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Cosmic Dealings

I WAKE to the sound of knocking at my bedroom door and the insistent cries of my friend Cherline, “Elizabeth! Elizabeth!” I mumble something along the lines of “I’m coming” in sleepy French and grapple with the mosquito net over my bed. At last, I swing my feet to the floor where they land in water.

I’m instantly awake.

My toes search for my floating sandals while my hands snatch up the journal, notebook, and flashlight I had left on the floor. I curse myself for that stupidity. Cherline shouts again. I grasp for my glasses, stumble barefooted across the dark room, and throw open the sliding bolt.

“Are you scared?” asks Cherline when the door swings open. Her reaction tells me what I must look like in the yellow light of her kerosene lamp.

WHY HAITI? I have answered this question more times than I can count. I usually respond with a rambling explanation that mentions reading *Mountains Beyond Mountains* for an intro sociology course, my dad’s travels as a medical volunteer, the bright young Haitian my parents sponsor at a Minnesota university, a Haitian American biodiesel fanatic my dad met through the Internet, and a California foundation that funds yearlong fellowships for recent college graduates.

This answer seems to satisfy other people. At least, it confuses them enough that they stop asking. As for myself, I’m still asking.

IT'S A sunny afternoon in Wyoming. I'm 19. I have two more years before I graduate, but already the future presses in on me like a closing bubble. Threatening suffocation.

I lie on top of a car-sized rock outcrop. I'm alone in a high valley stretched between the peaks of the Bighorn Mountains. It's my day off from the Medicine Wheel where I work as an interpreter. I let out a long, slow exhalation of mountain air. Here, I like to think, everything is clear. No pressure from the professors who have already started dropping the names of prestigious graduate scholarships. No pressure from those perfect grades that I swore I would stop pursuing after high school. Instead, blue sky above and the heat of sun-warmed granite against my skin.

Delve into the world. Don't hesitate. You only have one life. Go see what's out there. Try to do good.

These are the thoughts that run through my wilderness-intoxicated brain. I make myself promise to remember them.

THE MUDDY water rushes past the kitchen window where I stand washing breakfast dishes in a tub of rainwater. It's not a river. It's floodwater. Deep brown and swift moving, it whirls between the house and the trees. I admire the patterns, although I know the water is deadly.

Last night, Cherline and I carried our mattresses across the flooded yard and up the exposed staircase to the creaky second floor. We made a few calls from our cell phones. Something that would have been impossible in Haiti only a couple of years ago. Then, we blew out the lamp and lay down. For a short while, the rain slowed. The frogs bellowed in triumphant chorus. It was hard to believe that people on lower ground were fighting currents as they

clambered onto roofs, tossing children from one set of hands to another. Then, the winds picked up again, rattling the loose tin roof. The rainy drumbeat accelerated. Neither of us slept.

Now, the water has retreated from the interior of the house, leaving swirls of mud on the floor. The rain has stopped, but gray clouds hover overhead. We don't try to clean the house because there's no way of knowing if the worst is over yet.

It's not.

I SIT at a blacktopped table in an empty geology classroom, a packet of white paper before me. I grip my pencil and read the first question: "Describe the functioning of the soil system. Include all inputs, outputs, and transformations."

It's going to be a long test.

I'm taking the test a day late after spending a three-day weekend in San Francisco interviewing for the Compton Mentor Fellowship. On the plane to California, I had felt uncertain. I have minimal experience with biofuels. I have never been to an undeveloped nation. Yet there I was proposing a project on tree-based biofuels in Haiti. Before leaving for the interview, I had expressed my concerns to one of my roommates, while also expressing my worries about backing down from the project.

"Lizzie, I will not think any less of you if you don't spend the next year in Haiti," she had assured me.

Now, however, I badly want the fellowship. Meeting the other candidates has changed my mind. Their optimism and energy was contagious. I have trouble focusing on the test. I'm just starting the last question when my phone rings. I glance at the number. This is it.

"Hello, Lizzie?" says Anne, the fellowship coordinator.

“Yes,” I say hesitantly.

She tells me I’ve won the fellowship. I’m dizzy with excitement. At the end of the call, I turn back to my test. Somehow, it doesn’t seem so important now. I’m going to Haiti.

IT'S MY first evening in Haiti. After a night in a Miami hotel, I boarded an early flight to Port-au-Prince with my project mentor Georges, the biodiesel fanatic. Now after a bumpy drive north along the coast, we've reached our destination—Eben-Ezer Mission of Gonaives.

I pick at the food on my plate. Anxiety has sent my appetite fleeing, but I don't want to appear rude. I chat with Pastor Michel, the mission president, and various other people who will later become familiar to me. The mosquitoes nip at my ankles under the table as I try to decide whether the lemonade is safe to drink. It has ice in it so probably not, but I'm too thirsty to reject it. I'm wondering what is the earliest time I can politely retreat to my bedroom when Georges sets down his utensils and announces we have a meeting to attend.

I dutifully trundle upstairs with Georges and am introduced to four men who I'm told are agronomists. We sit in a circle on straight-backed wicker chairs. Off to the side, several young women crowd around an old television. Georges announces that we will speak French since I don't understand Creole. Nevertheless, my tired brain has trouble keeping up, especially against the noise from the television. This distraction is eliminated within a few minutes when the power goes out. Blackness reigns for no more than a few seconds—the time it takes for everyone to pull out their cell phones. The phones create a bluish glow while the young women light kerosene lamps.

Georges outlines the project. We will be planting jatropha and castor, two oil-producing trees already found in Haiti. The oil will be used to manufacture biodiesel for powering cars,

generators, and cook stoves. The last of these is the most important because we plan to replace charcoal stoves, which are responsible for devouring millions of trees from the nation's mountainous terrain and causing severe respiratory diseases among the women and children who cook with them. By planting oil-producing trees on marginal lands, we hope to provide a cleaner burning fuel, restore Haiti's eroded soils, and diminish the severity of the floods that sweep down the country's bare, compacted slopes with every storm.

That all sounds great on paper. However, when Georges leaves a few days later, putting me in charge of an abandoned nursery, a musty storeroom filled with jumbled tools, and a broad swath of dusty land that he tells me is mine to plant from one mountain chain to another, I am struck by the yawning gap that exists between ambitious, world-changing visions and the backbreaking, tedious work required to realize them.

I WADE through water up to my knees. I move slowly, feeling for hidden branches or ruts in the road. The water streams from left to right, spilling from the river more than a mile away and seeping across the flat land. Ripples form where it dips into a shallow ditch beside the road.

An old, green hiking pack is strapped to my back. To my left, Cherline carries the few belongings she brought when she came to visit a couple days ago. To my right, a young neighbor balances my large gray duffle on her head. We walk a little faster as we pass under an uprooted tree tangled in the branches of another tree. The wind whips the rain into our faces. I am the only one with a jacket.

Around us, hundreds of people carry mattresses, pots and pans, clothes, and other essentials to higher ground. Most move into the mission school just up the road. The scene

should be sobering, but at this point, the consequences of the flood have yet to sink in. Instead, there is a sense of adventure and vitality and community.

Pastor Michel sits on the porch of his house when I arrive decked out in rain gear and loaded down with my pack. He laughs jovially and declares me the great American explorer. I am glad I can provide him with comic relief. He will need it in the coming days.

I'VE BEEN in Haiti less than two weeks, and I'm already doubting my decision to come. I feel lost and lonely—and useless. I'm discovering that native Creole sounds nothing like the language cd's I listened to before I arrived and that Haitian French is a far cry from the Parisian French I studied in school. It's a major accomplishment when I manage to buy an avocado.

To top it all off, the mission is hosting a summer camp. The place is swarming with hundreds of children who delight in trying to extract gifts from the young "blonde." Boys who have just had their afternoon meal cry out to me, "Mwen grangou!" and pat their bellies. One afternoon, a group of girls follows me to the door of my house, asking for my skirt, my watch, and my shoes. Once at the house, they demand to be invited in to eat. I explain in broken Creole that I don't have enough for all of them. One girl shoves the others aside and points to her chest. "Just me," she says. "Not for them." Later, I will grow savvier in dealing with these situations, but for now, I'm flustered and tired. So I simply retreat into the house and shut the door.

One day, after a mildly successful attempt at getting the children to help me plant seeds, I go home to rest. I've been sleeping more than ten hours a day. I blame it on the heat. Before lying down, I splash a cupful of water on my sweaty, sunscreen-coated face. Sweatiness has become a state of being for me. I collapse onto my bed and pray for a breeze to sway the curtains. Feeling too tired to sleep, I pick up my book, Wendell Berry's *A Place on Earth*.

Within a few sentences, I dissolve into tears.

What am I doing here? Do I think I can save these people from their problems? What a presumptuous—and clearly unfounded—idea. I can barely hold myself together. Do I think all of this running around the world will improve my own life? Here's Berry telling a story about people who stay rooted in their own community, who appreciate what they have and don't strive after the grandiose, who recognize the beauty of the simple and the familiar. What I really want is to hunker down on a little plot of Wisconsin farmland, so what the hell am I doing in Haiti?

THE LAST light from the setting sun plays across the rippling waves. Cherline and I lean over the ramparts of an old colonial fort. We lay our heads on our arms and close our eyes, savoring the soft sea breezes and the sound of the waves lapping the rocks below.

"Quel est le mot pour 'vent' en anglais?" asks Cherline. I open my eyes and find hers on me.

"Wind," I tell her and ask for the word in Creole.

We continue to trade words in English and Creole, using French as our medium. Sea. Clouds. Sky. Moon. Stars. Sunset.

In the distance, flashes of lightning turn the mountains into a spectacular landscape of light and shadow. I'm still not sure why I'm here, but I'm glad I am.

I'M CURLED on a bed in Pastor Michel's house. The rain pounds against the roof in a thunderous crescendo. I cover my ears and squeeze my eyes shut. Make it stop, I think. It's the third night since the hurricane started. The sense of adventure has worn off. People are hungry. Flooding has isolated the region. And another hurricane is on its way.

The pastor's wife, Madame Michel, is suffering more than most though she bears it silently. Her father passed away from a pre-existing illness the first night of the storm. As hospital workers frantically moved patients to the upper floors, Madame Michel's family clung to her father's body to keep others from tossing it into the waters. The funeral home sent a message saying they could not take any more bodies. The next day, the family brought Madame Michel's father out of the city and buried him across the road from the house.

Now, as I lie on my bed, I hear a young voice whimper in the next room where a dozen girls sleep, draped across chairs and stretched out on blankets on the cement floor. The sound cuts through the rain. Soon other voices join in. But these voices are not crying. They are singing. Older girls soothe the fears of younger girls with familiar, soaring hymns. Gradually, the songs shift into the uniquely Haitian style of prayer. Each girl says her own prayers. Aloud. Simultaneously. The rhythmic prayers, with certain words shouted and others whispered, form a new type of song—percussive, hypnotic, lulling.

A fallen-away Catholic, I am skeptical of most religious practices, but if there were ever a time for calling on God’s mercy, this is it. And this seems to be a pretty good way of going about it.

“DO YOU like the Haitian nature?”

I hesitate, trying to decipher the intent of the question. Am I being asked about the personality of Haitians or the condition of their surroundings? I decide it’s the latter and reply in the affirmative. My interlocutor—a young Haitian man named Sadrack—asks me why. We sit on a cement wall waiting for our turn at the local well. I point to the mountains in the distance.

“The mountains, they’re beautiful. Of course, they should have more trees. But they’re

still beautiful. And the ocean. That’s beautiful, too.” I pause, wondering if my words sound as vacant to Sadrack as they do to me. Every time I look at the bare mountains or the dirty harbors, I can’t help wondering how they looked when the Taino people lived here. The Tainos—those first victims of European conquest in the New World.

“You know, technology can be both good and bad,” I say to Sadrack. He nods and waits for me to continue. “Electric light, for example. It provides a lot of wonderful things. It allows people to read in the evening and to feel safe at night.”

“Of course,” says Sadrack. He looks curious. What could be bad about lights?

“But it also blocks out the stars. In the U.S., some people live their whole lives in cities without ever really seeing the stars. Here, they’re gorgeous.”

Sadrack laughs. To him, it probably seems a small price to pay for the dream of living like an American.

“WE’RE GOING to town,” says Cherline. “Bring your camera.”

It’s Thursday. Hurricane Hanna, which came in on Monday, finally wore itself out last night and the sun is trying to come out. I’m not sure what we’ll find in the city, but the encroaching water has made the mission feel like a shrinking island over the past few days, and I want to reassure myself that there's life beyond its borders.

We push Pastor Michel’s car to start it, then cram inside. The pastor’s son drives. Four of us smash into the back seat, and another two climb into the rear cargo hold. One young man scrambles onto the roof just before we pull out.

We pass people wading out with bundles on their heads. A few young men walk their motorcycles along the flooded road. Only the handlebars show. The car's engine rumbles

ominously as it chugs through the water. On either side of the road, the water extends out to the mountains, making a lake out of farm fields. I start to question the sanity of driving deeper into the devastation.

Gonaives is a ruined city. Brown water ripples, swells, and pools everywhere. The mud is so thick it seems entire mountains must have washed into the city. Flipped cars teeter on their roofs, water swirling through the smashed windows. Skeletal dogs crouch on muddy atolls. Bedraggled clothes and snapped power lines lie tangled in the branches of upended trees. Water pours through the open gates of a school. The roads, bumpy and largely unpaved even before the flood, are now full of hidden potholes and piles of debris.

Nonetheless, people fill the streets—or rather, the rivers that used to be streets. A woman pushes a wheelbarrow containing a waterlogged sack of rice. An old man clutches a baby to his chest. A young man carries a guitar strapped to his back and a backpack strapped to his front. A family sits on their second-floor balcony, watching two endless lines of mud-smeared people wade up and down the street. Some shout. Some laugh. Some cry. But most are silent. Their eyes are blank. This can't be happening, those empty eyes seem to say. This can't be real.

THE WATER has turned green. Its retreat is almost imperceptible. Only by choosing a marker—a given tree or bush—and watching the water relative to that marker each day can any change be observed. Meanwhile, vivid green algae and mosquitoes flourish in the near-stagnant pools.

The smell would be unbearable if there were any choice but to bear it. It rises from the fetid waters and from the thick mud left in the wake of their slow retreat. It is a nauseating mixture of everything that has been submerged and is now rotting—animal carcasses, human

waste, heaps of trash. Plastic bottles bob at the surface and collect at the edges of the water. At night, cool breezes drift through the windows—breezes that should be refreshing but instead leave one gasping like a fish for a fresh breath that isn't quite there.

The days are busy. Meetings are held with community leaders. Reports are prepared for potential donors. Calls are made to coordinate helicopter supply drops. One morning, I walk down the cement stairs of Pastor Michel's house and discover a visitor sitting at the bottom. He smiles and stands when he sees me, wiping his hand on his pants before reaching out to shake mine. It's Dumond, the agronomist who has accompanied me in my work since that first night when I met him among three other agronomists who have since disappeared. I ask how his family is. He says they are well, then goes on to say that everything in his house is ruined. He says he walked to the mission because he did not have money for transportation. It's five miles to the city and who knows how many more to Dumond's home.

We get down to business. I tell him all of the seedlings in the nursery are gone. I watched them drown the first night of the storm. He asks about the seeds. I admit that I haven't even checked the storeroom, though I suspect they are damaged. We track down the key and head across the mission. We walk up the stairs of the school and traverse the rooftops to reach the flooded administration building, where we descend another set of stairs. Water covers the bottom few steps and is only a foot below the window ledge.

Dumond stops to roll up his pants and tells me to stay where I am. He hesitates only a moment before stepping into the tea-colored water. I sit down to wait, listening to the sound of his sloshing footsteps diminish as he wades down the long porch to the storeroom door. An old woman comes down the stairs carrying a bar of soap and a towel. I look out the window as she strips off her dress and scrubs herself, scooping up water with her hands. She chats amiably in

Creole. I only catch a few words, such as "pwason," but she seems content when I repeat those words back to her with a question mark—"pwason?"

She soon finishes, pulls her dress on, and walks up the stairs. A few minutes later, Dumond returns. He hauls a sack of seeds up to the roof and spreads a few seeds in the sun, cracking them open and smelling them. He saves two handfuls, then heaves the sack to the edge of the roof and dumps the rest into the water.

I BEND down to strap my boots into the skis. The air is still. As a result, it feels much more reasonable than the zero degrees showing on the thermometer. It's cold, all right, but not viciously so. My boots secure, I set out across the yard toward the "back 40," the rear portion of my family's 80 acres in the driftless region of Wisconsin. I hope the snow will be good. A few days before, it was so fluffy I sank up to my knees and completely lost sight of the tips of my skis.

It's perfect. The snow has settled and developed a glazed surface. I glide over four-foot drifts. Weightless. Limitless. Unbound.

A translucent moon hangs in the crystal blue sky. The sun has already gone down after setting the snow on fire in a show of color. Even now, the snow holds onto that light, although the color has gone out of it. To either side of me, the narrow ridge drops off into valleys, and the open meadow gives way to trees. Bare skeletons thrusting into the sky. It's a tricolor world: blue, brown, and white.

The transition from here to Haiti and back again has not been easy. When I broke into sobs for the umpteenth time, my mom demanded we talk.

"Stop expecting so much of yourself," she said, ignoring the snuffling noise I made into a

tissue. “You are not going to save Haiti.”

At the furthest corner of our property, I stick my poles into the release buttons. My skis pop open and I slip my boots out. I lie on my back in the snow. I’ve worked up enough internal heat that the cold feels good.

I’m only days from leaving again. The faces of my Haitian friends float through my mind. I will be happy to see them. My mom is right, of course. I will not save Haiti. I have just one wish as I watch a pair of hawks circle above me in the deepening blue sky: that all people could love their corner of the world as much as I love mine.

THE SUN reflects off the mountains, turning their slopes rosy. The moon, one sliver short of full, hovers just above the peaks. I could be in the desert Southwest. Those tents spread out on the dusty plain could be wilderness campers, escaping for a week from their high-stress jobs.

“Someday, when I have a family, I will take them up to the mountains every weekend,” says Sadrack, recalling me from my reverie. This is Haiti. Those tents are a refugee shelter. Six months have passed since the hurricanes. “We’ll camp among the trees. Away from the city. Smelling the fresh air. Eating the fruits of Haiti: mangos, bananas, coconuts.”

I nod. I’m intrigued. Most Haitians dream of getting out of tents, not into them. Most young Haitians have never seen a forest. So although they’ve learned about deforestation in school, they can’t quite grasp what is missing.

“You know, I’ve gone camping with the Boy Scouts,” continues Sadrack. “I liked it. But you have to have money to live like that. You have to have a job.”

“It’s important to dream.”

“You don’t understand. My life is a series of failures. My mother tells me I need to get my head out of the clouds. I am the only son in my family. My father is out of work because the school where he taught can’t pay its teachers anymore. My mother lost all of her merchandise in the hurricanes. I’ll probably never get married because I have to support my parents. My life is already over.”

I’m silent. What do I say? My life is a series of successes. My parents support me. I don’t support them, at least not at the age of 22.

“You’re young,” I say finally. “Life can change.”

“Not my life.”

The sun melts into the horizon. The mountains turn dark. The moon glows over the tents.

TI BEBE maneuvers along the rutted road, driving gently since it’s my first time on a moto. My friends and neighbors look up to watch me pass, a mixture of surprise and amusement in their eyes.

The crinkled dirt road turns into a pothole-ridden paved road as we enter the city. Mounds of mud—washed down from the mountains and scraped out of houses with brooms and bits of cardboard—line the road. It is now the dry season, and the mud is sun-cracked and studded with fluttering bits of plastic. The wind lifts a fine black dust from the mud heaps, blowing it along the streets and forcing it through the cracks in the houses, where it settles. Everyday, women wipe clean the surfaces of their homes, and everyday, the black dust returns.

Ti Bebe steers expertly over mud piles, around potholes, and between tap-taps, pedestrians, goats, UN trucks, and private cars. At last, we clear the city and start up into the mountains. My spirits rise with the elevation. The air is fresh, the traffic is gone, and the road is

surprisingly good. Everything is so close. The sun soaks my skin. The wind whisks the heat away in its almost-violent embrace. The shrubby desert landscape is freeing in its apparent emptiness. The roller-coaster road spins away beneath the tires. I feel alive as I have rarely felt before. My rational side tells me this is foolish. One misjudged bump, and I could be strewn across the asphalt—scraped, bruised, broken, or worse. But my visceral side will have none of that. I cannot give up this euphoria.

The landscape changes as we crest the first line of mountains and descend into a valley. Towering mango trees line the road. Their branches, laden with green bulbous fruits, arc toward each other, forming a shady trellis. A few miles on, we reach the end of the road. Literally. The asphalt drops off in a jagged tear, and a deep gulf opens up. Forty feet away, we see the other side of the road, a thin layer of black asphalt floating on twenty feet of sandstone.

Ti Bebe slows slightly, then turns right and we teeter off the road onto a narrow dirt path that circumvents the gravelly gulf. Girls with laundry baskets on their heads step aside. At the other end, Ti Bebe revs the engine and steadies the moto with his feet to pull us up the steep incline that brings us back onto the road. A couple miles more and we reach our destination, the center of a community known as Passe-Reine (roughly translated as "Passage of the Queen").

Pastor Josue pulls up just behind on his moto. We exchange brief introductions with our guide, Fedo, and are soon leaping from stone to stone across the braided streams that run through the community. Piles of smooth white boulders as large as my head dot the area. Pastor Josue explains that the rocks came down from the mountains with the hurricane rains and were strewn across the whole area until recently when they were cleared from the fields so crops could be planted. Fedo points out the four corners of a stone foundation that juts from the ground. It is all that remains of his house.

After we cross the last stream channel, we climb a path that switchbacks up the mountain. As we rise, we leave the trees behind in the lush, stream-nourished valley. The view opens up. On all sides are rounded, brown mountaintops. Some are cut with terraces, giving them the appearance of ziggurats. All are bare. The path levels off and we reach a high, scrubby plain. About thirty villagers are hacking at the brush with machetes, singing as they work.

"This is where we will plant the first trees," explains Fedo.

The community has agreed to participate in our pilot jatropha plantation program. As we approach, the people gather around to hear what the "blonde" has to say. I offer a few words about my hopes for the project, and Pastor Josue speaks at greater length about the work. At the end, several people come up to me and begin pointing to all of the mountaintops in view.

"We can plant there."

"And there."

"And on my land over there."

BIRDS SWOOP over the water. They land on the dead treetops jutting from the lake. It's a lake that should not exist. But good luck telling the birds that. Or the fish.

It's been eight months since the hurricanes, and the water in this broad valley shows no sign of leaving. When it comes to casting blame for the catastrophe, it's easy to point fingers.

It's the fault of the French: they cleared the forests to build plantations; they shipped thousands of Africans to this island so far from their native lands; they had the gall to charge the self-emancipated slaves for property losses, crippling the new nation.

It's the fault of the Americans: they isolated Haiti for decades to avoid setting a bad example for their own slaves; they occupied the country for nineteen years in the early twentieth

century; they continue to intervene in the nation's politics to this day.

It's the fault of the Haitian elite: they have strangled the nation's economy through feudalistic landholding practices; they have enfeebled the government through shameless corruption.

It's the fault of the Haitian masses: they have stripped the land of its trees in their relentless quest for charcoal; they live off foreign aid rather than pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.

It's God's punishment for our brazen sinfulness.

The wind ruffles the surface of the lake. I stand at the end of a deserted gravel highway where it runs into the water. We humans have a peculiar way of injecting ourselves into the center of cosmic dealings, I muse. After all, why should God bother to punish us when we do such a good job of it ourselves?

I stand for a few more moments, my hair and skirt blowing to the side. The first few stars emerge from an indigo sky. Clouds hover against the mountains on the opposite shore. A frog hops across the road and plops into the lake.