

## **Dave and Pam Return to Ouanaminthe for Start of School and Encounter Hostility**

**7:00 a.m., Sunday, September 4, 2011 (written by Pam Mann)**

We sit in the apartment main room, enjoying the relative peace. The small generator which starts up before dawn when the clinic inverter power dies has ceased roaring. I should be glad that the racket and gas fumes mean power is being provided to the all-night emergency room below our bedroom. The sanctified part of me knows this and gives thanks to God; the carnal part of me says, "Finally!" when the roar grinds to a halt at full daylight and we can hear again the gentle rumble of motorcycles and singing in the Catholic mass. My unsanctified self is grumbling this morning that we have no running water. The custodians forgot AGAIN to pump up water into the roof tank yesterday. Now we must wait until the big generator growls awake later this morning so the pump (and the custodians) can work. Saint Pam is praising the Lord anyway. She also rejoices in the Lord despite the fact that her head is still congested and her ears still plugged since the air flight to the island. Her unsanctified dark side meanwhile is irritated that two NyQuil cannot provide a good night's sleep if she's coughing, hacking up phlegm all night. Whose body is this anyway? The saint's or the sinner's? The two constantly bicker over that very issue. At any given moment, God only knows who is winning!

Ouanaminthe seems to be in a kindred identity struggle. Will it be a peaceable community or each man for himself?

Sunday morning often means extra fruit at breakfast, thanks to the abundance of produce at Saturday's market. This morning, however, Dave and I shared one well-ripened banana, barely four inches in length, which Dave sliced over our corn grits and milk. Why the meager ration of fruit today?

Yesterday, the main market day of the week, protesters discouraged shoppers, including yours truly, from venturing down Market Street. It was the first volley of gunfire a few doors down that settled it for me. I was already decided against my weekly walk to the market when Hugues phoned a few minutes later, encouraging me to stay home. In the early afternoon, Dave did venture out in the opposite direction of the market. Our street, Vallières, is at the center of the protests because it has been neglected in the city-wide street pavement project. This past week the word spread quickly that certain city officials had made off with the funds that should have completed the project. We on Vallières have our sidewalks in place but the road itself remains rutted dirt which quickly turns to mud and mosquito-breeding puddles with every rain. Young protesters now have built barricades of bricks and rubble, maybe two feet high, across Vallières at three points: one just east of the Univers Medical Centre gate entrance, another midway between us and the intersection with Liberty Street and the third right at the intersection which includes the remnants of burnt truck tires.

Dave thought it was easy to slip past the closest barricade when no one was paying attention and the gunfire had long since ceased. His errand involved heading to Jaccin's pharmacy on Rue Espagnole, the main street through town which parallels Vallières near the town square. Jaccin had repainted the front of his store during August so it looked auspiciously fresh as well as unusual in that it was one of the few establishments actually open yesterday. Dave, though, saw no signs of intimidation of store owners. He guessed that some people chose, on their own, to play it safe and stay closed until the unrest abated.

Dave met one former IU teacher during his foray who said, "The people have a right to be heard. But throwing rocks and burning tires is not how civilized people go about the business of life together." If only regular government processes for grievances actually functioned, Dave thought.

Dave returned home with hydrogen peroxide, phone cards for my cell phone and a sobered expression. "I totally understand people shutting down their businesses to avoid trouble. Did I tell you what happened to Celius's sister?"

"No," I said. "What happened?" Celius is an extraordinarily short guy, not even five feet tall, who works at IU. A very pleasant fellow with an easy smile and a high squeaky voice, he sits with a roll of TP in the lobby during school hours and rations it out as students have need. I know TP maintenance engineer

does not seem like a real job but, believe me, without this position in place our school toilets would be constantly plugged and inoperable. Knowing the humbleness of his job makes me all the more appreciative of his joyful spirit.

"Well, she lived in Fort Liberté," Dave began. I immediately noticed the past tense of his verb and knew this story was not going to end well. "She had worked all day in her garden and was returning home when thieves attacked her and shot her to death."

"What?" This made no sense.

"I know. How much money can thieves expect to find on a woman who's been working in her field all day? I asked Celius this question. You know, he sat there in my office so stoically telling me this. He had come in to greet me since he'd heard we had just come back. This terrible story was his family news since I'd seen him last. *Méchanceté*, he said. Meanness. They just did it for meanness."

"What?" I was still trying to make sense of this. "Like some kind of drive-by shooting?"

"Who knows?"

We paused in the safety of our apartment and pondered the passing of Celsius's sister whose name we did not even know. It was our impromptu commemoration of her tragic death. This is why people close their shops when there's gunfire and unrest in the streets. They don't want to become the subject of someone's sad tale.

What's amazing is that this is a culture where many people say to one another, "God knows." And those are strong words of encouragement, an exhortation to keep hoping for better days because our all-knowing God is not blind to our suffering. Oh, that justice would roll down like a mighty waterfall (Amos 5:24)! Our mighty God is present with us in our suffering, so intimate with us that not a single tear flows unnoticed. Take heart. God knows.

*They stir up strife, they lurk;  
they watch my steps,  
as they have waited for my life.  
For their crime will they escape?  
In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!  
You have kept count of my tossings;  
put my tears in your bottle.  
Are they not in your book?  
Then my enemies will turn back  
in the day when I call.  
This I know, that God is for me.  
Psalm 56:6-9*