

Breeze

December 1995

**THE REAL POCAHONTAS
WOULDN'T DRESS
LIKE THAT!**

What the Disney
blockbuster got wrong

Bell bottoms are back baby!

10 ways to rock
that look

**ARE YOU READY
FOR Y2K?**

A rough guide to
the apocalypse

**How to get your man
this holiday season**

**LAWYERS WHO CHANGE
THE WORLD**

An Interview With Renée François



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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



It's The End Of The World As We Know It

Remember the '90s? The iPhone wasn't yet a twinkle in Steve Jobs's eyes; Murphy Brown opted to raise her TV baby as a single mom, sending Vice President Dan Quayle into a tizzy; and, we all thought Y2K would bring civilization crashing down. We survived those turbulent years, but we are forever changed by the experience.

In the early '90s, I was a law student filled with the nebulous dread that plagues so many twentysomethings. Mixed with the fear of a coming apocalypse, I worried: the stock market would crash before I could set up my first 401k, the World Wide Web would never amount to much, and, I wouldn't find a job that made a difference in the world while still paying enough to handle my crushing law school debt.

I never worried that the government would fall. I didn't worry that I'd be forced into the sea on a rickety boat in hopes of saving my life. Yet, for many Haitians, that is exactly what happened.

On September 29, 1991, tanks rolled onto the streets of Port-au-Prince, the acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air, and Haiti's democratically elected president was trussed up like a Christmas goose and sent into exile.

I learned this not from the news but from the Haitian immigrant community—a network more powerful than Facebook. Though my immediate family moved to Brooklyn in the 1960s, we still had relatives in Haiti. We were on the phone all night tracking them down.

Spring Break that year found me in Florida filing asylum applications in a program sponsored by Catholic Legal Services. It was there I learned the distinction between "economic migrants," who must be shunned, and bona fide asylum seekers. I also learned that coming from a poor country made it much more likely you'd be categorized as a migrant—no matter the number of tanks that rolled down your street.

I spent 10 days listening to harrowing stories. Law students from all over the country came to help capture and present those stories in a way the immigration service could (hopefully) understand. We worked twelve hour days, lived off vending machines, and slept on army cots in a high school gymnasium. Our accommodations were luxurious compared to the tent cities the U.S. set up to house refugees on Guantanamo. (Before it became a holding pen in the War on Terror, the naval base housed Haitian refugees. It was also home to the first AIDS camp in history).

My stint as a would-be immigration lawyer changed my life. I learned I didn't have the courage to do the work. How do you sit across from a mother clutching her baby while recounting the worst story of rape and abuse and not be able to help her? How do you look into the eyes of a young boy who survived a 600-mile ocean crossing with little more than a jug of water and know he will be sent back to the hell he'd escaped?

I moved into international trade and development because that seemed to offer hope and possibility, two things I found lacking in immigration law. Lately, immigration issues have been calling me back. We live in interesting times.

When our leaders brand immigrants as rapists, criminals, and "bad people," immigrants (99% of Americans) must fight back. Like Murphy Brown, Anita Hill, and so many others, we must learn to speak truth to power.

In law school, I learned the best way to fight bad ideas was with better ones. The marketplace of ideas was a cherished institution. These days, a respectful exchange of views seems nearly impossible. Facts and logic, hallmarks of the

marketplace, have lost their currency. Research supports what many of us have experienced on Facebook. Dr. Melanie Green, a narrative researcher, finds that facts and logic entrench people's deeply held—though demonstrably false—beliefs. The more we argue, the less we hear.

So, how do we respond to these times? We tell stories. Dr. Green and others have found that stories persuade and help develop empathy when nothing else works.

This magazine was born of my effort to tell stories. It is a work of fiction set in the 1990s world of Renée François. Renée is a Haitian-American immigration lawyer (no relation!) and the protagonist of my New World Legal Thrillers series.

In this issue, I interview Renée for the fictional BREEZE magazine. Why? Because I loved '90s women's magazines! They brought intellect and wit (not to mention fashion tips) to their audience.

I survived Y2k thanks in part to those magazines. I'm bringing some of that good energy into the next existential crisis.

Marjorie Florestal
Author

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1995 DECEMBER



13

LAW RULES

An interview with lawyer Renée François who argues Supreme Court cases and keeps company with world leaders

16

24 HOURS IN HAITI

Spend 24 hours in Haiti. Meet the people and places of this culturally rich in pictures

17

SPOTLIGHT: AUTHORS

Author Marjorie Florestal talks about her latest thriller on the Haitian Refugee crisis

FICTION

When Death Comes For You: A New World Legal Thriller by Marjorie Florestal

19



Columbus Cove

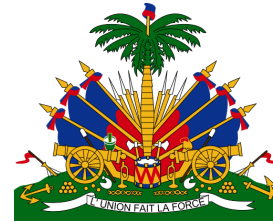
Labadee, Haiti

Photo Credit: Jamie Rizzo





Citadelle Laferrière
Cap-Haïtien, Haiti



LAW RULES

By Marjorie Florestal



Hotel Oloffson
Port-au-Prince, Haiti



Haitian-American Artist
Jean-Michele Basquiat

Renée François is running late. She rushes into our meeting with windswept hair, an off-white Armani suit, and an apologetic smile.

As a writer, I've had interview subjects arrive late before, but Renée's excuse is a new one. "I was meeting with Aristide and lost track of time. Traffic from the National Palace is terrible."

"Aristide" is none other than President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's democratically elected once-and-current president.

How does a lawyer from Brooklyn find herself keeping company with a

head of state? This is an interesting question. We should probably start from the beginning.

Renée and I are seated in a lush garden at the Hotel Oloffson, a 19th century gothic mansion in the heart of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital city.

It is October, and in almost any town in America, we'd be shivering in our boots. But here, the wind is balmy as it rattles off the Caribbean Coast bearing the smell of sea salt and endless fields of sugar cane.

Four years ago, the picture was not so idyllic.

On September 29, 1991, the Haitian military rejected democracy. Tanks rolled through the streets of Port-au-Prince, and the sound of heavy artillery and gunshots rang long into the night.

By the time it was all over, thousands were dead or wounded, Aristide was cast into exile, and army general Raoul Cédras had appointed himself leader of the Haitian people. "Today, the armed forces find themselves obligated to assume the heavy responsibility to keep the ship of state afloat. After seven months of democratic experience, the country once again finds itself prey to the horrors of uncertainty. With all Haitians, we will bring the ship to port."

Despite Cédras's lofty words, Haitians fled the island in droves. They took to the sea in boats held together with rusted nails and prayer. Renée watched the crisis unfold from her home in Boston. "At first, it was like watching Desert Storm on CNN—none of it felt real. People were being shot in the streets or they were drowning in 600 miles of open water because the sea was their last hope. All I could do was watch."

The moment came when she could watch no longer. "There was a little boy on the news," Renée admits, her eyes haunted. "He was standing on a street corner in Port-au-Prince with a hand to his head. He seemed so normal. Then he took his hand away, and all you saw was a huge gaping wound and blood. So much blood."

Renée struggles to hold on to her dispassionate lawyer persona. She shuts her eyes, and her elegant hands, with their perfectly manicured nails, clench and unclench. Then she looks at me with steely resolve. "Doing nothing was no longer an option."

Renée is the divorced mother of a young daughter. There was no way she could ignore the suffering of children. Within a few weeks, she had quit her job at a prestigious Boston law firm and set out for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.



“

Doing nothing was
no longer an option

—Renée François

"The U.S. intercepted thousands of Haitians at sea and interned them on Guantanamo," she explains.

This would raise a significant legal question. Were those on a US naval base entitled to the protection of US law? When Renée couldn't get answers from the federal government, she sued—all the way to the Supreme Court.

I find myself wondering what one wears to an argument before the Supreme Court? When Renée shoots me a quizzical look, I realize I have asked the question aloud.

"I'm not much for fashion," she says with a wry smile. "When I learned I would be arguing the case, my first thought was, 'I hope I don't embarrass myself.' There haven't been many women to argue before the court, and fewer still black women."

In fact, Belva Lockwood, the first woman who applied to argue before the court in 1876, was rejected by a vote of 6-3. It took the passing of a Congressional law before the justices would allow women to appear.

Even now, women represent only 15% of lawyers before the court, and the number of African American women to argue a Supreme Court case is vanishingly small [Editor's Note: There is no reliable data, but research from Mother Jones pegs the figure at less than 12]. The most famous is Constance Baker Motley, who won the case that allowed James Meredith to become the first African American enrolled at the University of Mississippi.

When I ask Renée why it was important for her to bring the plight of the Haitian people to the Supreme Court, she is fierce in her response. "Because I made a promise to the refugees on Guantanamo. I promised to make sure they were treated fairly under the law. These are people who have never seen the law work to their advantage, and I told them things were different in the United States. I also did it because I'm an American, and I want my country to live up to its ideals as well as the laws we've signed. We're signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which obligates us to protect those with a well-founded fear of persecution."

By this point, Renée has lost her reserve. She leans forward, as if to pull me into her world. "In 1939, there was a ship—the MS St. Louis. It carried 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. They were turned away from Cuba, Canada, and the United States. Many were forced to return to Europe where the Nazis killed 254 of them in concentration camps—that's 254 lives that could have been saved. After World War II, we promised to help create a new world. We must abide by that promise because America always keeps its promises."

In the end, Renée would find relief for her clients not in the Supreme Court but in a negotiated settlement with the federal government. In June 1993, the last of the refugees left Guantanamo. Estimates are that the US Coast Guard intercepted 35,000 Haitians at sea. Only a quarter were permitted into the United States. The rest were returned to Haiti.

Renée would go on to lobby the Clinton Administration to help restore peace in Haiti. On October 15, 1994, exactly one year ago today, President Aristide returned to the National Palace with a US military escort. In a speech marking the occasion, Aristide said, "We too have a dream. Today, in our beloved Haiti, the dream of democracy has become reality."

Renée and I are nearing the end of a three-hour-long interview. While I've gotten to know the lawyer quite well, I haven't captured the essence of the woman behind the persona. I try to coax her out with more lighthearted questions. It does not go well.

What was she like in high school? "Too serious," Renée says, deadpan. Her favorite designer? "Whatever's on sale at Macy's." How is she preparing for Y2K and the end of the world? Here, Renée shoots me a baleful glance. I am at a loss. Then the music starts to play.

It is an infectious beat—a joyful noise of drums, guitar, and the most beautiful voices. Kem Pa Sote. Woy! Renée leaps out of her seat and starts to dance right there in the garden. She is wild and free—like the music, and like this beautiful, heartbreakingly complex Caribbean nation.

Disclaimer: This is a fictional interview based on historical events. If you enjoyed meeting Renée François, check out her story in *When Death Comes For You: A New World Legal Thriller*, now available on Amazon.

24 HOURS in Haiti



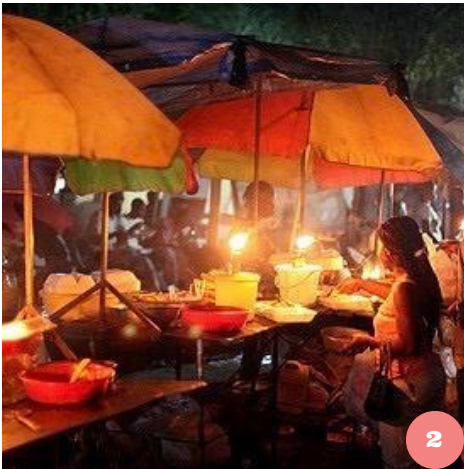
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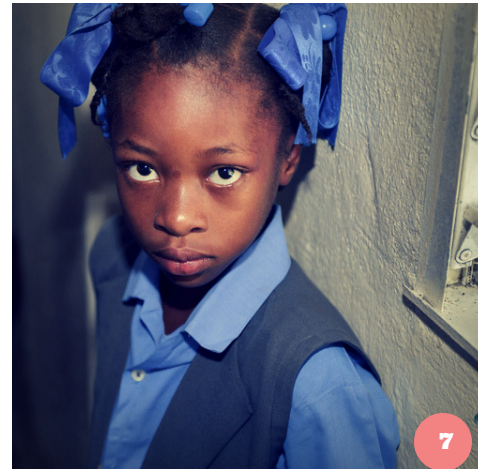
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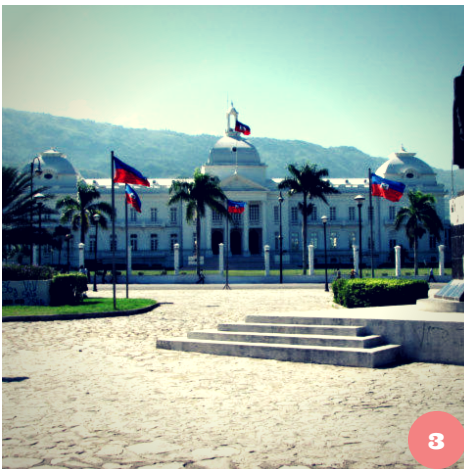
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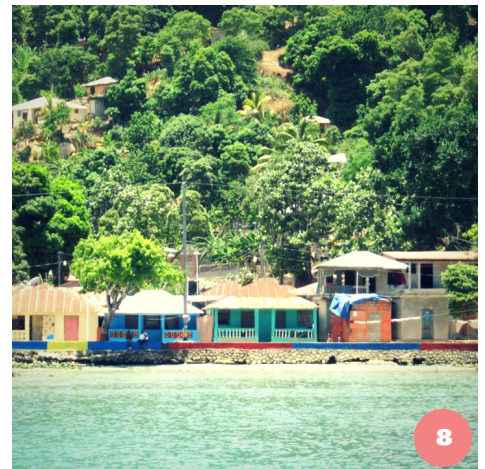
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SPOTLIGHT: **AUTHORS**

Marjorie Florestal's fiction brings to life the 1990s Haitian refugee crisis

4 Questions

Award-winning author Marjorie Florestal wades into the immigration debate with a new thriller

1. How did you come up with the idea for *When Death Comes For You*?

I started writing my first novel, and a character showed up out of the blue, Rose Fleurie. She was interesting—a French-trained Haitian chef who worked for President Aristide. I started to imagine what her life might be, what she might have seen during the coup.

The next time I saw Rose, she was standing on desolate land surrounded by barbed wire and flies. I wanted to know

more. I wanted to know how someone goes from working in a palace to languishing in a refugee camp.

So, I finished my first novel and immediately got started on this, a prequel. In *When Death Comes For You*, we get to see how Rose ended up in that refugee camp on Guantanamo.

2. The novel takes place in the 1990s. What fascinates you about that time period?

I joined the world of adults in the 1990s. We were on the cusp of a new century, and

everyone was questioning what the new horizon would like. Would we survive the end of the 20th century? The questions society was asking mirrored the questions I was asking myself as a young adult.

Those of us who survived the Y2K build-up and whose adult lives straddle two different centuries see the world in fascinating ways. I wanted to explore that world again in my fiction.

3. You wrote about a historical event—the Haitian refugee crisis of the 1990s. How much creative license did you give yourself to make things up?

It was important for me to get the facts right as much as I could. I did plenty of research to supplement my memory of events. But facts aren't neutral, objective truths. Sure, we can talk about names, dates and places using a common language, but the meaning of particular events change depending on where we're standing.

For example, when the military overthrew Aristide, some truly believed they were doing what was best for the Haitian people. The Catholic Church legitimized the military government—they must have believed they were on the right side of history. Also, the benefit of hindsight shows Aristide himself to be a complicated figure. How do you write about all this "accurately"? I strove for accuracy in the details of events but gave myself creative license with the way my characters experienced those events.

4. What was the most difficult part about writing this novel?

Bringing these issues to life in a compelling but also entertaining way. This is a thriller, it's meant to get the reader hooked, to turn the page, to ask "what happens next." But I am also writing in the tradition of other commercial writers who ask deep questions even as they entertain their audience. I'm thinking about writers like Raymond Chandler and Walter Mosley who push the noir genre to its limits by interrogating society just as much as they reveal the lives of their characters.

I don't write noir fiction, but it does inspire my work. In the issues I'm interested in, society is just as much of a primary character as my protagonist.

If I do my job right, it should all come together in a way that keeps you entertained. I hope that I've done that.

A woman A small boat 18 dead bodies . . .



"The crime novel is way down my list of favorite genres, but this one was such a good read I'm reconsidering my priorities!"

-- Seattle Sue, Amazon Reviewer

"I really enjoyed this book. The plot kept me intrigued, and I learned some interesting things about Haiti's and Cuba's histories."

-- C.A. Stone, Amazon Reviewer

"Well developed, interesting characters and gripping plot"

-- Amazon Reviewer

Available at
amazon



*"What you still need to know is this:
When death comes for you, She does not
steal into your home like a thief in the night
bumping against the detritus of your
ordinary life . . . No. Death comes
like a lady"*



When Death Comes For You: A New World Legal Thriller

By Marjorie Florestal

What you still need to know is this: When Death comes for you, She does not steal into your home like a thief in the night, bumping against the detritus of your ordinary life. The chipped white cabinet with its squeaking hinges. Your grandmother's broken teapot. The stuffed dancing monkey from America that takes pride of place on your mantel.

No. Death comes like a lady. She opens the door and waits, sensing into the darkness. If all is well. If your life is full of joy and triumph. If your lover is attentive. If dark clouds part like shimmering dew in your presence, She will turn back the way She has come. She will close the door with a click so soft, you will wonder if you heard anything at all.

But if you are trapped in the inky darkness. If the scent of your imminent demise wafts in your nostrils. Well then, She might just make her appearance . . . and you would be grateful.

Do you know what it feels like to die? To feel that last gurgling breath wiggle its way through your windpipe? I do. When Death came for me, I was only five years old. A tiny girl-child, I stood on the edge of a cliff high above the Caribbean Sea while the boys of Saint-Marc gathered below, taunting and laughing.

"Plonje! Plonje!" they cried. Dive.

Easy for them to say; they knew how to swim. In the bustling Haitian port town where we lived, young boys spent the early hours of the morning diving into the bottomless ocean.

They popped back up with nets full of docile carp and grouper, rock lobster, sardines, and even conch. They brought their bounty home for the women to cook over a charcoal flame with some fresh plantains and a spicy pikliz sauce.

“Rose is such a bébé-la-la. What a big baby!” someone shouted loudly enough for me to hear.

The laughter intensified until I felt its vibration in my clenched teeth and in the tears that sprang to my eyes. I’m no baby. I squared my shoulders and puffed out my chest. In an instant, my feet were racing across the jagged rocks toward the deep blue sea.

I’m flying! I hung in the air like a laughing gull with great big flapping wings. It felt so good that I allowed myself to think, if only for a moment, that it would be okay. Then the water rushed up to meet me.

You imagine my drowning as some long, drawn-out affair with much screaming and crying and floundering about? No. There is only stillness. Wrapped in a paralysis of fear, the body cannot move. For a child, the process is mercifully quick. It takes just twenty seconds to swallow a mouthful of water. Twenty seconds for the lungs to claw frantically at a tiny bubble of air. Twenty seconds to gasp and choke and vomit it all up only to take it back in with the next desperate inhalation. Twenty seconds.

The last time Death came for me, I was a woman ancient in my bones. We were crossing the Caribbean Sea in a boat some half-hearted carpenter had put together over a long weekend. Only the tiniest sliver of moon shone in the darkened sky. I stayed alert. When the jolt came, I was ready. The boat collapsed in a pile of wood and metal, splinters and shards. We plunged into the sea. By now, I knew enough not to resist. Why should I? This salt-seasoned world is as instinctively familiar as my mother’s womb.

Not so for the others. They struggled fiercely, churning the water with their arms and rending the air with their screams. Ede mwen. Help me.

The process of drowning is not nearly as merciful for adults. We struggle against the inevitable. It is our way. It takes three minutes for an adult to stop fighting. Three minutes to become so exhausted you can’t even raise your nose and mouth out of the water. Three minutes for the body to pulse and throb to a rhythm so erratic it does not register as a heartbeat.

Three long, endless minutes.

I went to work, swimming past scraps of lumber and old memories. I dove deep into the churning water, then popped back up with a lifeless shell curled in my arms.

We enter the world in a tight little ball and leave in the exact same way.

I counted off as I worked: Three. Six. Nine. Twelve. Fifteen. Seventeen. Where was she? I counted again: Three. Six. Nine. Twelve. Fifteen. Seventeen.

Still, she was not there. Where was the baby girl who'd wrapped her tiny arms around me moments before our boat melted into the sea? Even in the darkness, I had felt the weight of her stare. It was as if she knew that I—

Ede mwen. Help me.

I heard the words reverberate in my soul. I couldn't stop myself from plunging deep into the water once more. It was all blues and dark, dark grays down at the bottom of the ocean. I made my way by touch, my hands groping through the debris of a thousand sunken ships. My lungs begged for much-needed oxygen. I swallowed hard—not the air that I craved, but the brine-soaked water that craved me. My lungs were now razor blades scraping against tender flesh.

I dove lower, feeling the seawater rush through my veins, curdling my blood. I need to breathe. The thought screamed through my mind, but I knew it was meaningless. I could not have what I wanted. This was the price of my salvation. I dove even deeper. My hands collided with a sharp, bony elbow. Meci, Papa Bondye. Meci. I praised Father God as I grabbed hold of my burden and pushed against the weight of the ocean.

But I had stayed too long. I could feel the spasms in my throat threatening to close off my windpipe. I could neither inhale nor exhale. I kept moving only because the human body is a series of reflexes and electrical impulses that don't always know when they've been shut off.

I pushed up even as the darkness descended all around me. Then, just as the final twinkle of light started to fade, I broke free. I swallowed huge, greedy gulps of air, choking and spluttering. A sharp, wheezing cough racked my body. For a long time, there was only this—the sounds of life.

When the violence subsided, I looked down at the young girl still wrapped in my arms. She did not stir. The soft pebbles of her eyes looked up at me without recrimination, but also without hope. No! Not this time. Not this little girl.

I pushed the breath of life into her with a small prayer. How long had it been? Twenty seconds? Three minutes? Three hours? I didn't know.

I pushed more air into her, but it eased through her body without resistance. I pounded her chest, then breathed again. Still nothing. She would not see her sixth birthday.

I allowed her body to join the others. The air crackled with a sudden energy only I could feel.

"Take me," I begged, my strangled cry piercing the darkness. "I want to go home.

"You still have work to do, a stern male voice replied. I trembled at the words, but of course I had to obey. How could it be otherwise?

In the distance, I heard the roar of engines as the ocean shifted from the command of nature to that of man. The Americans were coming.



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