

Vagabond Spirit

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The skyline glows. It's as if the stars themselves, burning brightly, have swooped down from the inky sky to rest on the pinnacles of the city. Sharp edges against the blackness define a cathedral to our near left, and farther from us, turrets made of stone. The structures seem to exhale a thousand stories of kings and heroes.

Here, at the peak of St. Stephen's Basilica, Niki and I huddle beneath the scattered snow. Her hands are in her pockets, while mine, fumbling, adjust my thick coat. Exactly eight hours ago, Niki and I shook hands for the first time. Over coffee, her broken English challenged my few words of Hungarian. Now we gaze into the misty night as friends.

The Danube runs faithfully below us, shaping the city into halves with its purple ribbon of water. Niki points out a long, dusky boat floating just near the bank and a shrouded hill meeting the horizon. "Soon, we'll climb it to catch the sunrise in our hands," she tells me, her translation lovelier than mine could be. This is Budapest; this is the city of kings.

Three-hundred seventy days and six airplane rides later, my spirit has been captured by the native drums of Port-au-Prince. Dust swirls around my legs in an endless fury. The noises are strange and assaulting: roosters and wild dogs, the chatter of twenty small, vivacious orphans, and a Granny wailing at the gate. All night long, the chants and drum beats carry on. A tiny girl giggles as I twirl her, and her pink dress flows around and around. "You have love for the children," the orphanage guard calls to me, his left foot plodding in front of the right. His jeans drag in the dust, designed for a taller man and longer legs.

I pull my draped skirt up to my knees and let the breeze dance around my feet, mimicking the native girls. In that moment, as we silently eat mangos in the shade, we are no different from each other.

This is Haiti; this is a country of faces filled with hope against the odds.

These are the places my heart has been both ravaged and made whole. My vagabond spirit cries out for the messiness of a world that is beyond the borders of my hometown. I crave dust in my sandals and the chafing of rough mountain wind on my face. The world is both imperfect and sublime in its glory, and I will not rest until I've set both feet in all its crooks and bends.

