When Nothing Else Is Left

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The two-mile walk down the hills back from church featured many shades of green, leading young Sarah to realize, as before, that nothing could excite her soul more than God’s skillful designs. Everything looked so wild, free, uncontrollable. Only the small vertical patches of sugar cane seemed subdued, dotting the clearings in neat little, squared-off rows. They were surrounded by dense exotic foliage, of which the lengthy spears of bamboo and the broad towering trees, heavily weighted with breadfruit, stood out. The tiny dirt road, Sarah and her mother trod, appeared frightened by it all, cutting sharply to the left and then to the right, leaping upward and then back down again, careful with every bend to disturb nothing. Sarah was also afraid, but not of the surroundings.

Sermon fresh in mind, her mother had suggested they visit the old infirmary near the vacant British fort just outside of town. Theirs’ was the port-town of Lucea on the northwest coast of Jamaica. “Life is cruel, child,” her mother explained, “and it’s time you learned some of her wretched realities.” Sarah felt, even at twelve, she had already experienced some of life’s cruel realities. She had seen the young teen girls, keeping round the streets of town to bring home money, sometimes also wanting a baby. She had been harassed by Rastas keeping outside the school gate, selling ganga and promoting their cult-religion. She had heard the shootings downtown at the election rallies. She had noticed the old men, keeping round the storefronts, drunk on rum and Red Stripe from early morning, perhaps remorse over having run off on their women once too often.

Her mother’s spirit seemed deeply moved that Sunday, her voice increasingly mournful. “Mostly old folk in that infirmary, child. Getting old brings all kinds of ailments. Those poor souls have no one who cares so the infirmary takes them in.” Her eyes began to swell as she continued, “It’s a sin those old folk shut up in that barn, and no one to visit.” She pulled together to face Sarah. “Now don’t you fear, child,” she instructed. “Those old folk act kinda strange.” Sarah nodded convincingly, leading her mother to face forward again. She then pulled a sharp knife from her small, tattered handbag and charged the healthiest cane-stalk on the road’s edge. Cutting out a handy piece, she hurried back to her mother’s side and started peeling the woody skin between her teeth to suck out the sweet juices. Her mother continued, much more composed and unmindful of all the mischief, “It’s no wonder they act so strange, child, no one visiting them.”

Sarah noticed a farmer, back bent, long blade in hand, hacking at the wild grass around his eight-by-ten shanty. With savage blows,
he caused the grass to release a most pleasant odor to the country air. Her mother faced her again. “You just be friendly now child, and pray God you have a soul visit when you’re old and sick.” The young girl couldn’t feel what it was like to be old and sick and wondered how to act friendly while so afraid.

The air started in motion as they made their way out of the steep hills down onto the narrow strip of coast which butted the sea. Sarah counted the dugouts on the beach to be certain the fishermen had all returned. Upon entering Lucea, her mother hollered to a friend, sweeping her porch. “How keeping, Esther?” she asked. “Got no time to talk now. Me and the child have business.” They exchanged goodbyes before she turned back to face Sarah once again. “It’s wrong to share your good works with others, child,” she admonished. “That’s boasting, and God will take his blessing back.”

Leaving town, the infirmary came into view, and Sarah’s fear grew with every step. An old long structure, she had passed it many times to and from school but always at a safe distance and never with the thought of entering. None of the children dared approach it, except maybe Lenroy, but he was crazy. All sorts of strange sounds came from that place. Everyone knew it to be full of demons. Now Sarah was headed inside. She clung to her mother’s long dress. “Don’t be afraid, child,” her mother repeated in a useless last attempt to calm her.

After entering, her mother explained their intentions to the nurse while Sarah clung close behind and scanned the long spacious room. One old lady, lying frozen in her sickbed, hollered endlessly for the nurse. Another kept banging her metal cup against her wheelchair. Occasionally, a bed-ridden old man, down toward the other end of the building, would scream out as if in unbearable pain. Sarah grew even more afraid when she realized that everyone else seemed so unaware of it all. Perhaps some evil power had cursed her with an extra sense, enabling her only to perceive all these strange goings-on.

She continued to scan the room, taking great care not to get caught staring at anyone. Many had fixed their eyes on her as if deeply offended with her presence. She cringed at the thought of their silent judgments. Could any of them be safe to approach? One tiny old lady, whom her mother was trying to talk with, had shuffled across Sarah’s view several times. The woman’s relentless peer had burdened her heavily with guilt, as if she, Sarah, were the cursed soul personally to blame for the old hag’s decrepit condition. Sarah was careful to avoid her in her last slow scan of the large room.

At the end of her probe, Sarah noticed an old man propped in a wheelchair in the near corner. His expression seemed different from the rest, almost forgiving of life in spite of all it had done to him. Short silver whiskers crowded his black cheeks, like the many stars of
a clear night, and for a moment, Sarah could hear the high-pitched, almost electric sounds of thousands of crickets, voicing their nightly hymns in unison. He looked very old and fragile, but his wrinkle-laden smile somehow signaled that he would be a refuge from the rest, just like a sudden shower in the breezeless hills. Sarah eased cautiously over to his side.

He was very open and talked as if he had known her long. Perhaps, as her mother had mentioned, visitors were rare, and he was very lonely. "Young lady," he said, "God has answered many a prayer for me, but right now, his bringing you seems to be one of the sweetest." Sarah felt that her mother had had more to do with her being there than God, but also realized that the old man's loneliness had probably moved him to see her presence as some great fulfillment to his many days of hope.

The blanket on his lap had slipped, and when she lifted it back to his waist she noticed his legs were off some distance above the knees. She became very frightened again and wished, right then, that her mother would quickly tire of visiting each of the beds and take her home. Better yet, she wished she had never seen such a sight. Perhaps she was more afraid of suffering the same fate than from the shock of first seeing it. Her whole future depended upon her ability to run, and she had never before considered any such thing happening to her. She loved to run and trained almost daily. The freedom and authority it gave exceeded any experience she had ever known — racing past the other children on the rural roads or sometimes merely alone on the beach, just her and God. She was hoping to place high enough in the national competition to one day get to the United States and attend school there. For her, running was the only way to make her dreams reality.

The old man again eased her fear with his cheerful manner and positive view. How could someone in such wretched condition be so happy? He rambled on and on about his long, colorful life, causing her to suppose that his full past was the reason for all his joy. But his faith in God seemed powerful, more so than her mother's. When he spoke of God and the things that he was looking forward to in the next life, Sarah was amazed. Even their preacher, Jeremiah Ashley, a great man of faith, had never spoken so confidently about resting with the Lord. She asked the old man how he could be so sure that his death would bring such a great blessing. He answered at once, "Young lady, I'm old enough to know what life gives and takes. Life has given me more than I could ever have desired and has taken more than I could ever have feared. All a body can hope for at my age is enough wisdom to understand that there's nothing left but the promise of God. That's my joy, my strength, the soul of me."

At first, she thought it odd that someone with so great a past and so little, if any, future could hold so much expectation for what
was yet to come. But then, she realized that the old man's thinking was very sound. For him, there was nothing else left. What honest hope could he have but the promise of God? His words stayed with Sarah even as she and her mother traveled home that day, but they were quickly forgotten during the course of her busy week.

The following Sunday, after church, she asked her mother if they could return to the infirmary. Her mother was so surprised by this strange burst of enthusiasm, that it took her a moment to say yes. Unlike their previous visit, Sarah was not disturbed by the relentless, eerie sounds. When they entered, she looked quickly to the near corner. Then the old man's words began to sink deep into her head. The bed was sheetless, the wheelchair gone. Apparently, he had received the blessing for which he was longing.

Sarah thought. Her eyes began to swell and tears started flowing. Somehow that frail old man had legated a rare wisdom to her from another time, past. Her whole perspective had broadened. Perhaps she would never run fast enough to leave Jamaica. Perhaps some tragedy similar to the old man's did await her. She now realized that her future held many uncertainties. With that in mind, she began to pray that, like the old man, she too might one day honestly realize there is nothing left to hope for but the promise of God.