
Flash Flood

QUENTIN CANTRELL

“**Y**O MON, HAVE YOU HEARD anymore about da storm?” asked Jean-Paul Percot.

“Yeah mon, for sure Fidel’s going to get a snootful!” Balfour Baptiste threw his large head backwards and erupted into laughter. “Us, I don’t think so, mostly just rain. It’s been a busy season though, we’ve been lucky, just lots of rain.”

“Yeah, too much rain, mon. It’s rotting my plants’ roots. Everything, all of the time it is wet. Too much water’s as bad as not enough.” Jean-Paul shook his head morosely. Balfour laughed at his best friend’s demeanor. Jean-Paul was always fretting about his crops. This time, though, Balfour felt that Jean-Paul was right, there was too much rain.

The two men slowly pulled the seining net through the tributary to the Nord River on the Northeast coast of Haiti near the port city of Cap-Haitien. The overhead sun beat down on the men in the late September afternoon. The barometer had been steadily falling and the flat calm that always precluded the storms had descended over the small island. A steady drizzle had been falling for two days and the winds had begun to pick up. Tropical storm Jeanne was coursing her way through the Caribbean and Haiti was projected to be in her path.

“Ja mon, a reporter asked me if I had tape. I say ‘for what?’ She said, ‘to tape up your windows.’ I told her that I don’t have any windows but I do have some tape if she needed it. She got mad at me.” He shook his head and chuckled in amusement.

“Ja mon, another crazy white woman...” said Balfour.

The two men laughed as they made their way to shore with their catch. Balfour was half Jamaican and half Haitian. He had inherited a boat from his Haitian father and he primarily fished for a living. Many a time he had had to decline an offer to carry cargo far pricier (and riskier) than his fish. Modern day pirates prowled the waters trading in everything from drugs to humans. Fishing had become much more dangerous in the past decade as pirates had become equipped with increasingly sophisticated boats and navigational tools. Balfour persisted, though, because it put him above the average per capita income of \$1300 per year and because it was a tradition in his family. When he had been out fishing the previous day, the swells generated by the storm hadn't been large enough to cause him undue concern. This storm had been unpredictable, though, and already there had been a few more major storms earlier in the season that had unleashed their fury on the small, poverty-stricken country.

After thinking about it for a minute, Balfour told Jean-Paul, "Da storm shouldn't be too bad, mon, but we should go to Auntie Sarah's on the hill anyway...you never know."

Auntie Sarah was Balfour's only living relative. The sister of Balfour's father, she was the matriarch of a large family that included many sons. The men had all pooled their money together (three of them lived and worked in New York City and sent their paychecks home every week to their family) and built her a four-room cinderblock home on a foothill to the mountains. The elevation protected the home (a mansion by Haitian standards) from flooding but it came at a price. Because the only water source was a small stream way down the hill, the men had had to carry the water one bucket at a time up the hill to mix the mortar for the cinder blocks. Sometimes cabbie friends of the family's would bring tourists to look at the countryside and they would drop off a jug of water. So, slowly, over the course of three years, the home was built. They constructed a large watershed and placed it on top of the hill and trailed a pipe down to the house so that their mother wouldn't have to climb the hill to get her cooking water. Auntie Sarah knew she had been very blessed and she never turned away anyone in need. So, the men finished salting down their fish; put their fishing nets and radio in a bag, and headed for Auntie Sarah's house.

The storm gathered strength as it greedily sucked up the warm moist air and exhaled its fury throughout the atmosphere. Sheets of rain pelted Cuba. Wind ripped up trees and flipped cars around like coins being tossed in the air. All the while it rained and rained and rained all across the Caribbean.

“It’s not a hurricane mom, it’s a tropical storm!” shouted Daniel Silverman into the phone that hung from a pole on the edge of town. Rain pelted at his back as he cupped his hand over the receiver.

“Get on the next plane out of there! I just don’t understand why you’re there in the first place and now this,” Ina Silverman half sobbed as she yelled at her son who was thousands of miles away from her Fifth Avenue apartment.

“I don’t know, mom, I just thought, well, I thought maybe I could help...” Daniel trailed off as his mother began her tirade again.

“Help?” His mother laughed into the phone. “For god’s sake Daniel, you’re a plastic surgeon, what help would you be? You need to come home right now. I did not pay for medical school so that you could pay hero in some third world, AIDS infected country,” she said. “What does Julie say about all of this?”

Daniel paused; he hadn’t been able to tell his mother about the breakup. Julie Fisher had been his mother’s first choice for his wife. Pretty, an only child and a rich father. All of his mother’s qualifications were met. They made the perfect couple; they had had the perfect engagement, were registered at all the right stores, and were going to have the perfect wedding to preclude the perfect life. Then suddenly, Julie announced that the perfect part no longer included Daniel and replaced him with an investment banker. In shock, he had peevishly declined her offer to return the ring. The ring that had cost him every penny he, and his mother, had. Rather than face his mother’s wrath, he had signed up to go with one of his professor’s to Haiti to help distribute AIDS medication. The skyrocketing infection rate had been the topic of a paper discussed in a seminar he had attended. He didn’t really care about the AIDS pandemic, it had just seemed that providence had provided him a way to avoid his mother until he couldn’t put it off any longer. Besides, airfare and meals were covered, and he got credit too, which saved money in the long run. All in all it had seemed like a good deal. Nobody ever said anything about storms.

“Um, well, Julie’s gone, mom,” said Daniel.

“Gone? Gone where?” she asked.

“We broke up,” he said.

“The ring. Oh, my god! Did you get the ring?” she shouted.

“No, mom. No, I didn’t.” he sighed.

“Daniel Silverman, I demand that you get on the next plane out of there and come home right this instant. What did you do to make her mad? Whatever it is you have to go and apologize. Get her back or that ring back!” she shouted.

“Mom, please,” choked Daniel. “I..”

His mother shouted, “You’re just like your father...”

Daniel tuned his mother out as he stood with his back to the driving rain. His hands went numb and his eyes glazed over as he remembered a childhood full of his mother railing at his father; always about money and expensive things that she wanted. After his father had died from a heart attack (in no small part caused by his wife’s incessant need for material possessions and wealth), she had used the inheritance to groom Daniel to be a Fifth Avenue plastic surgeon. She would be set for life.

The sound of a branch cracking in the wind caused Daniel to snap out of his reverie. He caught the tail end of what his mother was saying “...spineless. Just can’t do anything right.”

Daniel ached for his mother to say something to soothe him. Something to make the sick feeling in his stomach go away. Something that would make him forget that there was going to be no honeymoon, no marriage, and no Julie. His eyes watered up and his bowels constricted as he fought his emotions. His palm sweated as it gripped the phone handle. “Mom, please, it wasn’t me,” he begged.

“Get on the plane and come home right now!” she shouted angrily.

“There are no more planes mom, I’m staying here,” he said with resignation. He had turned away from the last plane primarily because he was more terrified of his mother’s wrath than Mother Nature’s but, also, in the back of his mind, he harbored the childish wish that the storm would somehow cause his death and he would escape the misery that now occupied his life. He paused for a moment, hoping one last time that she would express some kind

of concern over his wellbeing. Waiting for something, some kind of acknowledgment that would never, ever come from her.

“You lied to me? How dare you lie to ME!!” she shouted.

At that moment, Daniel Silverman began his true journey toward manhood.

“Screw you, mom,” he said softly. Daniel hung up the phone on his mother and turned to face the impending storm.

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Jean-Paul and Balfour made their way down the muddy, unpaved street. It was slow going and they reminisced about their lives as they walked.

“Ah, what about the first crazy white lady?” asked Jean-Paul.

“The nun?” said Balfour.

“Ja mon, the holy sister Teresa,” said Jean-Paul.

The two men laughed; they first met each other at school when they were six. Balfour’s Catholic father had insisted that he go to Catholic school when he was young. His mother, however, had still believed in Voodoo and Balfour had received an extensive education in his ancestral customs and beliefs. The good sister Teresa had had her hands full with Balfour. He had openly resisted the rigidity of the instruction process and had consistently exasperated Sister Teresa by referring to similarities he saw between Voodoo and Catholicism. The final straw had been when Balfour, in an ill-fated (yet good-hearted) attempt to marry the two religions, replaced the communion wine with chicken blood. Much to his father’s anger, Balfour Baptiste was asked to not come back to Catholic school. Not much longer after that, Balfour’s family had been killed by rebels and he had only escaped being shot by lying with the bodies and pretending to be dead himself. After wandering the countryside for some time, Balfour ended up in an orphan camp on the coast.

Jean-Paul’s family had fallen victim to a cholera outbreak and an uncle in the Cabinet (Jean-Paul was a direct descendant of the much revered Haitian leader Jean Jacques Bessalaines) had taken him in. When the uncle was assassinated, Jean-Paul had also been sent to the orphan camp. They didn’t stay long in the camp once they met up with each other again. The friendship developed quickly and on a deep kinship level. They were all each other had.

For a while they had run with the Cannibal Army but they were against the looting and had decided to go back to the coast.

“Aristide, now, he could be a crazy white woman, just in disguise,” mused Jean-Paul.

Balfour laughed heartily at his friend’s joke. Rarely though, did the mention of the former president elicit laughter. Balfour and Jean-Paul had survived years of oppression and military rule. The riots and carnage that had accompanied the last twenty years were permanently emblazoned on their psyches. The natural disasters that wrecked their tiny country in the form of earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes were nothing compared to the human atrocities the small country had borne. From the plantation and slavery times to the current oppressive regime, the people of the country had been manipulated for the gain of others and then discarded with no second thought. The social unrest that was bred from this warped system coursed like blood through the natives’ veins. The spiraling decay of the infrastructure and living conditions in their country made Jean-Paul and Balfour madder and madder as the years went by. The tumultuous reign of Aristide and the intervening parties had ruined the country’s economy making it harder and harder to earn a living. In a country full of fighting, though, they couldn’t find any way to win any real change.

The men paused at the base of the foothills to take a break before starting up the hill. Balfour pulled a piece of bammy bread from his pocket and broke it in half. Jean-Paul cracked open a coconut, caught the juice in each half and handed one to Balfour. They ate together in silence for a while, looking out onto the countryside. Most of the area around them had been stripped of any kind of vegetation. Trees had been chopped down to use for firewood and to sell. All the bushes and plants had been pulled up and used for fuel. The coconut Jean-Paul opened came from one of the first coconut trees they had come to in their hour of walking. When the men were growing up, coconut trees had been abundant. Now, hunger and poverty had forced the people to rape the once plentiful land, stripping it of not only the fruits but also the trees that bore them.

The men passed by dozens of pairs of different styled shoes sticking up out of the mud on the ground. People who lived in the hills would often go to town all dressed up but with no shoes. Once they got to town, they would go

buy a pair of fancy shoes. When they started walking back up the hill to their home, their feet, unaccustomed to shoes to begin with, would begin to hurt and they would abandon the shoes on the roadside. Often, many different people would wear the same pair of shoes on various trips to town. Right now, though, they looked like strange skeletons rising up out of the ground, a bizarre vision of some kind of Dali-esque shoe cemetery.

At last they reached the clearing in front of Auntie Sarah's house. Dozens of people stood in the yard clutching bags, children and chickens, seeking refuge. The men passed a bucket of homemade beer among them, took a final piss and then all filed inside to find a spot on the floor. Auntie Sarah welcomed them all with an especially big hug for Balfour. "I knew an hour ago you were on your way," Auntie Sarah laughed and poked Balfour in the ribs. "I can always tell by the mismatched sizes!"

Balfour and Jean-Paul joined in the laughter; they were used to people making fun of the disparity in their heights and appearances. Balfour stood at nearly 6'2", ebony dark with wide features. Jean-Paul though, was 5'6", light skinned with fine features. Balfour spoke primarily Kreyol, a patois of French and African dialect that is one of the two national languages in Haiti. French, being the other, was what Jean-Paul spoke. Jean-Paul was a devout Catholic while Balfour believed in Voodoo. Despite these differences, and many more, the two were best friends. In some unspoken way, they seemed to want to shelter one another until they finally met up with whatever untimely death stood in store for them.

"Auntie Sarah, we have fish for you. Surely you can refill the beer bucket?" ribbed Balfour.

"Quiet, you silly man! You think I need a houseful of drunks during a storm?" she retorted.

"Oh, it won't be so bad a storm. I promise. We need beer after that long walk. Please woman, be kind," Balfour jokingly pleaded.

"Oh, be quiet you silly man. one more bucket and that is all. You can go home and drink beer!" said Auntie Sarah as she dipped more beer out of a barrel on the floor into the bucket.

The men passed the bucket around again and a silence fell over the group as they listened to the wind and the rain outside. They lit several votive candles

and the adults talked quietly as the children began to go to sleep. Balfour prayed to the voodoo god Sango (god of storms) to not unleash his fury on the already crippled country. For good measure he said a few Hail Mary's too.

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“Hi, my name is Dr. Daniel Silverman, I'm uh, a doctor on the AIDS team with Dr. William Clarkson. I was just, um, wondering if you need help.” Daniel hesitantly introduced himself to the small, dark haired woman just inside the Doctor's Without Borders tent. Her nametag identified her as a UN worker from Italy named Marcella Gianno. She smiled at him but grew immediately stern.

“Dr. Silverman, why didn't you leave when they evacuated? Do you have any idea what it could be like here in a few hours?” She demanded in heavily accented English.

“I, uh, well...it's a long story,” stammered Daniel.

“Looks like it,” said Marcella with a smile playing at her lips. She arched her dark brown eyebrows and looked at him over her glasses.

“Have you seen yourself recently?” she asked.

“Huh?” said Daniel.

“Look,” said Marcella as she pointed to a tin mirror hanging on a support post. Despite the blurry image, Daniel could see that he was disheveled. His eyes were red rimmed from crying and his hair, sans gel, was sticking out everywhere. His clothes were muddy and his shoes were soaking wet.

“Okay, I look terrible and I've had a rough time. But I *am* a doctor and never mind how or why, I want to help! Here is my I.D., my passport, whatever you want. Call Dr. Clarkson in New York,” said Daniel with rising emotion.

“All right, all right,” said Marcella as she inspected his passport. “I saw you around this last week with Dr. Clarkson, there aren't many six feet tall white Jewish men around here, yes?”

“No” said Daniel. “I mean, yes, uh, I mean....”

Marcella started laughing at his embarrassment. “What field are you in?” she asked.

“Reconstructive” he said.

“Hmm” she pursed her lips, “We don’t get much call for that here” She looked at him sideways to see if he caught her humor but on the tail end of his mother’s comment the remark didn’t sit well.

“Look, do you need help or not?” he demanded.

She didn’t understand the source of his anger but she could see that he was sincere about helping and there *was* a lot to be done.

“Well, what I need right now doesn’t require much medical expertise anyway. There’s a pregnant woman up in the hills that needs to come down to the clinic. I need you to go get her and help her back here,” said Marcella in a challenging tone.

“Babies!” exclaimed Daniel.

“No, not yet anyway,” laughed Marcella, mentally adding to herself, *if we’re lucky*.

Daniel got beet red at the very utterance of the word baby. He turned a deep scarlet as his thoughts progressed.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. With any luck, the storm will get its fill in Cuba and move on,” said Marcella.

“How am I supposed to get there?” he asked.

“Well, you’re lucky on that. Your guide happens to have a horse,” she replied.

“A horse? You want me to transport a pregnant woman on a horse?” Daniel exclaimed.

“Well, it’s better than if she walks; especially in all the mud. Besides, even if we did have a vehicle, there are no roads up the side of the mountain where she is,” said Marcella.

“I, uh, well, I don’t know...” Daniel stammered.

“Here’s your guide now. Chris, come on in, I found a doctor for you.” Turning to Daniel, Marcella said, “the woman you are going to help is his sister. Her husband was killed in the fighting in February. This is her brother Chris.”

Daniel nodded at the thin young man with dreadlocks in front of him who flashed him a toothsome smile from his ebony black face. Chris spoke to Marcella in his native patois. She turned to Daniel and translated. “Chris says thank you very much. His sister really needs our help, but you must go quickly. He knows some English. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine”

“Uh, Ok, do you have any rain gear?” asked Daniel.

“Well, we have these Red Cross emergency kits. Take a couple of them with you; they have a poncho and some basic rations. They also come in this nice, souvenir backpack.”

Marcella laughed as she handed Daniel the army green backpack emblazoned with the Red Cross symbol.

“How about a walkie-talkie or something?” said Daniel in a quiet tone.

“Nope.” Marcella shook her head. “Are you backing out, Dr. Silverman? Because I don’t have time to stand here. Yes, this is dangerous, but certainly you knew that before you came in here and volunteered to help. Now please decide what you’re going to do because I have a storm to prepare for.”

Daniel stared at the small woman with fiery eyes who stood in front of him and felt a twinge in his heart for the first time since Julie had crushed it. He reached into the backpack to get the poncho and headed for the door. “Come on, Chris, show me where the horse is,” he said over his shoulder. At the door, he glanced back and saw Marcella standing there watching him with the half smile on her lips again.

An hour into the journey, Daniel began to think that Marcella’s wish that the storm would turn and miss hitting Haiti might just come true. He and Chris stood at an overlook staring out at the harbor town they had left. Trees leaned low, pushed by strong winds. Whitecaps extended out as far as the eye could see and rain lashed at their face.

“Look,” Chris pointed out to Daniel far across the horizon where the storm was speeding to the north.

“Lucky, it goes away,” said Chris. “Still, much rain, it will get worse. We go now to my sister.” He pulled on the bridle of the horse and led it back toward the path.

“You mean this is it?” asked Daniel. “There really is no hurricane?”

“No, mon, no hurricane, just storm and lots of rain,” said Chris as he navigated the horse up the trail.

Daniel felt a sense of relief flood over him as well as a perverse disappointment. When he had shouted at his mother that it was just a tropical storm, he had been hoping that the storm would strengthen and become a hurricane. The complicated emotions that led to him not getting on the plane when

everyone else was evacuating also made him want to be in the most dangerous situation possible in order to cause his mother the most distress possible. She had trained him well.

At one clearing on the trail, they looked down onto what appeared to be a tree farm. Upon questioning Chris, Daniel learned that indeed the long rows planted at the base of the mountain were seedlings that were to be used to reforest the denuded countryside. An international humanitarian organization had started the effort and it was funded by various donations. Daniel watched as small streams of muddy water washed down the hillside taking the remaining topsoil with it.

Further on they came to a group of people huddled under a large cottonwood tree. They were incredibly skinny. Several were wrapped together in a threadbare blanket while the rest stood half clothed and drenched by the rain. Chris exchanged some words with them, they seemed to Daniel to be asking for food, but Chris and the horse kept moving. "What did they want?" asked Daniel.

"Medicine, food, beer, anything. They all have AIDS. Soon they will die," said Chris.

"Why don't they go home and get out of the rain?" asked Daniel.

"They are home," said Chris simply as he urged the horse up the trail.

Daniel couldn't help but glancing back behind him. Sure enough when he looked more carefully, he could see a cook pot, a couple of chairs and a small lean-to that was made of sticks and woven leaves. A woman with gaunt cheeks and hollow eyes stood at the edge of the clearing, two toddlers at her feet. She was holding a baby to her breast. Her head and chest were wrapped in a faded red fabric. Her vacant stare bore into Daniel for as long as he could stand. He whipped back around on the horse and stared rigidly ahead, trying to comprehend all of the thoughts that had suddenly begun to buzz around in his head. His head was telling him that he should help, but in his heart he was terrified. Despite his education, he was afraid of the disease; afraid of all the ramifications it bore; in short, he was afraid of a government created stigma. These weren't prostitutes, or drug addicts, or homosexuals; these people weren't wandering the streets or subways of Manhattan. They lived under a tree, for God's sake. What kind of moral depravity did that breed? If indeed the fallible human

condition could be so neatly boxed by “morals and values.” The same people who denounced the morality of homosexuality and labeled AIDS as a “homosexual” disease had put in place many of the embargoes and sanctions that now caused these people to be ill and to lack food and shelter. An unfamiliar feeling of discomfort overcame Daniel.

They rounded a bend in the trail and came upon a small cinderblock house. Daniel dismounted the horse and Chris lashed the bridle to a tree. Daniel followed Chris into the house that was actually a recent addition to a fallen down colonial manor home. The large house had been built overlooking the harbor. Stretching for below was a long abandoned sugar cane plantation. The crumbled façade of the older building served as a buttress for the newer one and protected it from the lashing winds.

Daniel stepped into what was an incredibly small but charming and immaculate house. Warm and dry, it protected its inhabitants and their belongings from the elements outdoors. The walls were covered with paintings in the traditional Haitian amate style. On a pallet on the floor was a chocolate colored woman with large black eyes who was obviously in the last stages of pregnancy. Three other children sat huddled under a blanket.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Daniel Silverman,” said Daniel as he knelt by the woman.

“Thank you for coming,” said the woman in perfect English. “My name is Lucia.”

Daniel was slightly shocked at hearing the woman talk because of the way her brother spoke. Sensing his surprise, Lucia smiled and said, “I was educated at parochial school. Chris was always more interested in art, and the nuns never approved of the traditional amate painting style. Besides, the school closed later on after the embargoes anyway, so I’m teaching him to read.” She leaned on stump that served as a table and slowly stood up.

“It is hard though,” she continued, “because we have no books, and I have no paper or pencil. But he does get the supplies to do his painting. A nice American man that he sells the pictures to helps him with that. There aren’t many artists left, traditional or otherwise. When he sells them, Chris gets a lot of money for the pictures. But we have to be careful that no one knows because they would kill him for the money, or else steal the pictures.”

She stopped suddenly and dropped her eyes. "I am sorry I'm talking so much, it's just that I am here alone with the children all day and I have no one to talk to. All of the neighbors are gone now..." her voice trailed off.

He was shocked by her words. Not for what she said, but because his sister, in her ten bedroom, eight bathroom home in Connecticut, had said the exact same words to him on his last visit there a few weeks before. Slowly, the shared face of humanity was becoming visible to Daniel. He was startled by the sound of a tree outside being ripped up and hurled through the air, whistling like a bottle rocket as it went. The storm accelerated outside and one of the children began to cry.

Chris said, "I think we need to wait a while, mon. Come with me. I have lots of pictures; maybe your American doctor friends would like to buy? Maybe I come to New York with you?"

"Come with me!" Daniel exclaimed. "I don't know about that, Chris, but yes, I'd like to see your pictures. And maybe I know somebody who would like to buy some." He stammered upon seeing the hurt look on Chris's face.

"Ah yes, buy some," said Chris with his face lighting back up. "Come look."

Chris led Daniel to the back wall. The artist pulled back a blanket that hung on the wall and revealed a small door. The two men went through a low tunnel coming out after a short ways into what turned out to be the wine cellar of the manor house. Piled on top of old wine caskets were dozens and dozens of canvases. Each one was unique in its colorful depiction of everyday island life. Chris told Daniel that he would paint the pictures in the front house, hang them on the wall to dry and then move them to safe keeping in the wine cellar. A couple of times a year, American collectors would come and buy the paintings. Chris had also hidden much of the money he had been paid because the banks weren't trustworthy. He swore Daniel to secrecy about the location of his treasure trove and the two men went back through the tunnel.

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All across the country, the storm raged. Rain pelted the bare hillsides. Runoff filled the streams and rivers. Already saturated fields got inches more rain dumped on them. Low lying areas started to flood, turning reddish brown

from the mud running down from the mountains. Morning came and the winds subsided. A collective sense of relief owing to the fact that the storm wasn't as bad as it could have been was felt across the land. Slowly, people emerged from their shelters and returned home to begin cleaning up the debris.

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Balfour and Jean-Paul left Auntie Sarah's as soon as it got light. They were intent on getting to the beach and collecting whatever shells and fish may have been washed ashore. Plus, Balfour had to check on his boat. They went carefully back down the mountain trail. Not only did they get very little sleep the night before but they ached all over from sitting on the floor all night. They were highly motivated, though, by the thought of what, in the poorest country in the Americas, amounted to a seafood buffet.

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Daniel and Lucia started down the mountain a little later than Balfour and Jean-Paul did. Lucia rode the horse and this time, Daniel acted as guide. Chris was staying behind to watch the other children. He had lashed a cart onto the horse for Lucia to use when she came home with the baby. The morning sun had just broken free from the horizon as they picked their way down the muddy path. A light rain still fell as the sun slowly rose burning its way through the early morning haze.

Jean-Paul and Balfour parted ways midway down the mountain. Balfour was going to the harbor and check on his boat while Jean-Paul was going to the valley to check on his house. They were going to meet back up with each other at the beach. Despite their fatigue, their spirits were high and Balfour was thanking the Sango for sparing them his wrath and sending Jeanne on her way. Jean-Paul admonished his friend to not be late and then disappeared around the bend. Balfour hurried toward the harbor, anxious to see his boat.

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Daniel and Lucia had been talking quietly when they neared the area where Daniel had seen the people huddled under a tree the day before. He gasped when they rounded the bend and before them lay a gash in the mountainside.

A mudslide had wiped away the whole copse of trees that had sheltered the AIDS victims. Lucia cried out and pointed a few feet down the hill. An arm hung by a red cloth caught up in a mass of tree roots.

Daniel shouted and tried to get closer, but the mud shifted. His brain refused to accept that the arm wasn't attached to anything. Tears welled in his eyes as he realized the implication of the red cloth. The horse whinnied and tried to shy away from the mud. Daniel told Lucia to dismount and carefully they made their way across the washed out stretch. With every step, Daniel was terrified that the mud would shift again and they would go hurtling down the mountain. He was barely able to control the horse and Lucia was beginning to tire. When they got back on the path proper, Lucia had to lay in the cart and rest for a while. Daniel continued slowly leading the horse down the path that was awash with runoff rainwater.

As they neared the valley, Daniel could see where the reforestation nursery had been. All 100,000 seedlings had been washed away. A gaping swatch filled with angry red mud was smeared over the former nursery. All along the hillside he could see people slowly making their way out of the mountains down toward the valley. Far off in the distance, he could see the storm clouds still roiling across the Caribbean. Lucia cried out in pain from the cart and Daniel rushed to her side.

"The pains," she said. "They're coming."

"How fast?" asked Daniel anxiously.

"Not very," she said. "Fifteen minutes or so. Plenty of time to get to the clinic. Don't worry, you'll be fine." She patted his arm as he tucked a blanket around her.

He blushed at the role reversal. *He* was supposed to be the one giving words of comfort. Lucia laughed at him. At first he scowled but then he was able to give her a wan smile. "I guess my nervousness shows," he said. "I'm sorry. I just haven't had any experience with this kind of thing and..."

Lucia interrupted him, "Don't worry about it, Dr. Daniel. I think you're doing just fine. Life in our country makes all of us nervous. None of us knows what to do anymore. Be thankful it's not a way of life for you."

Daniel stood staring at the woman in the cart. How very different from his mother she was. For a moment Daniel wondered what it would be like to have

had Lucia as a mother. He smiled at her and they continued down the path. The trees had thinned out again and the water rushing down the hill had gained momentum. They passed some other people on the path that allowed Daniel to get around when they saw Lucia in the cart. Greetings were exchanged and blessings for the baby were called out. Someone suggested that Lucia name the infant Jeanne in honor of how polite the storm had been to them. Something that sounded like wind rustling in leaves was playing at the back of Daniel's subconscious but his conscious mind was saying, *there aren't any trees*. Suddenly, someone further up the path shouted out, "Flood!" And the mysterious sound came into focus.

Daniel shouted out, "Hold on Lucia," and kicked the horse into a gallop. The cart bounced wildly behind the horse as Daniel headed for the other side of the narrow valley. A roaring sound like a hundred trains echoed through the valley. The ground shook as the wall of water thundered down on the people in its way. Daniel glanced over at the water for one horrifying second. Like an angry red dragon breathing muddy fire, the flood swallowed up the ground and everything on it. Riding the crest of the front wave like some bizarre hood ornament, was the impaled body of a young boy. Pieces of houses, trees, farm animals and all types of debris were churned around in the thundering water. With no warning at all, flood after flood hit the low-lying areas. People who had been out visiting or checking on their homes in the valley were swept away. Three of the floods had come together right up from where Daniel was with the cart. He was getting ready to lead the horse further away from the flood when he saw a man wedged between two trees. Daniel tied the horse to a rock and went back toward the man. He called out, "Hello, hello, can you hear me?"

The man looked up and winced in pain. "Ja, I can hear you. My leg's broken. This tree, it's not going to last much longer, then maybe I don't last much longer?" he gave Daniel an ironic smile.

Daniel looked to where the man had nodded. It did look like the tree the man was holding onto was about to snap. Daniel's eyes strayed to a large gash on the man's head that was bleeding heavily. The man must have sensed Daniel's hesitancy.

"Don't worry, I'm not HIV," the man said.

For the second time in one day, Daniel felt cut down to the quick of his existence. He suddenly felt haunted by every homeless person he had ever stepped over in Manhattan. He pulled off his shirt, stepped into the raging water and wrapped it around the man's head. Just as the tree branch the man was holding snapped in half, Daniel reached his arms around the man's waist and pulled him out of the water toward higher ground. The man collapsed, unconscious, in the cart next to Lucia who helped cover him with her blanket.

Disheveled, covered with mud and about to collapse from exhaustion, Daniel led the horse on toward the town and the clinic, all the while beginning to realize that he had found a new home.

★ ★ ★

Much to his relief, Balfour found that his boat had survived the storm unscathed.

He gathered up some bags and was headed for the beach to meet Jean-Paul when one of the other fishermen began shouting and running down the beach. Balfour rushed up toward the street to see what was happening, people were pointing at the water in the streets and talking about a flood in the valley. The valley was where Jean-Paul's house was located. Balfour began to run. He couldn't even make it into the area where Jean-Paul's house had been. The whole area was flooded and looting had already begun. People floated down the streets on logs, calling out the names of loved ones. Balfour felt overcome with a blinding, dark rage. He began shouting Jean-Paul's name, wading through the water searching for his friend. After a couple of hours, he became exhausted and headed back toward the town to see if he could find some food.

★ ★ ★

Daniel stopped outside the Doctors Without Borders tent and went back to the cart. He carefully lifted Lucia out of the cart and staggered toward the tent door with her in his arms. Jean-Paul could vaguely hear the street sounds around him. Incredible pain from his leg sent waves of nausea through him. He looked out and in his delirium he thought he saw Sister Teresa standing beneath a mango tree just like she had back in parochial school. He had always had tea and done sums under the mango tree on the school grounds. In his hallucination, he asked the sister to find the priest so that he could have last

rites. His throat was parched and he looked vainly for Balfour. Balfour was the one that climbed the mango trees, Balfour would get the fruit for him. Jean-Paul dragged himself to the base of the tree and waited to die.

★ ★ ★

Once he got to town, Balfour walked along the street praying to both of his religions. He remembered where the relief workers had set up after the last storm and headed in that direction to see if they had any provisions yet. Right before he got to the

Doctor's Without Borders tent, he looked over and was astounded to see Jean-Paul lying crumpled beneath a mango tree. Balfour rushed to his friend's side and pressed his head to his chest. Upon hearing a faint heartbeat, Balfour shook his friend. Kneeling by Jean-Paul's side, Balfour raised his massive head to the heavens and prayed for his friend's life to be spared. In his agony, he was surprised to see a single mango still hanging in the tree. He bounded to his feet, pulled his knife from its sheath, clutched it in his teeth and scaled the tree. With a quick flick of his wrist, he cut the fruit free from the tree and returned to the ground with it tucked in his waistband. He cut a piece off the fleshy fruit and squeezed it in his huge palm. The juices ran down from his brown fingers mingling with the sea salt that had been permanently rubbed into his skin. He cradled his friend's head in the crook of his arm and let the sweet nectar fall into Jean-Paul's mouth. The sounds around Balfour blended into a dull din in the background as he focused on his almost dead friend and willed him back to life.