

God Wanted Us to Come Here

by Leanne Ellis

She had stopped crying, but her eyes would not dry.

"I can't believe this," Alice moaned. "How could they think we were child kidnappers?"

"I think it's all a conspiracy," Betty said, setting her sturdy frame down next to Alice's lank one. "The Haitian government wants to divert attention away from its own incompetence. What better way to do so than to accuse a bunch of Americans of child trafficking?"

"They wouldn't do something like that. We're here helping like everyone else. The U.S. has donated more money and supplies than any other country."

"How else do you explain this?" Betty pulled her gray hair up into a bun and turned her wrinkling face to stare at Alice. Betty had small features, except for her eyes and brows. Their darkness and size made them stand out like dung beetles.

"I don't know!"

"We're *being accused*," Betty reminded her. "This isn't some misunderstanding. *They want to prosecute us.*"

"But why? I don't understand. We were here to *help*. How could anyone find fault with that?"

Alice had been in poverty heat before—the group had done a mission trip in Mexico—but Haiti was so destitute and downtrodden.. She knew she had to be positive—*this was a misunderstanding*—but her default tendency was towards anxiety and worry; in fact, she veered towards them like a drunk driver to a telephone pole. Alice knew herself to be too aware and sensitive about of what other people thought of her. She felt the opinions of

others flow past her like gas: insidious, unfair, menacing. Alice wanted to ignore them, to move beyond such petty human concerns: She wanted to be a walking embodiment of the holy. She wanted to open people's souls to God's glory so they would not be damned. What could be nobler than that? What could be more pure? That was why she handed out pamphlets on street corners and alleyways, why she took risks in coming to unknown places to promote his message, why she gave so much of her earnings to leaders like Betty to build on his holy words. And yet, people criticized her and other members of the church. Proselytizing, they said, as if they were spreading lice instead of giving people eternal life and salvation.

Haiti was supposed to be different. Alice was excited to help people existing in utter devastation. They would be helping the sick (from malaria, dysentery, typhoid), the injured (smashed limbs, infection, near death), and those poor, helpless orphans (no one around to hear their cries). No one could fault them for what they would be doing there, they were beyond reproach. And yet...here they were in a Third World Prison accused of trying to exploit the very people they were trying to save.

His neighbor, Jean, couldn't find his wife. It had been four days. She was underneath the house—of that, he was certain—but he didn't know anything else: if she was injured, conscious, alive...Screaming her name elicited no response, only the sounds of similarly fraught neighbors. Serge decided he would help him find her. He knew what it was like to lose a wife.

"The only thing that makes sense is us being scapegoats for the sins of the Haitian Government," Betty said. "Governments do it all the time: blame the big, bad U.S. for all their problems. Iran does it, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Venezuela...It's the perfect PR target to channel all anger and frustration of the locals: blame the U.S."

"But it doesn't make any sense to do it in this crisis!" Alice said. "The media needs to focus on the suffering and dying to keep

help alive, donations coming in. Why would they risk ruining their relationship with the U.S.?"

"You think anyone in Washington cares about us?"

"They must."

"Don't be naïve."

Alice turned her head away to look at another prisoner, Carl, who stood in the background shaking his head. Carl was big and burly; his stature made him stand out in a country like this, but his soft personality countered any natural authority his size gave him.

"I'm sorry, Alice," Betty went on. "I'm just pissed about this whole thing. How dare they? We take time away from our own lives to come down here and help these kids, to do God's work, and this is how we're treated? This is an outrage! We should have our own riot."

"Are you sure all the paperwork was in order?"

"What does that mean?"

"Maybe it's all a mix-up in the paperwork," Alice suggested. "On the Dominican side, or someone here made a mistake..."

"You mean me?"

"No! I didn't say that. Maybe someone back in Minnesota, maybe..."

"You mean me."

"I don't-..."

"There were no errors made except by the Haitians," Betty insisted. "Everything was in order. All of those children were orphans, and we were simply taking them to a better life in the DR. We're here doing God's work. Don't lose sight of that. We're here on a mission. *We've done nothing wrong.* We're the victims."

"Then, how could God let this happen?"

Betty stared off in the distance and then looked at her intently. "Right now, we need to focus on getting out of here: putting pressure on the embassy, keeping the story alive in the media..."

"I know. I know. I just can't believe this happened, that the Haitians would deliberately do something like this. It has to be a mistake, a paperwork error-..."

"It wasn't. Do you think I would have brought this group here if something was out of order? Remember: you wouldn't even be here if it weren't for me."

Carl glared at her but said nothing like the other five members of the group. He suspected everyone was too distraught and exhausted to respond to Betty. They had all been so eager to help the children and now they had to watch out for their own health and well-being in this hot and dusty cell.

On the day of the earthquake, Serge had been on his way back to his home with coins in his pocket for once, having been lucky to have found a few hours worth of construction work near the palace. He remembered thinking, as he approached his home, how life might finally be giving him a break in this hard land, when suddenly, the earth shook under him and his house fell to dust. He ran with several others to some trees and they huddled underneath it all together. He remembered, after the shaking stopped, glancing around at the rubble of everything: stones, dirt, rocks--another mass of unfinished efforts that defined this country.

Serge wiped the dust from his face, his nose. It was all he could smell as he stood, stunned, in the middle of the dirt road that had only moments before been the path to the center of the city. He had arrived to Port-au-Prince with his wife and young daughter, like so many others from the countryside, with dreams of opportunity and hope. Those concepts had collapsed, literally, and as he stood there, the first emotion, panic, supplanted the shock of what had happened: where the hell was his daughter?

Betty had always cut a divisive figure in the church with some members because of her grandiose aid schemes and dreams of orphanages dotting the world like Sheratons. Most congregants were too trusting and idealistic to think ill of her, admiring the

ambition and commitment to missionary work. A few, however, recoiled at her now all-to-obvious arrogance and intense zeal for ideas that always seemed devoid of details and happened to correspond to cultural trends of the secular and celebrity world, particularly in the area of orphans.

"This must be a sign!" Betty had announced the day after the earthquake to several members of the congregation. "As many of you know, I have been scouting land in several countries to set up orphanages, and I just found the perfect place in the Dominican Republic to expand my Children First Faith Initiative. God wants us to go to Haiti to help those poor orphans find a better life in the DR through Christ! Who wants to go with me to help?"

There had been a round of loud applause and hoots. Betty did have a proven track record in organizing successful mission trips. She seemed the natural candidate to expand the church's mission of "life-changing ministries" to include the establishment of orphanages in areas with an abundance of vulnerable and needy children such as Haiti, Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Bulgaria. Several congressional members had expressed interest in being both the recipient of an orphan and in helping to launch the organization off the ground. The church was lucky to have so many fundraisers, child care and social workers, and administrative assistants.

Carl had been one of those foolish enough to clap his hands at the time, and now here he was sitting with the fidgety Betty in a bug-infested jail for reasons he didn't understand. He had been one of the few put off by Betty's passion, but the thought of helping children in Haiti overcame any doubts he had had about the person leading them down there. They had all been worried about how they would react emotionally to the situation, but never did they think their focus would turn inward on their own future. And it didn't help matters that the lawyer Betty had hired—though the church was paying for it—said he needed a \$10,000 retainer before he could proceed with their case. Wasn't that close to a half million dollars in Haitian money?

Lydia was okay. Serge found her hours later at the neighbor's home where he had dropped her off on the way to find some temporary work. He surrendered to relief as she called his name and filled up in his arms. His parents had died years ago; his beloved wife gone in childbirth; his brother had disappeared. Lydia was all there was.

They didn't speak; he simply held her, lost in the moment of joy. He never wanted to look up again, had, in fact, gotten use to not seeing out of the periphery. It was easier this way, to simply look at what was before him, to trick his mind into thinking he was in a normal country despite his crusted clothes, the persistent low-grade hunger, the bouts with colds, flu, headaches, utter exhaustion. But then his eyes happened to glance up and the moment began to fade. He saw everyone else screaming and crying in grief. One woman walked around in a circle.

He was one of the lucky ones.

Betty had been looking for a distraction; the lawsuits were out of control. Her last nonprofit, Faith and Life Children's Organization, had run into some difficulties due to the recession and the obvious result of trying to do more with less. Why couldn't people understand that? People entered into the nonprofit world because they wanted to make a difference not a dollar. Betty was shocked by the lawsuits filed by two different former employees over unpaid wages. She had explained that both the hiring of a new accountant and the switching of banks was why there was delay in payment, but some people needed to call their lawyer at a moment's notice. Then, there was the whole mess of impending foreclosure because Wells Fargo wouldn't let her refinance on her house, and to pile it on even more, there was the stress of starting a new nonprofit in that same home--the Children First Faith Initiative.

The Haiti quake news shook her away from her problems. She was watching Fox News—it never went off like a fridge—when those horrific images first appeared. Betty's eyes became the cameras that swept over the crumpled buildings, the flying dust, the

endless piles as if God had blown a mighty wind over the unsecured. Perhaps he had. One never knew how he worked; the only thing clear was his sacred word.

But there was no denying his attempts to send messages to the people; they only responded to the dramatic. The Haitians' vulnerability would open their eyes to the truth that others would bring. And Betty knew that truth was Christ's work in the world which she and other church members would perpetuate in action and deed. Surely the most receptive and disadvantaged group, however, would be the orphans. They would have no conflict between what they had been taught and what the truth was; they were all empty heads.

Betty started making some calls.

Serge remembered his promise to Jean to help him find his wife. He pulled Lydia into himself as he walked through the scattered and strewn stones, the dirt, the garbage, and the dead. He had heard relief groups were gathering in the center near the palace. Serge wanted to drop Lydia off where she would be well cared for until he came back from helping Jean.

The scene overwhelmed: heavy tents with only the physically healthy standing. The sick and injured lay on blankets, wrapped tightly in sheets. Some had bandages on their heads; others were still caked in mud and blood. Only their uncovered faces revealed a living status. Serge glanced up at the brutal sun emanating unwanted heat like a fire in summer. He stopped to look around for other children. That would be the best place for Lydia. He saw several of them across the way in a more polished tent with several Americans, he surmised, by their size.

"Ce sera bien," he told Lydia, "it will be okay."

She didn't respond, just held onto him more tightly. They were both too tired to speak.

"Hello, how are you?" asked a young woman with long dark hair swaying in the breeze like drying laundry.

Serge shook his head to indicate his lack of English. He turned slightly so Lydia's face was visible. She glanced briefly at the woman then turned away. The woman, or girl she was so young, smiled at Lydia and put her hand on her hair.

"It's okay, you're safe now," she said. Her tone was soft and reassuring. She pointed to herself: "Alice."

Carl shifted his hefty self on the concrete floor and sighed. Everyone else was asleep or staring ahead without focus like a junkie. Only Betty was pacing around, lost in her manic schemes. Carl glanced over at Alice. She was huddled up as though beneath a table, her thin brown hair falling out of a haphazard ponytail. Her pale face was tear-streaked and her bottom lip quivered. She pulled her tiny white arms even closer around her T-shirt and dark skirt and lowered her head. Carl walked over and sat down next to her.

"Are you okay?"

"No, are you?"

"We're all in shock," he said, "except Betty. She looks fine."

"I just don't understand what happened," Alice told him. "One minute we're taking those beautiful children to Betty's orphanage in the DR, and the next, we have guns pointed at us and the children are screaming."

She shook her head at images of the children being torn away from their bodies and vision to be replaced by semi-automatics. Alice had been overwhelmed by everything since arriving in Haiti. She remembered seeing the overturned containers in the ocean as their plane descended, bobbing in the dark like mosquitoes in a pit of standing water, while skeletal pigs feasted on the refuse even the desperate wouldn't touch. It was shockingly hot for January, the humidity clinging to her like a wet shower liner. All around were piles of crumpled buildings as if a massive bomb had exploded throughout the land. Alice couldn't discern any sense of a country: there were no standing buildings, roads, and few cars. Everything was overturned and shaken, the thin people walking

around in crowds. She remembered taking a quick breathe in through her nose, but the rotting stench of dirt and decomposition make her exhale twice as quick.

It was all disorienting until the children were before them. They were frightened and sad, but the gentle, assuring touch of the volunteers helped to calm them quickly. The bonds were instant and intense because the children exuded such need and the volunteers had so much love and concern to offer. Alice was particularly touched by the fragile Lydia. She was three, but seemed younger because of her small stature and short hair. Lydia was very quiet, her eyes buried in the folds of her pretty blue dress. Alice thought how terrible it was her parents were already dead; Lydia had hardly even begun her life.

"Do you really think this is because we're Americans? Or Protestants?" Alice asked Carl. "That's what Betty says."

"I wouldn't put too much stock in what Betty says," Carl said in a low voice. "With so much happening here, I can't believe the government would take the trouble to arrest us because of our faith. I do think there's a lot of paranoia floating around, but I also think that Betty didn't necessarily have everything in order."

"What do you mean?"

"In talking to some of the other people, I've come to learn that Betty tends to jump into things without all the paperwork and procedures being completed, or even started in some cases."

Alice gasped. "What about her orphanage in the DR? It doesn't exist?"

"I'm sure she made the inquiries, but doubtful she closed the deal on the place."

"So, just where were we taking the children?"

Carl shrugged. "I think the only one who knows is Betty."

He stopped talking as soon as he saw her approach them across the cell. "Having a nice conversation?" she demanded.

Serge smiled and said his own name aloud. He pulled Lydia away from him to set her on the ground. He got down to his knees and

explained that he had to help Uncle Jean find his wife but that he would be back soon. These nice people would take care of her for a few hours. Here she would have warm food, other children around, and these nice adults. Serge pointed out all the other kids playing around them as if the earthquake had never happened. He felt he would break down when Lydia held up her small hands to him, but then Alice put hers in them and Lydia smiled. Serge felt instant relief.

"Je reviendrais bientôt," he said knowing this girl didn't understand what he was saying, but she smiled and nodded all the same.

Serge paused for a moment to look at Lydia's shining face, and then he turned around to face his fallen country.

Betty was surprised when the police had stopped their van at the border to the DR, and then leveled those ridiculous charges about child kidnapping or whatever absurd, trumped up accusation it was. She knew all the papers weren't in order, but who cared about that when lives were at stake? Didn't these people care about their children getting out of literal hell to a better life? Or were they so drunk on power they had to wield it even amidst complete devastation? Betty shook her head. She couldn't believe they would take all this time out for her small band of volunteers and thirty children. It didn't make sense if one was looking at it in a Christian way. When the plane touched down in Haiti, it reminded Betty of Revelations, of what the world would be like at the end of time. Here she was trying to save the children, and the fact that this government stood in her way meant they were more concerned with the resulting publicity and the money they would extort from "rich" Americans than they were with their own people.

Just then, there was a knock at the door and Haitian guard opened it up to a short Dominican man dressed in a beige suit with a colorful tie. He took out a rag to wipe the sweat from his brow and gave them a small bow.

Serge had been working for what seemed like hours on one particularly large piece of concrete. The sun was starting to set, but he kept pulling the debris away around it, hoping to loosen the mass enough to clear it to find Jean's wife. Jean was about ten feet away, trying to pull back similar slabs of weight. Serge's throat was so dry the top of his mouth was nearly sticking to the bottom. His hands were even drier from working in the dust and stone, leaving a scant trail of blood on what was removed because so much of the skin was scraped away.

One of their neighbors had helped them for a few hours, but then he and Jean were left largely on their own because everyone else had their own hell to deal with: salvaging remnants of a life, waiting in lines for food and water, lying in the blazing sun with broken limbs, trying to get the hell out the city. Serge thought that when he found Jean's wife and any others they could, he would retrieve Lydia and go back to the countryside. He was done with this wreck of a city.

"Who are you?" Betty demanded. "Where's Mr. Duvalier?"

"He was fired," the man said. "I'm Mr. Perez, here to represent you. Mr. Duvalier, as you know, wanted the \$10,000 retainer which was wired to him from your church through Mr. Blackstone. Mr., Duvalier then demanded another \$50,000 in fees, so Mr. Blackstone called me to investigate. I found out old Duvalier was going to try and buy your freedom with the money, so he was dismissed from the case."

"What are you going to do?" Carl asked. "What's the status of our case?"

Mr. Perez looked at everyone and smiled. "Things are looking positive for the charges to be dismissed again everyone--except for you, Ms. Mitchell." He was looking at Betty. She simply shrugged her shoulders.

He saw her prostrate body after moving that heavy concrete slab. When he saw her body, all the energy seeped out and tears poured

out like a drop down a glass pane. Jean rushed over and embraced his dead wife. He heaved great sobs, cried until every last ounce of water was wrung from inside. Serge turned away from him, overcome by what he was seeing and feeling all around. He simply stared into the sky, grateful that at least Lydia was being taken care of by those lovely Americans doing God's work.

