

Sharon Dilworth 5811 Howe Street Pittsburgh, PA 15232 412-362-8849  
sd20@andrew.cmu.

## **A Leaky Roof**

### Chapter One

The replacement radiologist arrived from Saudi Arabia with a wedding gown stuffed into her luggage. Not just a fancy dress that would do in a pinch but a full-length, silk, bustle train type thing with cream pearl buttons running down the back. The veil was a cap of fur feathers that hung around the face like an errant swan costume from the *Bolshoi Ballet* and right away I knew she'd be an unproductive mess here at the hospital compound. Immediately after meeting her, I predicted, quite verbally I might add, that she'd get into everyone's business, twist the ordinary into trouble, and then move on to her next third world country. I was right, of course. But then, so often I am.

Worried about damage to the dress by the intense sun, she got permission to store the gown in the newly opened morgue, the coolest place in Haiti. It was also windowless. We had celebrated the morgue's completion only days before her arrival with a large reception, an event not well attended by local villagers though the hospital staff came in full force. Put a bottle of rum and a boom box with *Kung Fu Fighting* blaring and they'll party anywhere. The Haitians weren't used to a morgue and were always superstitious about any changes at the hospital. The morgue was currently empty, which is why Dr. Ricks and she could use it for dress storage. It was empty not because of the locals' apprehension, but because it had been a good week. Relatively speaking, of course.

There was still malnourishment, extreme poverty, deficiencies, shortages of every kind; enormous employment problems to which no one in the world seemed able to offer up any advice, let alone help, and political upheavals at every turn. The locals suffered bizarre tropical diseases, and then of course, there was AIDS, and TB. The tuberculosis is a huge disappointment— at one time they had hoped to eradicate it from the Haitian countryside, but it's making a comeback—think Paula Abdul on *American Idol*. Fifteen years ago she was a LA Lakers's cheerleader divorcing Emilio Estevez, and now 40 million people tune her in twice a week to hear her say silly things about pitch and style, her multiple silver bracelets bragging of her fame. I never miss the show when I'm in the States.

The Windward Passage Hospital here in the Artibonite Valley, a wretched three-hour drive from the capital city, is the only health care facility in the district. It runs at full capacity every day of the year.

People were eager to talk to the bridal radiologist. It's exciting to have someone new at the compound. Lucy was her name. In our written correspondence as I prepared for her arrival, I had called her Lucille and she had quickly corrected me. She had signed on for a three-year contract and everyone was grateful to be getting a new radiologist. They wanted to make a good impression, though with the dress and her stories about her ghastly trials and tribulations (her words, I mostly avoid clichés when possible) in Saudi Arabia, I wasn't sure why anyone was bothering. Dr. Rick had hired her and everyone was excited to have a permanent member of the medical team. Conditions for foreign workers weren't great in Haiti –there had been a rash of Red Cross and U.N. kidnappings – and people weren't coming to the country as they eagerly had in years past.

Lucy had come on the same flight with the visiting team of orthopedic residents from Yale. Four young males. Like the Beatles. Their arrival has been much anticipated by the nurses and female office staff who complained bitterly that there were no available men. They complained about it to the Chef as if dating was supposed to be a part of the bargain – work in Haiti = meet the man of your dreams. There was intrigue at the hospital foreign compound – things that kept us entertained ever since the video player disappeared---but there weren't many opportunities for singles to meet eligible partners. The parties here were rather dull. They were always potluck.

That night I brought *coq au vin*.

Halfway through the party, Sophie, our host and self-appointed *charge des affaires* approached. Despite my position at the hospital – my father was the founder and

up to his death two years ago served as the head of the hospital --most people are extraordinarily nice to me because of this connection --Sophie did not like me Her husband, Xavier, was a wonderful surgeon, not only good but humble about his work and she was one of those people who, though horribly arrogant, actually got things done.

She tolerated me because of who I was, I guess. I sometimes thought to tell her that the feeling was mutual – given a choice of people to spend the rest of my life with on a deserted island, she would not be in my top seven thousand, but it wasn't true. To tell the truth, I would have liked her more if she had liked me more. Even if she had just pretended to like me, I would have taken that.

Lips pursed, Sophie managed to get out her sentence: “Where did you get a chicken?”

I looked at my skirt. Then under my arms. Nope. No chicken there. “Who said anything about a chicken?”

“You did.”

A cholera-like virus had recently wiped the district clean of all poultry. It's one of those heart-wrenching activities – something you think you can handle, but it's actually intolerable.

Chickens, roosters – the whole hunt and peck family had been obliterated from our valley.

“I've been talking about a chicken? Metaphorically, I hope.” I put down the rum. The local rum tasted like gasoline, made palatable when it was mixed with warm Coca-Cola. The strong taste told you were heading into trouble and after a glass or two

you felt like screaming or taking off your clothes so most of us stopped before that sort of thing became a reality.

Warm beer was usually available. Water filtered for our protection, of course. I moved on to beer. The burping began immediately.

The nurses were ogling the four orthopedic surgeons. With good reason. They were Hollywood pretty. Orthopedic surgeons are usually athletic. I think of them as failed quarterbacks who still wanted to play the game but were good enough in school to make it through medical exams. They were perfect examples – they could have played themselves on a television program -- full head of hair, bright white teeth kind of guys. You wouldn't mind a broken ankle with one them setting it for you.

Sophie wasn't done with me. "I shouldn't tell you this," she said and then went against her better judgment. "They think you have inside information on the depot break-ins."

"And what do 'they' think I know?" I asked. Despite Dr. Rick's bravado that he was doing the right thing in keeping quiet, the rumors about the robberies at the depot were rampant. Then again, rumors about everything concerning the hospital were thick and out of control.

My guess was that no one –and what I mean by no one is no one on the foreign staff—knew anything.

The recent robberies were odd. Odd because what was taken wasn't of value in the streets. We stored all our supplies there. We weren't stupid; we had a full time guard. Two at night. They must have been paid off and what was strange wasn't what had been taken but what had been left. Things that could have been used or sold

anywhere in the country: toilet paper, hospital sheets, kerosene, matches, boxes of oatmeal, and dried fruit, so many other things that would have earned the thieves real money if that's what they had been looking for, which was the reason for the confusion.

"If you don't tell what you know you can only blame yourself. The thieves have been stealing everything," Sophie said. She didn't have her facts straight. "Soon the hospital will be running without any supplies."

"That's not true, Sophie. No one's touched the spaghetti sauce."

The humungous cans were leftovers from the last American invasion. So when I said they could feed an army, I was not just whistling Dixie (Intended). They were damaged when they were dumped off the back of the supply truck, but someone thought they might also be contaminated with botulism and deemed unsafe. Now they sit in the canteen because there is no such thing as a dump or a trash heap in the countryside in Haiti. We try and build a dumpsite and people carry it away.

Sophie came back carrying my covered dish. It had not been opened. "You told everyone this was *coq-au-vin*."

"Really, Sophie," I sighed.

She un-burped the Tupperware lid. Surprise! Tomato stew! Just like I always brought. Maude, who cooked for me, thought her specialty was tomato stew -- I preferred her coffee, but she judged that insufficient and unsuitable for a party dish.

"Now where would I get the *coq* or the *vin*?" I asked.

It was not totally out of the question to buy wine in Haiti, but like anything else it wasn't easy. One could buy wine in St. Marc, a wretched hour's drive from our compound. (All drives needless to say are wretched; I will quit being redundant on this

issue). The owner of the shop was French and rumor was that he got everything off boats that came in from Martinique. French wines, mustards, and lavender soap. He was incredibly paranoid – one imagined he also got heroin off these nefarious crafts –and kept erratic store hours to mystify and frustrate the local authorities, who could never find him in when they wanted to ask him questions. A trip to St. Marc never guaranteed a bottle of wine, only a headache and dust in your hair.

“You shouldn’t joke like that,” Sophie said.

“Its not my fault,” I told her without much spirit. *Se pa fot mwen* is a Haitian expression that relieves one of all blame. It explains everything you really need to know about the people of Haiti. They’re not wrong – so much of the daily mess that makes up their lives isn’t their fault. I had adopted it as my personal mantra. *Se pa fot mwen*. Not my fault. Nothing was my fault.

Before I left the party, I stopped to say hello to our newest permanent staff member.

“How are you settling in?” I asked Lucy.

“It’s very nice,” she said and gave me a slight smile as if she couldn’t quite place me but was being polite because it was how she was.

My father often accused me of being jealous of the women doctors on staff. And I couldn’t deny this completely. I did feel envy of some women who could operate and work with the most seriously ill patients. I much preferred to work with the men. They were easier. But Lucy seemed purposefully difficult or rude, especially to me.

Time for a bit of an offensive attack. “What’s with the wedding dress?” I asked her.

I had been nice to her on her first night when she might have been overwhelmed with the place, now she could answer for herself.

“One never knows, does one?” Lucy said. Her response was canned – said at least half a dozen times that night alone. She had more to say. “The greatest thing about life is that we don’t know what is going to happen next.”

I didn’t appreciate planned party conversation and suddenly wanted to tell her that the only Lucy I knew was from Charlie Brown. That’s what she reminded me of – a comic cartoon character.

“You must have some idea,” I told her instead, smiling openly so she would not think me anything but friendly. “Weddings are usually planned affairs. They’re so rarely spontaneous. At least that’s how it works here. Saudi Arabia might be quite different.”

She was sitting in the center of large circle – the usual suspects had been questioning her. My guess was that she was an earnest, kooky, not-too-educated American who had gone to a second rate University, received her medical training in Egypt and then worked overseas because she couldn’t cut it at a competitive American hospital. It must have been quite a dress twenty years ago. What happened? Sun? Did they not have morgues in Saudi Arabia?”

Rick came to Lucy’s rescue. He came up beside me. “Michelle,,” he said in front of everyone and then leaned over and whispered in my ear. “Careful there, She hasn’t done anything to you.”

“Not yet. But she will,” I whispered back. I liked him being near me and felt like we made such a good team.

“Be kind,” he said. “We need her here.”

I growled but gave up bothering the new radiologist.

“Let’s build a lifeboat and get out of here,” I begged Dr. Rick. I had a drunken urge to stick out my tongue but I checked it. Rick had been named interim director of the hospital and I didn’t want to do anything to embarrass him, especially with all the new people there.

“Want to walk me home?” I asked him. He owed me some attention. He had been busy but no one was that busy.

He evaded looking at me directly and didn’t answer.

“We need to talk,” I suggested. I had a list of things I wanted to go over with him but that wouldn’t have taken long. Then there were other things, of course.

“I can’t,” Rick said. “Tonight’s not good.”

Like I’ve said, it wasn’t like we all went home and wrote emails or watched the news. There was no paper work to be done. We didn’t operate like that. I found his answer oddly dismissive and as I’m not one to beat around the bush, I called him on it.

“What?”

“I can’t,” he repeated.

“You can’t?” I had to tread carefully with Rick. He wasn’t an easy person to figure out. Yet I felt like we had known each other long enough that we didn’t have to be so formal. We didn’t have to be distant. That just seemed like a waste of energy and time.

“Michelle, let’s talk tomorrow.” He brushed me aside.

“All right,” I tried a smile. “Let’s do that. We can talk tomorrow.” I was hurt. I didn’t like to be treated like that. I liked to be important in people’s lives. This was off putting and I seethed inside.

Dr. Rick was one of the few people in Deschappelles I liked. In fact, if I were connected to a lie detector test I would have to say that Rick was the one person in Haiti I loved.

I had loved him for a long time and only recently had found some reason to hope. This was new territory for me and I was uncertain, almost lost and my navigational skills with men were unsteady at best.

I wanted to encourage him to see something in me he could love but I was also afraid to scare him off. I watched the local boys just in case he was a homosexual, or something more perverse, which didn’t seem to be the case. I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary, nothing seemed amiss. Still I listened but learned nothing on that front. I never asked. I never wanted Rick to find out that I had been putting my nose in his business. I couldn’t risk offending him. He was too precious to me.

Besides there are plenty of us who live without sex in Haiti.

I know what you’re thinking --“This isn’t right.” --stories about Haiti shouldn’t speculate about pedophiles. They shouldn’t talk about the sex life or lack thereof between members of the foreign hospital corps. And you’re right, of course.

Stories set in Haiti usually begin at dawn with the sound of a rooster. Like a national anthem, their cock-a-doodle-does echo constantly across the countryside. The

noise is always intrusive – the repetitive shrill sound bothers everyone, even those who are born listening to it.

But the aforementioned cholera combined with an anthrax epidemic took a huge livestock toll on our district. Chickens and roosters got the virus first, which is why Sophie was so livid when she thought I had brought chicken covered in wine to her potluck. As if I would waste wine on a cooked chicken. The anthrax eventually wiped out the pig population. The veterinarians are still roaming the countryside searching for infected swine.

Stories in Haiti are also political. That's why they're reported in the first place. They will recount in horrific details of the terror of the *Ton Ton* Macoutes, Duvaliers henchmen, who brutalized the citizens of Haiti –kidnapping and killing like a competitive sport. I've been here three years and I've yet to speak to a *Ton Ton* Macoute – with or without those aviator shades, which are back in fashion. People talk of them, but they are really nowhere to be found.

Most stories will talk of the economic despair, the continual, unsolvable destitution, the neediness that is so severe that everyone who sees it immediately tries to describe it and then fails. It's amazingly poor. That's all I'll say on that subject.

Voodoo is a major selling point in stories about Haiti. The exotic and mysterious sacrifices, the clandestine nocturnal ceremonies, the blood, the mystical journeys into other worlds makes for storytelling but like the *Ton Ton* Macoutes, it's difficult to find an authentic voodoo ceremony if you're white. White and they'll act one out for you. It will look real, but they wouldn't let you near a real ceremony. Those are private. With good reason, I'm sure.

Stories about white people in Haiti usually have at least one scene taking place at the Grand Hotel Olafson in Port au Prince, made famous in Graham Greene's novel, *The Comedians*. (The movie starred Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. It bombed, though when talking of Liz and Dick, this may be redundant.) Despite the country's current failure to attract tourists – no one goes to Haiti for fun (it's hard to party with all the poverty)—the white gingerbread hotel with its grand wrap-around porch, its famous rum punches and its swimming pool, continues to be a refuge from the distractions and misery of the capital city.

As I've already mentioned this particular story takes place in Deschapelles, a long way from the capital. The roads in Haiti were built by US Marines when they occupied the country in the 1920's. Feeble repair work has been attempted, but we're not talking progress. It was better when Papa Doc was running the show. Things got done when he was in charge. Of course there were other problems when that regime had power, but the roads were easier on the vehicles. People do get to Port au Prince on days off, but this story takes place while the Hotel Olafson is closed. The owner is in the States taking care of some family business, (which when translated probably means that he's trying to find some money to either sell the place or keep it running – either way, an uphill battle.)

My name is Michelle Wiggins. I'm twenty-eight years old. Neither a Christian charity worker, nor a Peace Corps Volunteer, I am the hospital founder's daughter and have lived in Haiti most of my life except for the years I was in boarding school back in Pittsburgh, the birthplace of both my father and the city where my step brothers live and where my mother will visit if she's in the mood to be provincial.

I am one of small group of people who the villagers here call *Blanc Haitians* – White Haitians, because of the length of our stay in the country and because of our ability with the language. They tease us that except for the color of our skin, we would be mistaken for Haitians. Our small group of long term kreyol speakers watch the proverbial revolving door of medical staff, journalists, engineers, charity groups, descend on our little village in the Artibonite Valley. They arrive with enthusiasm and strength – certain that they know exactly what we can do to make changes to help the hospital run better, to make the place better, to make things more efficient, to make everyone happier. They have ideas about the Haitian problem, about the electricity, about the food & water shortages, about the political problems, about the crime, about the domination of the church, gababout everything. And then they leave. Most take souvenirs: woven *macoutes*, --great baskets made from the local reeds – are popular. They're hard to carry, but definitely worth the few dollars the women charge. And paintings. Everyone leaves with a painting or two. They won't fit into a suitcase, but they'll look great on your kitchen or bathroom walls and aren't too awkward to put under your arm as an airplane carry-on.

And yet for all the years I've lived here, the fact that I was born here, for all that I say I belong to this place, the color of my skin immediately marks me as an outsider. Haitians can be anything – tall, small, blond, bald, blind, lonely, devious, shrewd, manipulative, kind, gentle, generous, humorous, needy, proud, brave, etc., but they are almost never ever white.

