

tion. He told me that since he now had 60 córdobas, he only needed 35 to buy the paint for his cart. Could he borrow it from me, since he was now so close to his goal? I told him I would think about it. In early sobriety, and especially in Nicaragua, hasty decisions are rarely advisable. And so I went inside the hotel to take a nap.

MISCHA BERLINSKI

## Venance Lafrance Is Not Dead

FROM *Men's Journal*

A COUPLE OF WEEKS after the earthquake, the werewolves came down from the hills.

"It's serious!" one man said.

He was talking about the loup-garou, a distant cousin of the werewolf. In Haitian lore the loup-garou was a kind of sorcerer who had learned to transform himself into an animal—a cat, a goat, or even a cow. Thus disguised, the loup-garou went out into the night to feast on the blood of small children. Two or three days after such a visitation, children would sicken and die. Now, with so many people in Port-au-Prince sleeping in the open air, the loup-garous were believed to present an exceptional danger.

He told me that not here but farther up on the mountain the werewolves had already killed a number of small children. This was the way the loup-garou story always went—not here, but not far away, the loup-garous were prowling. Another man told me that a *brigade vigilance* was formed to keep an eye out. Our baby's nanny later said that the police in her neighborhood had instituted a policy of zero tolerance for looters and loup-garous: both were killed on sight.

We were in the hills of Carrefour Feuilles, a neighborhood above Port-au-Prince. Before the quake small cinder-block houses had been stacked steeply one upon the next, climbing the bowls of the mountain, the inhabitants maneuvering through tiny alleyways. When the quake came, one house took down the next, leaving the entire hillside a smear of concrete and rubble and fallen satellite dishes.

"But why do loups-garous want to suck children's blood?" I asked.

The question provoked discussion. One man proposed it was a vice, like a taste for whiskey or smoking. Another man just shrugged. But a third man said, "*Le loup-garou—c'est le mal absolu.*" The loup-garou is absolute evil. I suppose, thinking it over now, that it was easier to stay awake at night watching for werewolves than it was to stay on guard for lethal aftershocks.

The earthquake was still recent enough that every passing truck gave me the shivers. Very early one morning, my phone rang, but when I answered it, the caller abruptly hung up. This pattern irritatingly repeated itself perhaps five or six times. This was Venance Lafrance's way of saying he was not dead.

I had met Venance three years earlier, shortly after my wife and I moved to Haiti. She had found a job in the justice section of the United Nations peacekeeping mission here, working with judges, prosecutors, and lawyers to reform the Haitian legal system. I had just published my first novel, and I figured that I could avoid writing a second one as easily in Haiti as anywhere else; in this I would eventually be proven completely correct. Cristina was initially assigned to the town of Jérémie, only about 125 miles from Port-au-Prince but remote, like an island off the coast of Haiti, fifteen hours of bad road between us and the capital. There were more coffin makers in Jérémie than restaurants, more donkeys than cars, and the paved roads petered out at the edge of town. We rented an old gingerbread house flanked by a quartet of sturdy mango trees. In the mornings merchants came down from the hills past our front gate with baskets of fruit balanced on their heads, and at night in bed under the mosquito net when the moon was silver and big, we heard voodoo drums and strange, spooky singing. I don't know if I've ever liked a place more in my life.

Everywhere I went in Jérémie, people asked me for money. Out front of the Internet cafe, a woman who was almost obese looked up from her breakfast and told me she was hungry. At the market, on the beach, in the streets, people would throw up their palms and say, "*Blann, ba m cinq gourdes*"—White, give me five gourdes. I've been in other places as poor as Jérémie—the slums of Calcutta, the highlands of northern Thailand—but I've never seen more

persistent and aggressive begging. There is a Creole proverb: "*Dè-gagé pa peché*"—Getting by isn't a sin. Asking someone who had money for money was just another way of getting by.

Venance Lafrance asked me for money just a few days after I got to Jérémie. I was walking to the beach—think goats, chickens, cows, pigs, and wild turkeys; mud huts; a strip of white dirt road snaking along high cliffs diving down to a postcard sea—when a young man with a bag of sweet potatoes on his head accosted me and told me in broken French after some conversational preliminaries that he wanted to be an artist. He was seventeen at the time but looked about twelve. He looked a little like a space alien, with very big eyes, a wide, tall forehead, and high, prominent cheekbones tapering down to a narrow, angular chin. He was wearing a T-shirt that read *LIFE IS SHORT. EAT DESSERT FIRST*. He was very skinny. I don't remember how he began the conversation, but the upshot was this: he was a student; he had no money; his mother had no money; his little brothers were hungry; and he wanted to be an artist. He had a terrific smile—chiefly what the good Lord gave him in exchange for all his troubles was this smile like an exploding sun. He asked me for money to feed his little brothers and I gave him the change in my pocket—about a buck fifty. I wouldn't have been sad if I never saw him again.

A few days later, Venance presented himself at the front gate of our house. Jérémie is a small place, and Venance, going from neighborhood to neighborhood and door to door, had found me. This was a degree of persistence and hard work that Venance would never again display in my presence. He had a look on his face as he waited for me of patient, fragile hopefulness. I invited him in, where he drank a glass of orange juice. Much later I learned that he was so excited to see me that he hadn't slept the night before. That's exactly the look he had on his face as he sipped his orange juice, like he couldn't quite believe that he, Venance Lafrance of Carrefour Prince, Haiti, was sitting there on my terrace drinking orange juice. Like it was all too good to be believed.

In the weeks and months thereafter, no pretty lady has ever been courted by such an animated and constant suitor as I was courted by Venance Lafrance. He came by the house all the time. He was unshakable. My wife and I tried many schemes to convince Venance to leave us alone. I told him that he was allowed to visit only

every third day. Every third day without fail he showed up at our door. We asked him to visit only between five and six in the evening, with the result that we had a standing appointment with Venance Lafrance at 5:01 P.M. We told him not to visit us at all. *Ha!* He was resistant to hints, oblivious to suggestions. What did he want? Not *just* to ask for money, but also to say hello, or to eat a meal, or to hang around, or to ask a question. After I had known him a week, he told me that he loved me like a brother; after I'd known him a month, that he loved me like a father. What he wanted more than anything, I think, was to sit with us out on the terrace in the evening and *belong*.

In the end Venance wore me down. I came to like him. It was hard to be mean to somebody so young who wanted so badly to be liked: He was the kind of kid you could horse around with. He was always up for kicking around a soccer ball, or taking a trip to the beach. You could send him up the mango tree and he'd come down with a half-dozen fresh, juicy pieces of fruit. He had an easy laugh. You could read a book around him and he'd amuse himself, or you could tease him about girls and he'd laugh. After a couple of months in Jérémie, it got to be an accepted fact of life that two or three or five days a week, Venance Lafrance would show up at our house and hang around until we told him that he had to leave.

Brilliant smile aside, Venance wasn't very handsome. He had terrible body odor, and his hair was reddish at the roots, a sign of protein deficiency. He asked me for money to buy deodorant and shoe polish, which he rubbed on his head. Though he said he wanted to be an artist, I never saw him actually make art. He was functionally illiterate. He was one of the laziest people I've ever met—and I say this as someone who is quite lazy himself. He had been admitted to a free school of ironwork, which he often didn't bother to attend. We would later hire Venance and his younger brother to sweep our yard on Saturday mornings. His brother would arrive on time and work diligently. Venance would show up late, work halfheartedly, and leave early.

Venance Lafrance had only one real asset in life—but it was considerable. Despite every disadvantage that he suffered, despite every self-inflicted wound, Venance was nevertheless making his way in the world with radiant, unwavering optimism. One day he bought a hen whom he named Catalina. This was to be the start of

a chicken-breeding empire. Then his family got hungry and ate Catalina. Venance was undismayed. He asked me for money to buy another starter chicken. If you gave Venance 50 gourdes, he'd give half to the kids on the street to buy candy—Venance saw himself as somebody who could afford to be generous. When he told us he wanted to be an artist, I think he chose the word almost at random from a list of grand words that to Venance were synonymous with hope. He would tell me later that he wanted to be a preacher, a doctor, an engineer. Step by step he went forward toward an opaque future that he was sure—absolutely, unquestionably sure—would one day be glorious.

In the meanwhile, he got by.

Walking around Port-au-Prince after the quake and talking to people, I learned all sorts of ways to describe in Creole just how a building fell down. A house that had held was said to have *kembé*, or hung tight, thank God. This was the case with my own house, in which not even the wineglasses had broken. A house with a crack or two or a hundred was *fisuré*, generally considered to be alarming depending only on the depth of the crack or its location. Sometimes a crack could be so wide as to admit sunlight and rain. Still more severe was a house that was *fracturé*, or fractured. This was the case with our immediate neighbor's house, whose walls split open to reveal the steel skeleton buried in the reinforced concrete. Some houses split in two—half the house coming down completely, the other half perfectly intact, leaving little windows into the occupants' lost worlds: a table still set for meals, books on bookshelves, a toilet. Even more dramatic than the fractured house was the house that was *penché*, or tilted. We saw such oddities all over town—houses that had suffered little or no apparent damage but were now tilting at extreme angles to the horizontal. The gravest category of destroyed home was said to have been *krazé*, or wiped out. If you wanted to add emphasis, you'd say that the house had been *krazé net*—the word *net* in this case meaning 100 percent, down to the ground, nothing left whatsoever but a pile of cement and twisted rebar.

The Lafrance family had not always been poor. Venance's mother had once been a successful merchant. When Venance was twelve, his little brother Frandi got into a fight with a neighborhood bully.

The other child was the son of a prominent Jérémie sorceress. Madame Lafrance and this other lady got to words. The other lady said, "Evelyn, you're too rich! You won't have money again!" Various magical curses were thus effected, and after that Venance's mother no longer had the strength to go to the market. That's how the Lafrance family fell on such hard times.

A couple of months after we met Venance, his mother came to visit us. Madame Lafrance was a slender, pretty woman in an ankle-length skirt who never smiled—she looked a little like she was suffering at all times from a very bad stomachache. She wanted, she told us, to start a little business buying vegetables wholesale off the boat from Port-au-Prince, then reselling them in the market, and she asked if we would be willing to invest in her enterprise.

Was she, I asked, still afraid of the effects of the magic curse?

"Oh, no!" she said. That was all finished.

We gave her the money, but things didn't work out as well as we had hoped: Madame Lafrance invested half her funds in the lottery and the remainder in a large stock of garlic. Madame Lafrance did not win the lottery. The garlic failed to move in the market and then rotted. When we asked her what happened, she explained that her enemies had—*once again!*—used black magic to curse her and her market stall.

We kept trying to help the Lafrances. There is only one upside to living on 50 cents per day: it shouldn't be that hard to reach \$1.50 per day. That's the difference between the bitterest poverty and what Haiti's former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide called "dignified poverty." We were willing to try most anything short of giving them a large wad of cash. What follows is a nonexhaustive list of various schemes we employed to help them:

Venance wanted to sell coconut water on the beach, at the big party the local population held every August to celebrate Jérémie's patron saint. I fronted Venance the capital to acquire the coconuts, but he forgot to bring his machete. When he went back home to get his machete, people stole all his coconuts.

... And then there was the time Madame Lafrance wanted to sell clothes on the street at Christmas. This scheme, too, was a failure, as Madame Lafrance bought ugly clothes. Also, we later learned, she gave away half the clothes to her relatives.

... And then there was the time my wife and I came back from

New York with a suitcase stuffed with merchandise that we'd found in a dollar store in Chinatown—a dozen toothbrushes for a dollar; children's toys; little clocks; cheap cosmetics; and so on. Madame Lafrance and Venance got to squabbling about just whom this merchandise was intended for. Both insisted that the other would waste the profits: Venance told us that his mother would spend the money on the lottery and magic; Madame Lafrance predicted that Venance would buy himself new clothes. Venance eventually dropped out of school to sell the merchandise himself. All the stock was sold at a loss, and Venance never went back to school, although he did acquire a nice wardrobe.

This last failure was what convinced us to leave the Lafrances to their own destiny. Our small experiment in social engineering had done more harm than good, and the Lafrances were as poor when we were done as when we started.

Port-au-Prince after the quake abounded in conspiracy theories. Many people were convinced that the United States military had caused the quake, using advanced high-technology weapons. Apparently such weapons had once been featured on the Discovery Channel. The earthquake was said to be either the result of an experiment gone awry, or the prelude to an invasion. *Why would you want to invade Haiti?* I asked. *Who wants this place?* It seemed I was naive: people told me that Haiti possessed vast mineral wealth and untapped oil reserves. All this jibed nicely with a central facet of the Haitian worldview—namely, that the great nations of the world all yearned to dominate plucky little Haiti.

A cartoon in the standard fifth-grade textbook, *Histoire de Mon Pays*, illustrates the thesis nicely. Haiti is shown not as a small island in the Caribbean, but as a huge and swollen territory sprawling from the reaches of the North Pole to the equator. Four figures, ostentatiously white and with rapacious grins, stretch from the four corners of the globe to lay huge hairy hands on Haitian soil. They are labeled France, the United States, England, and Germany.

If all the world were conspiring against Haiti, then your neighbor was probably conspiring against you. Truckloads of fifty-five-pound sacks of rice were being given away every day throughout Port-au-Prince after the quake, a program organized by the World Food Program, working with a consortium of international NGOs.

These NGOs were staffed by foreigners and relied on the cooperation of Haitian staff to decide who should receive assistance and who shouldn't. It was a commonplace of tent-city life that the Haitian staff had rigged the game: they were giving out rice only to their own families, or they were demanding kickbacks for the ration cards. People took me aside to level accusations at their neighbors, who were said to have counterfeited their card; or sold their rice on the black market at exorbitant prices; or feigned extreme poverty to receive aid, but were secretly wealthy.

The mood of suspicion was contagious: after a little while, I got suspicious too. People everywhere asked me for help. In the claustrophobic camp on the Route de l'Aéroport, one woman insisted that she had never received rice because she had been a partisan of the deposed President Aristide. Sitting inside her house in plain view were two full bags of rice. When I pointed them out, the little crowd around us began to laugh appreciatively. Nobody thought this lady had done anything wrong. Neither did I. Getting by isn't a sin.

About a year after I met Venance, he moved to Port-au-Prince. He was eighteen years old, and he went without so much as a gourd in his pocket.

In Venance's way of thinking, the world was like a series of concentric circles, the absolute center of which was Carrefour Prince, the village where he was born and where his grandmother still lived. You might not eat as much in Carrefour Prince as you'd like, but you'd always have something: there was (almost) always breadfruit from the breadfruit tree. But you were absolutely trapped. Life today was like life yesterday and like life tomorrow. The next circle outward was Jérémie. This was the life journey his mother had made: to leave the countryside. Venance had explored every narrow alley of the town and gotten nowhere. He had discovered only the world of his mother—small, provincial, mistrustful, and suspicious. This was a world in which the best you could aspire to was just scraping by, in which either your enemies were plotting against you or you were plotting against your enemies; a world dominated by the fear of magic. But Port-au-Prince—that was the outer circle of this particular human being's universe. It was the place to go in Haiti if you were young and excited about life.

Port-au-Prince was the only place in all of Haiti commensurate with Venance Lafrance's ambitions—to live decently, to eat copiously, to dress sharply, all without having to work very hard.

Shortly after Venance left Jérémie, my wife and I moved to Port-au-Prince also.

Venance was no longer a daily fixture in our life, but he made a point of staying in contact with us. He'd call every week or two, and from time to time we saw each other. A call from Venance Lafrance is a unique act of telephonic communication, because Venance, having no money to make a telephone call, will call—and hang up—until you call him back. There is no relenting and no choice. He might continue to call—and hang up—for an hour. Then he will take a break, perhaps to play dominoes or take a nap. He will then begin to call—and hang up—all over again, until finally you call him back. Venance is, above all, patient.

My Port-au-Prince was behind high walls and tinted windows. I shopped in a supermarket surrounded by a twenty-foot wall topped with barbed wire, and a squad of shotgun-toting toughies patrolled the parking lot. Venance's Port-au-Prince ran parallel to mine and was there always, but without Venance was invisible to me. Venance could hardly walk a block downtown without slapping hands with another acquaintance. He knew how everyone on the street earned their living, every scam, dodge, and swindle. Venance could tell me the latest jokes (I never found them very funny) or the latest Creole slang. He told me gossip from Cité Soleil, the slum where he lived: apparently the president of Haiti, René Preval, had spent an evening there not long before, drinking rum on the stoop. Every time I left Venance, I gave him a few bucks, and I considered the money well spent.

Venance was getting by in Port-au-Prince. He had scraped together the money to buy a portable telephone, and he wandered the city selling phone calls—anyone who wanted to make a call could use Venance's phone. Half of the young men in Port-au-Prince have the same job, but Venance was unusually good at it. Venance was social and knew everyone, and people liked to use Venance's phone. In the course of a long day strolling the city, he might make a hundred gourdes—about \$2.50. This is why Venance had come to the big city. His job took him all over town: he could walk over to the sprawling neighborhood of Carrefour

on the south side, with its narrow twisting lanes heaped high with garbage—he had family there—or he could park himself on the Champ de Mars out front of the National Palace. He could just sit on the corner with his buddies playing dominoes.

Venance's hold on the city, though, was tenuous at best. He was robbed at gunpoint and lost his phone and income. Then the cousin he was staying with evicted him from his shack and Venance was forced to mooch off a succession of different, more distant relations, who tolerated him for a short time, then got tired of feeding his perennially hungry mouth. At one point he thought he found a job as a houseboy: a childhood acquaintance had become a police officer and needed somebody to watch over his car and dogs. This fell through when the police officer was transferred to the northern city of Cap-Haïtien. The last of Venance's relatives was sick of him. Venance had just about exhausted his options in Port-au-Prince when he met Cousin Maxo.

Venance met Maxo Pierre on the Champ de Mars. Maxo made a living selling barbecued chicken there in the evening. It turned out that Maxo came from Chambellan, not far at all from Jérémie. Both Venance and Maxo were proud sons of the Grand'Anse province, so there was a bond between them. Thereafter, on seeing Maxo, Venance always asked after Maxo's bad foot, a kindness Maxo noted. Sometimes Venance passed all day with Maxo down on the Champ de Mars telling stories. This was about the time when Venance was out of a job and home, and he opened his heart to the bearded older man. Maxo said, "Venance, barbecue business is good business. Tomorrow if you want you can become a big barbecue entrepreneur. Keep it up. Venance, stay with me for a long time. That way you can get ahead."

Chicken was a good business for Venance, not only on account of the fact that it suited his temperament and he was a good chicken cook, but also because he was observant and a fast runner. You needed to run fast if you were going to make it in the chicken game—the police would impound the barbecue of anyone caught grilling out on the Champ de Mars. That's why Venance was so useful to Cousin Maxo: Maxo had the bad foot, but when the police came down, Venance could grab that 'cue and fly. Together they made a good team, Venance and Cousin Maxo—Cousin Maxo teaching the young man the secrets of the Champ de Mars BBQ game, show-

ing him the special Maxo chicken sauce; Venance protecting the BBQ from the police; the two of them sociable fellows, flirting with the ladies and grilling up the birds and laughing and joking until the early hours of the morning.

Not only did Maxo bring Venance into his business, but he invited this lanky kid off the street into his home, giving him a place to sleep right on the floor with his own kids. That's when Venance started calling Maxo "Cousin Maxo," as a sign of respect and affection. Venance appreciated the fact that Cousin Maxo treated him like a man, but treated him like family, too, showing him kindness, never telling him what to do, just letting him be.

In Maxo, Venance found something he'd been looking for all his life. His father had been a sorcerer named Destiné Paul. Destiné Paul quarreled with an unsatisfied client. The client swore he would take his revenge on Destiné Paul. Which he did—Venance's father died, a victim himself of magic, when Venance was just five months in the womb.

Each morning Maxo would give Venance a little money for coffee and bread. Venance saved a bit of that every day and soon was able to invest in a chicken breast or two, which he put on the grill. The profit was his own, and he turned it around into more chickens. What he was looking forward to and working toward was the day he could buy himself a whole case of chicken. Break up the birds, boil 'em. Rent refrigerator space. Get himself a barbecue of his own. Buy cabbage and bananas and manioc. Go out on the Champ de Mars at night, pay to plug a light bulb into the generator, and call himself a chicken man, too.

Venance had been out every day with Cousin Maxo for about six months, selling chicken and earning, when Venance got it into his head that he wanted to spend the hot month of August back home in Jérémie. He had a little cash in his hand and he wanted to flaunt it, show the girls back home the success he was making of himself in Port-au-Prince. Cousin Maxo told Venance that this was a poor idea, that if he had a good thing going, he should stick with it. But Venance ignored Cousin Maxo and went home.

The National Palace had been a source of considerable pride. I was standing in front of its vast, very white edifice when a young man approached and asked me if it was true that the National Palace,

before its collapse, had been the most beautiful building in the world, as he had learned in school.

"It was *very* beautiful," I said, looking for a diplomatic answer.

The conversation attracted, as often happens in Haiti, a crowd of kibitzers, all wanting to throw in their own two cents. Two Haitians can converse, but three is an argument. Some maintained that the presidential palace was the most beautiful building in the world; others that it was the most beautiful presidential palace in the world. The argument was not about aesthetics but about the precise recollection of a fact that had been memorized in a schoolbook. The conversation got quite heated, and in the end one man had to be taken away before he slugged somebody.

In a city of remarkable piles of rubble, the presidential palace rubble was particularly spectacular. In its collapse it looked as if it had been constructed originally with Legos, then smashed by the hand of a very large child. It was somewhere between *fracturé* and *krazé*—it all depended on whether one looked to the wings, which were almost intact, or to the center. Certain portions of the rubble expanse could even be described as *penché*.

A large tent city had cropped up directly in front of the gates of the palace, and then metastasized to the palace's flanks. Each of Port-au-Prince's tent cities had its own character, as any small town will, and here the mood was surlier and more aggressive than in other refugee camps. I asked somebody why the mood in this particular camp was so rough, and was told that it was due to the presence of the many escapees from the National Penitentiary, which was just a few blocks from here—although I found this explanation unlikely. Surely if anyone had cause to rejoice these days, it was the escapees.

Just three days before the world came to an end, Venance Lafrance slunk back into Port-au-Prince like a beaten dog. His return to Jérémie had been disastrous. His mother had gotten sick. His brother had gotten sick. And then he'd gotten sick too. He had almost died. All the capital he had accrued in the chicken game sweating over a hot barbecue, he had lost. He'd gone home to Jérémie to show off what a big man he'd become. But now, just to get back to Port-au-Prince, Venance had visited a local politician and agreed to sell her his vote in the upcoming parliamentary elec-

tions in exchange for a place on the big Trois Rivières, the weekly ferry to the capital.

The next morning, Venance made his way on foot (not even a gouarde to take a bus) up to Cousin Maxo's little concrete house in Bel Air.

"Venance, I didn't know you were coming!" Cousin Maxo said, *happy to see him*.

Cousin Maxo wasn't just happy to see Venance on account of Venance being Venance, but also because Cousin Maxo *needed* Venance Lafrance. Madame Cousin Maxo gave Venance some bread and coffee, and then Cousin Maxo told Venance the bad thing that had happened in his absence. It was just a couple days back. Madame Maxo had been out grilling on the Champ de Mars when the police had come round. She wasn't fast enough. The police had seized the family barbecue and all the chicken on the grill, too. She had gotten away with just a bowl of raw bird.

Cousin Maxo sent Venance out to buy some water for the house. Venance came back with five five-gallon buckets. After he had bathed, Venance lay down on the floor of the house and went to sleep for the rest of the morning.

Venance was finally home. Venance was finally needed.

The Rue Dalencourt winds down then up the steep valley between the Avenue John Brown and Canapé Vert. Before the quake, this had been a shady street of small houses and apartment complexes. The largest of these apartment complexes, a homicidal five-story monster, had come down. A few surviving relatives—a young woman, her brother, some friends—had hired a group of young men to do the dangerous work of pawing through the rubble. I sat outside and watched the diggers for a few minutes. Not far from us on the ground was a charred spinal cord and skull. The smell of decomposing flesh was quite strong in the air. Later, the diggers came up with the body of the young woman's sister—a large woman, to judge by the six men needed to carry her. Haiti is a country where women take pride in their voluptuous displays of grief—there exists an entire profession of paid mourners, whose copious tears and loud wailings are taken as a tribute to the qualities of the departed. I had been at a funeral not long before the quake where distant lady friends of the deceased had attempted to

throw themselves bodily into the coffin. Now this young woman walked over, identified her sister, and walked back with a cool smile on her face.

This was like another country than the one I thought I knew.

On Tuesday, January 12, in the late afternoon, Venance Lafrance was playing dominoes out front of his friend Alfred's house. The board was balanced on the players' knees. They'd been slapping the bones for hours—days even. There was a big crowd around the board waiting to get in on the game. The board started shaking. The tiles started sliding. One of the fellows said, "Who's shaking the board?" Another fellow said, "Not me." Then the bricks started falling—*ka-choo, ka-choo, ka-choo*! Venance heard a noise like ten thousand trucks roaring up a steep hill. The street itself started making waves. Some of the fellows who'd been waiting to play dominoes started running—but Venance didn't run; he just stood his ground, watching the houses shaking and the street swinging up and down like a rubber hose, rolling up, down, left, and right. The dominoes that had been on the board were on the ground, clattering like they were dancing. Right in front of Venance a two-story brick house leaned over on its side in a big cloud of dust, like it was tired and needed a break—*penché*.

When the ground stopped shaking, Venance's first thought was Cousin Maxo. He ran home through the streets. He passed collapsed house after collapsed house; the entire population of Port-au-Prince was in the streets.

Cousin Maxo's two-story house lay on a little alley. The cinder-block walls had given way and buckled outward. The first floor had come down, exploding massively as it made contact with the concrete foundations. Then the roof had come down also, staying largely intact. The house that had been two stories, or about twenty feet tall, was now just concrete slab on a waist-high pile of rubble.

*Krazé net.*

Madame Maxo was outside. She was showing up at the house just as Venance was getting there. She was saying, "Where's Maxo?" Then she was saying it all over again: "Where's Maxo?" And again, "Where's Maxo?" Venance knew where Cousin Maxo was. When Venance had left to play dominoes earlier that afternoon, Maxo had gone upstairs to take a nap.

"Maxo's inside," he said.

"Are you sure?" Madame Maxo said. "Is it true?" Venance thought a second. But he knew Maxo had been sleeping. He was sure of it.

"Yes," he said.

"Then he's dead," she said.

Venance Lafrance stood with Madame Maxo out front of the rubble that buried the body of Cousin Maxo. She began to cry. Now the neighbors were drifting out front of the collapsed house. Madame Maxo collapsed into their arms. All that evening and night, Madame Maxo lay on the sidewalk on a cardboard box out front of her collapsed house with her head in Venance Lafrance's lap. She didn't know yet—nobody knew—that the city was destroyed; she thought it was just her house that had collapsed. Venance ran his hand through Madame Maxo's hair to calm her. The radio announced that there would be another quake in the night, and the radio was correct: there were aftershocks all through the night. In the distance there was the sound of sirens.

Venance stayed with Madame Maxo for two days in front of the ruined house. For two days he didn't sleep. Neighbors cooked and passed around food—only Madame Maxo didn't eat. Venance had never been responsible for anyone before. Now he washed the children and made sure they ate, and kept far from the rubble, and stayed far away from the burning bodies. When Madame Maxo cried, he consoled her, as best he could. Madame Maxo had a little money in her pocket when the quake hit—that's what kept the family going. Venance himself didn't cry for Cousin Maxo. The tears wouldn't come. He felt light in his head—like he had been transported to some strange new world.

Behind the Église Sacré-Coeur—*krazé*—there was a little garden, with benches and a small statue of the Madonna. Both a school and a rectory had collapsed here, and many priests had died, their bodies decomposing not far from where we stood. A middle-aged man with a trim beard and spectacles approached me and asked in French if I had noticed the amazing particularity of the Madonna.

"No," I said. The Madonna had neither fallen nor was it weeping.

He looked at me a long time, as if I couldn't possibly be as dense as I seemed.

"She's turned to the east," he finally said.



"To the east?"

"To the east."

The Madonna, on further examination, had shifted slightly, several degrees off the horizontal.

The man went on to claim that *all* of the Madonnas of Port-au-Prince had shifted to the east. He had gone around and examined them, he said. I asked him what was the significance of this unusual fact.

"This could not be an accident," he said.

Venance Lafrance, wearing sandals, stepped on something soft and squishy—a lady's arm, just lying out on the Champ de Mars. Venance Lafrance, whose fast feet had made him a natural in the chicken game, sprinted off. Bodies. Bodies starting to smell, bodies rotting in the sun. Fat dead people. Skinny kids. Big strong corpses, corpses built from lifetimes of lifting, toting, and hauling. Bodies of families. Bodies of naked old ladies. Bodies of naked old men. All the bodies puffy and gray. A guy saying, "You got to see this," then a big crowd watching a couple of dead kids having sex in a hotel room on the Grand Rue. More bodies. Some covered. Some not covered. Bodies in flames—the smell of meat cooking. Still more bodies. A tractor loading up bodies, scooping the bodies into a dump truck. Venance figured, based on the numbers of bodies he saw in the streets, that most all of Port-au-Prince was dead. That's what Venance saw on the way from Cousin Maxo's house in Bel Air to my house. When he got to my house, it was closed, locked, and empty. Then Venance kept walking, all across town, to his niece's house in Carrefour. On the way he saw two young men, handcuffed, splayed out on the ground, sticky blood running river like from their heads. Shot by the police. The folks watching them called them *voleurs*—thieves. When Venance got out to his niece's house, it was gone, collapsed, like all the others.

On the radio they had announced that the government of Haiti had arranged free transport to the provinces by all available means. Venance left Madame Maxo and her children on the street beside the rubble of the house they had occupied: he was just another mouth to feed. Cousin Maxo's body still lay trapped under the crushed cement—a few days later he would be pried out and burnt on the street. Venance left Port-au-Prince with nothing but the clothes that were on his back when the quake struck.

The return to Jérémie was not easy. Others had the same idea as Venance, and the Wharf Jérémie was packed. The wharf was not large, and great nervous crowds jostled for position. There was no place to stand or sit. Venance heard snippets of conversation: "Let me go! Let me pass! I didn't die on Tuesday, I'm not going to die in Port-au-Prince!" People carried what possessions remained to them in huge bundles on their heads and in suitcases. Venance spent almost three days trapped on the wharf. The pier itself had collapsed, and access to the Trois Rivières was only by private canoe or dugout: those who could pay found a place onboard. Venance had no money; the big boat left; and he waited. He didn't eat. Water was his priority. He found some.

By the time the ferry returned, barges had been stacked to create a makeshift dock. He found a place on the boat—nobody knows just how many were onboard, but every available inch of the boat was packed: the aisle, the stairs, the decks. The mood was tense. A large aftershock hit, and from the boat you could see the city rise and fall. The passengers began to stampede back to solid ground. Venance shouted, "You're on the boat, you're on the sea! Why are you running? If you run on the ground, you could die!" But nobody listened. When the ground calmed down, they came back on the boat.

Then, finally, the boat set sail, and Venance Lafrance watched Port-au-Prince recede into the distance.

Venance's story has an epilogue, of sorts.

When Venance called me very early in the morning, it meant that he was alive—and that he wanted money.

He told me that he had big plans: he wanted to start his own business barbecuing chicken in Jérémie, and he was looking for an investor. I gave him a hundred dollars. Later, I learned that he spent it on a couple of pairs of jeans and some shoes. When I remonstrated with him, he explained that nobody wants to buy chicken from a chicken man who looks like a bum.

Where there's life, there's hope; and where there's hope, there's life.

Long live Venance Lafrance.