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Lorna Van Gilst
Dordt College

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Pearls Before Swine

by Lorna Van Gilst

We stood on the starboard deck as the *Skyward* eased us through muddy swirls of brine and touched Port-au-Prince with a soft nudge.

“When you disembark from the ship, you will be surrounded by children asking for a quarter, a nickel, a dime,” the cruise director had told us. On a Monday afternoon the children should have been in school, but they well knew when the ship came in. “Don’t give them handouts,” we’d been told. “Ask them first to carry your bag or act as your guide.” The economic leaders wanted to wean the youth from the notion that one can live by begging.

Waiting for clearance, we watched two dozen Haitians attach themselves somehow to one gaudy suburban bus, which then swung on two wheels past the dock and up the mountain road.

All of us women wearing skirts, in deference to local custom, our stream of Americans flowed down the gangplank and into the eddy of schoolboys, vendors, and taxis there to meet the ship.

Our driver lost no time packing us into his rusty old Thunderbird, careening through the city, honking, dodging potholes and natives, who stepped aside calmly without a waver of the broad bowls balanced on their heads.

Everywhere, the schoolboys appeared—in the church, in the shops, in the marketplace—hovering around the rich *Americanos*, eyeing pocketbooks and handbags. I found myself wanting to shake them off. But, of course, I didn’t, for I am a decent woman, not one to judge people for being poor.

I tried to resist the typical tourist routine, but the vendors were ready to dicker. Their wooden salad bowls had such a lovely grain that I too returned to the taxi looking every bit like the exploitive American, as if sneaking off with a forbidden chunk of the petrified forest.

Back at the ship, the six of us burst out of the tight taxi—at least the squeeze had spared us the jostle we would have felt had we not been so tightly wedged in. Ascending again to the third deck of the *Skyward*, we looked down on a rutted little dinghy bobbing on the ripples below. Suddenly a dark hand reached out of the water and threw something into the boat before descending again. A black head popped above the murky surface, and then another hand, and it too tossed something into the dinghy. Half a dozen more quick black hands flung a trinket or two into the little boat. What channel gems were they collecting, I wondered. And how could they see what to claim in that cesspool in which we were anchored?

The sun caught the gleam in the bottom of the dinghy, and I noticed then the row of old men leaning over the deck rail to fling loose pocket change into

the sea at the young lads, black seals in a filthy Sea World leaping up to catch the toss in mid-air. Mostly they missed, for the smirking old men at the rail, having listened well, made sure the schoolboys did some work for their pay.

All the while a phrase kept ringing in my head—pearls and swine, pearls and swine, don't cast your pearls before the swine. Yet it seemed to me that the swine were casting the pearls. I regretted that my people should be so entertained by making the little dark sea beggars jump. But I kept watching and the old men kept tossing and the schoolboys kept jumping. And we were all entertained.

In an hour or so we left it all behind—the potholes, the poverty, the schoolboys, a good bit of American money—even a drunk passenger holed up in a local bar. I was ready to forget the guilt, put it behind and move on to another port. A luxury cruise was difficult enough to justify back home; Port-au-Prince had only deepened my guilt.

Back at sea, the constancy of the waves restored the economic balance. The old men returned to their wives, their berths, their bars. I knew that as soon as we docked in San Juan, I would put the dinghy safely out of mind.

But I could not. Nor the old swine at the rail.