

1 - A TINY PIECE OF METAL

As I sat on the back of a *Dayang* 110 moped, an overstuffed black backpack tugged on my shoulders and a 50-pound flowery suitcase from the 80's rested on my lap with the tiny wheels digging into my legs. I was focused on a team of *UDMO* specially trained police officers (a version of SWAT) who had just led my moped driver through roadblock after roadblock composed of trees, rocks, sharpened metal spikes, nails driven through wood and broken glass. All the while, my mind returned to a tiny piece of metal that surrounded a window on American Airlines Flight 819 out of Miami.

My moped driver was a young man who grew up in the town where I work as a missionary. He was a typical boy in that he lived with his mom and siblings while his father was basically absent. His first and last name both began with J, so he was J.J., but no one ever called him that. When he transferred into the school where I administrated, I was his English teacher, and I got to know him better. Over several stretches, he spent a good amount of time at my house.

While hanging out there one day, he and a friend picked up my digital camera. I told them not to play with it. It was a clear command. They continued to pretend they were a photographer and a model. Thirty seconds later...CRASH! Pieces of the camera skipped across the floor of my house. It was a moment that made a huge impression on J.J. He often brings up the story to this day, noting that he was warned, flagrantly disregarded the fair warning, and then immediately saw the true justification for it. He has listened to warnings differently ever since.

Somewhere in the teen years, J.J. became arrogant and defensive. As his school administrator, things became tense between J.J. and me for a time. It came to a head early one morning. Students were allowed to wear street clothing (no uniforms) for a special occasion. J.J., whose family didn't have much money, showed up to school in an all-white sports outfit that looked like it should be in a magazine picture. He was dressed and ready to be seen. He was also looking for trouble.

My job in the school at that time included "yard duty" in the mornings. I would mill around with the 300 students before school to make sure no trouble developed. I heard a scuffle that morning and found J.J. in a fight with the man in charge of yard maintenance and security. A crowd had already gathered. Punches were about to be thrown. I pushed through the crowd of students and school cooks and stood between J.J. and the maintenance man. I took a powerful forearm to the side of my head. It was a punch intended for J.J., but I took most of it.

I remember the meetings school leaders had regarding J.J. that day. Should we keep him? Should we expel him? We had enough reasons to expel him for sure. We decided to keep J.J., hoping we could help him navigate what was obviously a difficult period in his life.

J.J.'s life did turn around, making him one of many success stories for that Christian school. By the end of 9th grade (the highest class offered by the school at the time), the school's director was visibly saddened to see J.J. leaving. He was now a favorite student. J.J. had become a model of maturity. His grades were top-of-the-class. He went on to finish high school in another town and then attended college in *Cayes* for several years.

Back in September of 2022, I was about to miss a flight out of *Cayes* when J.J. showed up to bail me out.

2 – TO THE RESCUE BACK IN 2022

J.J. had a dubious honor. During my 30 years in Haiti, I walked many paths with many people...garden paths, wooded paths, and beach paths. No one had ever gotten me lost, completely lost, except for J.J. Two separate times we had found ourselves deep in thorns and thistles with no path ahead of us or behind us. It was truly an unusual event, and it happened twice...twice with the same guy! It is ironic that he would be the one to lead me out of trouble years later...two times.

In September of 2022, the vehicle taking me to *Cayes* for a flight to *Port-au-Prince* was stuck at a roadblock outside of *Cayes*. We knew J.J. was living in *Cayes*. We arranged for him to come and meet me on the other side of the barricade. I would cross on foot, and he would take me on his moped to the airport. After some debate, I approved the plan, and we took off together on foot. People watched us closely to see what we were doing...a foreigner and a Haitian walking through a roadblock together. For many of those initial minutes, I was ready to turn around at the blink of an eye. As we got deeper into the plan, I decided to move ahead and trust the hearts of Haitians...both friends and strangers.

We hopped on J.J.'s little bike and went through a series of roadblocks. At one point, J.J. told people manning a roadblock that I was a doctor on my way to help people. Humor often diffuses a tense situation. They surely knew it was a lie, but it created a pause that allowed us to continue on our way.

I clearly remember the face of one angry man who demanded we not pass his roadblock. He was holding a tiny Coca-Cola bottle. When J.J. said we need to go through, the man was visibly upset. He attempted to smash the bottle on the pavement in front of J.J.'s front tire. Twice he tried. The tiny bottle didn't break. It only bounced around. He lifted it up and looked at it as if to say, "What is wrong with this thing?" The atmosphere ticked a few degrees cooler at that moment. His attempt to make a violent statement turned into quiet giggles from those nearby. We drove on through.

We finally arrived at the airport, and I flew home to PA that same day with proof that Haitian people are in general compassionate and helpful to each other and especially to strangers.

That event was replaying in my mind now as I flew into *Cayes* once again. This time I was headed in the opposite direction. With February 7th approaching, J.J. was going to be a part of this day as well.

In 1986, unpopular President *Jean-Claude Duvalier* fled into exile on February 7th. Since that victorious moment, Haiti has chosen the same date to serve as Inauguration Day. Sadly, presidential inaugurations are rare in Haiti. In my 31 years in the country, there have only been three inaugurations on February 7th. Power is more often transferred through a coup or some kind of upheaval. Many years, the date of February 7th is marked by tension in the streets coming from dissatisfaction with the political situation.

That was the reason I booked my flights for February 3rd and 4th. According to my carefully constructed plan, I would arrive in Haiti on Sunday, the safest day for travel. I would safely make it to my home by Sunday night. I would unzip my flowery suitcase, and allow my friends to discover things of monetary value and things of sentimental value: a brand-new soccer ball, gifts, food, supplies, and two bags full of my mother's famous ranger cookies. Then I would follow the news about the protests in the cities across Haiti as if it were happening in some foreign country.

Those plans changed on the tarmac of Miami International Airport.

3 – THE PLAN GOES SIDEWAYS

After a night in Charlotte, and after watching my flowered suitcase go up and down the luggage conveyer belts a few times, I arrived in Miami on time. I boarded Flight 819 to *Port-au-Prince* scheduled for a 10:30 a.m. departure. Passengers were seated, and I sent messages to the people waiting for me in Haiti that I would be arriving soon. I had plenty of time to make my 3:15 flight to *Cayes* and ride home to *Pasbwadòm*. Everything looked great.

Then, the pilot spoke to the passengers. Using the most gentle language possible, he informed us that upon inspection, technicians had discovered a small piece of metal stripping around a window that had begun to pull away from the outside of the plane. We would need to wait for a mechanic to arrive on site, consult the safety manual, and do what needed to be done. After an hour, we received more news. The strip of metal was clipped, satisfying the safety manual, and we were cleared for takeoff. Except, now there were ominous black clouds in front of us.

The pilot informed us that Miami International Airport was shut down until the storm blew over. For another hour, rain pounded the plane. Afternoon rainstorms in southern Florida are known for coming on suddenly and clearing just as quickly. This one did just that. Skies were clearing rapidly, and the motors of Flight 819 were being revved. It was 12:30, and enough time remained for the 90-minute flight into Haiti's capital.

Again, the pilot spoke gently to his frustrated passengers. Part of the same rain system that had drenched us was now due south of Miami. No planes headed to the Caribbean had clearance for takeoff until further notice. The window of time for me to make my final flight was closing.

My experience traveling into and out of Haiti over the years has led me to make as many contingency plans as possible. I had arranged to have a room in Port on Sunday night...just in case. I had also arranged for a missionary friend to pick me up at the airport in *Cayes* with his truck...just in case. As things twisted sideways, my contingency plans were gaining importance.

We landed in Port at about 2:20. Still on the plane, I noticed a plume of black smoke somewhere behind the big airport. I feared it was a sign of protests. By the time I went through Immigration and picked up my flowery suitcase from the 80's, it was nearly 3:00. My SUV chauffeur, another former student, sped from the big airport to the little airport next door. I learned then that the plume of black smoke was just someone burning trash. Port-au-Prince was calm and peaceful. We rushed inside the little airport and joined a growing line of people who had missed the final Sunday flight to *Cayes*.

My carefully constructed plan had fallen apart. A Sunday evening arrival at my home in *Pasbwadòm* was impossible now. A simple piece of metal stripping on a plane in Miami initiated a series of events that led to me being where I did not want to be. I was spending a night in *Port-au-Prince*, meaning I would be travelling on Monday morning...often the chosen time for street protests to erupt.

4 – ANTOINE SIMON AIRPORT

A nationwide protest was set for this Monday morning. Plans called for people to take to the streets and block the major roads all over the country. People were preparing for life to be paralyzed until February 7th at least. The questionable logic of the protest plotters said that shutting the country down with roadblocks would pressure the current Prime Minister to leave his post. He is public enemy number one. He has ridden the rocky throne of power in Haiti since taking over following the assassination of President *Jovenel Moise*. This current prime minister's task was to prepare nationwide elections. It has been more than two years. No elections have happened, gangs have expanded their territory, food and transportation are both outrageously expensive, and schools are closed regularly due to repeated tensions. For many in Haiti, the Prime Minister must go...hopefully on this Monday morning.

I enjoyed a quiet Sunday evening at a Christian guest house close to the airport in Port-au-Prince. At 5:45 a.m., I was in line again at the little airport waiting for a morning flight to *Cayes*. That flight was delayed, but we were finally on the ground in *Cayes* by 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning. I was now at *Antoine Simon* Airport, named after a Haitian president who was born in the region. As a crow flies, I was all of 38 miles from *Pasbwadòm*.

I remember when the *Antoine Simon* airport was being built. I think I was one of the first people from the general public to enter and visit the inside. Some of my friends in *Cayes* took me by the site to see the new addition to life in the Southern Department of Haiti. A man who worked inside noticed us looking at the new building and runway from outside the fence, and he decided to invite us in and give us a tour, probably because one of us was white. He works there to this day.

Several times I led sixth graders on field trips to this same airport. We scheduled our visits so that we could see a plane land and/or takeoff. It was a highlight of the excursion for many young students. I have happy memories of wide-eyed kids exploring a new world there. Then, ever since the gangs began blocking the main artery from the South into the capital, I have flown into and out of *Antoine Simon* Airport almost every time I travel.

At the airport on this Monday morning, I was content to wait things out. I was aware that this same airport had been the site of a violent protest just a couple of years ago. At that time, protesters somehow broke into the airport grounds. They were furious about the daily flights to and from *Port-au-Prince*. Business was booming...for the airline. Their prices rose often. Public sentiment said that the plane company was behind the gang-blocked streets, or at least propheteering from them.

So, the furious crowd decided that day in 2022 to break into the airport, steal a plane, and then burn it in the street. Sadly, they didn't bother to notice which plane they pushed out of the airport and lit on fire. Photos circulated around the world of a missionary mail plane in flames just outside of *Antoine Simon* airport in *Cayes*, Haiti. The innocent mail plane was parked at the airport while missionaries were putting a roof on a church. As so often happens, a victim's attempt "to be heard" ended up creating brand new victims.

Security breakdowns at the airport that day in 2022 were noted. So, on this Monday morning of protests and anger, teams of police officers were on duty and monitored the front gate as well as the entire perimeter.

5 - DECISIONS

J.J. lives in a tiny room close to the airport, and a member of the *UDMO* police force lives in the same building. They are good friends. That officer was on duty at the airport on this Monday morning. As I waited around, I quickly noticed two unusual things: a full *UDMO* team was sitting in front of the airport, and all gates were closed. I worked on my plan to have a missionary friend pick me up and take me to his house. There were many roadblocks between us, and he was unable to even think about driving to pick me up. So, I waited. I was content with spending a night in the airport if necessary. Many fellow passengers were there, security was visible, and I felt completely safe inside the airport grounds. I was assured by the fact that they had been overrun not long ago. Certainly, that would not be allowed to happen again. The atmosphere out front was calm. Some passengers came and went on motorcycle taxis, since no vehicles were able to navigate the streets. It would have appeared completely normal, if not for the presence of the *UDMO* team and the closed gates.

Then, late in the morning, I noticed that the airport's fire engine and a police vehicle sped down the runway to the far side of the airport. I later learned that they had discovered a crowd of people pulling on the chain-linked fence. At the time, I figured they were leaving through a back gate. Instead, they were addressing an attempt by a small crowd to enter the airport grounds...again.

Later, I watched one high-ranking police officer surveying a section of fence to one side of the runway. He walked toward the fence where we both heard a revving motorcycle engine in a wooded area outside the airport's fence. He evaluated the situation with his eyes, and he reached for his pistol. He never pulled it out, but the sound of the motorcycle disappeared into the distance as he walked toward it with his hand on his weapon. For me, it was proof that the people in charge were paying close attention to the situation.

While I sat quietly and waited for hours, J.J. had come to see me, and I was able to give him a gift I brought for him...*UNO*. He wanted to have a game he could play with several friends and neighbors to encourage friendships. I hid some cash in the *UNO* box. It was payment for J.J. because he had purchased my ticket for me at the airport a month earlier. I handed the box to him through the gate as many eyes watched us. A white guy giving someone a gift attracts attention. This *UNO* box was a good cover, hopefully throwing off anyone with bad intentions.

J.J. took the gift and after a lengthy conversation at the gate decided to go and wait across the street. At one point he brought me a *JUMEX* apple juice, banana chips, and a bottle of water. Going through his mind was what might happen if he left with me still in the airport. Would the white guy be forced to spend the night inside the airport? What would he eat? How would he sleep? How many days would it be? Rumors were spreading that the current strike would last for days...until February 7th at least.

J.J. knew getting home would be tough enough, with roadblocks all around the area. He also knew if he made it home, he wouldn't be able to return anytime soon. His thoughts kept coming back to me "alone" in the airport. (There were many people in my position, but it is true none were foreigners.)

The *UDMO* officer, who is friends with J.J. was stationed outside the airport, and he had spoken to J.J. once or twice during the day. J.J. had shared why he was there at the airport, having concern for

his American friend. Finally, the officer said, "Let's not be seen speaking in person. Call me on the phone instead." About this time, I told J.J. he was free to go home. My plans were to wait it out at the airport.

J.J. said goodbye to me, and I went back to my seat. Calls to the American missionary assured me that he was unable to travel and had no idea when things would open.

Though he had said goodbye, J.J. did not go home. He remained at the airport wrestling with his own decision. How could he leave his American friend? J.J. then received news from the officer that an *UDMO* team was in the process of escorting a police officer from the city of *Cayes* to the airport to catch a flight out. On their trip back to the city of *Cayes*, they could potentially escort the foreigner away from the airport...but it would have to happen right away. The officer added another condition: J.J. would have to be there with the American. The officer, to protect himself and his team, could not take responsibility for escorting a person he did not even know.

J.J. appeared at the gate and asked me if I wanted to take advantage of the offer. It was a small window of opportunity. In that moment, I didn't remember J.J. getting lost on the way to the beach two times. I thought instead about the previous time J.J. had so expertly taken care of me in the streets with roadblocks. I agreed and ran to get my flowery suitcase and black backpack.

6 – INTO THE ROADBLOCKED STREETS

A police pickup truck loaded with armed *UDMO* members sped up to the front door of the airport. A man jumped out and entered...obviously the officer they were delivering for a flight. J.J. was there with me beside the truck, and an officer motioned for me to get in the back seat of the cab. There was no time for the greetings that are such a beautiful part of Haitian culture. This was strictly business. My flowery suitcase went into the back of the truck. J.J. took off to go get his cycle.

These officers were helmeted and masked and wore camouflage uniforms with padding and bulletproof vests. Their eyes, however, were the simple eyes of human beings doing a job, not sure of what was to come. They didn't speak but nodded to me approving of my place in the vehicle.

As they drove into the street, they looked for J.J. who would follow us on his motorcycle. The driver looked back for J.J. and said, "Where is he? What's taking him so long?" I felt their frustration in moving slowly. *UDMO* officers in the street during protests are a target. The officer in the passenger seat pointed out that J.J. was already on his cycle out in front of us. We took off.

At the first roadblock, we slowed to a stop. I saw an identical police pickup truck with armed *UDMO* officers waiting in the street on the other side of that barricade. There were no protestors, but lots of eyes watching. The officers said I would have to cross on foot with several of them and join the other team. We did that, but now I would be riding with J.J. on his cycle and follow behind the truck from this point on because the vehicle was full of team members...a driver, three passengers in the cab, and four on benches in the back of the pickup. Everyone's sentences were short and direct. Moments mattered; it was clear.

J.J. lifted the flowery suitcase into the back of that second truck, but an officer quickly rebuked him. He was not aware of any plan to haul anyone or anything. J.J. froze with the suitcase half in and half out. In a tense moment, we all paused for a few beats. If this team rejected us, we'd be on the wrong side of a roadblock and all alone. Finally, another officer who was on a phone call motioned to go ahead and put the suitcase into the truck.

Now I was behind J.J. on his little moped headed toward several more roadblocks, following a team of *UDMO*, with my suitcase in their truck. One cause of concern in crossing roadblocks is the reality that you really can't turn around and go back easily. You've reached a point of no return in a sense. Our complete focus was on what was ahead.

The first couple of roadblocks were just tree parts strewn across the street. People who had blocked the road were nowhere to be seen. Two officers got down in unison and pulled the branches out of the way. The truck drove through, and we followed. That happened a few times.

Other barricades were more serious, like a full-sized tree that protesters had cut down and dropped right across the highway. Trees are like gold in Haiti. Shade is a life saver. Sadly, trees are just another innocent victim when mayhem takes over in a society. Everyone will suffer the loss of that tree for many years. It is not hard to recognize that the root forces behind actions like these are very dark. Other barricades included scattered spikes and nails sewn on the pavement. In those cases, a signal would be given and the whole team of officers would dismount to attack the problem together, either kicking debris with their boots to clear the way or joining together to push and pull heavier objects off the road.

At some point in our travel together, J.J. eased up even with the police vehicle. They were not happy. He was instructed to remain behind the vehicle and for the first time, an officer explained something to us. He said he wanted us behind the vehicle, "...in case they throw rocks at us."

At one roadblock, an officer noticed a block of wood with a nail sticking up. It had been placed in the middle of an open space between two branches. It was obviously a trap. Someone had placed it there hoping the driver of the police vehicle would choose the open space in the road and drive right over the nail, causing a flat tire which would immobilize the team for a great amount of time.

For street protesters, *UDMO* forces become the enemy. Creating extra work for them or slowing them down would be considered honorable accomplishments. A flattened tire would be an act worthy of a trophy.

This team of officers was observant and professional. They collected and removed many such traps as they made their way down the barricaded street.

Doubts crept into my head at one point. I convinced myself the decision to trust J.J. was an error brought on by the knowledge that he was able to help me once before. I was sure we would regret the decision to take to the street. In the tension of these moments, though, there was no time or place for rethinking. We had to work together, and we did. We looked out for each other. We made the best decision possible in each moment. We were calm and professional, like the officers.

7 – ACCUSATIONS AND A RESPONSE

At one roadblock, an older lady in a long humble dress appeared and helped the *UDMO* team remove debris from the street. She was upset, telling the officers that it was the people across the street who had built this roadblock. She and her husband (apparently) were helping the *UDMO* officers and obviously didn't agree with the road being blocked. I looked across the street and saw a young man sitting on the porch of a cement house. His manner was defiant, but he said nothing. He watched with folded arms as the older couple pointed to the building where he sat.

The debris was removed, and the officers were loading up onto the pickup again. An officer behind the truck, probably 10 yards in front of us, raised his weapon in the direction of the house where the young man sat. He paused, apparently giving the man time to flee. The man did flee as a shot rang out. It was the unmistakable pop of a tear gas weapon. We heard the shot, the whiz of the canister, and the impact on the walls of the house. I didn't look back. We were moving again.

As I recall the event now, there was silence both before and after that shot. It rang out so clearly due to the silence. I think, except for the shooter and the man on the porch, we were all just spectators in a theatre for that moment.

Anxious to leave the scene, J.J. had pulled up beside the officers again. I saw the proverbial smoking gun as the officer took an extra moment before mounting the vehicle.

My heart is broken for the older couple trying to stand up for what is right in their little part of a broken country. All the young people across the street from them will undoubtedly learn of the accusation. They'll know who pointed them out, and the older couple will most likely suffer the vengeance of the young men. Once again, decent honorable people will pay a price for speaking against darkness and decay.

At another roadblock where team members cleared debris, the same officer fired a canister of gas into an open path. I have no idea what he saw on that occasion. It was clear they were using the tear gas to dispel crowds and discourage those who had intentions of blocking the roads again.

The roadblocks we saw were all abandoned, probably because the *UDMO* troops had come through recently while delivering the officer to the airport. The folks who build roadblocks are generally unarmed and usually afraid of the *UDMO* teams and any police presence in general. *UDMO* teams have a reputation for shooting first and asking questions later...if at all. If things weren't confusing enough already in Haiti, there are now rumors flying around the country that teams of "fake" police have appeared in uniforms with the goal of shooting up crowds of people to create even more havoc. Either way, the architects of these roadblocks were nowhere to be seen.

That changed as we progressed closer to the city of *Cayes*. As we would round a corner, we began seeing people scattering. Some were probably rebuilding the barricades and setting traps on the ground again. Some were probably just watching and wanted to leave the scene quickly when *UDMO* appeared. After leaving one roadblock, we heard two distinct explosions behind us. To my untrained ear, it was not gunshots. We heard no bullets fly by or land anywhere. The police didn't react as if they were under fire. It was probably a homemade device that is intended to create panic and fear. We all progressed as if nothing had happened. I saw no one look back.

I asked J.J. if we were not yet close to the point where we could duck into the small streets and make our way to his house. He said, "Almost." People in Haiti are famous for their use of the word "almost." If you hire a carpenter to build you a table by November, and if you call him in October to ask if the table is done, he'll inevitably say, "almost" even if he just purchased the wood yesterday. On a trip, if you are over halfway to your destination, you are "almost" there, even if the last part takes another hour. J.J.'s report about being "almost" finished with the roadblocks was not much consolation.

8 – TO SAFETY AGAIN

At the beginning of our journey together, J.J. was wearing a blue Notre Dame cap and a handkerchief around his face. I was bare headed. At some point, I asked J.J. to borrow his hat so that I could stand out less as a white guy in the middle of the action we were experiencing. He gave me the hat but took the time to tie his mask on his face again. I wondered why he would try to hide HIS identity. Later, I learned that that was not the reason. He re-tied the handkerchief to prevent breathing in the tear gas fumes, which he had experienced in previous adventures with protests and police actions.

By God's grace, we arrived at a tiny path where J.J. could duck in and find his way home through tiny back streets. There was one hitch. My flowery suitcase from the 80's was now far ahead in the back of the pickup. J.J. and I discussed leaving the suitcase and trusting it to find its way back to me at some point. Then, we saw the officers waiving us ahead to come and pick it up. We did so, but wondered if it was a mistake. Tension was thick in the streets. I grabbed the suitcase and thanked the officers. I said, "*Bondye beni ou!* – God bless you!" without looking at them. They said nothing.

I put the 50-pound suitcase on my lap and situated myself in the limited space behind J.J. We drove down off the pavement, and the weight of the world lifted from us. Now the only danger before us was slippery mud and wet hills. It was a good trade.

J.J. turned right, turned left, and turned again until I was completely disoriented. Somehow, we stayed upright with all the weight on the back wheel of the *Dayang* 110. We drove through water, up hills, and in between cactus and trees. People saw us and smiled. Some looked twice at a white guy on the back of a moped in the back streets outside of *Cayes*.

J.J. drove down into a deep puddle and started up the other side. The moped lost power and we settled back down into the puddle where the motorcycle stalled. There was only one way out. I would have to get down, so both of my white sneakers plunged deep into six inches of brown water.

In another circumstance, I may have considered other possibilities before soaking my sneakers. But on this day, I gladly stepped down, flowery suitcase in hand, and climbed out of the water. A couple of smiling boys happened by as J.J. worked with the stalled motorcycle. They tested their English phrases on the white guy who showed up in their neighborhood and got his feet wet. The phrases worked. They smiled at my English responses. The tensions of the dangerous street disappeared as I experienced the other side of Haiti...the sweet side. We were only a hundred yards away from what was practically a war zone, but this was the peaceful easy country so many people love.

9 – SHARING *UNO* WITH NEW FRIENDS

God gives us windows. Sometimes we peer out of a window and don't like the view. We are repelled by what we see...by what WE see.

God, however, sees it all.

Someday we might see this life without the windows. Maybe we'll see clearly. Maybe we'll know why things happened the way they did, and we'll feel that sense of correction that always comes with a clearer view.

Until then, I will trust God and try to diligently seek His face, His will, His path.

After a cold bucket bath and time to recover from the action of the day, I ate rice cooked with coconut...my favorite Haitian cuisine. It was prepared by someone I had the opportunity to meet as a result of the window problem in Miami and everything that changed with it. Later, I enjoyed *UNO* with four people I most likely would not have met ever in my life. They are friends of J.J. They learned the new game, and we played happily together for hours. We laughed and learned a bit about each other.

As we played, a shelf behind me held a photograph in a stand-up frame. It was a photo of a young police officer in uniform. He was a rookie at the time of that photo. Years later, he would join *UDMO*. In that position, he would agree to help J.J.'s white friend who he had never met. We had hopes he would be there to play cards with us that evening. J.J. talked to him on the phone before we played. All *UDMO* officers were "on duty" until further notice. While we laughed and played cards, the photo of one young Haitian police officer watched over us.

J.J.'s description of his officer friend was that he smiled constantly and was friendly with everyone he met. He would check in on neighbors regularly. J.J. said that people often commented that his personality was more like that of a pastor than a police officer. His superiors chose him to lead his *UDMO* team because of his way with people. When I did meet him, J.J.'s descriptions were all confirmed.

Windows open and close in this life. I have learned to enjoy the ones that are open. A wise person once said, "Someday you'll die. But until that day, you won't."

I am thankful for the metal stripping that changed my plans. I am thankful God oversees it all. We escaped tragedy. Someday, we might not. That doesn't mean God is not God, and it doesn't mean His is somehow not in control of everything. He deserves to be worshiped when we understand and when we don't.

Can a person be thankful for the current hopeless situation in Haiti today? Could one somehow be thankful for the state of this sad world in 2024?

I want to live this life learning to trust His view more than my own, more than what I manage to see outside my own little window.

10 – HAITI'S SAD SITUATION

Haiti is a mess. In the absence of any clear direction, more and more elements are appearing on the stage. Sadly, they only tend to confound any hopes of progress or a solution.

1) The Prime Minister is not an elected official. His appointment to the position is a point of contention. He represents the government, but the government seems to be only a minor player in the stage production that is Haiti today.

2) Gangs control most of the city of *Port-au-Prince*. They do as they please with the population. No one knows how many innocent people have died. No one knows how many girls and women have been raped. No one knows how many children have been sold away into an unspeakable life.

3) A former military man who spent time in US prisons is now back in Haiti raising an army of protesters hoping to oust the Prime Minister. This man has visited several cities and has been welcomed by the population at large, but street protests never end the way they begin. For many in Haiti, blocking the road and being in the street is a proper way to show discontent. However, while the road is blocked, pregnant women are forced to deliver their babies at home. Some die. Sick people can't get any care, and they die. Doctors can't reach the hospital, and patients die on their hospital beds. Communication lines are cut. Supplies are not delivered. Quality-of-life (almost laughable already) gets worse for the entire population. Still, when one shot is fired by police, and one young protestor dies, the radio airwaves explode with hostility toward the police. No one ever mentions the people whose lives ended because roads are impassable for days.

4) One group of men who were initially charged with protecting the environment in parts of Haiti have transformed into a heavily armed and well-equipped military force. They are seen training in videos circulated everywhere. Their plans and intentions are unclear.

5) The nation of Kenya has offered to send 1000 officers to fight the gangs in *Port-au-Prince*. That plan is tied up in legalities and finance issues. Everyone can see the ugly history of outside help making things worse here in Haiti. Very few people hold out any hope for yet another foreign intervention.

So, we have the government, the gangs, the protestors, the armed para-military force, and perhaps an international force gathering on the same tiny playing field. Anger and frustration are thick. Accusations fly. Each group appeals to the public. Each group has supporters and vehement detractors on the radio. The result is sheer confusion and hopelessness.

Will two or three of them align at some point? Will each one independently fight the others seeking the coveted seat of power? Will Haiti flounder in confusion for generations?

It is in these deepest, darkest situations that we see God's beauty shining...if we choose to open our eyes. Recent Sunday School lessons prepared by Dick Cleary have me dwelling on the following :

1) God's love is the wonder of this world, but wealthy cultures too often can't see it over their piles of wealth and possessions.

2) Calvary's cross is true love, the very thing people write songs and novels about, but then so often reject when it looks them in the eye.

3) The transformation that God works out in the lives of people who cling to Him is real beauty, but we pay for fake beauty instead.

4) God's amazing grace is free, even to a gang member who has ravaged his own people, but somehow many "good people" just walk away from it.

5) The laws that God set up have governed societies for thousands of years, but every generation thinks it can improve them.

6) God intervening in man's sad state with a Sacrifice of His own is still the most powerful of all messages, yet we contort to avoid it.

As a missionary in Haiti, I have opportunities to help people look deeper out of their own little windows that really don't make much sense to the human observer. Together, we think about big things. We wrestle with love and peace, with violence and crime. It is a joy for me to live life here. It is a privilege. It is a mission. I still feel God's call to be right here.