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# WILLING TO DIE?

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*This travel warning is being issued to inform American citizens that, due to the continued unrest and a steady deterioration of the security situation in Haiti, including violent confrontations between pro- and anti-government forces, the U.S. Embassy has further reduced its presence in Haiti with the orderly withdrawal of Peace Corps volunteers. The Department of State strongly urges American citizens to depart the country . . . at their first safe opportunity.*

— U.S. State Department warning, February 19, 2004

**A** body lies in the middle of a dirt road near where we live, tennis shoes poking out from under the cardboard and branches laid over it, flies buzzing around. Political demonstrations spin out of control as pro-government gangs swoop in with clubs and guns. Plumes of smoke rise from burning tires at intersections around the city. Roadblocks manned by angry young men pop up at random; they might take your car, or much more. A man in a wheelchair whom we

see regularly on the way to work is murdered for his political views. Eleven radio stations are ransacked. Three foreign journalists are hacked to death by the machetes of an angry mob. Whispers circulate that those in power are offering human sacrifices, including pregnant women, to spiritual powers. A French woman is kidnapped. The rebels are coming. Helicopters — an overhead whir that usually means the president is on the move — are busier each night. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide announces he will fight to the death. U.S. Marines come in to protect the American embassy, and ships are stationed offshore to ensure Haitians don't escape to south Florida's beaches. I receive phone calls and e-mails from incredulous friends and family, asking, "Why haven't you left yet?" The rebels are coming closer to Port-au-Prince — and with them the potential for a chaotic civil war between insurgents and gangs, both heavily armed. Police strip off their uniforms and dash in their underwear into the hills. Jails around the country empty.

**A**s the above mixture of truth and rumors swirled at increasing velocity, my wife and I were in Haiti working for a grassroots development organization. We consulted with many of our Haitian and American friends and co-workers about whether we should leave. They all said it would probably be safe for us to stay, but wise to go. To one Haitian man in our office, I said, “It’s awful. I can just get on a flight and leave, but you can’t.” The fact hung there for a moment. Then he shook his head and said, “I know, but I’m arranging to take my wife and two kids and stay with family in the countryside. Go. Go and come back, and we’ll be together after things settle down.” We hugged and returned to figuring out our respective plans.

The rebels had just taken over the north of the country without much resistance, and clearly a clash in Port-au-Prince (the president’s power base) was imminent. Haitian radio stations, the U.S. State Department, and our neighbors were daily spinning out worst-case scenarios of societal breakdown. President Aristide’s prediction was a “blood bath.” My wife and I talked every day about what to do, about how to make a decision like this. I found myself awake at 3 A.M. considering what I was willing to die for, not as an abstract philosophical exercise, but as a practical concern: would I call the American Airlines office in the morning?

I imagined living with both decisions: staying and going. I knew going would carry some regrets, whereas staying would result either in no regrets or devastating regrets. We considered the idea of my wife going and me staying. Chances were I would be safe if I kept out of the city. But there was also the chance of a messy, prolonged civil war. Would people target me, a foreigner, on the presumption that I had money or things worth stealing? I couldn’t do my job if it wasn’t safe to move around. I could accomplish more from Florida.

My sleep was fitful, my dreams troubled. I questioned my own integrity. Pride (pitiful, but it’s true) was urging me to stay: I would secretly enjoy being able to say that I had lived through a coup, which would somehow boost my legitimacy. Fear and the survival instinct — as well as the love that compelled me to protect and be with my wife — told me to go. On the one hand, I didn’t want to abandon the people I had come here to live with and work alongside. On the other hand, there wasn’t anything I could do for them in this situation. And so it went, round and round.

**A**bout five years ago I was working in Shkodër, Albania, during the Kosovar-refugee crisis. My first night there, I was held up while walking on a dark street with a new Albanian colleague. The two young assailants unsheathed massive bowie knives from their belts. (There was something Wild West about the place.) My colleague stepped between them and me and told the teenagers they had better not do anything, or his family would quickly and surely exact revenge. The robbers apparently weren’t in the mood to start a family blood feud, which is not uncommon there. They let us go. The encounter reinforced something I was told over and over in Albania: “Never, never go out at night.”

One Saturday morning a group of Albanian friends and I

went to the beach, a couple of hours away. I drove a rust-colored SUV, and another group followed behind in an old Volkswagen van. As we drove home in the afternoon, I looked in the rear-view mirror and realized the van was no longer behind us.

We backtracked on the narrow, treacherous mountain road to find the van aflame due to an electrical malfunction. The driver and passengers were safe, and together we watched sadly as the tires melted and the frame roasted to a charred skeleton. It was late afternoon, and we needed to get home to Shkodër before sunset, but not everyone from the van could fit into my SUV. I drove as fast as I could to get the first group back as dusk fell.

By the time we arrived in Shkodër, it was already dark. We still had to go back for the handful of people we’d left waiting by the charred van. I was the best driver, and the SUV was effectively mine, but I was reluctant to be out driving at night. It was not unusual for armed gangs to set up roadblocks on country roads, ambush drivers, and steal their vehicles. A few of us consulted. “You stay,” they said. “It’s dangerous. We’ll go. It’s better if we go.” So I put my keys into the capable but inexperienced hands of a sixteen-year-old Albanian, and he went back for the others, taking with him an adult who couldn’t drive.

Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” I was not willing to lay down my life, nor even risk harm — rather, I handed that risk to someone else.

I assume my Albanian friends and colleagues lost some respect for me that evening. I certainly lost some respect for myself. Nothing happened. Everyone returned safely. I still regret not having driven. The choice revealed something about me, and also, as such decisions do, played a part in shaping me.

*(end of excerpt)*