the orphanage functioned with no apparent abuse of the children and no embezzlement of the donated funds. A supervising group arrived from Austin twice

a year, bringing generous quantities of stuffed animals, non-perishable food items, basic medical supplies, and freshly printed Bibles. Damien had worked for them several times already.

“We are running a tight ship here,” the last missionary group leader was fond of saying, with an apparent sense of achievement and a well-meaning smile.

As a former student at a prestigious high school operated by the Catholic Church in Port-au-Prince, Damien was familiar with tightly run ships of this kind. His family could not afford the tuition payments, so he attended the school on a scholarship granted by the Church, one that he received based on his previous school performance. Following his graduation it was assumed that he would teach at the school as a volunteer, for free. In brochures distributed for donors in America this was described as “our alumni giving back” and understood to be the properly selfless way to pay off the debt he was assumed to have incurred by attending the school.

It was not against Damien’s nature to “give back,” to the contrary, it suited him well. He became an organizer, an advocate, a volunteer teacher for disadvantaged children, a mentor to students who were about as disadvantaged as he himself had previously been. Alongside “giving back,” Damien started working as a fixer and tried to make ends meet as he navigated life and paid his way through the labyrinthine structure of Haitian higher education. He attended University, working his way through street barricades and cyclical teachers’ strikes, and kept a willing faith in a better future for his country and for himself. He had no doubt that through God’s grace and his own talent many things were going to be possible.

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Damien was looking towards the airport exit through the Pathfinder’s cracked windshield when he noticed Josue approaching, leading a group of three. Damien recognized two of the missionaries from previous trips, but one of the men was new, Damien had not seen him before. He got out of the car to greet the visitors, and to introduce himself to the new person who appeared to be the one in charge of the group. After placing a few polite questions regarding the flight, Damien piled the Americans’ luggage in the trunk, and the four of them got in the car. Josue collected a tip from Damien and went back to the airport building, to search for clients of his own.

“Is this your first time in Haiti?” Damien asked the new man once they were seated in the car. The man’s name was Thomas. He was in his late fifties, a jovial man with a thick beard and a sizable stomach that made him look older than his age.

“Yes. I am excited to be here and to learn more about the country,” said Thomas as he settled himself comfortably in the passenger seat, next to Damien. The other two Americans were sitting in the back.

“Welcome. I hope that you will enjoy your stay,” Damien said, and he smiled.

The cars along the road kicked up the dirt of the unpaved streets. Damien drove slowly, skirting large rocks and hard-to-navigate potholes that littered the streets. While keeping up the small-talk with Thomas, Damien wondered what his city looked like through the eyes of the new visitor, this *blan*,<sup>1</sup> or foreigner, in Haiti for the first time, but he did not ask. Traffic was slow, almost at a standstill. Damien rested his eyes on the street vendors, on the mangoes, the cassava breads, on the bananas and the drinks, on the people jostling along the cars, selling water, soda, and plantain chips roasted on open fire. His eyes followed the people pushing merchandise in wheelbarrows, offering their services. He felt hungry, so he contemplated calling out to a man who lingered close to his car, to ask him to bring some fried chicken from a nearby stall, but then he decided against it. He thought that the Americans might not be up to eating food prepared from meat that had been stored in the heat for over a day, under conditions that they likely would judge as unsanitary. Damien did not want to be the only person in the car eating food, he feared that it might make his employers think that he is unprofessional. He decided to wait, and eat after he dropped them off.

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<sup>1</sup> *Blan*, literally meaning ‘white,’ is the generic word Haitians use to describe foreigners who visit the country, including dark-skinned people from the US. It likely dates back to the time following the Haitian Revolution of 1793–1804, when the Constitution of the newly dependent country stipulated that “all citizens of Haiti are black.” This was a principle that functioned independent of real skin color, which is reflected in the fact that many doctors of European (primarily French) descent and a group of soldiers of Polish descent were allowed to and chose to stay and become citizens of independent Haiti.



Roadside food vendors outside Port au Prince. Image courtesy of the author.

In contrast to Damien's deliberate reserve Thomas was animated and talkative, busy asking many questions. He was eager to impress himself and others as a socially conscientious, open-minded person, willing and able to help those he thought were less fortunate than himself. He had been serving on the funding committee of the orphanage for a couple of years now, but he had never been to Haiti before. He was curious to finally see the country with his own eyes and to experience it personally, or at least to have adventures which he saw as "experiencing Haiti outside the orphanage."

They had been on the road for about forty-five minutes when Thomas started taking pictures. At first mental ones, later also capturing images on his phone. If Damien could have read Thomas's mind, he would have received an answer to his unspoken question, he would have learned what the city had looked like through the eyes of someone who grew up under different skies, a man who saw the same people and the same places as he did, but gave them a different meaning in his mind. Thomas saw old trucks used as buses, covered with colorful pictures and slogans painted on them: *Jesus has come, God is with us, or Patience in the Lord*. He saw vendors in stained and stretched-out T-shirts or in colorful summer dresses walking alongside or standing by the road, selling drinks from containers dripping with melting ice. Men balancing heavy, electric blue plastic sacks on top of their heads, filled with small bags of water for sale. Others, walking with sacks of rice or bundles of clothes, also on top of their heads, their feet covered up to their knees with the white dust of the road.



Port au Prince traffic. The words on top of the truck translate as: "Blessing of God." Words on roadside store: "God first." Image courtesy of the author.

Thomas saw makeshift stalls lining the streets, built of metal or of wood and palm fronds, he saw women preparing food on open, smoky fires, their faces embraced by the dust and the heat. Watching the words painted on cars, buses, and the small, color-filled, container shaped metal structures that functioned as stores, lottery places or barber shops, Thomas had the impression that God was everywhere. Omnipresent, Thomas thought, as He should be. *Jesus le saveur, La main de Dieu est réel*. “Jesus our Savior” and “God’s hand is real” beckoned to all, mostly in French, sometimes in Kreyol.

Thomas took a mental note of the garbage that filled the streets, and of the people navigating around or wading through heaps of trash, trying to find the best way ahead. He snapped pictures of the traffic not moving, and he wondered whether any of his images would be able to capture the essence of the past hour and a half, the time they had spent being stuck in traffic, heat and dust. He also wondered what emotion it was that would best describe the street scenes, whether it was a sense of patience and resignation, or a sense of aggression, as drivers, hindered by chaotic traffic, by crowds of pedestrians, by narrow streets and spontaneous rules made up on the go were nevertheless pushing ahead, imposing their will on people and on objects that stood in their way.

Thomas photographed Damien as well, who sat in the driver’s seat, in the middle of it all, calm and reassuring. Unphased. Pushing ahead when he thought it would be worth the effort, so they could be moving along. Seeing nothing unusual or worth mentioning. He was at home.

The dust-filled air and littered streets of Port-au-Prince looked different from what Thomas had expected of a capital city. The physical condition of the streets and of most buildings, and the animals mingling with people lent a small-town feel to the place, but the noise and the bustle reminded Thomas that this was not a small, rural backwater. Port-au-Prince, this modern day Haitian capital, was full of people and cars that navigated around each other and avoided accidents more frequently than what would have seemed reasonable. Motorcycle taxis zig-zagged among the vehicles and the pedestrians, transporting passengers who balanced their bodies in smooth, gracefully practiced ways, as the driver skirted cars, potholes and pedestrians. Sometimes two or three people sat in the back of the moto, behind the driver. Mothers cradling their babies, children going to school. To Thomas they seemed crazy, their navigation dangerous. In Damien’s eyes they were skillful, weaving their way through traffic and life.

Watching the *motos* pass by his car made Damien think of the small wire cages that the moto-taxi drivers tied to the front of their vehicles, where they kept the money they received for transporting people throughout the day. When sitting on a moto, Damien always liked to watch the once colorful, faded paper bills swirl around in the cage, chased by the wind during the ride, fluttering wildly and catching dust, becoming stiff from dirt, unable to fly away. Like butterflies trapped within the confines of a bounded, wind-swept plain, the swirling bills reminded Damien of the people of his land.

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“The amount of garbage and the smell in some places is terrible. Coupled with the heat and the dust, it penetrates your defenses,” Thomas will tell his audience later, recounting his Haitian experiences back in Texas, and he will be right. He will describe the photos he took as “images of poverty,” and from his perspective, he would again be right. Still, if he had asked Damien or other locals, they would have told him that these were simply images of daily life. To call it poverty is a matter of comparison. Not that they would deny the hardships inherent in their reality, or ignore that it was wearing them slowly down, day after day, but they would have preferred not to use words that equated their life with helplessness and misery. They would also have preferred not to see it presented as such in foreign advertising campaigns that solicited donations for aid. Those images and their pleading messages sounded pitiful, almost offensive, arrogant in their insinuated judgement. Damien saw these images as manipulated stills of their lives. Lives lived by individuals, weak, strong or average, but all, by necessity, resourceful. Some of them were kind and caring, some cruel and opportunistic. Like people everywhere.

“We are all facing and conquering risks here many times a day. We are not victims to be pitied, we deserve our own chance at changing fate to fortune,” Damien liked to say.

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By the time Damien delivered the missionaries and arrived back home from the orphanage it was late afternoon. The small, scarcely furnished apartment felt hot and stuffy. Damien checked to see if there was electricity to charge his phone and he tried to turn on the fan, but the outlet was dead. He was not surprised. Over the past years government-supplied electricity became more and more intermittent, available not more than a few hours every two or three days.

He went to the bathroom to wash his face. The water-barrel by the sink was almost empty, so he used the one in the kitchen, which he had recently filled up. Then he went back to the kitchen, lit two candles to counter the collecting darkness, and sat down to eat the food he had picked up on the way. When he finished eating, he lay down on the bed and fell asleep.

He dreamed that he was living a different life. Not very different, still being Damien, still living in Haiti, on an island that used to be and perhaps could one day again become a lush, tropical haven. He had the same education, the same giving heart, the same frequent smile on his face, the same gently teasing words. But in the dream, he had a job which was permanent, which did not only last for a few days or a week. In the dream he was not simply an assistant, an accessory to the success of foreign journalists, researchers or activists working on global social justice projects. In the dream he conducted interviews and wrote pieces of his own that were published under his name... he hosted a radio show about Haitian politics, culture, and social reform... he was driving a car that did not have a cracked windshield... he drove along a winding road of waving palm leaves and was about to arrive at a house to visit a beautiful, strong woman he loved, when the phone rang and woke him up, cutting his dreams short. It was Thomas on the other end of the line.

“*Bonsoir*, Damien,” Thomas said, showing off one of the first local expressions he had already picked up, “Would you be up for having some beers together at a bar?”

Thomas wanted to go out and he needed a ride. Disguised as an invitation to hang out and chat with a new friend, it would be work for Damien. He had no desire to drive all the way to the orphanage, then back to town, then drop Thomas off again, but he needed the money, so he said yes.

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Several hours later, just past midnight, Damien was on his way back home. He was tired and his eyes gave him trouble, he did not see well in the dark. He relied on his instincts and slowly followed the road, the narrow path marked by the car’s headlights. He and Thomas had spent two hours sitting at a bar, drinking Haitian beer and rum, both of which Thomas insisted on trying for several rounds.

“Good stuff. Cheers,” he toasted.

Damien liked to drink rum mixed with Toro, an over-sugared local energy drink.

“Try it like this, with Haitian Red Bull,” he told Thomas, tempting the American with the experience of something new and exotic sounding. Damien could easily have drunk Thomas under the table, but he was careful to keep his mind straight, to answer Thomas’s endless questions. He remembered that the next morning he would have to get up at six and drive to the orphanage again to take the missionaries to their first meeting. Sometime around eleven o’clock at night, when it became clear that Thomas would happily stay at the bar for much longer, Damien finally decided that it was time to head back and catch some sleep.

“I was having a blast, man, I forgot all about tomorrow,” said Thomas, a bit unsteady. But he agreed to leave. He did not offer to pay for Damien’s drinks. When they arrived at the walled compound of the orphanage he clambered out of the car, shook Damien’s hand and thanked him for a great evening.

“Port-au-Prince is a fun place,” he said. “Thanks for the ride, man.”

He shut the car door and slowly walked away towards the building entrance. He did not give Damien any money for the ride, or for the time Damien had spent entertaining him. Perhaps he thought that the evening was fun for both of them the same way, that Damien was as much interested in his stories as he was in Damien’s, that the conversation itself would count as an acceptable favor in return. Or perhaps Thomas simply felt entitled to such service, as part of a deal that the Haitian *chauffeur* was already getting paid for. Or perhaps he simply forgot. Damien sat in the

car, quietly wished Thomas a good night through the rolled-down window, and did not mention anything about money. He did not feel like asking for something that he should have been offered. He carefully rolled out of the yard with the car. Small rocks and sand crackled under the wheels.

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The moon was shedding a pale light on the road. Damien felt tired. He wanted to close his eyes and give them a rest, so he veered towards the right and stopped where the curb should have been, had there been any asphalt to mark the width of the road. He leaned back in the seat and let the stars enter his mind, let their gentle twinkle take his thoughts off the lurking feeling that he was taken advantage of, over and over again. That he did not have a choice. As his closing eyelids shut the world out, he invited the moon to visit his soul for a while.

Sometime later he woke up. His eyelashes felt heavy, so he opened them slowly, with care. He straightened himself in the seat and rolled the window fully down, to let more breeze in. To collect his thoughts, he walked his eyes along the familiar landscape outside the car, moving them through a scene of worn mountains, seaside planes and tall, curvy palm trees, then alongside leaves swaying like shadows in the breeze. Damien started the car, then he turned his face toward the passenger seat, and noticed Carmine sitting next to him. It was hard to make out her face and her beautiful features mingled with the darkness of the night, but her eyes shone the way they have always shined at him. The white dress she wore lit up her face. She appeared to have dressed for a ceremony for the gods.

“Damien, *cheri*, why the heavy heart? My beautiful, grown man son. Tell me what is weighing on you,” she said. “Nothing *maman*, I just felt suddenly tired as I was driving, so I stopped for a short rest. Make no worries in your heart for me. I am well. See, I am leaving, going back home, right now.” He touched her with his eyes, hoping that his glance felt soft, a silent touch of velvet caressing her face. He saw Carmine move her arms, felt her holding him, not the way she held him when he was a small boy, but the way that a proud mother holds a grown up son, with the care of a woman who had carried him in her body so that he could exist. Flesh from her flesh... He let the feeling linger. When he raised his head and turned toward the road again, she was not sitting there anymore. “*Mési, maman cheri,*” he said aloud, knowing that she could hear him. He pulled back to the middle of the road and continued on his way.



Haiti countryside, sunset.  
Image courtesy of the author.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Ildiko Tillmann**  
SUNY Stony Brook, US



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