Rain Falls on Water
A Journey into Haiti

by

Aimee-Noel Hartley

HRTAIM001

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Media Theory and Practice

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2006

Compulsory Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

Signature removed

Date: 20/02/2006

For my brother Strachan busy winning the battle of our lives

Woch nan dio pa konnen doule woch nan soley
The rock in the water does not know the pain of the rock in the sun
– Haitian Proverb

Contents

Chapter 1

Checking In

All news out of Haiti was bad. There wasn't much of it, but when reports came they showed streets burning, people shooting, hurricanes terrorising and told the world to blame Haitians for AIDS.

It was the perfect place for an idealistic suburbanite to go on vacation.

I wanted a taste of it. I wanted a glimpse of strife and chaos; of horror, hurricanes, coup d'états and sieges. My sheltered mind probably could not handle massacres, but I was willing to risk that too. I longed to know how bad the world could look and I wanted to know I could survive it and walk away believing it wasn't actually as malevolent as we think. Above all, I longed for Haiti to confirm for me what I already knew – that we were all the same; underneath the thin boundaries separating people and places lay a passionate humanity common to all. I was prepared for it to show me what the world looked like at its worst, but I was equally ready for answers to how and why it could turn around.

From behind the suburban white picket fence, where the world turned upside down at a teenage pregnancy or a non-English speaking family moving into the neighbourhood, a place like Haiti seemed unthinkable. It sounded like a parallel reality where life itself and people themselves had to be of a whole different order for things to go that wrong.

I, however, knew more than just suburbia. Indeed I had grown up in a two-parent, two-dog Canadian home nestled behind a perfectly trimmed Kentucky bluegrass lawn; but I had long since refuted it and many of its values and moved onwards to spend a few years in urban America and a couple more in Africa. I thought I knew what nasty looked like. I had even spent a month living in an African village; first white person 'ever' to stay in Elupondweni, South Africa. There were bare feet at school, communal water taps and no flushing toilets. I washed from a bucket, shared a lice ridden bed with two others and killed a chicken with my bare hands. I had jogged through African hills trailed by dozens of barefoot children while the sun set artfully on huts in the distance. Life in the village was challenging yet beautiful, simple yet spiritual. Children played freely in the fields while the tragic stories told by the wise faces of the elderly were offset by hopes for a brighter future for their kith and kin. This seemed the natural order of poverty, at least the rural kind.

Of urban strife, I knew a fair bit too. Inner city America taught me about the rules of the street. My four years of work with gang members and incarcerated youth in the fiercest parts of California provided me with an understanding about cycles of poverty and violence. However, it also showed me the power of communities in enforcing their own principled codes of conduct and honour. Similarly, the tattered streets of urban Africa illustrated parallel patterns with even more violence and death and a lot less help from those more privileged. Above all, these experiences had instilled an inalienable understanding that it was 'our' fault. The West, complete with capitalist supremacy and flippant disregard for life and suffering, was directly and indirectly responsible for most evil in the world; thus, it deserved a lot of the finger pointing. People had been abused and marginalized for centuries, always at the hands of some version of imperialism. Histories of exploitation and intolerance haunted the present and most global institutions had firmly entrenched power in the hands of an advantaged few. Virtually everyone else was a victim, some more than others. From within the bounds of my own privilege, I had begun to understand the cost of my sheltered life on those less fortunate and was willing to accept my piece of the blame for their distress.

In Haiti, I already knew that whatever suffering there might be was barely the Haitians fault. I suspected the West of causing most of it, ignoring as much as they could and having ulterior motives to publicise the little that they did. We didn't care, that much I knew; but about the rest, I hadn't yet made up my mind.

It was 2004, a year that history will remember as the one Jean Bertrand Aristide, the first democratically elected president, was ousted for the second time in a rebellious coup and took refuge in South Africa. In his place, the United States' 'council of eminent persons' had appointed interim Prime Minister Gérard Latortue to supervise the padding of pockets and raping of lands while the notoriously corrupt nation came up with a plan for its next 'democracy'. A couple of months later, while non-partisan militia annihilated one another with smuggled artillery, the United Nations stood idly by and Tropical Storm Jeanne swept through the north and washed the city of Gonaïves into the ocean. The death toll was as unfathomable as it was un-countable given that most bodies were lost in the Caribbean and foreign aid agencies could not agree on whether the gangrene infested people dying two months later were classifiable under 'Hurricane' or 'Other' in the cause of death charts.

For me, I would remember 2004 as the start of a great personal journey. I had resigned from my job in California, left the most permanent position I had ever occupied (two years) and set out on another journey of discovery. I had travelled to Southern Africa, hoping that moving as

far away from home as geographically possible would help me learn my place in what I understood to be a big world.

Nervous about mounting pressure to 'settle down', I needed a reminder that Earth was a vast and stimulating place. Routine scared me. I was approaching the 'marriage' age and my childbearing capability was apparently a ticking clock. I was much too young to take any of it seriously, but my mother (of four children between the ages of 22 and 28) had already moved into her retirement home and planned where the grandchildren would sleep. Around me, friends were beginning to pair up and commit to nine to five jobs, engagements, lavish weddings and mortgages. What used to be all night benders involving skinny-dipping in shark-infested waters (the way I liked them) was morphing into tea and cocktail parties. I still did not own any furniture, let alone teacups.

I longed for a sense of belonging and stability, but not under those conditions; I refused to be scared into the mundane. I wished for my life to remain adventurous and wild, boundless and passionate. I had grown up believing that dreams could come true and that the amazing was possible, but since graduating university I had been scared into acknowledging that the 'real' world was also a fearsome place. Money made it go around, people were rarely tender and hope was not eternal. I needed to take the chance to find out if the potential that I saw actually existed, before it worried me into submission. So to Africa and beyond I went, in pursuit of inspiration.

It was not all under romantic illusions, however; I wanted to fail. The best learning happens when you fall short and I longed to see beyond my sheltered perspectives. Furthermore, I wanted to find out how I measured up when those perceptions crumbled. What part of my idealism would slide away? What priorities would surface when I got scared? It was hard to imagine a place where my soapbox would cave and my attitudes about development and human potential would come crashing down, but I knew it existed.

I wore my idealism on my sleeve and critics probably could have seen me coming miles away – the suburbanite holding fast to the belief that the world is a place for change: if we could just all gather together and do the right thing. Yet I was smart enough to know that if any place would teach me to know better, Haiti would.

Travelling to Africa had been an immeasurable learning experience. Within a year, my anxiety had loosened its grip. I felt free from the pressures of life and free enough to take on something bigger, worse, scarier. Languishing at the bottom of the human development indexes and the top of the emergency and corruption ones, Haiti seemed to be in the midst of the biggest political and social crisis in the world. Accordingly, it promised to teach me a 'war' perspective that Africa had not.

The opportunity came about through my father. My non-denominational accountant patriarch happened to work for a Bahá'í follower. Mark, my father's boss and my soon to be sponsor, sold industrial vegetable ripening products by day and doubled as a Bahá'í philanthropist every other waking moment. His project, Partners for Prosperity, was a faith-based networking group that collaborated with a number of constituent organisations worldwide. Barb, the administrator, said that their two partner programmes in Haiti, Centre for Transformation and Learning and *Fondation pour le Développement en Milieu Rurale,* 'desperately needed help'. Accordingly, she jumped at the chance to send me and Mattias, a fellow student globetrotter, to serve them.

I was reluctant to accept that anybody desperately needed help, especially mine. I begrudgingly suspected Barb of being a typical Western philanthropist who believed that everyone needed our help. Furthermore I had only the vaguest notion of what Bahá'í was. I envisioned a cult-like meditating posse engaging in wild pilgrimages and sacrificing animals to the heavens. Thoughts of religious imperialism worried my mind, but my Google searches revealed some promising rhetoric from the world's newest official religion. According to Bahá'í, what the world commonly sees as different religions have rather been successive interventions by one God, aimed at the gradual civilisation of human nature that will one day manifest in moral understanding and a global community. Believing in one world, one people and equality for all, Bahá'ís consider service as a principal and collectively work towards social justice and development.

So it was set. From Africa to Haiti I would venture for two months of fear-inspiring adventure armed only with my own brand of idealism and self-righteous cynicism. I was ready for a good time.

Chapter 2

Aba Aristide

Forecasts during Haitian winters had nothing to do with the weather. The climate was dependable and hardly needed analysis or warning – hot and dry. Instead, when people rose in the morning to check projections, they were learning guerrilla activity and violent hotspots.

Hot and dry was a far cry from the New York November where I caught my connecting flight between Johannesburg and Port-Au-Prince. I cursed the precious space that my mom-made woollen coat and pink beanie would take up in my suitcase. Haiti would be no place for wool, yet I was not prepared to walk 10 blocks and take three subways from my hotel to JFK airport on a bitterly cold morning wearing island garb.

By the time I arrived at JFK, the buttons on my homemade jacket were unfastened and flapping and I carried my warm hat folded in my hand. I was late and running.

It was 06h20 and I was trying to calculate if I could check in, clear customs and make the 07h15 flight. My heart sank when I saw a mob of people snaking towards the American Airlines check-in desks. Groups wearing fur coats and colourful shoes bunched around piles of suitcases. Agents stood in high traffic areas directing people. The accents were familiar, but I only knew them as generically Caribbean.

Dozens of flights took off from New York to the West Indies. You could travel just about anywhere from New York and the hot winter sun provided a bright alternative to the frosty northern winter. More importantly, close to one million Caribbean people lived in the big city. Thousands of Trinidadians and Haitians stayed in Brooklyn. South Bronx was famous for its Puerto Rican celebrities, Spanish Harlem too. Every year, countless island expatriates competed in the Caribbean Day Parade. They proudly flaunted their national colours while riding on floats and dancing to the steely beat of metal drums. Haiti had won more annual parade awards than any other nation.

Visions of my travel companion swirled through my head. Mattias and I had never met but had both heard from Barb how marvellously we would get along, how much we had in common and how productively we would work together in Haiti. I pictured a typical Canadian wearing Teva sandals, surf shorts and a backpack adorned with the proud maple leaf flag; perhaps he would even have a scruffy little beard and the signature patriotic friendliness, 'eh'. At that

particular moment, I envisioned him scouring the crowd at the gate for a similar looking, but female, counterpart and wondering if she would ever show up. Of even greater concern, if I missed my flight, was the thought of our Haitian hosts looking for me fruitlessly in Port-Au-Prince. However, I would never project the same stereotypes onto them. I felt perfectly comfortable judging Canadians, but typecasting a group of people I did not know felt too scary and condemnatory.

The only Haitian I knew was my brother's long-term girlfriend. Beautiful mulatta Chloé was born and raised in Port-Au-Prince by Haitian parents and educated in North America. She crossed paths with my brother while they were in medical school together in Montréal. Fiery, bright and upwardly mobile, she had the right credentials to create change in her beloved country and spoke passionately about doing so. Throughout their three-year relationship, she had filled my mind with ideas and notions about travelling to this storied land. With the growing chance that my older brother could one day live with her in this country, I wanted to get to know her background. Moreover, as Chloé became an increasingly important part of our family, Haiti had risen steadily among our interests. We had all paid close attention to recent headlines and spent hours discussing the issues.

When Haiti began on its most recent trip to hell in a hand basket, I was quick to ask Chloé what she thought of it all. Staunchly opposed to Aristide, she openly lambasted him as an evil tyrant.

'He needed to go,' she said simply and sharply.

Columbus first planted the Spanish flag on the island of Hispaniola in 1492. Following this inaugural discovery, the Spaniards carried out a systematic exploitation and eventual extermination of the indigenous Arawak Indian population. Within 50 years, colonists began importing African slaves to work the gold mines and sugarcane fields. The trade continued when the French took over control of the St Dominique (later to become Haiti) side of Hispaniola in 1659. Within a hundred years, there were up to 700 000 Africans, compared with 40 000 whites and 28 000 freemen of colour (offspring of masters and servants).

The slaves were understandably resentful. Furthermore, they vastly outnumbered their owners. Despite rigid controls, revolutions began in 1791. In captivity, masters had brutally mistreated their slaves: they stuffed and exploded gunpowder into their rectums, rolled them down hills in spiked barrels and even buried them alive. Rebels repaid their former owners with brutal and repugnant massacres: chopping off legs, sawing people in half, impaling children on spikes and raping women. They burned and sacked the land and destroyed almost everything on

it. Eventually the mutineers defeated Napoleon's French troops and sent them back to Europe for good. In 1804, Haiti became the second free colony in the Western hemisphere and the first free black republic in the world. Revolutionary hero Jean-Jacques Dessalines inscribed the Declaration of Independence on parchment made from the skin of a white man, using his skull as an inkwell and his blood for ink.

Over the next 200 years, Haiti became the target of widespread exploitation, interference and mismanagement. Rebellious elites led most independence wars; they then built governments that mirrored those of their colonial parents. The French, on the other hand, fled the colony and left a paranoid slave population behind to manage a destroyed country. Only a very small minority of skilled colonists and coloured freemen remained. Haitian masters had systematically denied vital education and training to their servants; accordingly, the newly freed slaves lacked the skills necessary to take over political responsibility. They were peasants and had only two models on which to base governance: plantation and tribe. Once liberated, the masses were not concerned with politics; they were content with their freedom and wanted only to be left alone.

Accordingly, Haiti adopted a feudalist system. Some civilians, mostly mulattos, gained wealth and power; the rest were controlled by these elite and lived on subsistence farms or provided labour for the wealthy. No middle class grew to fight for democratic rights and equal access. Peasant serfs remained uneducated, illiterate and poor. The limited resources stayed in the hands of the small elite; these aristocrats preserved their power by sending their children abroad to learn how to govern and rule. They became officials, politicians, clergymen and lawyers.

Haiti's rulers included a long succession of ill-fated presidents and one long American military occupation. In the 200 years since independence, Haiti had suffered 35 coups. Black peasants supported some of the administrations, but mulatto elites endorsed most. They were all uniformly suspicious of incursions and were almost all backed by one or other foreign power. Revenge inspired much of Haitian politics and governing often involved un-doing the deeds of those who came before.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the most recent presidential casualty, was the first leader to harness the energy of the peasant masses. A priest by vocation, he rose among them in La Saline, a slum in Port-Au-Prince. He began his political career in the ghettoes, preaching against the ruling Duvalier regime and sermonising about injustice toward the masses. The diminutive, hollow-cheeked and be-spectacled leader gave form to ideas that the poor never had the platform to express. He gave hope to the most desperate people and led them to organise. The country's foremost scholar in theology, '*Titid*' – Little Aristide, was exceptionally clever and had learned to speak the language of both the people and the intellectuals. Accordingly, he feared nobody and

openly criticised politicians, officers, criminals and ambassadors. However, he spoke little about revenge, opting instead to focus on securing food and jobs for the most vulnerable citizens. His seemingly neutral approach helped capture unprecedented support from peasants, intellectuals and the liberal elite. After his successful movement to un-seat the Duvalier regime, the popular leader won a landslide victory in the inaugural democratic elections in 1990.

By 2004, Aristide had twice been removed from Haiti. The first evacuation came in 1991, only seven months into his presidency. The Duvaliers penetrated the Haitian army and overthrew him in a military coup. He flew into exile in Venezuela, then America, while the world diplomatically called for his restoration. Three years later, Aristide returned under American military support to complete his term in office. After his reinstatement, his governing methods changed drastically. He abolished the army, created a civilian police force, provided arms to his supporters and viciously attacked his opponents. Similarly, his reputation changed; the formerly charismatic, humble priest became widely known for corruption, fraud, and organised crime. After three dubious elections, where his party won 67, 88 and 92 percent of the vote, he clung desperately to his constitutional power despite increasing domestic and foreign scrutiny.

As far as coups go, it had been a relatively short one that ran him out of the Presidency for the second and last time. Army veterans, former dictators and disgruntled citizens, unified only through their common dislike, gathered in the north and marched through the cities toward the capital in the south, rioting and seizing as they went. In Port-Au-Prince, friends and foes of the soon to be former president fought one another in the streets while they awaited the arrival of the rebels. Students rallied for the end of his presidency, '*Aba Aristide!*' they shouted. Meanwhile, slum residents pelted rocks and waved automatic weapons back at them, screaming '*Viv Aristide!*' to demonstrate support for their leader. Cities were looted and people were murdered. The United Nations could not contain the escalating situation; however, before the turmoil rose into a full-scale civil war, the United States exercised its self-appointed diplomatic responsibilities and swept in with an ultimatum. Soon thereafter, Aristide was removed. He waited several hours for a country to accept his application for asylum and finally landed in South Africa, all the while accusing the Americans of kidnapping. In the wake of *Titid's* departure, the restlessness continued; chaos raged in his absence as it had in his presence.

I hedged a little at Chloé's deliberate approval of Aristide's elimination. It conflicted with the opinions of the American Congressional Black Caucus and other conscientious advocacy groups that I supported. They argued that he threatened French and American authority and that his removal was motivated by sabotage and exploitation. While Chloé was happy to see the 'tyrant'

go, regardless of how or who followed, socially responsible civil society criticised United States intervention and cried out against the unconstitutional ousting of Haiti's once celebrated and first democratic president.

'He has done terrible things to the country,' Chloé insisted. 'He dragged us all into poverty, called for the blood of the upper-class, brought corruption and made us look terrible to the whole world. He needed to go.'

I always listened with one ear and took sceptical mental notes when a person of privilege spoke politics. Even as family, I suspected that Chloé's relative freedoms tainted her opinions. Aristide's predecessors, the Duvaliers, had reigned for over 30 years while adhering tightly to typical dictator formulae: a select few prospered greatly while the rest were beaten into submission. Democracy was never nice to former dictators, or to the small elite who profited from them. Aristide, if little else, had successfully managed to eradicate power and privilege from the previously advantaged. I was not convinced that Chloé's opinions were entirely objective or that I could consider her more credible than the Congressional Black Caucus, South African President Thabo Mbeki and all the protestors gathering in California carrying signs supporting the ousted Haitian ruler.

At the airport, standing breathless at the edge of the crowd in my frazzled state, I looked sympathetic enough for an airline agent to approach me and ask, in a Caribbean accent, where I was going.

'Port-Au-Prince,' I replied pathetically, hoping that he might understand I was late. 'Last line,' he gestured to the far end of the crowded room to an empty corridor lined by maroon velvet ribbons strung between waist-high posts. 'Thank you Sir,' I replied, relieved that my queue was the shortest of them all and I might make my flight.

I breezed past long lines of people headed to their respective island destinations, scurried directly to the ticketing agent and shoved my passport onto her counter-top. 'Port-Au-Prince, 07h15,' I told her with some urgency. She glanced up un-interested, opened the passport and tapped away at her computer for a couple of seconds before the machine spat out the long, slim ticket with a warning attached:

> Passengers are advised that the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security has determined that Port-Au-Prince International Airport does not maintain and administer effective aviation security measures.

'Gate 78,' she said, pointing directly behind her. 'Boarding begins now.'

All information I had about Haiti and my schedule therein came from three un-empirical sources: Chloé, Barb and the Internet.

According to Barb, I would be spending my time working with two organisations: Centre for Transformation and Learning (CAFT), and *Fondation pour le Développement en Milieu Rurale* (FREM). The two organisations worked together in Haiti to deliver educational programmes to teachers and children. Partners for Prosperity had further been involved in the building of a primary school in Pichon, a small rural community in a flood-ravaged part of the southeast. A Haitian couple, Nadia and Lulu Balthazar, led FREM. It concentrated on grass-roots organising and development within that community, including oversight of the school. CAFT, it appeared, did an overwhelming amount of work related to education. They developed materials, conducted trainings and built resources. Apparently, they were also looking towards a large batch of potential future projects.

My final source of information was the Internet. There, I had learned to expect marginalized conditions and intense poverty. The United Nations Development indexes ranked Haiti near the bottom in all categories. It was ranked 153rd in human development (out of 177), by far the lowest in the Western Hemisphere.

Despite an earnest effort to find information, there was no way of knowing what to expect. My only real concern, however, was finding my hosts at the airport; the rest, I knew, would come in time. I recognised my lack of adequate information; yet relished in the idea of learning it as it happened. I expected the unexpected and liked it that way.

Blue-eyed, brown-haired Mattias had already boarded the plane and was sitting in 26H wearing Teva sandals. My seat was 26G.

'Mattias?' I offered shyly.

'Aimee?' he answered with a nod.

I was unexcited to meet him; in fact, I was unimpressed about the idea of a travel companion altogether. It was nothing personal, simply that my intention was to travel to Haiti when nobody else would go; to get grimy, dirty and local. His presence threatened to tamper with the 'extreme factor' and render the journey more commonplace. There was no need for fellow foreigners to help weather the storm. I grudgingly accepted that he would share my experience but arrogantly hoped my intentions were nobler than his.

We casually chit chatted on the plane. Mattias was a trained environmentalist who knew all kinds of big words. He had spent time working on a tidal generator and lived in a Volkswagen van engineered to run on used vegetable oil. His most recent job was guiding month-long kayaking trips through the Pacific islands along the remote coast of Canada.

Our plane was eerily empty, maybe only 10 percent full. The five seats stretched out to my left were empty; the row in front had one woman with a toddler.

I eavesdropped on a conversation between the toddler's mom and a suited man wearing the signature Mormon Church of Latter Day Saints badge. The woman was Haitian but living and working in New York. She was making a special trip home with a trunk full of school supplies. Over the following week, she would be heading out to her family in a rural town to deliver supplies and games to the local church. She was further trying to keep her daughter connected to her homeland, her roots. The missionary had also brought with him boxes of school supplies and religious texts. He, too, was headed to a rural town. He would befriend locals, provide supplies and convert people as he went. The conversation reeked of religion and sympathy.

Historically, religion had severely damaged places like Haiti. Colonialism, slavery and racism had followed the footsteps of missionaries, claiming biblical mandates while stripping people of dignity, rights and spirituality. Cultural superiority was high on my list of things I loathed and along with it came sympathy; I already knew that Haitians did not want it, nor did they need us to show it by sending crayons. They needed help the same way all humans do – through understanding, respect and support. Haiti was not inferior to North America or Europe and Haitians were no different from any other people. It struggled more than some others because of a painful history, lack of resources, political neglect and human greed, not because of an inherent inferiority. The thought of presumptuous 'others' feeling sorry for the poor and sending crayons while patting themselves on the back for their charitable efforts made me sick. Good intentions were simply not enough and I could not find excuses for ignorance.

Mattias had reluctantly carried with him a box full of exercise books, pencils and a CD burner, sent by Barb and Partners for Prosperity. He had refused to carry 26 volumes of French encyclopaedias because they would not fit in his luggage. I did not know enough about Partners' philanthropic approach to judge it. I knew only that it endorsed grass-roots approaches and encouraged dialogue from programme constituents. I did know, however, that Barb had never been to Haiti; her messages to me about disasters and dire need added up to good intentions based on hearsay. She had seen photos of poor children in under-served schools from some organisations that shared her faith, so she sent pencils with hope of making a difference. I could not blame her, but I guess I kind of did.

As the plane descended, the noonday sun made the sea sparkle like a field of diamonds. Terrestrial Haiti popped out of the glistening blue; the Andilles Mountains towered above the cities on their slopes. Port-Au-Prince looked every bit the cliché: abandoned ships strewn along the shoreline, decrepit shanties crowding hillsides and stretching all the way to the water's edge,

blurring the line between land and ocean. Crowds of ant-like people milled through poorly designed streets. Excitement made my heart beat faster: I was happy to be on my way to a brand new place.

On the tarmac, the doors opened to a burst of stifling hot, dry air and the sweet smell of the tropics. This was no place for wool.

Chapter 3

A Cinderella Story

After Mattias tried and failed to explain what an external CD burner was to a frowning customs officer using broken French and dramatic hand motions, we found Nadia Balthazar waiting in the air-conditioned diplomat lounge. For one American dollar, our check-in luggage was cleared through customs and brought to our feet while we sat on an over-stuffed couch.

We rode in a two-car motorcade through the streets of Port-Au-Prince. Smoke, fumes and dust filled the air. It reeked of rotting garbage and animal sweat. Cars, people, livestock and rubble merged into one road bursting with activity. The city had never applied zoning laws: posh fenced-in villas mixed and matched with street stands while three-story mansions perched above hillside slums. Through the haze, I could make out a row of stately homes on top of a hill.

'Aristide: No.' said Énol, a CAFT employee, as he swerved expertly through a crowd of school children, up onto the sidewalk and around a pile of cinder blocks in the road. 'He was the first real president. I remember when we voted him in. It was happy times, but look at it now! I could speak about him forever, but no matter how many good things he may have done, I will never forget that he gave guns to kids. He went into *Cité de Soleil*, *Croix des Bouquets* and the other poor parts of Port-Au-Prince and gave 13 year olds guns. He said it was to protect them, but it was to protect him. He armed our children; I will never forgive him for that.

'The country is better now that he's gone. I do not know what will happen here next. The election will be sometime in the next two years, but there will be no worthwhile candidates. There will be dozens of names on the ballot, but none of them will make a good president.' His comments were simple and cold, but not frustrated.

Haitians had accepted that politics merely involved shuffling leaders within systems built by foreigners under the guise of democracy. Only a couple of leaders in history had cared about the masses, and they succeeded only for a short while. The rest appealed to interested outsiders and the national elite.

They hated the peasants too. Longing to distinguish themselves from the illiterate passive, black masses, the elite politicians desperately sought acceptance from the 'civilised'

nations. In 1915, the American military invaded Haiti and imposed a military dictatorship that lasted until 1934. During their occupation, the Marine Corps operated according to racist protocols and imperialist goals characteristic of their own country during that time. Racial discrimination increased and the Americans reinforced the need for Haitians to whiten their skin and act as 'European' as possible: marrying light, speaking only in French and practicing Catholicism. By rejecting *Kréyol,* voodoo and other characteristics of the peasantry, the elite felt closer to the civilised white world and learned to justify blaming the poor for living in miserable conditions. Politicians and political parties rose from those who could afford the military support necessary to continue their political, economic and social domination over the enormous peasantry.

Aristide had appeared as the cornerstone of egalitarian politics. He had spoken to their hearts and promised prosperity; then manipulated them to build his own power. Before him, Duvalier had given tens of thousands of peasants and slum-dwellers an unprecedented opportunity to join the party by giving them guns and including them in the civilian police force, the *Tontons Macoutes*. He also recognised the critical role of voodoo, the underground religion created by slaves and still practiced discretely by most of the populace. Duvalier, though, further inspired unprecedented corruption, terror and polarisation among the people. He murdered opponents, destroyed the economy and created a massive exodus.

Haitians had grown tired of it all. They had tried restlessness and revolution; they had sought, fought and waited for change. When Aristide failed to bring visible results, he left them even more confused, suspicious and apathetic. Life had become increasingly difficult since his departure: people were angrier, hungrier and far less interested in the political fate of the nation. Yet Haitians remained distinctly Haitian: fiercely proud of their heritage and determined to survive while leaving burdensome politics in the hands of others.

Haiti would struggle to become a sovereign nation, free of outside control, without respect for its enormous peasantry. Experts who came to implement sophisticated methods of diplomacy were most often chased away by angry mobs suspicious of authority. Projects aimed at advancing democracy failed miserably. Specialists always left confused and unsure about how to solve Haiti's endlessly thwarted quest for true liberation.

Linda, my host, was an education specialist who had come to Haiti from Canada 27 years before to spread her newly acquired Bahá'í faith. A divorced husband and two grown children later, she authentically called Haiti her home. Founder and director of CAFT and national leader in her growing religion, she had lived through extensive changes in this Caribbean paradise. According

to scripture, Bahá'ís are apolitical. Replacing politics with education and moral development helped create stability in a rapidly changing environment, both locally and worldwide. Through years of national chaos, Linda remained peacefully devout and unmovable in her faith and her work.

Linda's house was the perfect Haitian haven, if such a thing existed: an urban oasis. Pétionville was a formerly upper-class suburb located a couple of kilometres uphill from the city centre. Until recently its elevation, reputation and security forces had allowed it to escape most of the violence and malodorous air. However, due to the recent onslaught of increased aggression and rural influx, people had crept steadily up and out of the capital. The formerly excluded bourgeoisie were finally forced to deal with the harsh realities of urban life and grime. Above us, a palatial row of grand mansions sat on a ridge looking down and out to sea.

My new dwelling blended busy urban life with the peaceful tranquillity of home. Inside the fenced yard, palm trees and jungle growth shielded the house from the mayhem on the streets and sweetened the hot winter breeze that blew through the pane-less windows. Only a curtain and some evenly spaced bars separated outside from in and creatures crawled through the gaps toward the light and warmth. Little, pink, translucent lizards with beady eyes scuttled on the ceiling, shrieking a bird-like call. Colourful iron hangings were splayed across the walls and Holy Scripture was carved into wooden palates that lined bookshelves filled with religious and development texts. A large-screen television sat in the centre of the lounge. At the back of the airy room, a partition separated the main lounge from a makeshift office with a computer. It was simple but clean.

Electricity was a problem all over Port-Au-Prince. The city promised to provide it at least once a day and it usually lasted between four and eight hours, though it was never consistent. We only had access to running water when it was on. Linda's house, like many others of middle to upper class status, was equipped with a battery-operated inverter. The re-chargeable inverter stored its power when the electricity was on and could typically provide enough energy for lighting, computers and necessities, but not the water pump or television. She stored water in cycles: fresh, used, and dirty, for washing, cleaning and flushing.

When we arrived the first time, more than a dozen people sat in the lounge and dining area. They were reading an assortment of materials and working together to answer questions in exercise books. Kids of varying ages came through the front door intermittently, greeting adults with a light kiss on the cheek. Soon enough, over 25 people had gathered to form a misshapen circle.

Worship began with a song. Smiling gently, Linda passed me a prayer book. Group members read the text in no particular order. On the opposite side of the room, a small teenage girl wearing a bright purple skirt sat smiling throughout the readings, hugging the friends around her and bursting regularly into a grin that kept catching my attention.

When my turn came to read, members of the circle looked expectantly toward me.

'No thank you,' I said in English and quickly deflected the attention toward Mattias who looked equally uncomfortable. '*Non merci,*' he said in French. A moment later, we exchanged desperate looks.

It was a bit much for the first day. We had landed squarely in the middle of a religious meeting devoted to a creed we knew nothing about. I realised quickly that we were expected to be Bahá'í and that I was staying in a mission. Linda was the messenger and her house was the place of outreach and study.

After the prayer meeting, Mattias and Nadia left. He was staying with the Balthazar family across town in the city basin at Croix-des-Bouquets. They needed to make the journey before nightfall when the gunfire typically began.

When they had gone, the girl with the smile approached me shyly. I greeted her warmly in French and she told me her name was Sulzaire. She was 15, still in school and spoke enough French for us to maintain a conversation. I was learning quickly that my French fluency would be of only partial help. Haiti had two National languages: French and *Kréyol*, a combination of French and African vernaculars with some English and Spanish influences. The slaves created it and two hundred years later, 80 percent of Haitians spoke it almost exclusively. French was reserved for the elite 20 percent: the educated ones. Sulzaire and I communicated well enough to establish that we would be great friends.

Outside, the sun disappeared and night fell. With darkness, the nature of the noise changed. Songbirds that crooned by day were replaced by synthesised beats blasting from over-sized speakers. Men drinking and gossiping at after-hour gatherings drowned out the market place chatter. Vehicles revved their engines and hooted their horns. The myriad of sounds echoed through the streets and streamed into the house. Sleep would be difficult in this place.

After a couple of days exploring the city, I still could not properly navigate my way through the busy streets. Haiti was hardly scary and I had not seen or felt any violence, rather the opposite. I fondly watched merchants in the marketplace look after one another's belongings. Haitians were honest and caring people. My life felt safe from bullets, crime and violence. Walking through bedlam, on the other hand, required a mastery of skills I had yet to acquire.

The streets of Pétionville were simply madness. The suburban neighbourhood was as hectic as the busiest African marketplace I had ever seen. Long before dawn and well past dusk, absurd numbers of people packed onto the streets, sidewalks and alleyways. United Nations soldiers in marked vehicles patrolled the area carrying AK47s that matched those of countless armed guards. Tables, chairs and buckets lined every corner and individuals hawked Salvation Army reject clothing, decrepit produce, cheap sweets and pirated music. People urinated in corners. Evil smells poured out from corners and crevices and assaulted my senses. Grey sludge covered the roads and got increasingly thick as the day passed; boys and men used the puddle water to wash cars. Trash burned in mounds as large as buildings while people sat quietly watching the smoke fill the air. Open drainage systems, designed to carry the community's waste into reservoirs, were filled to their brim. I was convinced their contents could kill.

People travelled by tap-taps: canopy covered pick-up trucks with homemade benches in the backs. Colourful images of hip-hop stars and religious scripture decorated their panels. I never saw a tap-tap with bare sides, but had noticed several with brilliant caricatures of Tupac Shakur painted on the back and 'Jezus Comeback' painted artfully above the windshield. Around the corner from Linda's house, six narrow roads converged from different directions; each perpetually clogged with traffic jams as far as the eye could see. The nucleus, served as both the central market place and transportation station. Drivers hooted their horns and shouted angrily at one another in *Kréyol,* conductors pointed people into their trucks and everyone blasted Caribbean pop music. The intersection stood at a virtual standstill, until vehicles broke loose from the web and sped down the street. One morning, I saw a car smash into a motorcycle carrying three people, including a child. There was blood, but everyone was up on their feet and moving within a couple of minutes; the boy was brushed clean and sent to school clutching his bleeding arm under a white uniform. Accordingly, I walked through the busy streets nervously negotiating the storm sewers while peering fretfully over my shoulder to make sure that every zooming car I saw was not my last.

One slow Sunday afternoon Sulzaire and I decided to go for ice cream. We licked the chocolate scoops while casually sauntering through the streets. Halfway home, I slipped. The sidewalk, like most else in the city, was built from concrete; the thin layer of sludge covering it made it strikingly similar to ice and my traction-less sandals had no grip. In a brief but defining moment, I lost my balance and slid toward one of the sewers. As I fell, I pictured my own death by disease or infection. Frantic, I used my reflexes to make a quick adjustment and saved all but my foot from touching the cesspit.

Of course, I survived to tell the story. My shoe did not. It was lying four feet down in a puddle of filth, contagion and some other substances I didn't want to imagine.

Within moments, a crowd formed. My near-fall was dramatic enough to draw considerable attention. I stood on one shoe, my leg perched up like a flamingo's, ice cream cone in hand and giggling like a child. A pair of United Nations officials chatting to a couple of prostitutes looked in my direction then walked over to join the back of the growing crowd.

I had no idea how I would get out of that mess; I knew only that I refused, under any circumstances, to take another step with my bare foot. Sulzaire ran to fetch an extra pair from the house; otherwise, besides buying someone else's old shoes from the vendor down the street, I could not figure any logical or desirable solution to my predicament. I never wanted to touch my sandal again. As far as I was concerned, it could rest forever at the bottom of the drain.

As the pack formed, I abandoned my efforts to control the situation. I was clearly the outsider and the scores of people around were busy scheming ways to save me: the damsel in distress. I pleaded with them to give up, telling them repeatedly that Sulzaire was bringing new shoes from home, but my *Kréyol* was terrible and the effort was quickly becoming about more than me, or my sandal.

As the spectators chatted among themselves negotiating ill-advised rescue efforts, a young man emerged carrying a large plier-like device. I had no idea what it was used for in any 'normal' context, but on this given day many men applied it in a collective effort to pry off the grate covering the gutter. Now the only thing between the shoe and me was approximately four feet and every germ I could conceive of.

Against a series of pathetic pleas, Denis, my appointed rescuer, jumped in the pit. Feet first with legs exposed, he hesitated but a moment before plunging down. Using his hand, he leaned over, rescued the flip-flop and held it over his head to a chorus of applause before scrambling out of the drain. The excited pack looked on with glee. Searching frantically, he held onto the sandal until he located a water tap in the near distance. He rushed over, rinsed it under its flow, cradled my foot in his hands and slid the shoe back onto its rightful place. The glass slipper had found its foot.

Blushing, I thanked Denis profusely, bowed in gratitude to the crowd and started on my way home. I felt stupid: sheepish with the attention and disgusted that that damn thing was touching my body. Before I could flee, however, I had to allow two of the men a fair chance at courtship. I expressed appreciation for their interest, claimed I was married, hoped to see them soon and then allowed Sulzaire to drag me away. Denis followed us home.

Once in the house, I tossed the sandal in a bucket of bleach, put my foot next to it and scrubbed them both with a tube of hand sanitizer. Sitting on the toilet with my foot in a basin, I laughed aloud at the enormous effort that had taken place to rescue my cheap, insignificant shoe.

In Haiti, you did not need to go looking for adventures; you woke up to them. I loved it. I now had my own Cinderella story to add to my repertoire. Fairytales have happy endings. True to form, I got mine – a shoe, a legend and a dozen new friends. However, I could not avoid looking around and asking when and why fairies were replaced by suffering in this country. When and how would Haiti, like me, find its Cinderella story? Where did hope begin?

My previous understanding of third-world life had been more idyllic than what I was experiencing I Haiti. I had seen heartrending examples of poverty and strife in Africa, but the scope in Haiti was unparalleled. Living in South Africa had provided me with a glimpse of humanity at its worst – apartheid had inspired some of the most spiteful cases of hatred and discrimination in the history of the world. People had been separated, mis-educated, raped and massacred. And yet, because it came to an end, there was a sense that the most horrific parts were over. South Africa had not fully recovered from apartheid, but the country was finding new pathways toward reconciliation and prosperity, one step at a time. The Africa I knew had plenty of poverty, political unrest and disease, but it also believed that the best years were yet to come; thus, hope flourished and progress happened.

Haiti, on the other hand, showed no signs of recovery; the chaos felt as if it could go on forever. Violence was escalating and the political situation deteriorating. After 200 years of fighting for it, democracy was barely any closer. Even under ideal conditions, countries struggled to implement sustainable progress; in Haiti it seemed impossible.

I had come to experience the world's deepest poverty and despair. Under the guise of altruism, I selfishly hoped to gain knowledge and find inspiration from other people's suffering. By the end of the first week, I had seen it, touched it and lived it. Yet I had not really contributed anything.

The issue haunting my illusion of altruism was whether my trip was about anything but me. Haiti, in all its distress, needed more from its visitors than to provide lessons to help them learn. It would show me much more than I had come to see, but I owed more to the people who sent me, as well as those I met along the way. It was no longer justifiable to walk through the streets measuring heartache and telling it to myself like a story.

Chapter 4

Boat People

A few weeks after my arrival, I finally met Chloé's parents. They lived in a pretty, fenced off house in Pacot, a historically wealthy neighbourhood in decline but still exclusive. From the garden terrace, next to an emptied swimming pool, they enjoyed a view of the capital through the tops of avocado and mango trees. Grandma lived next door on the shared property the family had bought from a former president over 100 years before.

They had all tired of Haiti and lived in a perpetual state of mild panic. Grandma had sent most of her children and grandchildren away to America, Canada, Guatemala, France and New Caledonia. More recently, she had sent them her jewellery; she slept better without it.

Chloé's parents arranged for me to meet with her two best childhood friends: Axelle and Gaël. Axelle, an interior designer based in Paris, was home for a brief stay. Gaël's family had owned the same art gallery in Pétionville for over 70 years. She was the third generation manager and worked hard to keep it full of strikingly beautiful Haitian art. She was a vibrant woman: clad in bohemian garments and draped in jewellery with long, curly, copper hair falling over her shoulders.

We met for dinner at Café Albert, a restaurant in Pétionville seemingly reserved for foreigners and local bourgeoisie. Outside, United Nations vehicles were parked haphazardly along the street, on the sidewalk and in the yard. The restaurant inside the white, gingerbread building sprawled out onto a grand terrace that was protected from the swarming streets by overgrown bougainvillea and a fairytale garden complete with winding paths, goldfish ponds and a cupid fountain. The atmosphere was chic and offered a hint of tropical mystery. The imported white people that were seemingly absent on the streets crowded around tables, eating imported seafood and drinking imported vodka. As we moved out to the veranda, I could hear French, English and Portuguese (which I recognised only because of Brazilian flags embroidered on the unbuttoned shirts of uniformed men). The swimming pool reflected the full moon that shone brightly above. It was American Thanksgiving weekend and we were meeting a group of young Haitians who had returned from abroad for the vacation.

An estimated population of eight million people lived in Haiti; three million Haitians lived abroad. The exodus began in droves soon after the rigged 1957 elections put François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier in power. Opportunities diminished and political repression increased. Accordingly, skilled members of the upper class, including doctors, lawyers, teachers and engineers, fled and resettled elsewhere. As poverty and violence escalated, poor Haitians, who could not afford visas or airfares, joined the mass departure via the high seas, initiating a new phase of migration – 'boat people'. Following Aristide's election, optimism soared and emigration slowed. Upon his removal and after his re-instatement, the economy spiralled downward, violence proliferated and flight increased. The Diaspora also grew exponentially through second generation Haitians who were born and raised outside the country but still considered it home.

'Brain drain' is the loss of trained intellectuals and technical labour through emigration to more favourable geographic, economic or professional environments. Macro-economic theories suggest that countries invest in their young people in order to produce social capital – increasingly skilled people. Availability of social capital raises expected returns to education, stimulates human capital formation and lifts the economic rates of a nation. When expertise leaves, it lowers the growth and welfare of the people left behind.

However, the same drain that had crippled an already fragile political and social system also generated a significant economic contribution. Members of the Haitian Diaspora sent more than $1.0 billion a year to family and friends in cash and kind; the Gross Domestic Product (not including this contribution) totalled less than $5 billion. Many people relied on these remittances as a critical component of their income, paying for education, and healthcare, housing and basic necessities. Emigrants worked hard to stay connected to home.

Flocking to Miami, New York, Montréal, the Dominican Republic, Bahamas, France, French Guyana, Jamaica and Martinique, those who could leave did. They were not always welcome: unfavourable immigration policies tried to keep Haitians out of many countries. The Dominican Republic exercised arbitrary deportation. Native-born Dominicans who 'looked' Haitian were regularly denied citizenship and deported by the army without due process. The American Centre for Disease Control included all Haitians as a category of potential AIDS carriers and instructed the Department of Home Affairs to discriminate accordingly. However, while countries cringed at and resisted the 'boat people', they invited those who could help make them richer and healthier.

The earning potential for émigrés was usually much better abroad than it was at home. Haitians could make more money driving a taxi part-time in America than they could working

full-time in their own depleted and declining job market. While the brain drain haunted their home nation, individuals – particularly those with privilege and promise – had to pitch country versus self and determine which to serve. Ideally, they could choose both; however, Haiti was plagued by chaos and instability and they usually had to select one over the other. Opportunities were limited at home while international prospects called to the upwardly mobile.

On this evening at Café Albert, I was sitting with seven people my own age who had gone to a private Catholic high school together. Of their graduating class of 60, five remained in the country. I sat next to Goeffré, a bald Palestinian fellow who graduated with Chloé. The conversation started slowly.

'How are you?' he recognised me as an outsider and greeted me with a tired smile.

'I'm great, thanks, and you?' I replied dully.

'Not so good. What do you think of Haiti?' For such a question, there was no simple answer and those who asked knew it. I needed to come up with a thoughtful description or insightful question that would incite promising conversation. 'It is interesting, but I am having a great time,' I said. My reply was pathetic.

'Haiti is awful,' he replied with an exasperated sigh. I prepared myself for a typical tirade about how difficult life was – Haiti is awful, life is so hard, the poor keep getting in my way when I drive…. I had heard much of it before.

Goeffré had studied at the London School of Economics and was working as an auditor in Port-Au-Prince. 'I love Haiti but it is just too hard here. The suffering is what kills me. The people out there work harder than I ever have. Selling what? Gum, two-cent gum! Then they hope to feed their kids with it! How can I ever look at them and believe it will get better? And for me, I am expected to do the same quality work as I would in London or New York, but every morning I have to wake up, call and find out where the *Chimères* militia are and see if I can even get to work. By the time I finally arrive using some or other circuitous route, the power shuts down. My deadline is still 17h00, it is already 11h00 and there is no hope of getting anything done without power. Today I missed our deadline again. I called in the morning and was given a good route to drive: straight through downtown. However, by 08h00, there were seven cars on fire and eight people shot dead in the centre. Traffic stopped for hours. One alternative route has been closed for over a month now, and the third took four hours because of all the traffic.

'When I returned to Haiti after London, I knew the only way I would survive was to commit to staying for at least two years. You simply cannot move here and give yourself the option of leaving. If you do, you will doubt yourself every single day. So I promised two years

and said that afterwards I would be allowed to ask all the questions about departing that I had been denying myself.'

When I enquired how much longer he had until he reached his milestone he said, 'I passed it five months ago.' He looked at me, his eyes fraught with concern. 'I just don't think I can do it anymore. Today was a bad day. I found a girlfriend six months ago and that was enough to convince me to stay. Then last month I got a promotion that helped me feel worthwhile. But, last weekend my girlfriend broke up with me. I could keep working at my new position, but I am not convinced,' he said, pausing to stare into the distance and sip his Jack Daniels. 'Now I must consider that I am single in Haiti. There is no life for single people here, not if you are over 25.'

I thought about my rapidly expiring clock; I was approaching my 26th birthday and apparently had only a few weeks of eligibility left.

'Look around us, I promise you everybody over 25 is either married or gone. They have left to places where they can get a drink after a long day of work with people who share their lifestyles.'

I looked around the restaurant at the different groups sitting at their tables. People were paying for cocktails with American dollars and getting increasingly intoxicated as the evening wore on. Men, young and old, were sizing up the women and trying to seek their attention. Outside, teenage prostitutes circled the block, waiting for wealthy men, or anyone with booze on their breath and cash in their hand, to exit into the night.

My mind wandered to the working poor or the jobless that made up 99% of the Haitian population. They were not worried about single life or sex, nor did they wonder what was happening in New York clubs. Most Haitians knew of New York but could probably not find it on a map. Goeffré's concerns were elitist and I wanted to judge him for it.

'What do you want to do?' I asked.

'When we were in high school, I used to scheme with Chloé and some other friends how we would save Haiti,' he said with a laugh. 'Save Haiti! As if it was our duty or our right. Chloé was going to save it through medicine, I was going to be in politics and some other friends would be lawyers and leaders. We talked about it every day.'

'What would it take to convince you to stay here and try to revive it now?' I asked. Never mind the illusion of rescuing a country; I wanted to know what his debt to a deeply struggling society was worth to him.

'I would never go near government; it is not worth my life. Someone would kill me. Moreover, with all of the corruption and the problems, it would all be for nothing. I can honestly say that even my best efforts and deepest commitment would probably do nothing to help my

country, not now. Things are falling apart faster than they can put them together. The country is worse now, by far, than it was during those lunch-hour conversations. I could fight my whole life, give up so much that is important to me and it would probably be for nothing. I have to leave this place.'

'Is there no hope at all?' I asked.

Goeffré sighed deeply and scratched the back of his head before answering, 'I certainly hope there is. When hope dies, there is nothing left.'

The atmosphere for the idealists, the lovers and the brave had deteriorated. Even the most inspired were losing sight of solutions. Goeffré had replaced his childhood dreams with a desperate desire to hang on to hope while waiting fearfully for its death.

'There is something special about this place though,' he said in an uncharacteristic shift from harsh realities. 'I know in my heart that I could never be completely happy outside this country. I could live a perfect life – have a great job, wealth, family, friends, but at best, it would only ever be 95 percent complete if not in Haiti.'

The world's greatest leaders and revolutionaries were often born into their causes, creating an unassailable obligation to engage in them. History further showed that all too often people had to be willing to die for what they believed in. Heroes, like Aristide in his early days, lived within a purpose much greater than themselves. Aristide, as a peasant priest, suffered among his people and was willing to endure the threat of persecution and death to fight against an oppressive regime; but he had no choice: he could not leave. What about those of us, like Goeffré and myself, who were not confined to a place or an issue and did have the option of walking away?

If Goeffré stayed, he would face violence and suffering, inhibit his personal potential and hope vainly that he was making a difference. If he went, he could work efficiently, sip martinis with beautiful people and feel a perpetual emptiness that came from knowing he was not home.

I, on the other hand, had the liberty to move anywhere, and my personal desires were the only thing determining where to go. I was developing a growing sense of social responsibility, but my real reason for travelling to dangerous and marginalized places was that I liked them. True altruism would have had me paying my debt to society by serving as an underpaid nurse in a small Northern Canadian town covered in snow eight months of the year; working for a cause determined by my nation's needs, whatever that may have been. Yet I was on a Caribbean island, enjoying the experience and judging one of its own for complaining.

My actions had never required an explanation; rather they followed my wishes, interests and whims. I had never stuck around, or lived long enough to see if any of my contributions

actually led to sustainable change. I had given to good causes: volunteered, recycled, mentored, campaigned and donated, and had served well with many people in several places; however, I had always left.

I openly criticised people with selfish intentions, who continuously chose to satisfy their own desires over the needs of others. However, I found myself admiring and sympathising with Goeffré. He was genuinely struggling with a conflict between personal and national identity; something I had never even faced. He challenged my idealism. Would I stay so optimistic if forced to watch something I believed in deteriorate so drastically and so rapidly? Surely there existed a personal limit to what people would tolerate. If factors beyond my control limited my contributions and staying cost me my safety and prosperity, perhaps I would take off too.

Later that week Gaël hosted an opening at Galerie Monnin to display two artists' work. Both were Haitian women: the first, an abstract painter who mixed dark and bright colours on enormous canvases to create breathtaking images; the second, a sculptor and Gaël's sister, moulded her friends' and family's heads and body parts in plaster and covered them with metallic colours and random bits, such as screws and rocks. There were skulls, claws, hands and a dog. Pieces dangled above our heads and lined the walls. They were morbid and gothic and gave me the creeps.

The Port-Au-Prince elite, mostly local, mingled among us. Black, white and mulatto chatted politely in French, English and *Kréyol* while sipping wine and snacking on crab cakes and sushi. Gaël was running about putting red dots on the sold items, all priced in American dollars.

After a couple of hours, the items were sold and the wine gone. I sat with Gaël on the gallery balcony and watched the street life below. The marketplace was as busy as ever. People were everywhere, even after dark. Tap-taps painted with cheerful scenes and happy slogans clogged the narrow streets. Fires burned and people huddled along the street, taking shifts between sleeping and selling their goods. UN vehicles stood idly and old white men spoke in dark corners to young black women. The lively sounds of *Compas* music filled the night air with personality.

'This view looked very different six months ago,' she explained. 'This road never had a street market, not since the day I was born and brought here; it was clean and quiet. Less than a year ago was the first time hawkers came this far up the hill to sell stuff. It is too dangerous in the city centre now; people are walking up the hill. The traffic has been changed to accommodate the increase. The street in front used to be two-way, now it is one-way. It makes it worse for the

gallery because the corner is so busy and there is no room for pedestrians,' she said pointing toward a long line of vehicles.

'I had to replace a window on the lower floor with a wall' she said, pointing to a large square in the middle of the stucco surface that was painted a darker shade of burnt orange than the rest. 'We used to have a display window there showing one painting or large piece, but it got shattered and the art stolen. We made a smaller window with a little display, but that got smashed too. So now we just resurfaced it.'

She pointed toward the spot where the gallery building met with the neighbouring structure. 'You see that corner? Since the traffic changed, the men make pee-pee there. You see, there is someone now. So we have to build a wall. There used to be a garden there, but we had to put a barrier up to protect it from the pee-pee, but now people make pee-pee over it, so we must build a bigger one.'

How many walls was she willing to build as her city deteriorated around her?

'I hope I can live in Haiti forever and I will do whatever I can to stay. When the time comes that it is too much, then it is too much and I will leave. I hope that never happens.'

Chapter 5

The Rainy Season

After a couple of weeks, I was ready to get out of Port-Au-Prince. Missionary life and city pollution were beginning to threaten my composure. According to my initial plan, I would be splitting my time equally between the two organisations: CAFT and FREM. Yet I had only seen Mattias and the Balthazars once since the first night. In that brief encounter, Mattias and I barely had enough time to share our perceptions about the country and note that, thus far, our experiences were markedly different. While I had been extremely busy working with CAFT and engaging in the many activities happening around me, Mattias had spent most of his stay waiting in offices or locked within the family compound. Furthermore, he spoke neither French nor *Kréyol* and was growing increasingly frustrated by the 'flexibility' of Haitian schedules.

I had not spent nearly enough time with the Balthazar family, nor did I know enough about what they did. All I knew was that FREM was fledgling, grass-roots and focused on environmental issues in rural southeastern Haiti, the same place the Balthazars called home. Most importantly, I knew that floods had ravaged this area six months earlier during the rainy season.

Mr Balthazar and Mattias picked me up at Linda's house. I hopped into the back of the truck with the Balthazars three young sons, Patrice, Daniel and Amadis, aged 10, 13 and 15 respectively. As we drove from the hills of Pétionville across town to the Balthazars house in the valley of Croix-des-Bouquets, Mattias and I talked a mile a minute, debriefing one another on all that we could squeeze in. He informed me that Haiti would soon slide into the sea.

In 1924, Dr JC Dorsainville described Haiti thus:

> After Cuba, Haiti is the largest of the Antilles. Four mountain chains run along its length. Its plains, covered with plantations, are watered by numerous and abundant brooks, streams, and rivers. Forests, coffee bushes, banana trees, and corn cover its mountains, their summits crowned with clouds.
> Because of its natural wealth, its fertility, the sweetness of its climate, and the incomparable beauty of its landscape, Haiti is worthy to be called Pearl of the Antilles.

When Columbus first set foot on the island in the 15th century, forests covered more than 75 percent of the land. Haiti had rich soil, abundant trees and plentiful water. Spectacular mahogany woodlands made it the richest and most fertile colony in the New World.

When I arrived, it was the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Aerial views revealed bare, burnt and brown mountaintops with outrageous bedrock exposure. The image provided a particularly shocking contrast to the thick, velvety greenery of neighbouring Dominican Republic. They further showed enormous build-ups of sediment at the mouths of every river, evidence of lost topsoil that had slid into the sea. Only two percent of its land was arable and only two areas larger than twenty square kilometres had over 60 percent tree cover – enough to be considered proper forest. Both were national parks protected by rangers and armed guards.

Up until 1804, under colonialism and slavery, all agriculture was highly regulated. After liberation, the country developed a land use system: parcels were distributed to former slaves and sons of slaves who preferred to farm for themselves rather than work for the state. Holders divided their land into increasingly small portions as they split it among kin. Holdings became limited as the population increased. Hardly any large-scale agriculture was practiced; instead, local markets and subsistence farming met the needs of each family and community. Under this system, people stayed poor and resorted to chopping down the forests to provide more farming land. The government paid little attention to agricultural development, except to exploit it for export.

Deforestation increased dramatically in the early 1900s as population and urbanisation increased. The growing urban poor turned to the cheapest and most efficient available resource for fuel: charcoal. Coal producers cut down trees of any size, dug a shallow pit, threw the branches in, set a slow fire, covered the burning wood with earth and left enough space near the bottom for some smoke to escape. In time, the suffocated wood turned to charcoal. By 1954, the forest cover had dropped to nine percent. By 1996, it had slipped to three.

When President Aristide was chased out of the country after his first election in 1991, he asked the international community to impose trade embargoes, including oil. Before his exile, Haiti had begun implementing the infrastructure necessary to support a shift from charcoal to oil as a major energy source. Besides industry and vehicles, individual households were increasingly using gas for lighting, heating and cooking. Under the trade embargoes, supply to Haiti slowed to a halt. Prices rose sharply while black-market petrol stations sponsored by drug and gang money were erected around the country. The poor were the first to lose access to fuel, as they could not afford the rocketing costs or risk the danger of dealing on the black market. Instead, people

returned to charcoal; production was simple and safe: smothering trees to death. Within a year, the vast majority of Haitian households relied exclusively on coal.

When Aristide returned from exile in 1994, the embargo was rescinded, oil returned to Haiti and prices dropped to a relatively affordable level. By then, however, charcoal was an economic and household staple. People had little use for gas; they insisted food cooked over charcoal tasted better and continued to trade it on the market.

Deforestation had left Haiti's mountainous topography exceedingly vulnerable to rain and weather. The roots of trees retain nutrient-rich topsoil; without them, it quickly washes away. Besides rendering crop growing near impossible, the lack of soil poses an imminent flooding danger to anyone living on, near or below a hill. Trees and soil regulate and absorb rainfall; without vegetation, rain and drought become increasingly dangerous, and fragile sedimentary slopes collapse into ruin.

In the event of extreme weather, unparalleled disaster loomed over the capital; the shifty earth simply would not be able to support the millions of concrete tons its two million inhabitants had placed on top and along its slopes. Particularly vulnerable were Cité de Soleil and Cité Carton, the country's most populous and notorious slums. The former, the City of Sun, was the seaside ghetto I flew over on my way into P-A-P International. Built on marsh, this home to 450 000 was forecasted to sink within four minutes of a flood or landslide. Similarly, Cité Carton (Cardboard City) was built on a former landfill and predicted to collapse into ruin within six minutes. With no alarm systems or electricity and limited roads in and out, inhabitants would only learn their destiny by being crushed or washed out to sea.

The same drainage system that had swallowed my shoe was built to carry rainwater from the mountains to the sea. The public also used this drastically undersized ravine system as a public disposal service, in the absence of any formal one. The domestic and industrial trash that urban pigs and cows grazed upon in my neighbourhood could one day block the flow of floodwaters into the ocean. If a significant rainstorm arrived, the garbage would create a dam, drains would overflow, trash would spill into the streets, and torrents would tear through neighbourhoods and slums. The city would collapse.

The previous month, a tropical storm struck Gonaïves, the country's revolutionary centre in the North. Hurricane Jeanne had torn through the Caribbean, barely missed Jamaica, calmed down to a mere storm and hit the city in its heart. It demonstrated to the entire country how fast its pitiable infrastructure would collapse in an emergency. Gonaïves was shattered. Homes, schools and churches were obliterated and their remnants left strewn across the waterlogged streets. Gun-wielding soldiers drove through the disease-infested roads picking up floating

bodies. The world watched in horror, for a couple of days. The death toll was incalculable, as the tempest swept most bodies to sea. A month later, drainage systems were still in ruin and Gonaïves remained flooded and completely defeated.

Foreign experts had been predicting disasters in Haiti as early as 1940. International observers and specialists predicted that the whole country would wash into the ocean, the rivers become tombs and the mountains turn to dust. Environmental professionals from around the world, backed by hundreds of millions of dollars, worked for decades to rescue Haiti from its fate. Hundreds of specialists came and went: they planted trees, watered fields, built solar panels, published studies, and drew diagrams. Without a stable government or a unified effort, however, their work was futile. Despite their efforts, nobody successfully addressed the social, economic and political conditions; accordingly, sustainable change eluded them.

Mr Balthazar, an agronomist and geologist by profession and Professor at *Université de Notre Dame* was working to address these critical issues and bring them onto political agendas. He met regularly with foreign aid agencies, national and international politicians, local organisations, students and anybody willing to listen and contribute. His master plan included an emergency evacuation map for the most vulnerable parts of Port-Au-Prince and a sustainable reforestation programme that included economically viable alternatives to charcoal. He had invested in mangoes. 'We have a plantation outside the city,' he told me. 'Mangoes are easy to grow in many parts of the country. They can be eaten, dried, sold and even turned into fuel.'

Besides his full-time work in Port-Au-Prince, Mr Balthazar had further initiated a grass-roots effort to prompt environmental changes in his hometown. Belleanse lay in the southeast and was particularly vulnerable to flooding because of its position below a barren mountain. In partnership with some interested foreigners, he was organising community members to focus on environmental issues and begin to facilitate change. He oriented, mentored and educated leaders within the community, hoping they would eventually take control of the project.

This information was a lot for me to digest in one evening. I was already overwhelmed with how many problems Haiti faced, before I learned entire cities might wash into the sea. It seemed impossible that almost every conceivable political, social, economic and environmental issue could plague one country. An evil mastermind intent on destroying the country could not have concocted a more perfect roadmap to disaster. I wondered to myself what might come next.

We spent the night inside the gates of the Balthazar's house in the Port-Au-Prince flatlands. Outside the compound, gunshots rang out, protest fires burned and tension contaminated the dusty air. It was even noisier than Pétionville and I barely slept.

By the time we began our journey over the mountains the next morning, I felt renewed resolve to find answers to my mounting list of questions. I was also holding onto a desirable vision of fresh air and reflection in the countryside. In Belleanse I pictured a stunning Caribbean beach away from urban activity and pollution. I understood we would be hard at work, but also gleefully expected that work would take place in remote, serene locations that would surely match my more idyllic visions of poverty – small villages, simple lives and smiling faces.

Just 15 minutes outside Port-Au-Prince, the road ran out of tarmac. *Route National #1* changed abruptly from potholed asphalt to dirt and rubble. I was happy to be sitting inside the cab, protected from the dirt and dust. The smell of burnt rubber began to disappear as we bounced along the road through strangely desert terrain so near the sea. We turned off the national highway and drove along a makeshift road directly toward the mountains and the Dominican Republic. Around us, several mountains showed tan flanks of barren hillsides. They bore scars revealing where they had been stripped of their vegetation. Mr Balthazar pointed out missing topsoil, distinguishable by white lines starting near the top and drizzling down the brown slopes of each mountain.

Approximately 30 minutes off *Route National #1*, the road transformed from a slope of dirt moguls into a large riverbed, almost 200 metres wide and littered with both big and small boulders. Five minutes later, we found disaster.

The previous spring, the small village of Fond Verrettes experienced a devastating storm. The village was built along the edge of a waterway; in the middle of a dark night, rain transformed it from a flowing stream into a raging river. Floodwaters roared through the town, demolished buildings, wiped out the road and swept scores of drowned bodies downstream. An estimated 1200 were left dead or missing. The torrent further gouged deep trenches that significantly widened the river's breadth. Survivors were left homeless, fatherless, school-less and penniless. Moreover, they had to consider that the riverbed had carved a route through the heart of the village for next year's rains to follow. In the middle of the riverbed stood one tree, the only one strong enough to withstand the storm.

The opposite side of the mountain told a similar story. In one day, rain became perilous. The downpour came and there were not enough trees to stop or slow it. Earth, rock and soil boiled, broke and tore away, tumbled downhill and picked up everything along the way. On this side of the mountain, the hill ended in a basin; the dip in the earth's surface became a lake where there was once none. While the river had carried its victims out to sea, the lake held the bodies still: as many as 800 dead and decaying corpses remained on its floor. In the middle, thousands of

slowly drowning trees stood while bodies and plants rotted around them. The survivors in the village of Mapou lived around the new lake in plastic Red Cross issue tents.

Seventeen international organisations had rushed to the region to provide rescue and aid. They were mostly the big ones responsible for cleaning up the world's messes. When we arrived, six months later, they had all disappeared. In their wake, they left temporary shelters, seeds to last a season and logistical frameworks to develop farming cooperatives. Oxfam had further left behind a 300-metre stretch of paved road as part of a three-tiered aid programme. First, they provided emergency shelter and supplies for relief. Second, they rationed out seeds and livestock among the villagers to replenish what was lost. Third, they implemented a Cash-for-Work programme that involved hiring 35 people for 30 days to pave a piece of road. Mapou was over 50 kilometres away from the nearest asphalt thoroughfare; here they were all dirt. None of the locals owned cars; they walked. International organisations formerly implemented Food-for-Work programmes, in which they gave peasants one meal for a day's work. They replaced this approach when workers complained and compared it to slavery. Men, women and boys from surrounding villages were now paid cash to build shelters, fetch supplies, dig holes, guide workers, clean debris and fish bodies and wreckage out of the lake.

We drove through the devastation and absorbed the carnage. Curious people turned to examine our passing truck. Recognizing Mr Balthazar, most of them waved in our direction; many approached to greet us. As we inched our way down the rutted road, the images tugged at my conscience. The scale of suffering dumbfounded me.

'The village primary school recently held a story telling session,' Mr Balthazar said. 'One child recounted a story of a woman who climbed a tree to escape the flooding but when her arm got too tired, she dropped her baby into the water.' He paused, while bouncing around his seat behind the steering wheel.

'Another narrated his own story of sitting on a rooftop while watching bodies float by. These villages lost many people; over 10 000 families in this area were directly affected by the floods. That means most of the people you have seen watched the destruction happen and lost someone they know. We had counselling when the big organisations were here. The people spoke a lot about nightmares. I think what scares them the most is that it might happen again. In fact, it will most certainly happen again, only easier and faster. The culverts left by this year's storms will channel the water directly through the villages next time.'

My learning potential reached its capacity. Given that knowledge relies on comprehension, my processing abilities ended when Mr Balthazar told of a seven year old that watched a tree impale her mother. His stories kept coming, and they were all inexplicable to me: I

could not understand any of them. I tried, but my analytical skills were not strong enough to consider what happened to that child when her entire world crumbled in front of her eyes. When he showed us the rows of sun-damaged tents, I could not adequately empathise with the families who were forced to live in them and rely on hand-outs to survive. I could never identify the helplessness involved in losing their whole lives to a force well beyond their control. Sadness overwhelmed my heart; in the absence of understanding, compassion was the best I could do.

I had always been convinced of a common humanity, of a shared spirit that belonged to us all. Accordingly, it was hard to believe one could feel so lost. My mind reeled; searching desperately for something to make sense or identify with – answers, explanations, something to blame. I could not find any. In Mapou, the quest for knowledge was replaced with incomprehensible suffering. My heart could not feel this, I could not breathe it, bleed it or write it in words.

Chapter 6

Drawn to the Rhythm

The long stretch of pebble beach was alive with parties of people pulling on large ropes. A group of small rowing boats were scattered throughout the shallow waters while some bigger vessels, one with an outboard motor, floated about two hundred metres out to sea where the enormous fishing net had been dropped. A team of men, women and children were responsible for hauling it to shore.

Until recently, Belleanse survived on the ocean's bounty. The tiny seaside village had been a vast resource of herring and other edible sea creatures. Men spent their days in homemade boats tossing and gathering nets made by their wives. They caught enough to feed their families and have some left over. The extras were preserved in salt buckets, dried on the stony beach, crushed into powder and hauled over the mountain to Port-Au-Prince to sell for a profit. The earnings, in turn, allowed the locals to purchase basic necessities – charcoal for cooking, seeds to grow corn or millet, tools to repair their salt-ravaged boats and, if they were lucky, a goat or piglet.

The past couple of years had brought drastic changes to the local economy. Under President Aristide, federal fishing regulations had softened and often gone overlooked. For a nominal and 'informal' fee, industrial vessels from neighbouring Dominican Republic had invaded Haitian waters and vastly depleted the available stock. The same subsistence, renewable lifestyle that had sustained the people of Belleanse for decades had virtually disappeared. Fish, for the most part, could no longer be found close to shore. Finding and catching them required a motor; motors required money; money required fish.

'Life in Belleanse has taken a turn for the worst,' Mr Balthazar told me with sadness in his eyes. 'We never had much here, but we never had starvation; that is new. Now, more and more people are leaving to go to the city and find work there. Most of them come back with nothing. They try to go back to the fishing, but there are no fish to catch. They don't have anything.'

The community had been reduced to the endeavours we had watched on the beach: a collective near-shore scavenging effort. The bigger net and increased labour led to a higher yield than their individual efforts. The villagers would divide the catch.

Late one afternoon, Mattias and I decided to go jogging. We had spent the morning walking through the small village, meeting residents, examining facilities and swimming in the sea. As we wandered around the tiny centre, a few women sat behind market stands selling meagre supplies of charcoal, biscuits, *clairin* rum and soap bars. One wore a facemask made from bark ground to a white paste. A small child poked his head out from behind her large skirt, *'Blan!'* he exclaimed and pointed toward us foreigners. Small, two-room, wooden houses with lean-to kitchens lined the dirt roads in the village centre, each painted in two pastel colours: one shade for the top half, another for the bottom. Trees had the same two-tone, markings. I had asked what it was all about, but was answered with a shrug, which I interpreted as a suggestion to change the subject.

Voodoo had gone underground because of years of persecution from catholic and protestant churches. In a cruel twist, it had adopted its loutish reputation because it was never practiced in the presence of outsiders. In actual fact, voodoo was hardly savage; rather it was wild, unthreatening, expressive and open. Practitioners believed that it would outlast humankind and other religions: religion was man-made and man was spirit-made; spirit was God-made and spirit was voodoo. I could only guess that the markings on the trees were unspeakable because of their link to the black magic secret society.

The long dirt road out of Belleanse made for a refreshing change from my failed attempts at jogging in Pétionville. After a couple of weeks of urban life, it seemed the perfect place to work out. As we ran further away from town, the homes became increasingly shabby. Painted, sturdy, homes became clay, wattle and thatch as we got further away. People stared in wonder as we jogged by. *'Pa Machine?'* they shouted. 'No, our car is not broken,' we would answer and wish them a good evening.

Ahead, the road twisted westward and climbed up a hill. Behind us lay the slowly setting sun, a patch of bright light shining into the slowly reddening sky. A field in the distance was burning in preparation for the next planting.

We jogged at a fast pace. My stomach churned and ached, presumably unsettled from the cornmeal and herring lunch cooked over an open coal fire; nevertheless, I kept going. I had spent a couple of weeks craving this kind of exertion and an opportunity to process some of the things I had seen and experienced. Mattias, it appeared from his intensity, had also been looking forward to this chance. I would do my best to keep up with him.

On our return, as the route descended back to sea level, we decided to take a chance, turn away from the road and head to the beach. From above, it looked possible; if we could make our way around or down a cliff, a long, empty, stretch of heavenly sand awaited us.

The drop was not as easy as anticipated. What we originally thought was a footpath turned into an animal trail and quickly led to a sharp drop into the breaking waves of high tide. Mattias, a rock climber, suggested we try it anyway. My original concern had nothing to do with safety: I was worried about getting my shoes wet. We successfully descended the face and found ourselves battling with the incoming tide to stay dry. After a couple of failed attempts, I surrendered to soggy feet and resorted to struggling my way through the water. Before long, the adventure became tiresome and dry land looked increasingly appealing.

The route back to the road had no foot or animal paths; rather, we bushwhacked. Prickly shrubs scraped and jabbed at my bare arms and legs while mosquitoes bit my bare skin. I wanted out, quickly.

About 20 metres from the road, in a stretch of skinny deciduous trees we came across a mound of dirt. Five metres long, two wide and one high, a trail of grey smoke emerged from its base. It looked like a simple pile to me, but Mattias knew at once the signs of a charcoal factory. Presumably, this was the fruit of a villager's labour, but there was nobody around. Between the heat coming down from the sky and up from the pit, the temperature quickly became unbearable. Animals could hardly breathe near the toxic trenches.

As environmental concern mounted throughout the aid community, several agencies had implemented aggressive environmental programmes. Agronomists, botanists, biologists, epidemiologists, economists, anthropologists and others from overseas had developed and implemented several comprehensive plans to replenish and revive what had been depleted over the years. Concerned global citizens, federal governments and international organisations financed re-planting, seed distribution and education schemes. The protocol seemed simple: replace and protect what was lost.

Since the mid 1980s, CARE had administered an Agroforestry Outreach program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Within a year of its implementation, they were re-planting thousands of acres a year throughout the country and waiting while the trees grew and the soil resumed its stabilizing capacities. In hundreds of nurseries, the agencies further grew 10 to 15 different types of fast-growing, soil-retaining trees. Teams of experts tended the delicate seedlings. They were held in specialised banana-leaf

buildings with their own water sources until ready for distribution. People came to the nurseries to pick up the seedlings, which they planted using their own land and labour.

Relying on what they deemed common interest and sense, the experts believed Haitians would understand the imminent short and long-term perils of de-forestation and would thus preserve their replenishing stock. They further initiated an education campaign to properly inform constituents of the 'why and how' of the Agroforestry Outreach programme.

Local people liked the project. They appreciated the idea of soil retention, but that was really a secondary concern for them: trees were a cash crop. They needed money and they could cut the free trees down to sell as charcoal or, in some special cases, as planks for construction. While CARE and USAID were planting and giving away seven million trees a year, Haitians were cutting down some 20 million.

Environmental concern was a privilege. The bottom line was that poor people did not make as much money planting trees as they did cutting them down; thus, tending to their slow growth was an unreasonable investment. Space was limited; farmers could hardly sacrifice precious corn, millet and cash crop room for long-term production, not when starvation and disease loomed. Survival always won over environmental concern.

Re-forestation, education and seed distribution programmes persisted despite decades of failure. The lessons were harsh and telling, but acceptable alternatives were slim. Experts adjusted ineffective projects and in some drastic cases, they abandoned them altogether; however, their mandate to find a solution was rigid. They could not quit and allow Haiti to self-destruct. No matter the obstacles and the low success margin, they needed to persevere, correct and innovate.

Partners for Prosperity, our sponsors, had forwarded an initiative to implement a tidal generator in Belleanse. They understood the environmental and economic fragility of the area and believed the tide provided a sustainable energy alternative for the beachfront village. Mattias and I were responsible for assessing its viability. Many specialists and concerned citizens in Canada had put their minds and resources together to develop the plan. Ecologists and geologists had been perfecting models for years. They had recently developed a suitable, cheap version that was potentially useable in rural Haiti. In their minds, they had located a lasting solution to a perpetual problem, and had informed Mr Balthazar accordingly. When he resisted, they shrugged it off as a misunderstanding: the experts all agreed it would work. There were plenty of waves and not so much seaweed or plant life that it would damage the machine; most importantly, the energy would never run out.

'They have looked at photographs of the beachfront and decided that it could work,' he told us. 'I still do not know who they thought could have operated such a machine here. Who

would have fixed it when it broke? Up the mountain from here and all around the cities, you can find the remnants of many brilliant projects: unused tractors stripped of all their parts, piles of modified seed planted wrong, farming cooperatives corrupted and USAID recycling bins filled to burst with all the wrong stuff. With the money provided for a tidal generator, we could instead plant and harvest acres of sustainable mango trees or corn farms. The soil is right for both these crops and people know how to manage them. Yet the 'experts' that do not know the area will not listen. They have even insisted that a tidal generator would help draw tourists to the area; they would come to the beautiful beach, see the interesting energy project and not have to worry about blackouts. Where would the tourists stay? How would they get here?'

'What tourists?' I thought to myself.

Mr Balthazar reflected on all of this with an exasperated look. He was obviously tired. Born and raised in Haiti, he loved it deeply. He had lived, left, returned and fought for a country he believed in. Now, he spent much of his time explaining it to people who just did not understand.

I was one of them. I had occupied this otherwise busy man's time for days in order to learn how to contribute. I had pledged to stay open-minded; accordingly, I left my own knowledge behind and instead leaned upon him for questions and answers. Taking the time to show me around and entertain my queries stole valuable moments away from real work. I listened in earnest and was prepared to give my very best effort, but realistically my impact would be limited. I had spent the vast majority of my time thus far consuming information while producing very little that was concrete.

Practically and spiritually, I was there to 'help.' Accordingly, I would systematically relay Mr Balthazar's concerns to the appropriate people in Canada, develop whatever tangible contribution I could, and dedicate my resources to best serve; but even I knew that my efforts were unlikely to leave any substantial results. Ultimately, I would be one more white face that came in a motor vehicle, looked at people who had less, and left, all the while hoping that my open-mind would somehow lessen any negative impact. I was pilfering the time of someone who did not have any to spare, despite my sincere desire not to cost anybody anything.

Mr Balthazar arranged for us to meet with four community leaders over dinner one night in Belleanse.

'*Président,*' they all stood up from their seats to greet him as we walked in. Mr Balthazar had run as a local representative in the most recent federal elections. Posters showing his face

adorned homes, churches and trees throughout the village. He commanded obvious respect from every person we encountered.

Over a dinner of imported fish and canned corn, we exchanged niceties while sipping local *clairin* rum. The men were all teachers: two at primary level, the other two at secondary. One of them spoke significantly more than the others. Besides an educationalist, he was also the director of the town bank (open one day a month) and radio station (shut down for the time being). He was active in all local affairs and announced, on their behalf, that they were willing to get involved in our projects. Thrilled at their enthusiasm, we informed them that we did not have any plans to speak of; rather, we were looking to serve their interests, however they saw fit.

Curious about our intentions and frustrated over the effects of other international aid efforts, they wanted us to clarify our role in their village. The conversation, translated periodically into English for Mattias, circled for a long time. The men reported on the failures of those who had come before us, told us that starvation, health and floods were their biggest concerns and emphasised their desire to make a difference. They wanted to introduce environmental education into their schools, broadcast community information on their radio station, build better roads into the cities and provide sustainable livelihoods for their families. However, they did not want to conduct any more evaluations that would not produce results, the village was sick of diagnostics.

I asked for an itemised list of how I could help.

The leader spoke of listening to those who were most often ignored. 'This whole world is really one,' he said passionately. 'What happens in Haiti affects people elsewhere. The struggles here damage your economies, your lives. Our people are your people. You cannot ignore us here or it will come back to you,' he continued, looking me directly in the eye as if convincing me to care. 'These troubles are everyone's problems; they belong to us all.'

I nodded in agreement; too scared to say anything. I was afraid of leaving a negative impact as I travelled through this country and clearly these men had entertained the unfulfilled promises of many who had come before. I did not want to participate in that legacy, but was not confident in my ability to avoid it. I aspired to contribute to sustainable, endogenous progress that truly served the communities; yet wasn't sure I knew how.

'If you want to introduce environmental education into the schools, I can help create a curriculum,' I offered shyly. They nodded their heads, so I continued, 'I have experience in building courses and access to Haitian materials. I could design primary and secondary modules before I leave.'

The men considered and accepted my offer. I could tell they were hoping for more.

At night, while sleeping on the balcony under the veil of my mosquito net, I awoke suddenly to the sound of singing. I sat bolt upright and tried to remember where I was. Outside, a melodic female voice, metered by the beating of a drum, cried out under the starry sky. I couldn't understand her words: probably *langage,* the ritual language of voodoo that sounds close enough to *Kréyol* and French that it can fool you into believing you understand it; yet her message rang clearly through the cool midnight.

Voodoo spirits dwell at the base and in the branches of mapou trees. The trees grow high, spread wide and bury their roots deep below the earth's surface. They are sacred. Voodoo worshippers place their offerings in the branches to reach the gates of the Gods, to be freed to communicate with the spirits beyond. Drums call out to the Gods, but the Gods answer only when the rhythm pleases them.

If the spirits are not fed, the people have lost their way. When this happens, the Gods lift their feet from the land and walk only on water; when they do, the rain falls only on water. The land becomes dust while the mountains burn. The Gods stop listening to the drums.

Outside the house in Belleanse, a giant Mapou tree swayed to the rhythm of the ocean breeze, capturing dreams and trapping the verses of the suffering in its branches. Drums pounded in the streets to release their offerings into the dust. The rhythm called out to the great Gods, asking them to guide their feet back to the land.

Chapter 7

Chaos Theory

'*Pa pwoblem,*' said Mr Balthazar, shrugging his shoulders, opening the truck door and climbing out. No matter what issue, obstacle, or catastrophe came up; his response was the same: 'No problem.'

The truck's rear differential had imploded and seized; thus, it could no longer turn the back wheels. The only solution was to remove the drive shaft. Mattias and Mr Balthazar were the connoisseurs when it came to mechanical difficulties. I watched and passed tools from the box. After half an hour of tinkering and hammering beneath the truck, Mattias emerged with a one-metre steel cylinder and a smile. We got back in the vehicle and hoped for the best.

After three more attempts, the truck would still not turn over. Mattias and I shared a chuckle at Mr Balthazar's characteristically unconcerned reaction. We re-exited and resumed our customary position at its rear. In Haiti, we learned through practice, the solution to most mechanical problems was a rolling start. In both private and public situations, passengers frequently lined up behind vehicles and pushed them into operation. Men, women and children, dressed for work or play, knew the routine.

Mattias and I used all our strength to force the truck into a roll along the flat, rocky road. As it picked up momentum, we moved into a slow, then a fast jog, to no avail. It would not start.

For the next hour, the two men emptied the contents of the toolbox, rummaged through the truck bed and eventually rigged a solution out of a soda can and fishing wire. Acid had burned its way out of a battery cell and through the iron tray beneath it. Without enough support, the cells kept slipping out of line. They cut the drink container with a knife, laid it flat beneath the battery and tied it into position with wire from a spool.

With a prayer and a push, the truck started.

Driving back toward Port-Au-Prince, we stopped in Pichon, the hillside village closest to Mapou. It had narrowly avoided the catastrophic floods that ravaged its neighbour less than five kilometres away. The same waters ran through this village, but here the soil managed to hold and there was no dip in the topography to catch the run-off and create a lake. Pichon had felt the

impact and lost houses, crops and soil stability, but only seven people died. Accordingly, the bigwig international organisations had passed it by on their way to greater disasters.

Pichon had, however, received other development aid. PLAN International sponsored children in all three of the local primary schools. Teachers had received textbooks, Bibles, rulers, and crayons from churches abroad. A European Commission banner swung from a tree announcing a farming cooperative that nobody seemed to know much about. A Save the Children clinic had opened, and then shut; the sign remained posted above the door of an empty building. CARE ran summer camps for the kids during the school break.

The village had no centre, electricity or telephones, and limited access to potable water. Multiple one and two-roomed buildings were strewn among sugarcane fields and coconut trees. It was my idyllic image of rural poverty: simple but pure. A group of caring citizens in Michigan had erected *Ékol Pa Nou,* 'Our School', in 2000 and supported it ever since. Mr Balthazar's brother had re-located to Lansing years earlier. There, he organised a philanthropic effort among his Bahá'í congregation and constructed a 50-square-metre, open-air primary school. In its fourth year of operation, *Ékol Pa Nou* served almost 250 children from first to fifth grade. The Friends in Michigan paid the teachers' and principal's salaries, furnished desks and chairs, funded uniforms and sent supplies. They insisted quality education was the key to poverty alleviation in this small town.

There was only enough space at *Ékol Pa Nou* for one child out of every four in Pichon. Community members fought among themselves for limited places in the school that came equipped with free lunches and uniforms. In many cases, one lucky child attended Our School while siblings were forced to attend the old public one.

We visited unannounced and turned up to find over 200 children in identical pink uniforms – girls in skirts, boys in pants, sitting in crowded rows facing one side of the class. Five teachers sat idly in front of the students, each one overlooking a different section while the youngsters whispered among themselves. There were few signs of learning. The teachers looked up upon our arrival, jumped into action and rushed to greet us. The kids turned to check out the commotion.

Every class performed a rehearsed song and dance in our honour. The youngest ones hopped up and down out of their seats and gyrated their little hips. One girl smacked another across the head; then she started crying when she saw me looking. The older class completed a reading exercise: each student recited a paragraph from a circulating science textbook. The teacher, Mr Épin, moved with the book, looking over the shoulders of the designated readers and

loudly correcting their mistakes. He was drowning out the children's voices to show off his French skills, while peering toward me and nodding his head to encourage my approval.

Mr Épin dismissed school two hours early and walked down the road with us to the office. The Friends in Michigan had anticipated a high volume of visits to the area and built a modest wooden house in Pichon to accommodate them. It was an otherwise ordinary two-room building painted in pastel, equipped with the only electricity generator, computer and television in the village. Visits from Michigan were fewer than expected; accordingly the house doubled as an office. Under Mr Balthazar's direction, they had employed Jacques, a local man, to lead organising efforts and assess community needs. FREM worked closely with the Friends in Michigan to develop a committee of members from Pichon and neighbouring towns, Mapou, Belleanse and Cibao. The initiative sought to determine priorities, chart a course of action to address the environmental issues and design a long-term plan to correct them. The idea stemmed from allowing people with entrenched interests and concerns to learn how to fight for them. Mr Balthazar recognised that the international agencies could never commit to such a long-term investment. Given his personal interests, roots and reputation, he could accomplish what the big organisations could not: listening and committing.

We drove up to find Jacques sitting in a lounge chair in the yard. The Friends in Michigan had brought portable seats that moved in and out of the house where Jacques now stayed. Three sturdy, black roosters with colourful throats and tails roamed freely through the yard. I sat on a piece of wood on the ground while Mr Balthazar spoke with Jacques. A growing crowd of curious spectators lingered at the yard's edge.

Organising efforts had stalled because several of the 12-member committee had left to find work in Mapou. Oxfam's Cash for Work programme was designed exclusively for Mapou residents, but members of the Pichon populace had secured themselves some of the limited positions. They had used falsified addresses of family members living in the proper zone or devised other methods of stealing posts from Mapou inhabitants. Two members had departed for Port-Au-Prince hoping to find work. Their families had lost their crops in the floods; they had to compensate for what had been lost.

Jacques asked Mattias and me what our role was in Pichon.

'What would you like it to be?' responded Mattias, trying to adhere to the important principal of listening. 'If we could do something for you, what would you like it to be?'

'I could use a VCR,' Jacques answered. 'We have a television screen here and I would really like to watch movies.'

It was depressing to see what adverse effects aid had on Haiti. Survival had seemingly become a matter of filching handouts from whoever happened to be giving them. Transparency International ranked Haiti dead last in their corruption perceptions index: the most crooked place on the planet. I would never accuse Jacques of dishonesty; but certainly his life was better off than most living in his village and he was using charity to benefit personally. I had some sympathy for his situation. Survival was difficult and life threatened to get even harder. Aid agencies came and went but rarely affected his quality of life. He had lost faith that this, or any, programme would change the course of his personal or his community's fortunes; he may as well get what he could while it was available.

The Friends in Michigan had invested their interest in Haiti and planned to stay indefinitely; but that rarely lasted long. In the eyes of the community, they may simply have been the latest round of white people trying their hand at helping the poor. If, and when, the situation became intolerable or inefficient, the Michigan friends could always return home and re-focus their efforts on new friends in a safer place.

Mr Balthazar had gained the trust that the international organisations could not. His reputation lent credibility to the efforts of those who accompanied him, including us, but even he could not inspire faith. Mattias' and my presence most likely inspired hope for new opportunities to gain something, not for change.

While some critics argued that much of the world had forgotten Haiti, numbers suggested otherwise: it was the most aid-dependent country in the Western Hemisphere. Public foreign assistance totalled $1.1 billion and accounted for over 20 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. The European Union committed $325 million, United States $230 million, the World Bank $150 million. Private aid, made the total even higher.

Healing, guilt money, charity, poverty alleviation, development assistance, financial support, humanitarian relief: the jargon differed depending on the source – whatever they called it, many people keenly showed their interest with their wallets. Donors were doing a reasonably fine job of giving money to the country's problems; unfortunately, success was rarely that simple.

The World Bank recognised difficulties in working with fragile nations and developed a Low Income Countries Under Stress (LICUS) approach to dealing with them. Emphasising policy environments, institutions and governance, this emerging paradigm submitted that countries that performed well in these categories could absorb higher levels of aid and were likely to be more effective converting it into economic growth and poverty reduction. Accordingly, LICUS sought to concentrate its resources on poor countries that showed a commitment to development

effectiveness, made efforts to improve governance, end corruption, make effective use of aid money and ensure local 'buy-in' to their strategies. The World Bank improved its own efficiency by supporting development within these reasonable growth contexts.

Three-quarter of aid-receiving countries failed to meet these criteria. Haiti barely met any of them and held no promise to do any better in the future. Structural shortcomings were rooted in the history of a people who had sought freedom since 1804. Since then Haiti had been interfered with, exploited, undermined, occupied, dictated to and simply screwed with. Crisis of governance went well beyond the political, and the country remained mired in a deadlock that had brought it to the brink of social, economic and institutional breakdown.

Some individuals argued that international aid was in fact the latest of a long line of forces to mess Haiti up. Governments had been duly criticised for attaching their own foreign policy objectives to aid schemes. Aid was determined as much by political and strategic considerations as it was by the economic and performance needs of the recipients. By 2004, many donors saw few political benefits in getting involved in Haiti; the problems were too complicated and the only thing left in the national coffers was debt. Working toward diplomatic and political progress would be long and harsh and many did not want to get involved in such an ugly process. Instead, they channelled money through development specialists such as USAID or Oxfam. Providing funding showed that they cared and conveniently never required getting directly involved.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) had developed a 'difficult partnership' approach for its work in Haiti. They recognised that the problems were unlikely to be resolved conclusively in the short term and that the structural weakness of the state would probably remain for some years to come. They also felt that aid could not afford to wait for a hypothetical end to a crisis that could last indefinitely. Accordingly, CIDA adjusted its expectations to accommodate a failing country. Goals were set intentionally low and they no longer defined success in terms of actual positive progress, but rather in preventing negative change. Results had to be modest, modifiable in scope and progressively verifiable. CIDA accepted the right to err, the risk of not meeting objectives and the likelihood of unsustainable results. They expected their programmes to fail.

The biggest problem in Haiti was hope, not a lack of interest. Assessing and re-assessing the situation, changing their minds and implementing round after round of new schemes; organisations brought with them their own mandates, their own people and carried about their own business. They rarely boosted the overall health of the nation and hoped, at best, not to make it even worse. Failure was endemic, they said, and acted accordingly.

Aid had turned Haiti from a fiercely proud country into a nation of beggars and even stealers. It had sucked the spirit out of the same people who once defeated Napoleon in the name of freedom and reduced them to fighting for handouts and grabbing what they could. They were not even disappointed when 'help' left. Haitians had given up.

We spent the weekend looking and learning how assistance quickly turned poisonous. We witnessed neglect, misinterpretation, and dependency, all by 'do-gooders' who never fully understood their impact. While Mattias and I were becoming increasingly embarrassed about our status as advantaged outsiders, we acknowledged that Mr Balthazar was the primary factor that lent credibility to our presence and our work. He had been seeing and re-living the same pattern for years. I wondered how, under these impossible conditions, he found the courage to keep working. Did he actually hold onto the hope that everyone seemed to have lost?

'Chaos Theory,' he answered simply. 'Do you know it?'

'Explain it to me,' I said, because I wanted to hear his interpretation.

'Chaos Theory is based on two basic premises. First, that within chaos there is order. We may not be able to see it, but we know it is there somewhere. Second, that small change can create big. It could be by design or accidental, but sometimes a small shift can change the order of the universe.'

'Have you ever considered leaving?' I asked.

'I have considered it. In fact, I have left. I spent a full decade in France and a couple of years in Michigan. But I came back, I wanted to come back; I want to die here – looking out at the Caribbean Sea, the only one I have always loved. This is my country. I do have to consider what is best for my family and children. If the situation gets worse and I must worry about violence, I may have to move my children elsewhere, but this is my rightful place, this is where I belong.

'I need to work towards small change,' he continued. 'And I need to believe that it will one day lead to big. There is promise in this country for many great things to come, there simply has to be something that will let us meet our potential. I don't know where we will find it, but we will.'

It rolled off his tongue with the same ease he used while cutting a soda can perfectly in half with a rusty pocketknife.

Chapter 8

Bon Dye Bon

The youths filed through the doorway one after another while Linda scurried about the house preparing for the party. Groups gathered according to age: children at the table, pre-teens around the bookshelf and teens on the couches. It was Baha'u'llah's birthday, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í faith. 'Glory of God' was born in Iran in 1817 and died in Israel in 1892 after spending most of his life banished from his Muslim country for his wayward religious affiliations. Throughout his life, he wrote divine tablets, preached God's words and spent several years incarcerated in Tehran's 'black pit', a dungeon where he was whipped on his bare feet and wore 50-kilogram chains around his neck and wrists. The manacles were so tight and heavy that they left permanent scars. In that prison, he received a message from the Angel Gabriel that he was the Promised One. His birthday was an annual Bahá'í holiday that was celebrated with great enthusiasm.

Glenn, a fellow North American turned Haitian, worked as a director for the HIV/AIDS Global Fund and sat on the National Bahá'í governing body. He lived alone in a stately home perched high in the hills above Pétionville. It took two trips in two over-flowing 4x4s to carry the 25 youngsters from Linda's up to Glenn's for the celebration.

His house was at high altitude and surrounded by flourishing, well-tended gardens. Even the air was fresher; the wind blew away most of the rank, city smog that smothered people in the valley. Inside, a full circle of white plastic chairs had been arranged in the otherwise empty living room. Teenagers were designated one seat apiece, while the younger kids had to share. Silence echoed through the vacant, white halls. A couple of younger children played in their seat, tussling with one another until one fell flat on the floor. Guilty laughter filled the room for a moment before the kids resumed their hush.

Linda entered once everyone had settled. She took her position inside the circle. All eyes stared fixedly on her. She looked like the Virgin Mother, standing with her hands folded in front of her navel, her smiling mouth closed and eyes gazing at her captive audience. Glenn entered with processed cheese slices on white bread; everybody received one half sandwich and a plastic cup half full of lemon drink. Linda asked if we knew what we were celebrating. Nobody responded.

'Today we celebrate the birth of Baha'U'llah, our prophet and father of all,' she answered her own question. 'Why do we pray?'

I would have answered 'because the old white woman put us in a car and drove us to the old white man's house', but I kept my comments to myself. The stark age and race disparities were painfully obvious: I was one of three adults, all white, in a room filled with children, all black. We were speaking about religion and handing out cheap food. It looked like an image out of a colonial textbook. Of all the compromises I was prepared to make, participating in a patronising scene like this was never one of them. I looked around the room and wondered who else saw what I did.

Linda read the reply from a book of verses:

> Suffer me, O my God, draw nigh unto Thee, and abide within the precincts of Thy court, for remoteness from Thee hath well-nigh consumed me. Cause me to rest under the shadow of the wings of Thy grace, for the flame of my separation from Thee hath melted my heart within me. Draw me nearer unto the river that is life indeed, for my soul burneth with thirst in its ceaseless search after Thee. My sighs, O my God, proclaim the bitterness of mine anguish, and the tears I shed attest my love for Thee.

It was a disappointing party; I had left the house expecting laughter, dancing and singing. I had anticipated some differences between my and Linda's party styles, but this hardly seemed like a 'good time' by any standards.

Civil society in Haiti was a difficult thing to define. It covered a range of organisations – grass-roots, community-based, para-statals, relief missions, foreign aid agencies and charities, to name a few. The United Nations preferred to label them non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They spoke an industry-specific language punctuated with unintelligible lingo. According to them, 'development' contrasted with 'charity', 'endogenous' clashed with 'exogenous', 'needs' varied from 'requirements' and 'objectives' differed from 'goals'. They were responsible for executing relief and aid efforts and Haiti was saturated with them, although nobody knew how many there were. Estimates were in the hundreds, but changed depending on how surveys accounted for varying statuses. Scores of them were inactive but still wished to be included in the totals. Others were still in the planning phase, while dozens folded every year. Collectively, they appeared to be a law unto themselves: running all over the country doing a myriad of projects according to a variety of different paradigms.

Given the implicit absence of a formal economy, 'development' rivalled politics as the most expedient route to personal gain. Aid workers lived significantly better than the average

citizen did. They had cars, servants and televisions. Offices were spacious, air-conditioned and protected by armed guards. Foreigners could often live a better life working abroad than they could at home where civil society was typically known for its low pay. Internationally, some of the most educated and productive citizens agreed to forego personal wealth to serve causes they believed in. They rented apartments and used public transportation while their equally skilled 'for-profit' counterparts owned houses and drove luxury vehicles. These previously underpaid individuals could come to Haiti and live in the lap of opulence. Furthermore, a lack of institutional controls and accountability allowed substantial pilfering....

CAFT was deliberately apolitical. It worked autonomously to provide pedagogical training to teachers, principals, religious leaders and NGO personnel in all provinces. National schools typically used corporal punishment and teacher-centred approaches in the classroom. CAFT provided expert guidance in dialogue and participative methods for teaching and discipline. They had coached hundreds of educators and directly or indirectly touched the lives of thousands. Linda was very honest and staunchly committed to the organisation: social justice and education were Bahá'í principles. Only two of seven staff joined her faith, but they all shared a deep appreciation for the importance of their united vision and mission.

CAFT had existed for three years. It began as a sub-project of PLAN. PLAN was a huge international outfit with a $426 million expenditure budget. Their chief fundraising scheme included providing individual donors an opportunity to 'foster' children in impoverished areas. For a small monthly amount, people in wealthy countries contributed to nourishing and educating youngsters. They paid for school fees and uniforms, food supplies and supported projects to bolster overall community health. To reward their generosity, patrons were given photos of and correspondence from their 'fostered' children. Sponsors felt good about their contributions and enjoyed seeing and hearing from the kids they gave to. The 'fridge child' format was an extremely profitable one that generated enormous resources for dozens of organisations.

CAFT was founded under PLAN's supervision to fill the teacher-training portion of their education enhancement programme. CAFT provided training services to educators and neighbourhoods working with the 'foster' children. Their partnership ended when Linda suspected corruption. A brief independent investigation revealed that almost 50 percent of the children actually existed. When she began prodding, PLAN quickly terminated CAFT's contract and initiated a new partnership with another coaching organisation. Accordingly, CAFT was forced to reinvent itself.

When I arrived, its survival was jeopardised by a drastic lack of funding. Linda immediately put my fundraising experience to use and I generated several grant proposals to help

promote their continued existence. The staff was made up of didactic experts, an administrator and a driver. They had never identified a need for fundraising capacity; when they finally did, it was under the threat of imminent demise. I sent applications to the United Nations (UN), Save the Children (STC), Rotary International and the European Commission (EC).

Linda had been unable to locate the EC's *appel d'offres* calling for requests for that year. She insisted they would understand and accept ours on a rolling basis. Accordingly, I built the proposal on the previous year's objectives as outlined in the EC's guidelines. After I had prepared and sent a letter of interest, we organised a visit with the director.

We drove through the busy streets of Pétionville, down the hill into Pacot and arrived in time for our 09h00 meeting. A large European Commission plaque covered the top quarter of an orange gate. Behind it, an old colonial mansion had been transformed into offices.

Linda greeted a secretary. She looked up and gestured for us to take a seat on a row of wooden chairs. 09h00 became 09h15, then 09h30. Eventually, she dialled a number and asked if Mr Dupart was ready to meet with us. She replaced the receiver, smiled at us and said: 'He will see you now.' We walked down a sterile looking hallway with white tiled floors.

Inside, Honorat Dupart, Director of the EC's Haitian Mission sat behind a desk in a spacious, air-conditioned office. He stood up to shake our hands and motioned us to sit on a couple of leather seats. He was impeccably dressed in a black designer suit with a shiny blue tie.

He had received our letter of interest, but unfortunately we had missed the submission deadline. We would have to re-apply next year, using the proper protocols and formulae. They did not accept un-solicited requests.

Linda unloaded seven training manuals on his desk and started explaining CAFT's approaches. 'We are trying to provide educators with new methods of teaching children morals,' she started. 'We are living in an increasingly valueless society. Under the current conditions, classrooms don't guide children in ethics and spirituality. CAFT has developed ways to teach children to use God to lead them to reach their full potential. We have documented that the methods are successful.'

Mr Dupart picked up the manual and flipped through the pages without looking at them. The first lesson, '*Bon Dye Bon,*' taught the goodness of God in *Kréyol*. 'I am certain your programmes are outstanding, I can see they are of the highest quality,' he reassured her. 'Have they been accredited by the Department of Education?'

'We have not approached the government branches for any of our services,' she answered. 'CAFT has a strict policy to remain apolitical. Local and national governance has altered so drastically and often that we feel it is more efficient to work without them. We focus on

educators and communities while avoiding bureaucracy. That is the best way to serve the Haitian people.'

Mr Dupart sat upright in his chair and paused for a moment before responding. 'We work closely with the National Government and Department of Education and feel that the best chance at sustainable change comes through supporting local infrastructure. We insist that pedagogic programmes are endorsed by the appropriate branches,' he replied, holding Linda's gaze. 'I would be happy to evaluate your application and consider your organisation for funding, but not until next year. Please pay close attention to the EC-Haiti website to learn the dates and we can discuss this issue at that time.'

Back in the car, Linda breathed an exasperated sigh, 'It is just not logical. He is not logical. Can he not see that we need a new approach?'

I paused for a moment while trying to evaluate my role in this discussion. For CAFT's sake, I could have re-iterated the importance of clearly understanding funders' mandates before approaching them with your own; it would have behoved us not to castigate government while speaking with a public officer. Instead, I decided to argue vehemently against mixing religion and politics....

'There is a danger in recommending religious approaches to a state agency,' I started. 'I don't think that representatives of official bodies are even allowed to accept such proposals. If you want to provide curricula that speak about God, you may have to seek out faith-based funders, not government ones.'

'But, religion is necessary,' she insisted. 'Without God, children live in a moral vacuum.'

'What if they do not believe in God?' I asked. 'Do those with different faiths or none at all have no morals?'

'Everybody believes in God,' she replied with certainty.

'Not everybody believes in God,' I argued, with anger rising. 'Voodoo is the most prominent religion in Haiti. They don't believe in the same God as the one you teach. Surely we cannot expect an official agency to support programmes that tell kids to change their religion and accept a new God.'

'But it is necessary,' she continued, unmoved. 'Haiti is not the same as Europe or North America. Only a very small percentage does not share the faith; they are foreigners or highly educated elite. The rest want God in their lives; they need it. Look at the social deterioration: sex, alcohol, drugs, tattoos and video games; they are unravelling the spiritual fabric of the whole world!'

'Then surely you can understand why we cannot appeal to a European organisation to support this approach. They are irreligious as much as CAFT is apolitical,' I retorted, thinking about my tattoo and the barefoot children around Haiti who had never even seen a video game.

Neither of us would compromise and we were quickly slipping into an argument that had endured centuries of discussion, dispute and even war. Faith, by nature and definition, is based on believing in answers where there are otherwise none. Bahá'ís believed, faithfully, that the world would one day unify under God. When it did, poverty would subsist and justice would reign. Linda's confidence was immovable, as was her conviction in this providence.

Reasoning had never defeated piety. I was stupid to believe I could exercise my secular arguments and convince her to change. I had taken the low road and indulged in a futile quarrel for the sake of appeasing my own conscience. The notion that Haiti could be saved if only its people believed in a better God offended me. I abhorred the idea that Haitians lacked a fundamental morality; moreover, that sex and body art in these conditions were a reflection of poor ethics.

Haiti had undergone drastic and horrifying changes and abuses in the 27 years that Linda had lived there, yet she had hardly altered along with it. I admired her resolve and commitment and acknowledged that she had served the country well; yet the same principles that compelled her to act so devoutly and selflessly also ignored the critical details of her immediate environment.

Later that week, I called Sulzaire to join me on a trip downtown. Although she participated in activities, she was not Bahá'í; thus, she provided a refreshing break from an increasingly tense environment. We were going to buy art. Every time I had travelled to the city centre I stared longingly at the artwork displayed along sidewalks and street corners. I particularly loved the colourful paintings and pictured my future home, if I ever had one, decorated with pieces reflecting the places I had visited. I had considered purchasing something from Gaël at Galerie Monnin, but could not afford the high-society prices. I convinced myself that the roadside artists were as genuinely talented as those responsible for the pieces framed on the gallery walls. One street painter in particular had repeatedly captured my passing eye. His distinctive style used bright shades and exaggerated characters.

We hopped in the back of an over-crowded tap-tap and headed to the town centre. Gaël, Chloé, the Balthazars and my parents had warned me emphatically against travelling anywhere near downtown. Goeffré avoided it every day on his way to work. Much of the violence and kidnapping they saw on television and read in the newspapers happened there. They felt much

safer knowing I was in Pétionville. Furthermore, travelling by public transport was doubly ill advised.

I had visited downtown many times and never seen or heard violence; hence, I chalked their concern up to well-intentioned paranoia. The streets were busy and thriving. As we walked through the street-side market, soldiers passed slowly in armoured vehicles. Policemen lazed in trucks with guns slung over their shoulders. Many looked at me; one uniformed man called me over. I declined and walked on. Some merchants shouted for my attention while others sat idly next to their goods. We were trying to find the painter, but a statue dealer distracted us. He pursued us while carrying two armfuls of small stone carvings representing children hugging mothers while sitting on their laps. The figures had circular shapes: joined at the base with a hole in between the bodies then reunited again at the top. He would give me a very special price. I liked the pieces well enough and negotiated a charge of 75 Haitian dollars (US$10) for five.

We bargained a similarly 'very special price' with the painter: he would give me three 'masterpieces' for the price of two. I selected three fantastically vibrant canvases and slipped a wad of old, worn-out cash into his hand.

Two hours after arriving, we finagled our way into an already bursting tap-tap with five carvings, two jewellery boxes and three wall-sized paintings. As Sulzaire and I neared home, traffic slowed to a virtual standstill. After waiting patiently for 15 minutes, the heat became overwhelming and we felt it expedient to walk the rest of the way.

Past the line of stationary cars, we rounded the corner onto our street to find a throng of people standing directly in front of Linda's house. An unarmed police officer stood calmly at the edge of the crowd. We approached him to ask what the commotion was about.

'A man fell,' he answered in *Kréyol*. I looked to Sulzaire for an explanation. 'They have killed a man,' she told me, still listening to the constable. 'They found him stealing from the shop and the group chased and killed him.'

I ran toward the mob. Some were shouting angrily but I could not understand what they were saying. Most were chatting amicably among each other. One woman was sweeping the street. Besides funerals, I had never seen a dead body before; it was hard to accept that a group of neighbourhood vigilantes were actually capable of killing a man. Morbidly fascinated by this brand of 'community' justice, I snaked my way through the crowd until I could see him clearly.

The man, dressed in a green t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, lay in a puddle of blood. His eyes were closed and face disfigured. When they learned he was a thief, the group had chased him and thrown stones. When they finally caught the bandit, they surrounded him and beat his body using rocks, sticks and hands. Finally, someone took a knife and cut his throat.

I was horrified. I retreated through the maze of people, stumbling as I went. Once clear, I ran into the house, threw my art on the floor and fell onto the couch. Sulzaire followed a minute later, placed her items on the table and looked at me curiously. She had seen killing before and was surprised at my reaction. 'He deserved it,' she said softly. 'He was a thief stealing from our own community. We are all better off without him.'

When she learned the news, Belle, the domestic worker, hurried through the lounge and burst out the front door. Linda entered the room and looked inquisitively at me. She had heard the commotion and wondered what it was about, but was too busy working on a new curriculum to venture outside.

'There is a dead man at the end of the driveway,' I informed her. 'A dead guy!' she said surprised. 'What for?'

Sulzaire explained the vigilante justice. 'What a shame,' she said shaking her head absent-mindedly and walking towards the kitchen to fetch some water.

Chapter 9

Paradise Interrupted

A Save the Children truck, with driver, came to pick me up at Linda's house and head out to the beachfront Xaragua Hotel, northwest of Port-Au-Prince. CAFT was holding a 'participatory action research' training conference for the local Save the Children (STC) staff. 'Participatory action research', despite its impressive title, was merely a method of including constituents in programme evaluation and design. It should have been an obvious concept – those who receive programme benefits ought to be given the chance to voice their opinions. Unfortunately, in the NGO world, this process tended to be long, slow, prickly, and thus overlooked. Accordingly, 'experts' were most often left to determine the best interests of and methods suited to people they had never met. All too frequently, a PhD student from an urban American university decided what the people of rural Haiti needed and wanted.

STC did not apply enough participative methods and recognised their deficiency. Thus they set five days aside for CAFT to teach them how. By the end of the week, they hoped to have gained enough tools and techniques to apply more inclusive practices in their regular work.

We drove along *Route National #1* north and out of the city. We were headed toward the wild and lovely beach coast that had once been the playground for the rich and beautiful. The Haitian upper-class had long ago invested in this stretch of land; many had built second homes along the white sand beaches. The holiday abodes ranged from quaint bungalows to grandiose compounds. They were easily distinguishable from the local homes: quintessential thatch huts with mud-caked floors and paint splashed walls.

Interspersed between the houses were a string of top-rated international hotels, most of them empty or closed. Club Med and Hotel Kaliko had once played host to holiday-makers from all over the world. Guests used to fly in to indulge in days and nights of exotic paradise. The upscale resorts offered snorkelling, sailing, and booze-cruising. Kids rode horses through palm-shaded trails and played soccer with the locals for a 'truly native' experience. Parents visited the *Source Puante*, a nutrient-rich natural mud spa, and ate fresh seafood.

North America had also blamed this same stretch of land for the HIV/AIDS pandemic: *Côte des Arcadins* coast was also rumoured to have been a bourgeoning gay hot spot. Allegedly, homosexuals came to participate in 'wild promiscuity' among themselves and with the locals.

Academics who studied the virus in its early stages found a recurring connection between HIV and homosexual men who had travelled to Haiti. Seemingly, the correlation was considered consistent enough for the American Centre for Disease Control to label 'Haiti' as a primary cause of the illness. North Americans were callously warned to avoid the four H's that cause HIV: homosexuals, heroin users, haemophiliacs and Haitians. The logic that led to this conclusion was appallingly poor and the findings never withstood academic rigour; the stigma, however, remained popular among the public. Many people in North America and the Caribbean continued to blame Haiti for the onset of HIV and labelled its people accordingly.

The actual number infected hovered around 5%, a similar number to the rest of North America and far below most of Africa. Moreover, conditions of poverty, racism, and discrimination contributed significantly more to the spreading of the epidemic than sexual 'promiscuity' with gay tourists.

Along *Route National #1*, the owners of the monster hotels had forsaken Haiti. During Aristide's first exile in 1991, the United Nations imposed sanctions that froze assets and banned unofficial trade and travel, including tourism. Entry and exit was restricted to those with special visas or enough money to bribe officials. At the beach, growing lawlessness threatened proprietors and they saw nothing to gain from staying. They simply closed the hotels and left. Local people lost their livelihoods and were left with nothing.

Long after the embargo was lifted, the once lively beachside remained eerily empty. It looked no different from any other part of rural Haiti – poor. The towns became increasingly desperate. The empty hotels and holiday homes were still there, but people no longer came from Florida, New York or Paris to soak up the sun.

While certain posh hotels in Port-Au-Prince continued to make a lavish living off foreign aid workers, politicians and drug kings, guests rarely made the trip to the beach. The road was long and bumpy, and to those with money to spare, a couple of days up the coast was not worth the slow trip through striking poverty; especially since Jamaica had hassle-free, HIV-free, fly-in resorts just across the Windward Passage.

Out of Port-Au-Prince, we drove toward the Xaragua along the rutted roads while trying to avoid potholes as big as trucks. In some places, patches of dusty gravel replaced large gaps of missing tarmac. We passed countless rows of peasant homes. People lived dangerously close to traffic: women walked along the roadside while balancing buckets on their heads, children played marbles on the narrow shoulders. Remnants of former army checkpoints still stood intermittently along the side of the highway.

After driving 50 kilometres, we could finally see the shoreline. A gentle sea breeze wafted into the truck and neutralised the smell of burning brakes and gasoline. Coconut palms dotted the beach and swayed in the wind. The sun beat down from its full noonday height.

The Xaragua, owned by a Belgian businessman, had barely weathered the embargoes and the dead economy. The once-luxurious hotel relied on its prime beachfront location to survive the difficult times; it was barely working. Down a tree-lined driveway, the formerly white walls of the 100-room building were slowly turning grey while the main doors hung loosely from their hinges. Old lounge chairs facing the sea surrounded a kidney shaped pool with layers of peeling paint. Inside, out-dated colours decorated the walls and green shag carpet covered the floors.

It served our purposes. STC staff had gathered at the Xaragua from all over the nation. STC operated a host of youth programmes in several towns around the country. Focusing on children and families, they promoted the rights and futures of Haiti's most vulnerable and dependent by operating comprehensive education, emergency, hunger, HIV/AIDS, economic and health programmes.

Funded by independent, government and foundation donors, STC had a global operating budget of over $250 million. It was an effective organisation that made a concerted effort to keep abreast of current trends and issues in development practice. There were many benefits to large-group trainings: staff felt like a team, learned together, and were equipped to do better work. Because of their abundant funds, they could afford to conduct the 'participatory action research' course at the Xaragua.

Every session began with a round of song and dance. In the mornings, we started the days by rehearsing a tune about the old Army General 'Pipo' and listed off his clothing pieces round by round. As with most other songs, 'Pipo' involved a range of dance moves and actions.

'*As-tu connu Pipo, Pipo du temps qu'il etait militaire...*' we pointed to our hats, guns and shoes while marching in place.

The STC staff included a mix of people who had arrived from around the island. From city and country, nationals and foreigners, young and old, they shared a dedication to children. Group activities were lively and fruitful; their diverse experiences and generally open personalities bred a particularly productive learning environment.

During the morning, I joined a group of workers trying to develop storytelling tools for illiterate participants. This particular cluster of employees worked on issues surrounding mother and newborn health.

'It is difficult to explain the problems in Haiti,' Rolande told me. She was born, raised and educated in Port-Au-Prince and had been working for four years in Maissade, a mountainous region six hours from the capital. 'Political, economic and social forces definitely have an impact on health. They affect AIDS, tuberculosis and all the other infections we see in both adults and kids. So many factors determine health: from hunger, torture, rape and other extreme suffering down to proper nutrition and simple viruses. They also dictate how we run our programmes. We would be foolish to pretend we can talk about health without looking at the bigger issues. But our jobs are restricted to addressing health specifically. By policy, STC ignores political context and focuses only on humanitarian issues. It is sad for me to work hard on our programmes knowing that everything I do could be undone because of the country's political situation.'

'Par Example,' she continued, 'four years ago, when I arrived in Maissade, there was a flood in one of the neighbouring villages. Most of the town was displaced. The people could no longer grow the crops they usually did; they had to find whatever work they could, wherever they were moved to. The police came for months to maintain stability in the region. Ti Marie was a teenage girl who stayed with her family in the village, trying to survive on their diminished sugarcane crop. She carried a bucket full of cane to and from the market place everyday. Officers along the way took note of her: she was a pretty girl. She felt lucky to get this attention since the men appeared to be powerful and respected. Despite knowing he had a wife and several other partners, she got involved with an officer because he offered to bring her to the big city. He disappeared without ever bringing her to Port-Au-Prince. She moved there on her own to work as a servant, for a tiny wage. She found a new boyfriend who worked as a tap-tap driver and became pregnant. Her boyfriend did not accept the pregnancy and neither did her employers; they both dumped her.

'She came to our clinic when she was forced to move back to Maissade,' continued Rolande. 'She was pregnant, HIV positive and had no money. Her mother was living in Maissade, trying to grow sugarcane. She came into the clinic a month before she gave birth. We taught her nutrition for herself and her child and tried to access drugs for the HIV, which had become AIDS by that time. She died last month. Her 8-month-old daughter stays with her grandmother and is HIV positive. She was infected from her mother during breast-feeding. We taught Ti Marie to bottle-feed; however, she did not have consistent access to clean, boiled water, so sometimes she breast-fed instead. Mixing breast with formula milk increased risk: they had different textures that damaged the child's fragile digestive system and allowed easier transmission of HIV. If Ti Marie had bottle-fed, she may have contaminated and killed her child with dirty water; instead she risked HIV transmission.'

She paused for a moment, 'There is nothing simple about working in health; it is directly linked to race, class, gender and politics.'

At the end of the day, I went jogging. *Route National #1* was far more spacious than the streets of Pétionville and I was relieved to have a chance to enjoy the 'fresher' air. Fitness played a critical role in maintaining my mental and physical health, but I had only been able to train while on trips outside of the city.

I felt there was a minor moral dilemma involved in this brand of exercise. Disturbing reports of careless visitors had always bothered me. I cringed at those who arrived in foreign lands expecting to maintain patterns and comforts of home. Yet, I was going for a run in a place where it was anything but normal. I hoped that my brazenness was not shocking or offensive, but I wasn't sure.

I ran along *Route National #1.* Trucks piled high with cargo and people rumbled past, stirring up dust that got in my eyes and pores. The sun was beating down on my tiring body and I could feel blood pumping in my ears, sweat running down my brow and my regenerated muscles bursting out of their slumber.

'*Bon swa'*, I greeted passer-bys with a smile and a wave. Based on their reactions, they did not see many of 'us'. Men working in banana fields dropped their hoes, children swimming in a creek stopped splashing, women sweeping their yards pointed. A boy on a bike quietly rode next to me for a while. I attempted to make conversation but got only short answers, shy smiles and the occasional wink in return. Groups of men called me over to them. I refused politely and kept moving.

Twenty minutes into the route, the number of people lining the road grew steadily. My embarrassment brewed as the spectators increased and I realised how absurd I looked: an unannounced, sweaty white female jogging along the national highway in blue spandex.

Before long, I ran full speed into a marketplace. Hundreds of people were gathered around a row of iron stalls. They all looked at me. For a long moment, I swear the place turned completely silent. Music stopped, activity froze; I could only hear the sound of my blood ringing in my ears. Their stares made me feel transparent. In a matter of minutes my innocuous jog had turned into a self-inflicted peep show. I was living the proverbial dream where you show up to school naked and everybody gawks.

I gave up my resolve to be friendly and instead ran as fast as I could out of the market. I kept running down *Route National #1,* as far away from that moment as possible, mostly for fear of turning around and doing it all over again.

A few minutes later, I passed a small group of young men.

'*Amène le taureau à la vache*,' one beckoned. He had asked me to bring the bull to the cow, and I knew what it meant: he wanted me to 'acquire' him.

I looked at him with obvious disdain and replied, 'If you want to speak to me you will have to keep up with me.'

'Just one moment of your time,' the young man said as he began running by my side. He looked 20-something, wore broken sandals and carried a bag on his back. My conditions stayed firm, I would not stop. Therefore, he joined me.

His name was Fran Fran. Born nearby, he had recently returned from school in Port-Au-Prince after his mother had passed away. He did not know what she died of, but thought it was tuberculosis. Now, he helped support his siblings by selling stone carvings to tourists both locally and in the city. He made it to the capital once a month to spend the weekend peddling goods in the *Marché Au Fer*. He offered to marry me. I, as it turned out, was exactly what his mother had always wished for him and he was certain he could bring me great happiness.

I explained that I was merely looking to find a short cut home. Thankfully, Fran Fran knew of one. With his guidance, I could avoid the marketplace and find my way back to the hotel.

We turned right from the highway, ran down a footpath towards the sea and made another right turn onto a trail that led to the Xaragua.

'We can stop here,' Fran Fran said, slowing as we trotted through a vacant sugarcane field. I insisted that there was no reason to break: we could speak and run at the same time. I was not afraid of him, yet felt somewhat uneasy about lingering in the back woods of an unfamiliar village with a complete stranger. Furthermore, I assumed he was looking to court me using the same annoying routine that dozens of other men had previously tried and failed. The sun was setting and I could not afford the time to slow down and listen to his wasted appeals.

'Please stop, we must talk,' he pleaded. I grew increasingly uncomfortable as Fran Fran desperately used many of the lines I had heard before from desperate men in desperate situations.

'I love you', he insisted. 'I want to marry you. Let me show you.'

'But you don't even know me,' I challenged. 'Let's just be friends.'

'Take me to Canada with you; I will work very hard.'

Guilt tugged on my heartstrings, but I was acclimated enough to avoid the wrenching pity that would otherwise accompany such a request.

The few people that lined the back trail looked at us suspiciously as we zigzagged through coconut palms and banana fields. Fran Fran pumped his chest out and looked back at them with pride.

After 45 minutes of fast jogging, the footpath intersected with the highway. The road looked familiar enough for me to continue on my own. Fran Fran's efforts had ended suddenly when I told him that I was married and my husband would be very upset if he knew he was speaking to me in this manner. He had persisted relentlessly despite all my protests; yet one mention of an imaginary man with a bruised ego was enough to call the whole thing off.

I thanked Fran Fran profusely for his help, wished him well, and hugged him tightly as a sign of our new bond.

A few minutes later, I crossed through the hotel's old-fashioned doors and slid comfortably into anonymity among fellow visitors and away from the glaring stares. Breathing a sigh of relief, I promised I would never jog in Haiti again.

On the last night of the workshop, we held an intra-organisation talent show. STC staff performed jokes, song and dance while enjoying one another's company over bottles of beer. Sitting by the bonfire, I recounted my jogging story to Auguste-Pierre-Yves, a program co-ordinator from Port-Au-Prince. He found great humour in picturing me running down *Route National#1* while vehicles passed by. He figured drivers thought I was an illusion.

'They must have seen you in your shorts and wondered if they were dreaming,' he said laughing. 'We don't see many people jogging up here, especially not on the national road.'

As my story progressed, his eyes widened with surprise. When I got to the part about following Fran Fran through a short-cut, he interjected mid-sentence and told me frankly, 'He thought you were looking to buy sex.'

'No!' I gasped in disbelief.

'I hate to say it, but I think so,' he said with amusement. 'Tourists used to come here to find young men. When the locals saw you running and looking for shortcuts, they probably thought you were seeking the companionship of a 'special' friend.'

'Even women?' I asked, surprised.

'Yes, women too,' he replied, still chuckling at my naivety. 'It wasn't only men who came to Haiti to find sex; everybody did. In this region it was a very strong industry, one of the best. However, it has suffered like everything else in recent years. Perhaps you brought hope that there will be a resurgence.' He slapped his knee with hilarity and called everyone over to share the news.

Chapter 10

Lights Out

After two months in Haiti, my stomach cramped up and underwent its third bout of crippling 'digestive' illness. The Italian doctor sent me to get my stool analysed in a dark, basement lab. She suspected a parasite.

I was relieved she didn't mention malaria. Mattias had been sent home weeks earlier delirious, dizzy and covered in a red rash. He had picked up dengue fever, haemorrhaging dengue fever and malaria: three different diseases from three different mosquitoes. We knew that Haiti was a malaria zone yet had both arrogantly refused to take prophylactics despite waking up every morning covered in bites and regularly seeing sick people.

His exit was painful. The Balthazars made certain the best doctors in the top hospital provided him with care; but ultimately, he would receive better treatment at home and thus decided to leave immediately. I helped him sort out the logistics for his emergency evacuation – after several wrong numbers, missed calls and cancelled tickets, we managed to get him out of the country within two days. He flew to Canada via Miami, Dallas and Los Angeles. His father picked him up 37 hours later at Vancouver International Airport. Feverish and staggering, he was rushed to the hospital for two nights then spent dozens more at home in bed.

My lab results returned positive for both a parasite and a bacterial infection. It wasn't good news, but it could have been much worse. I suspected I had contracted one, or both, during a trip to Belleanse. My stomach hadn't felt the same since. I had concluded my sickness was due to new flora and fauna, poor nutrition and toxic air; but I was wrong – a tiny microbe had made its way into my intestines to multiply. For the better part of a week, I alternated between the commode and the computer; too weak to leave the house, but alert enough to finish my environmental education curriculum in between bouts of extravagant illness. The medication kicked in within a few days and my pleas to avoid an emergency evacuation were heard.

My health was deteriorating and my departure was imminent. I wasn't ready to go. My reluctance came from a fear that I had not yet achieved my goals. My failure to identify any specific objectives had led me to hide behind ambiguous targets of 'learning' and 'contributing'. Accordingly, I didn't know how to assess my impact or results. I had 'learnt' death, disease, desperation and greed, and been lied to, preached to, and promised much. I had 'contributed'

proposals, training, planning, teaching and curricula. Yet, I wasn't convinced it had created a lasting, or 'personal', mark. There was abundant 'learning' and 'contributing' left to achieve and it seemed wrong to return home without having any tangible results or answers to show.

My birthday came on a Saturday. It is my least favourite day of the year and I hoped it would glide by unnoticed; the last thing I needed was a reminder that time kept slipping by. But, alas, my friends were on to me and organised a party. Sulzaire and two other neighbours fetched me from Linda's house and led me to the home of Férial, another senior member of the Bahá'í community. She and her family had moved from Iran after fleeing religious persecution. They were friendly people and their big villa reflected that warmth.

I arrived to find a gathering of over two-dozen people. Among them were co-workers, neighbours, shop-owners, musicians, artists, Chloé's family and friends, and members of the Bahá'í congregation. They came from different places and were every colour, all ages, rich and poor. Knowing it was my favourite, Férial had baked a delicious chocolate cake. They turned out the lights and brought it to me in the lounge while singing the Happy Birthday song. I blew out all but two candles. Ten-year old Shirin gasped and teased me, 'Two husbands, Aimee will have two husbands! Maybe one will be Haitian and she will come back.'

'There is no need for marriage,' I reassured her. 'I will come back no matter what.'

I suddenly understood with resounding clarity that Haiti was in my heart. While my 26 birthday candles burned in front of me, the singing faces melted together, flickering and glowing in the light. Haiti was Haitians; until that moment I had mistakenly separated them in my mind. The best relationships are grounded in knowing and caring, not assessing people's worth. I had never measured the quality or integrity of my new friendships; I didn't need quantifiable proof to know that they were meaningful. Similarly, I could love Haiti without calculating my contributions or solving its problems.

Driving home, all but three of us rode in the bed of Férial's truck. Thirteen people sandwiched themselves in about one square metre, then careened down *Route National #1* toward home. I stood up behind the cabin, faced forward and pretended to fly. With my arms spread wide, I closed my eyes, let the wind rush through my hair and felt an overwhelming sense of peace. I opened them again to the dirt, bugs, dust and smoke; but I didn't care.

Driving to the airport, I was reminded of what it looked, smelled and sounded like when I arrived. I had believed that when the time came to leave, I would have become 'wiser'; learnt how to make sense of it all. By the time I finally did go, Haiti was no less overwhelming and I was only marginally less foolish and naïve than on arrival.

We got to the airport in Nadia's truck three hours early. On the last corner before turning into the airfield, I saw my first Haitian traffic light. The bulbs were smashed, the post was bent and people treated it as a four-way stop. When conflict arose, drivers would hoot their horns and scream at one another until, eventually, someone moved and order was restored.

It was an emotional good-bye. '*Laisse-moi pas tomber*,' Nadia pleaded. I pledged to never let her down and asked her to do the same. The promise felt genuine and easy enough to follow through with. I had every intention of going back and taking Haiti with me. When you leave home for a long period you return a different person – you never come all the way back. I would be returning to a place where Haiti would again be just a bad story on the evening news. People would tut-tut at the images of hungry children, rioting crowds and horrific floods. Newspapers would follow the next 'democratic' election closely and readers would shake their heads when it descended into chaos and Haitians chased the diplomats away. And I would get angry with those who turned off their televisions and turned their attention back to their First World lives. They would wonder why I cared. But Haiti *would* stay in my heart; I'd picture the faces and the lives of my distant friends while it all unwound around them.

I took my place at the end of a long line of people waiting to get into the terminal. Two hours and three security stops later, my suitcase had to be re-packed as the guards had removed everything and rummaged through all my belongings. I could not afford the time to organise it properly; instead, I randomly stuffed everything back in. There was no longer room for my mom-made woollen coat, so I swung it over my shoulder.

There were only two American Airlines agents serving the long queue of people, all headed to the same destination. We stood patiently, chatting among ourselves in French and *Kréyol*. People wore bright colours and carried fur coats on their arms. I recognised CAFT's administrator Mme Télemac in the crowd and waved her over. She was going to New York to visit her sister and did not know when she might be back.

When we finally left for JFK an hour and a half late, I sat next to an American police officer on the over-booked plane. He had arrived from Illinois to train the Haitian police force in gun marksmanship.

'It is very rewarding,' he informed me. I was appalled at what effect providing weapons and training to a renegade police force in a violent nation governed by an illegitimate administration might be. 'But I can't handle anymore of it,' he said.

He proceeded to tell me that he was shocked at how unmotivated Haitians were about improving the conditions of their country. 'Don't they want to help themselves?' he asked me.

'Oh, they want to help themselves,' I assured him, trying to hide my anger. The conditions had bitterly divided the Haitian people: rich from poor, dark from light, foreign from local and along political party lines. However, despite radically different backgrounds, Haitians shared a common and passionate commitment to their country. Their stories were drastically different, but they all sought the same ending – that Haitians be granted freedom, prosperity and grace. Furthermore, they all wanted to be a part of the legacy that helped change its fortunes for the better.

'Do you think you or anyone can bring about change?' he asked, concerned that even 'we' could not save the benighted and impoverished nation. 'Where do you find hope?'

'Chaos Theory,' I answered simply. 'Do you know it?'

Bibliography

Alesina, A. 'Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why' in *Journal of Economic Growth.* Springer Science and Business Media, New York, 2000.

Baine Campbell, M. 'Travel Writing and its Theory' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

Barthes, R. *Image, Music, Text* trans. Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang, New York, 1977.

Bassnett, S. 'Travel Writing and Gender' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

Bortolotti, C. *Hope In Hell – Inside the World of Doctors without Borders.* Firefly Books, New York, 2004.

Bryson, B. *African Diary.* Transworld Publishing, London, 2002.

Burt, A. and Diedrich, B. *Papa Doc and the Tonton Macoutes.* McGraw-Hill, New York, 1969.

Byrs, E. 'OCHA Situation Report No.4, Floods – Haiti.' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations, 28 May, 2004.

Chamberlain, G. 'Haitians Celebrate Election of Priest.' *The Guardian,* London, 18 December, 1990.

Chamberlain, G. 'West Turns Aid Screws on Haitian Plotters.' *The Guardian,* London, 2 October, 1991.

Conrad, J. *Heart of Darkness.* Penguin Books, London, 1995.

Danticat, E. *Breath, Eyes, Memory.* Vintage Books, New York, 1994.

Davidson, R. *The Picador Book of Journeys.* Picador, London, 2002.

Deren, M. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti.* McPherson & Co., New York, 1983.

Farmer, P. *The Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War on the Poor.* University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2005.

Farmer, P. 'Who Removed Aristide' in *London Review of Books, Vol.26 No.8*, London, 15 April 2004.

Férère, G. *Haiti and its Diaspora: New Historical, Cultural and Economic Frontiers.* St. Joseph's University Press, Washington D.C.,1999.

Fox, J. *With Both Hands Waving.* Kwela Books, Cape Town, 2001.

Gold, H. *Best Nightmare on Earth, A Life in Haiti.* Prentice Hall, New York, 2001.

Hallward, P. 'Why They Had to Crush Aristide – Haiti's Elected Leader was Regarded as a Threat by France and the US.' *The Guardian,* London, 2 March 2004.

Hulme, P. 'Travelling to Write' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

Kidder, T. *Mountains Beyond Mountains.* Random House, New York, 2004.

Kotalik, J. *et al.* 'Annual Report- the Coalition Against Corruption.' Transparency International, Berlin, 2004.

Levin, A. *The Wonder Safaris.* Struik, Cape Town, 2003.

Lewis, S. *Race Against Time*. House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 2005.

Middleton, N. *Kalashnikovs and Zombie Cucumbers*. Littlehampton Book Services, London, 1995.

Murphy, D. *South from the Limpopo.* John Murray Publishers, London, 1997.

Naipaul, VS. *A Bend in the River.* Penguin books, London, 1980.

Norton, M. 'Haitian Border Town Washed Away.' *Associated Press,* Port-Au-Prince, 27 September 2004.

O'Kane, M. 'When the Waiting Ends.' *The Guardian,* London, 15 October 1994.

Orozco, M. 'The Impact of Migration in the Caribbean and Central American Region.' *Policy Paper,* Canadian Foundation for the Americas, Toronto, 2003.

Penny, S. *The Whiteness of Bones.* Penguin Books, Johannesburg, 1997.

Pratt, D. 'The Horrors of Haiti.' *Sunday Herald*, Glasgow, 22 February 2004.

Rodriguez, A. 'Haiti Promised 1.1 Billion Dollars in Aid.' *Agence France-Presse*, Paris, 20 July 2004.

Roumain, J. *Masters of the Dew.* Heinemann International, London, 1978.

Smart Bell, M. *Master of the Crossroads.* Pantheon Books, New York, 2000.

Theroux, P. *Dark Star Safari.* Penguin Books, London, 2002.

Wilentz, A. *The Rainy Season: Haiti Since Duvalier*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987.

Youngs, T. 'Africa/The Congo: the Politics of Darkness' in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.