

## **Haiti – 1990 – Presidential and National Assembly Elections**

I fell in love with Haiti on June 29th, 1985. I remember the exact date because I left Haiti on June 29th, 1998. Thirteen years to the day I was so sure I would return. Somehow I never did. Haiti broke my heart in more ways than one, and to this day I have never let another place take hold of me the way she did, my Haiti Cherie.

It was an orphanage that first brought me to Haiti. I had just finished grad school and had decided to volunteer for three months. Well, I debated whether or not to apply to the Peace Corps. No one expected me to last three days, let alone three months, except those friends who heard Tahiti when I said to Haiti. But in fact it was love at first sight. Adopting to Haiti was one of the easiest things I've ever done in my life. It fit me to come and show, set like a sock, for reasons that are hard to put into words. It seems too easy to say that I fell in love with the Haitian people, though I did. It was so much more, though. I loved the language, the music, the food, the art, the chaos of the marketplaces. I even loved the heat. When I think of Haiti, I recall the scent of roasting coffee mixed with burning trash. Sugar cane charcoal and orange peels. Assent. I came to find intoxicating. I certainly wasn't blind to the poverty and suffering that surrounded me. After all, I was living in an orphanage with children who actually had parents for the most part, but who did not have the means to care for them. Nor was I blind to the Taunton Makut, Duvaliers's henchmen, who were still around in those days.

I guess I just didn't allow anything to detract from the beauty that was everywhere and extended my stay another two months, but then I really had to go. Why was it so hard to leave one of the volunteers at the orphanage put it this way. You know that you are loved here. Yes, that was true. Haiti loved me in a way I have never been loved before. And I returned that love, which is probably why I've never revisited it, would hurt too much. Back in the States, I cried every single day while going through the motions of looking for work. This was more than re entry shock. I was bereft when Baby Doc fell that February. I felt so guilty for not being there. I should have been there. But that was a long time ago. I returned to Haiti after only nine months without any plan in place. Bonjour kebab, as they say in Creole, the good Lord is capable.

A stayed at the orphanage until I found work with an NGO and was able to afford my own apartment in Pétion-Ville. It was there that I experienced Haiti's first election in more than 30 years, the 1987 election that ended in a brutal bloody massacre. I remember Jeeps filled with men firing their machine guns at random, including at my apartment. I remember pulling my mattress off the bed so I could sleep below window level. I remember feeling sick when I learned the sheer number of people who had been

gunned down as they attempted to vote, something I had always taken for granted and had not always bothered to do.

It was devastating and the three years that followed were even worse. Coup after coup after coup, at least five, maybe 6. Yet instead of driving me away, it made me more determined than ever to stay to do something, to participate in the healing process in any way that I could. The various NGOs I worked for were all doing good work, but I never felt that I was doing anything significant to help Haiti, at least not until IFES, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, hired me to work on the 1990 election. It didn't matter that I was hired as the office administrator. They could have hired me to make the coffee, and I would have said yes. I was thrilled to play the small part in Haiti's Democratic future.

Every day had meaning every day was significant. I don't remember much of the day-to-day work leading up to the election to be truthful. What I remember was the feeling of being part of something important. The weeks leading up to the election were violent ones, but then again, there had been so much violence in the country's since the *dejukage* the uprooting of baby dock that I had become inured to it. If there was gunfire in one section of the city, I simply took an alternate route. If I encountered a corpse in the road, I drove around it. It's not that I was particularly brave. It's just the way we live. Back then, everybody did it. There was such a high level of anxiety in those days and not just about another military coup.

The vast majority of people were worried about the rise in popularity of one particular candidate pair, Jean Bertrand Aristide. They were worried about his leftist leanings. They were worried about his charisma. They were worried about what it would mean to have a man of the people in power. It wasn't just Rs Ds, so-called radical ideas, about justice and equality that his opposition found so threatening. It was the influence that came from his passion and. Everyone knew that Aristide held the hearts of the poor in his hands. They would have done anything, he asked of them, which is why everyone from business owners to army generals to affluent Haitian housewives were absolutely terrified of him. Or rather, would his election would mean to their way of life? From the moment our state announced his candidacy, the poor took to the streets with handmade brooms and began sweeping the sidewalks and even the streets themselves. They wanted to make him proud because he made them feel proud. Once, titi. President, they cried our years of exploitation will be over, or so they thought.

I confess that I was crazy about him, Aristide. He was the first political candidate I ever believed in. He really cared about the Haitians I cared about. I trusted him. I placed my hope in him. There were at least another dozen candidates vying for the position, but

the eyes of the world were solely on one man. The election of a man like Aristide would influence politics far beyond the shores of Haiti. With the 1987 massacre fresh in people's memories, everyone knew that the presence of foreign journalists and election observers would not be enough to guarantee a safe election. But at least we were better prepared this time. When my boss Jeff Fisher asked me if I wanted to join the IFES team as one of the observers, I couldn't contain my excitement despite my vivid memory of 1987, it didn't even occur to me to turn him down. I remember I barely slept the night before the election. I was nervous, excited, hopeful, terrified. My stomach was in knots. I clearly remember thinking I might die today, but if so, I would do so with honour. I prayed for courage that morning, but mostly I prayed for Haiti. I was so invested in this election I couldn't bear thinking about what would happen if the military shut everything down again.

We decided to split up the IFES observer teams and head out in different directions. Since I was fluent in Creole, I knew the city so well. Jeff and I went off on our own. It was important to both of us to observe at the sites that had experienced the most violence in 1987. But first we wanted to head over to Aristide's Parish, Sanjan Bosco, where more than 50 people had perished in another brutal massacre. In 1988. We'll be brave or foolish, maybe a little bit of both. I remember feeling defiant. I was filled with righteous anger. And a sense of determination. If something like what happened in 87 was going to go down again, I wanted to bear witness to it. It was time to show some solidarity instead of just talking about it.

To our delight, everything seemed to be going smoothly, or at least as smoothly as anything goes in Haiti. We stayed for a while and then went and observed elsewhere. We checked in with the rest of the team by radio and everyone had good things to report. Turnout was low at first, but it was happening. I guess people thought that if a repeat of 1987 was going to happen, it would happen early in the day. As word spread that people were voting successfully, Haitians emerged from their homes and the numbers increased. By late afternoon, the lines were pretty long. After comparing notes with the rest of the team over lunch, Jeff and I headed back out with one goal in mind. We wanted to end the day and witness the ballot count at Le Cole, Argentine, the site where the highest number of murders had taken place in 87. Some from machine gunfire, others from the blades of machetes.

Eventually the polls closed and from what we could tell, no one had been attacked trying to vote. It was time to start counting the ballots. Jeff and I were hardly the only observers in that tiny classroom. There were OAS members, reporters, all kinds of people. By this time, I was exhausted. With everything winding down, the adrenaline that had kept me going all day was starting to fade. Was all getting to me the emotion of

the day, all that tension. My nerves were shot and my stomach was churning. I knew we had several hours to go since each ballot had to be removed from the box unfold. And held up one at a time, so every observer could see it before the vote was noted. I wasn't going to make it, I whispered to Jeff that I needed to find an out house, a Bush something, and I needed to find it quickly.

I dashed out of the classroom into the schoolyard, somewhat frantic, since there was no outhouse insight. I was going to have to find somewhere else. Just as I peed the gate, who should be walking in? But President Jimmy Carter and his entourage? I glanced up at him, mumbled a quick uh high, and then excuse me, and ran past him towards the gate. By the time I returned to the school, the president was gone. My one chance to meet a former president, and I missed it. That's life, I guess. And then it was over.

The votes were counted and everyone went home. The next morning was insane. As you know, the election was declared free and fair by observers and journalists from around the world arrested one with more than 67% of the vote was valid. Everyone took to the streets waving branches. It was such an emotional day. When I think back to my years in Haiti, I am most proud of that moment. It doesn't matter that my role was such a minor one. There are no small parts. I was married two months later. Hadi and I entered our equally fraught honeymoon phases together. I'm sure you know that our esteem only managed to stay in office for seven months before he was ousted. Given the enormity of the chaos he inherited was hardly enough time to even make a dent. But you had to have a much broader understanding of the world in order to get that. Aristide had promised a new heaven and a new Earth, a change of biblical proportion. How could that possibly happen overnight? Would you have succeeded if given more of a chance? Who knows. What I do know is that something died in me when the news broke of another coup. I lost my faith. Not in God, but in the notion that Haiti would someday emerge from the muck and the mire in which she was forever sinking. In Creole we often say *Ayiti bagensons num*. Haiti never has a chance. Just look at the sheer number of hurricanes and earthquakes and floods and epidemics that have hit Haiti since 1990, not to mention the political turmoil, the kidnappings and the current wave of gang violence. But back then, we believed we had hope and we rejoiced.