My Spiritual Hurricane Seasons

A True Testimony

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Introduction

Hurricane! Oh, hurricane! What a devastating occasion it was to look down memory lane and reflect on those heartbreaking, stormy days that dashed against my life. I was thrown into the eye of the storm, whipped by its tail, spat upon by the rain, and tossed left and right by the wind. I remember standing there and witnessing the damage dealt by the hurricane as it gracefully passed over my island, continuing its destructive path as it searched for a resting place to die out.

Oftentimes, I would feel numb at the sight of the destruction. It caused me to do things I normally wouldn't—things I would regret later in life. Getting to the root of my problems was how I realized God was putting me to the test. He wanted to see how well I would recognize His hand in the midst of the hurricanes, so that I may come to trust and depend on Him for guidance.

My experiences, with their stormy days and nights, have shaped me into the woman I am today. They gave me the opportunity to look through God's binoculars in faith. I could clearly see the hand of God was upon me, preparing me for something greater and better than I could ever imagine.

This book is about the series of hurricanes I've encountered during my journey on this planet Earth. They were a life-changing ordeal for me, but with the help of God and the people He placed around me, I was able to survive them. I had to go through something that would break me and make me, all over again, into the person God wanted me to be. My aim is to help others understand there is hope and a light at the end

of the tunnel, so long as you undergo the process of being tossed around—however painful that might be.

Please note everything in these pages are my personal experiences and how they've impacted my life. Yours will be different, and that's okay. I'm just happy I could share these teachings with you.

Chapter One

Growing Up on Saint Martin

Saint Martin is an island located in the Caribbean Sea, less than two hundred miles east of Puerto Rico. Each year during the hurricane season, it is hit by a handful of hurricanes and tropical storms, devastating the local villages. The island is split in half, the north belonging to France and the south belonging to the Netherlands.

It was on the northern French half that I was born. I grew up in a household of nine children, though it should have been ten. Our little Star was the last. She shone on this earth for nine days before her life was cut short. Even in that brief time, she had become very dear to us all. She was our baby sister, and we loved her.

It was uncertain what her exact cause of death was, but the doctors told us it may have been kidney failure or possibly brought on by my mother lifting heavy things during her pregnancy. There had not been much rain that season, and so she had to fetch buckets of water every day. Or perhaps it had been the result of my mother's emergency C-section. The hospital's head doctor, the only one on the island in those days with the proper expertise, to possibly confirm the assumption, had been called away to another island. So the conclusions were unclear.

My mother stayed in the hospital for the duration of my little sister's treatment, hopeful that in the end she could bring Star home. Alas.

"What do you mean—my baby will not be going home with me?" she demanded. The news devastated her.

We all cried together, knowing we had nothing to show for what had grown in my mother's tummy for nine long months. A day later, Star

was wrapped in white linen and buried in a little shoebox my father had saved. My oldest sister and brother accompanied him to the cemetery, along with two family friends. Our mother remained in the hospital; she could not bear to witness such a horrible ordeal.

I don't believe she was ever the same after that. With the loss of her child came the loss of her sense of direction and self-worth. After she was discharged from the hospital, she remained in her bed for weeks. My oldest sister begged her not to give up and to not abandon the rest of us, but my mother no longer had the motivation to take care of our family. We were the last thing she wanted to think about in her grief, something we struggled to understand.

Before our tragedy, my mother would dress us up every Sunday morning, and we would follow her to the Catholic church in our small village. That stopped after the death of our little sister, and she never attended church the way she used to.

We would, however, occasionally go with my father to the Methodist church not far from home. His faith was important to him. He would say to me, "My child, when you go to bed at night, put your shoes far under your bed. Then, when you reach for them the next morning, you will be right where you are supposed to be—on your knees. Stay there for some time in worship."

Whether we liked it or not, life continued. My father did the best he could—combing our hair and so forth—together with my oldest sister, who was only twelve years old at the time. When this awful tragedy took place, she had to step up and take over our mother's role. There were other people helping out here and there, but when they left, there were still things that needed to be done.

We were never to speak of our little Star again. My father decided it would be too hurtful for my mother to ever bring up the subject. Yet the mystery of how my baby sister really died haunted my family for years. That, of course, was also never to be brought up. It wasn't until four decades later that I chalked up the courage to ask about what truly happened.

I was seated on the veranda with my parents and some family members visiting from Antigua. As we chatted, my inquiring mind decided to bring up the sensitive topic of little Star. The question made my family go quiet for a moment. My father stood from his chair and

paced the room. With a soft, low voice he said, "She was an angel. When I looked into her eyes, I saw something was different about her. She just didn't have the wings to prove it. Oh, how beautiful she was, like a glowing star. Maybe it was better for her to die than for her to live and grow up with a disability."

Then my mother responded, "I don't know exactly what it was that she had. All I know was that her movements were very slow while she drank her milk. One day I took her in my arms for a stroll in the corridor of the dark hospital ward, just admiring her beauty. When my arms got weary, I went back to my room and sat down to sing her a lullaby. In a split second, I felt her stretch her little body out, pressing it deep into my arms. She felt different than she did a few minutes ago, and that's when I grew concerned. I called for the nurse to come and see what was wrong with my baby.

"The nurse told me Star was going to be okay. She took Star out of my arms, and I never laid eyes on my baby again—alive, that is. I later learned she had died in my arms. I couldn't believe she was really gone."

My dear Star, we might not have known you the way we wanted to. Just know we will forever love you. Those nine precious days we had with you will always be cherished. You may not have had the burial you deserved, but we will always carry you in our hearts. Farewell, dearest little sister of mine, until we meet again someday.

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Like most families in those days, giving children a whipping or correcting the neighbor's child was considered a normal thing. I can't begin to comprehend the severance of the punishment that was given to our friend next door. Her grandmother would tie her up on the balcony for hours as punishment. And those times we went home to report how Miss So-an-so corrected us after lingering on the street when we should have been home from school? I can tell you, there was more where that came from. My family was no different. We just felt our whippings at home were far worse than most.

The beatings began long before the death of little Star, but as the years went by, they grew more intense. At times, like a hurricane, our

father would strike us at any given moment, and we had no idea what brought it on, what had accumulated in his furious storm. We knew more rain was coming if he came home and found our daily chores were not done on time.

My father would whip us with whatever he could get his hands on. Sometimes he used Japanese ropes, and other times he would cut an old fan belt from one of the cars he was working on and use that on us—oh, yes! I remember he had this black belt with metal holes in it. When he whipped us with that belt, it left a nasty mark on our tiny bodies, imprinting the holes.

Electricity on my island was distributed through heavy-duty cables. They were elevated in the air using strong poles, not underground like they are nowadays. Those cables were so stiff, we weren't able to bend them with our bare hands no matter how hard we tried. And when that thing came in contact with the flesh, it would rip it open, inflicting unbearable and indescribable pain on us children. We were sent to the sea to soak the wounds. The salt made them burn like hell, but being in the cool water was still soothing.

Hiding my father's weapons was unwise. He would become very angry when he couldn't find them, and without hesitation, he would search for another object to use. That was how he gathered so many different kinds.

One day, he called us to his chamber in the yard and sent us out, one by one, to look for his missing weapons. We concocted a scheme to trick him into believing we were unable to find them. It was a brilliant idea, we thought, and it proved just how close we were as siblings. But our father caught on, and the plan blew up in our faces. We paid a humongous price for lying. After that, we decided not to hide *all* the weapons at once, but only the ones that did the most damage.

Looking back at those moments, it's funny how our father acted as though we'd devised a major conspiracy in hiding his weapons, speaking to us like criminals. Though how could he blame us? How could someone send you to fetch an object to beat you with and expect you to be in your normal frame of mind? I remember those journeys I took in search of a weapon, knowing I was going to be whipped with it. I was able to choose, and so I usually brought back a normal belt because it was softer than the others.

My mind began to form ways of enduring the whippings before the blow arrived. I thought of them as storms and treated them the same way. I started paying more attention to the weather forecast (my father's mood) to gauge exactly what category of storm I was dealing with. Just a quick glimps at his radar was sufficient to detect whether or not I was going to be spared from the rain. The whippings were coming my way, ready or not. So, I would brace myself and even try to hold them back, but I had no control over them, he was a strong man. I actually felt the blows before they landed on my little shivering body, and once the weapon or the rain *did* hit, it didn't matter. I had already mentally prepared myself to deal with them. Rain would always come; it was a part of nature. Even when my mother did her part to warn us about not getting wet—just like the weather channel offered numerous warnings—we didn't always listen. Occasionally, we did put ourselves in the position to get wet.

One day, my father assigned me and my sister Verna to paint a cement mixer for one of his customers. He placed it in the garage before leaving for work and said, "This is oil paint, be careful not to get it on your cloths. If it gets on your hands, use some thinner to remove it. I need it done by today."

We took the brushes and proceeded to get the job done. Coming to the end, I realized we didn't have enough paint to finish the job. We looked at each other, puzzled at what to do next and fearful of what our father would say. Desperate for his approval, we came up with a plan to solve the problem.

"If Daddy said this was oil paint, then we can stretch it by using a little oil," I suggested. My sister agreed. We added water to stretch water paint, after all; it only made sense to add oil to oil paint. So that's exactly what we did.

Our father got home very late that evening and was pleased with the job. The next morning, we followed him with pride to the garage to take a last look at the cement mixer before delivering it to the owner. He placed his finger on it to make sure it was dry to his likeness, and to our surprise, his finger had paint on it.

"Aye!" he exclaimed. "What did you guys do?" He was staring at us with wide eyes. I never knew my father had such big eyes until that day.

"N-nothing," I stuttered as I turned to Verna. She'd gone to hide behind me.

After few seconds of silence, she said, "We just did what you told us to do—we painted it, and when there wasn't enough, we added some oil in the paint to stretch it."

"What?!" he screamed. We didn't understand why he was reacting that way. "This thing won't dry with extra oil on it! Scrape it off!" he shouted.

It took the entire day to clean off the paint. We were terrified we'd receive a beating on top of the extra work, but it thankfully never came. The job of scraping the paint, sanding the mixer, and then painting it all over again was enough of a lesson for one day. I learned that if I wasn't sure of something, I shouldn't be afraid to ask for instructions.

I'm sure all this sounds abusive, but in those days, the blows were a normal thing, even if they didn't feel right. We were told our father did it because he loved us so much and wanted the best for us. In his mind, he needed to beat us to keep us in line and out of trouble. He was very protective of us girls too, and never allowed us to go anywhere on our own. We were always accompanied by him. As we grew older, our brothers, while younger, took up the torch of escort.

People often wondered why and came to their own twisted conclusions. In high school, the other children looked down on us and teased us for our family's behavior. I cannot begin to formulate the things that were said about us, but the bullying broke my heart and caused me to distance myself from others. I still had my siblings, though. We had each other's backs, and that was what mattered.

I should clarify my father wasn't always strict and overprotective. He was also a loving father, and we had heaps of fun with him. My father played hoops and volleyball with us all the time, and at the Lowlands, I was introduced to tennis. He often took me with him on his business trips. Wherever he went, I tagged along. The hotels were fun. I took advantage of their accommodations and enjoyed all the luxuries they had to offer.

The garage was my favorite place to be because that was where we bonded the most as he tackled various projects. When he worked under the cars, I was right there beside him handing him the tools. By then, I had become a real tomboy, wearing large clothes and caps everywhere

to the point where people were unsure of my gender. Later on, I started helping my father repair the cars he worked on.

As the years went by, I grew out of my tomboy phase and began to enter pageants. I was crowned Carnival Queen three times in our annual Carnival and Summer Festival and was a runner-up four times on the island and once in Guadeloupe. I was no longer that tomboy I once was. I had become a beauty queen, and I wore my tiaras with delight. I even crowned my junior sister on one of those occasions. My father had a front-row seat at all those events, even in Guadeloupe.

I can recall Christmastime very well, for that was my mother's favorite time of the year. It made her jolly and brought life back into her spirit. Each year, just a few days before Christmas, we would venture to the mountain top with our father to cut down our Christmas tree, which was always an adventure.

I remember jumping in my father's white Cadillac with excitement, holding my Christmas list in my hand with the names of all my siblings—all eight of them—along with the gifts I'd get for them. While he and I went shopping, Verna stayed home to help with the baking; there were many tarts, cakes, and Christmas hams to be made! I was twelve years old at the time, and it just the two of us. Off we went to buy Christmas presents for everyone. That was so much fun, with toys everywhere and lots of people tossing me in every angle of the store as I tried to get in closer to pick up the dolls and cars and whatever else was on my list. There were so many toys around that made it very difficult for me to choose.

As we made our way back home, we would gaze out the window of the Cadillac, admiring the decorative lights and listen to carols on the radio. On one of these wonderful trips home, our pleasant ride was suddenly cut short as we lurched, and I was thrown forward. Presents went everywhere. My father stretched out his hand to catch me but was unable to stop me from hitting my head on the dashboard. My body collided with the windshield as if it were a piece of meat thrown against the glass. I rolled back down onto the seat, struggling to position myself. We were alright, but I went into temporary shock, and there was a bump on my head that wouldn't fade for days. My father appeared to feel guilty about that.