

When the Heavens Opened

To this day, I hate thunder and lightning. The blinding light, the rumbling sound, like furniture being moved in heaven, still terrifies me. Thunder and lightning defined my first experiences of Haiti.

When I arrived in Haiti, almost fifty years ago, I was still a young girl. I had been sent to a village that we would call ‘the wop wops’ back home. We didn’t even have electricity in the house I shared with my older colleagues. In the evenings, we would light our kerosene lamps on the balcony, which shone through the neighborhood. The balcony let us look out over the neighborhood, and keep watch. There were some unsavory types around – because of the poverty and rumors of the activities of the *Tonton Macoutes* – so we had dogs to keep us safe.

I first experienced terrifying lightning on that balcony. Just after arriving, I remember our colleague, Alison, was working away on her hand-powered sewing machine, while the rest of us were chatting about scripture on the balcony. Suddenly, there was a terrifying flash, and, coming to my senses, I found myself cowering under Alison’s sewing table. Alison, bemused, asked me what I was doing. I was embarrassed, but, I had good reason to be scared! A couple of days later, when another storm came in, I was again out on the balcony, this time with another Kiwi, Jill, who was staying with us. Without notice, another storm arrived, and a tremendous bolt of lightning hit the ground just a few meters away. The heat was intense, and the hairs on Jill’s right arm were singed. The thunder that immediately followed almost knocked us off our feet.

Honestly, the general roughness and violence alone was enough to make Haiti scary. I had never imagined the storms would be this bad, too. I had come to Haiti on a mission, but my first real memory was of being saved myself.

One Sunday afternoon, I took my little motorbike to visit church, five miles away in a place called Arcahaie. On the road, I passed the sellers of yummy peanut tablets, and other vendors, and arrived at the church. Driving into the yard of coconut palms, I parked my bike and slipped into the sanctuary. For a while, we sang hymns together, but once again came the sound of far-off thunder. It was like an alarm bell, and everyone got up to make for home.

Back on my motorbike, I noticed the street vendors had gone. Although it was still early in the day, the sky was pitch black. This was going to be a bad storm. Not soon after, I heard a ‘chug, chug, chug,’ and my bike stopped. Oh no. The bike was too heavy for me to push. I knew no one nearby. And the rain was beginning to fall in earnest.

I was scared. A young, helpless, white girl in the middle of nowhere in Haiti. I had no way to call Alison, or my friends from church. I was trying to muster the courage to ask for shelter in a nearby house, but I was scared of who might answer the door. The inky darkness, with no kerosene lamps around, felt sticky, claustrophobic, and oppressive.

As the rain came down harder, I knew I had to do something. It was then that the road lit up. The lights of a car. A red car – one that I had seen before. The door popped open, and driving the car was Sovè, a young Haitian man that lived near us. He simply said, “Alison te vwaye’m,” in Haitian Creole, meaning “Alison sent me.” He helped me get my bike started, and on our way back, I followed closely behind the car, just to get some protection from the heavy rain. It was very strong now, and the lightning was flashing.

A few meters from the house, a strange thing happened. The storm clouds suddenly parted, and bright sunshine broke through. Sovè, seeing I was safe, waved out the window of the car and drove on. When I entered the house, Alison greeted me. I immediately thanked her for sending Sovè out to look for me. Alison looked puzzled. “But, I haven’t seen Sovè in a week!” she said.

I wasn’t sure what to think of it. When I returned to my room, I stopped and thought. It seemed that when God had opened the heavens, he had also sent an angel to come to my rescue. I hope he sends more angels to protect the good people of Haiti from the increasing violence.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. **The narrator uses slang from her home country to describe the village in Haiti as ‘the wop wops.’ What do you think ‘the wop wops’ means?**

Answer: An extremely rural area.

Hints/Clues: The slang is followed by the description of a village, suggesting a rural location, but also that ‘there were almost no cars, and we didn’t even have electricity.’

2. **What country do you think the narrator comes from?**

Answer: (Aotearoa) New Zealand.

Hints/Clues: Also tied to the first clue, the phrase ‘wop wops’ is Aotearoa New Zealand slang – sharp students will search for this as a clue (a search of ‘wop wops’ on Google Japan results in an 英辞郎 entry as a top result)¹. The other clue is that the narrator refers to Jill as ‘another Kiwi’ – Kiwi is a term Aotearoa New Zealanders often use to refer to themselves.

3. **The narrator occasionally refers to Haiti as being unsafe. This story was fifty years ago, but do you think Haiti has gotten safer?**

Answer: Probably not.

Hints/Clues: Around the beginning, the narrator comments that ‘there were some unsavory types around – not yet as bad as the violent Haitian gangs these days,’ suggesting that the situation has gotten worse. This is made more explicit in the very last sentence, which states that she hopes God will send ‘more angels to protect the good people of Haiti from *the increasing violence*.’

4. **When the narrator’s bike got stuck in an unfamiliar neighborhood, she was afraid. She specifically mentioned she was a ‘young, helpless, white girl.’ Why do you think being white would make her more afraid?**

Answer: Because white = likely wealthy.

Hints/Clues: This will likely be a difficult question, and points should be given for well-considered answers. Nevertheless, white people are a considerable minority in Haiti, and those there would likely be seen as wealthier than the locals, and therefore a target for potential crime. This is evidenced by the fact that in a place without electricity, the narrator was riding a motorcycle, and that she lived in a house with a balcony that overlooked the neighborhood – suggesting a higher position.

5. **What was the narrator was in Haiti to do?**

Answer: Missionary work/To be a missionary.

Hints/Clues: The narrator explicitly states that she ‘had come to Haiti on a mission,’ and that this is immediately followed by ‘my first real memory was of being saved myself,’ suggests that her mission was to save – this is evocative of Christian proselytizing missions. This is further supported by various references to heaven, as well as to God and to angels. As this type of work will likely be unfamiliar to most students, credit should be given for other well-reasoned answers, such as simply, ‘volunteer work.’

6. **The title has a double meaning. What do you think both meanings are?**

Answer: Strong rain and God’s intervention (or something similar).

Hints/Clues: A consistent theme is strong rains and storms – ‘the heavens have opened’ is a common idiomatic expression for sudden, heavy rains or storms. Also, the narrator explicitly

¹ <https://eow.alc.co.jp/search?q=wop-wops> 〈NZ 話〉 奥地

says that in her interpretation, 'when God had opened the heavens, he had also sent an angel to come to my rescue,' meaning she believes God opened the heavens to send an angel to earth.