

Eviction day

Death dues stop and memories fade

Story and photographs by Bramwell Ryan

Port-au-Prince, Haiti: On eviction day moisture oozes from the bay, squeezing past the floating debris of branches, soggy newspaper, torn fabric and human waste and soaks the air. But the humidity doesn't creep as far as the neighbourhood.

Here it's dry. It is rattlingly, clankingly, raspily dry. The only moisture would be tears, if anyone knew that today is eviction day. But those who might weep are kept out of those parts of the neighbourhood on days like this.

The complex is in the centre of the Haitian capital. From the stubbly hills surrounding the city, the neighbourhood is easy to spot. Although everything in this Caribbean country is sun scorched, muted and leached of the vibrant moisture of life the light blues and sun-baked reds of the complex stand out. Seen from the hills this big rectangle is a little less chaotic than the surrounding neighbourhoods and their knitted ball of dwellings.

The complex is densely packed, even more condensed than other areas of the city. Still, it shows some kind of order. The same order you see in the fibers of a dead tree - insanely close, and chaotic, until you look closer. Only then can you see the tree is fused together in a way that offers permanence and strength. But like all things, that solidity only lasts during life and then the rot starts, followed by the



dust and ashes.

On the hills you can't smell the neighbourhoods surrounding the complex. We're particular about which smells of life we like and there are far more we don't like. Thankfully at the main entrance the sun-roasted aroma of other areas of Port-au-Prince starts to fade as you cross the stone bridge. What's under the bridge should be called the sticks river, except there's no water left. What was the river is now choked with the debris of life; plastic jugs, torn shoes, rusted cans and thousands of sticks and stones, insults to the eye and the memory of what once floated there.

Most residents of Port-au-Prince have to cross the sticks river at least once. Few have to pay a toll but as a foreigner, I do. And the toll keeper isn't someone to argue with. He looks mean and is all black – shoes, pants, T-shirt stretched at the sleeves and neck, bandana and sunglasses. Even the long barrel of his shotgun looks black. Why he needs a gun on this bridge is a puzzle. Few complex residents ever leave, weapons don't usually influence those coming in and the looters are sanctioned. But his job was to be selective and although he never questions the residents, foreigners need to produce cash.

With a five in his back pocket and the shotgun over his shoulder, the guard sauntered into the complex and pointed to the areas off-limits to a foreigner.

The evictions don't happen all at once rather they take place in sections of the neighbourhood. At the end of the wide central lane that runs off the sticks bridge, a left turn takes you to a huge pile of wood,

Above: An altar to Baron Samedi, voodoo king of the cemetery and the dead.

Left: A pile of untouched dirt is all that is left of Papa Doc Duvalier's original grave.





Above: A funeral on its way to the cemetery.

Below: A looted caveau.

rusted nails, bits of torn cloth and reddish dirt. The wood is shattered into splinters and shards of what used to be rectangular depositories of love, affection and memory. These boxes have lost their form just like those who once used them. After the eviction they're hauled here from all over the neighbourhood. The guard says they'll be burned.

Down the main street, left into a smaller one and then right squeezing onto a tiny lane. On either side stone boxes crowd the road. They are a bit bigger than a living room couch but stand head height from the ground. They're dirty, the pastel paint flaking from the stone, stains from bird deposits and dust streaks tossed there by the wind. Many of them are busted open with most of the gaping holes at the end. The crumbled to dust cavities let the secret silence inside ooze out. Squinting to balance the bright sunshine with the dark interior of the caveau, a set of eyes stares back from the inside. Sometimes a finger beckons, a tooth gleams or a femur shows proof of a childhood break.

Few of those inside the caveaux have jewellery. Their caskets are missing the metal attachments like handles, rivets and corners. The weedy lanes between the caveaux are fertilized by Haiti's finest. Walking through the aisles stirs dust and makes dust. You can't wander the narrow alleys without stepping on bones, kicking a skull, mixing the ashes of forgotten hopes, forgotten names.

Another right onto a secondary lane and then a left onto one of the main streets brings us to the reddish pile of pride and greed. The eviction here was much more public than most in the complex. Papa Doc Duvalier, the former president, the tiny despot of this blighted land, came to rest on the fashionable main street of the neighbourhood in 1971. When he was gone long enough to no longer inspire fear and when his son proved weak, the riots in the neighbourhood near Papa's resting place boiled and bubbled. Late one night the family pulled him from the ground, whisking his body to a secret spot. The pile of hastily thrown red dirt remains untouched, a reminder that only love survives death, not ambition.

Papa's eviction differed only by degree from the grave clearings that happen throughout the neighbourhood. At least he was remembered. For others, memory lasts five years. Death means the family rents space in a caveau. The screechy yells of mourners, the off-key music of a few brass instruments, the invocations of the priest and the tears of those left behind ease the passage of the casket into the stone tomb. A plaque, with name and dates, is attached to one end of the small mausoleum. For the poor, remembrance is etched in chalk.

For five years the family pays caveau rent. That's how long it takes for our dust to become dust, for our flesh to fade like the flowers in the spring. Grave robbers and animals speed the process but in five years nothing of value is left in a caveau, except memories and powdered dreams.

On eviction day staff of the Port-au-Prince cemetery in the centre of the Haitian capital haul the bones out of the caveau, throw them into the basement space under the tomb, pile the splintered casket wood for burning and sweep the cavity clean for the next body.

The harsh lesson of the value of life and memory is not lost on Haitians. Eleven years ago they knew the world's interest in them would fade quickly. Four years ago the world didn't care about their accelerating descent into anarchy. And today, after a coup and the late night escape of the ex-priest-president they have faded again from the headlines. Once again it is eviction day in the neighbourhood.

