

"All your Contacts are Dead"*

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I was not there when it happened. Like most people outside, I learned of it from the news, not even the night of the Event itself, but several days after, when one of my colleagues, Marc, a white Canadian on the building mission with me, in Kigali, brought me a newspaper with a photograph on its front page of the National Palace building fallen over on itself like an ornament on a wedding cake.

He pointed to it and said, "Isn't this where you're from?"

I peered at the headline, "Earthquake in Haiti," and then at the photograph of the broken capital building that had always stood, next to the Champ de Mars, facing Place L'Ouverture, framed by an iron fence at least nineteen feet high, interrupted every few meters by thick concrete pylons painted white, and an even taller ornamental gate that swung open to admit dignitaries (some, in the past, never came out). The fallen structure was a landmark. It had not always been there. But it had been there all of my life.

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It meant something. Now it was gone? I tore the paper from my colleague's hands.

"I'm sorry," he said, though there was nothing for him to be sorry for. It wasn't his fault.

I read about the death toll, estimated already in the several thousands of thousands a week or so into the calamity. I read about the buildings flattened, the rescue missions being deployed from Cuba, with others to join them from around the world, coming over from across the Dominican border and across the chain of mountains dividing the two countries, because the Americans had shut the airport, the most direct port of access. A chill went through me as I read, and I tried to call my grandmother, but she did not answer.

"I'm sorry," Marc said again, putting a hand on my shoulder and squeezing it lightly, but I waved him away and tried to call a different number from my cell. I called my father's cousin, Dieudonné, a fixer and driver in the capital, who always had the latest gadgets, but his line was also dead. There would be no response for several days. The problem could have been my own whereabouts, I conjectured, but later, I would find out that the problem was the damage on the ground, more severe than any photograph could convey (though the fallen Palais National was in itself a sobering reality), when I received an email from a fellow engineer on the ground, a Haitian American named Lucien whom I had connected to Dieudonné, who occasionally hired him as a driver. There was no message, no subject line, only a series of photos of the devastation, one after the other. I recognized vast open spaces of places I used to know: the church where I had been baptized marked by the cross of a crucified Jesus; my mother's house reduced to a flaked pink stoop decorating a pile of rubble; the hotel where Dieudonné and his girlfriend, Sonia, worked flattened to the ground.

There was a picture of my grandmother, Ma Lou, showing the broken stalls in the market beneath the cathedral, which was also collapsed, broken beyond recognition. I sighed in relief at seeing

Ma Lou's round, open face, her mouth open, her arms wide. I could see from her pose that she had been explaining what had happened when the photograph was taken. She was alive. A message followed saying that Dieudonné was also alive, then another stating that Lucien had witnessed a wave swallowing Richard into the sea since he had served as his driver that fateful

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day. The body had been lost to the waves, he wrote, matter-of-factly, so my father was presumed dead, another casualty of the Event. The next email contained two lines. "You should come back," it said. "What Haiti needs now is builders: that's us."

We had both received our degrees at the end of the previous year, Lucien's in engineering and mine in architecture, with the hope of opening a practice in Port-au-Prince. The problem, for us, was that we both had chosen to specialize in accessible eco-building, and the likelihood of being able to get paid for that kind of work at home was slim to none. This was why Lucien took odd jobs to make ends meet, but also to network, depending on his family in the US to send him money to keep him afloat while he remained in Haiti. Both of us had been hired, right out of our master's degrees, to work for NGOs in our first jobs. Lucien had been lucky to be hired by a Canadian nonprofit locally. I had been hired by a French NGO to work in Rwanda, where more international funds had been made available to rebuild the country after the ten-year anniversary of the genocide. I would be working on affordable mixed-use buildings, the kind that could house studios, businesses, and multigenerational family units in the same place. I was especially interested in building structures that would be useful to collectives of women pooling their resources in the new economies of the Global South, with microloans and cooperatives.

These were already popular throughout Asia and were becoming popularized in parts of Latin America along with notions of architecture for the people. Lucien specialized in water and sewage systems, on maximizing clean energy. We hoped to one day revolutionize building in Haiti.

It wasn't that there weren't Haitian architects and engineers who could do the job—UNESCO sites like the Citadelle Laferrière to the north demonstrated our long history of building structures that could outwit time; there were also the wooden gingerbread houses so well constructed that they had withstood termite invasions, the Revolution, hurricanes. The rich had had their mansions built back in the mountains, many designed and built by Haitian hands, but constructed of imported materials. But as the capital became overpopulated, mostly with poor and rural folks seeking their fortunes and in need of quick housing, building codes were not, could not be, observed, and structures were built of hastily fashioned cinder blocks, many of which were hollow in the

middle, and one person would build on top of another, wherever there was room, in zigzag, up the sides of the hills encircling the city, between the valley and the higher reaches inhabited by the wealthy, one person's roof serving as another's floor. Building codes were reserved for people with means and running water. The rest took their chances. What would we be able to offer? I wondered.

Soon, the disaster vultures would descend on the island; things would spiral out of control. In our line of work, it would be the emergency shelter crowd we would see first, those with prototypes ready to go. Shelters had become a business opportunity, as more people around the world were displaced, made homeless and migratory by civil wars and famines. If someone, anyone, could roll out a compact structure that could house families of at least four, keep them dry when it rained, safe from the beating rays of the sun when heat swelled, and screened from mosquitoes—in short, designed to improve the chances of survival while minimizing the kinds of illnesses easily spread in the cramped quarters of an IDP camp—then that person would be not only hailed as a hero but guaranteed to reap the financial rewards for generations to come, all while having made the world a better place. We would have to watch helplessly as lesser-equipped professionals used the destitute to test their new products.

“Come back,” Lucien wrote. “Haiti needs us.”

It was Lucien who had been driving my father the day he disappeared, swallowed by the sea. It was Lucien who told me the details of the disappearance, and on whom I came to rely, later, when I tried to track people, starting the work of beginning again, of hoping.

I could have been there, for the earthquake itself. I had been there a few days into the new year to bury my mother. But I had already planned to be in Rwanda, after the funeral, and had left even sooner than I had planned because my father, my biological father, had said he was coming to the funeral but never showed. I was so angry. Instead of trying to track him—I knew Dieudonné would know where he was—I stayed on schedule, and joined the French architects deploying to Rwanda to build affordable structures where they were needed, because the country was now stabilized and accepting outside help, and it was the sole

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French-speaking country on the list of choices I had been given. Had my father unwittingly saved me with his failure to appear?

I told Marc of my mother's death, then, of my father's disappearance. He was the person I trusted in the group. He later came back with one of the laptop computers and showed me how to create a social media account. "This is the only place I'm seeing messages posted," he explained. That was how I learned about who had died beneath the rubble or who was still being searched for, how I learned a majority of women at the head of national women's organizations—Anne-Marie, Myriam, Magalie, Myrna—women with whom I had had conversations about programs that would provide women with training to work in masonry and construction, maybe even get associate's degrees in engineering—had perished, all of them, a whole generation of activists gone in a matter of seconds, decades of work wiped out.

It wasn't long before others on my team awkwardly approached me to ask if I could track a coworker, a fixer, an intern, an in-law. These requests were followed by emails from others I had known at school, in the States, with contacts in Haiti seeking the same.

My first query, to track an intern who had been meant to join us in the field but who had decided to take an extended holiday with his family before beginning to work, was sent out like a fishing line in still waters to Lucien. A few days later, his response read, "I'm sorry, but all your contacts are dead. Your intern is alive but all the contacts you gave me to find him are dead." The phrase rang in my head for days: "All your contacts are dead." I understood immediately it would not be the last time I would have to read the phrase, or some variation of it.

I took the names down in a notebook, and the names of whom-ever they thought might know that person on the ground, and I would send out new queries, usually a few at once. Some of the time, most of the time, I would find the person they were looking for, learn where they were, if they were on a list for evacuation, or not, if they were safe, or not. Nine times out of ten, like that first time, it would be the contact names who would be unaccounted for, those who lived in the country full-time, or who didn't have the means to live in houses with fortified, shear walls, and I would have to make another list, one for the dead, and yet another list for the phrases I could use to relay the news, all different depending on the degree of remove the dead had from the person who had

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asked. The list of the dead grew day by day, week by week. I got through those days by focusing on the living, putting the list of the dead at the back of my mind even as the list grew longer. Still, death was with me like a cloak, a second skin. My mother, the person I was the closest to, had died—that was my personal earthquake. My father, a man I hardly knew, was presumed dead, or disappeared. I was on the other side of the world, in a country where so many had perished by their neighbor's hand.

The stories haunting Kigali's mountains—like the mountains themselves, down to the sienna brown of the soil—remind me so much of Haiti, preoccupy me as if they are my own. I take long walks at the end of each day, up a hill, in the direction of the city, trying to shake things off, to think clearly, objectively. I watch myself being watched. But it is not enough to use the little Kinyarwanda I know: *muraho* (hello), *bitese* (how are you), *murakoze* (thank you). I can't blend in. Don't want to. Don't want to become part of the fabric of things. Couldn't. Can't. Isn't part of the job.