

**LORD'S GATE**  
by Marc Erdrich

Lord's Gate, as it is widely known here, is not actually a gate; nor is it a particular aspect of heaven – though in some respects it bears a closer resemblance to the Promised Land than the biblical allusion might have you imagine. One flank features the rotting remains of a local rum shop that long ago relinquished two of its outer walls to the elements and is now policed by a hoary cow who spends most of her time stomping the floor and chewing cud in the manner of a Monday night quarterback nursing a warm bottle of beer; the opposite post is guarded by a strikingly similar structure, sans cow, housing a single mother and her ten children.

Entering through the Gate on a paved surface, the road divides: to the left a dirt path presses forward on the level for about a hundred yards before petering out alongside a narrow graveyard surrounded by banana fields. To the right, a badly pitted secondary road of dirt and gravel rises erratically, passing an old banana packing plant and continuing along a grass track to the top of a hill where, amid spectacular views of the mountains to the north and the ocean to the east, a modest house

of concrete and stone guards the former plantation that spreads out across the valley.

It is a bucolic scene, despite the obvious presence of poverty scattered like decaying leaves amidst the landscape. Sheep and goats – some tied to trees, others trotting along one footpath or another in a tight huddle – bleat loudly as if they are being chased by an unseen demon. Not far off, over the hill, where the land drops off steeply, there is what appears to be a village, a tight-knit group of houses, nothing more really, but something besides the banana fields and endless mango and pawpaw and breadfruit and orange and grapefruit trees that seem to occupy the better part of the island.

Outside Lord's Gate, on the main road, adjacent to the spot where Harry and his wife stand disconcertedly in the intense midday sun – having just been deposited on the disintegrating macadam by the "conductor" of a Toyota mini-van carrying 20 intrepid travelers over treacherous mountain roads at excruciating speeds – the land drops off precariously to a green valley lush with bananas and dasheen. Notwithstanding the irony of a cow and a family sharing analogous quarters, Harry appreciates – with an enormous stretch of the imagination mind

you - that someone living at the top of the hill might once upon a time have referred to this spot as the entrance to the kingdom of God, since seen from where he is now standing, the path to the top of the hill does seem to stretch endlessly skyward. In all other respects however, Lord's Gate appears to be the entrance to yet another impoverished West Indian community.

The setting, seen by Harry, is as unlikely an end to the ordeal that began six weeks earlier as could possibly be imagined, and so it is with a determined weariness that he unloads his and his wife's belongings from the van and together they begin the trek up the road to the house on the hill under the watchful gaze of the cow and the residents of Lord's Gate, several of whom are bathing in their undergarments at a stand pipe just beyond the entrance. They view Harry and his wife with a combination of curiosity and awe, like two wild animals escaped from the zoo.

An hour later, sitting on the back porch sipping a glass of iced rum with lime, watching the sun dip below the hills and breathing a tad easier, Harry and his wife reluctantly return to the proceedings of the past several days, looking for clues to where they might have gone wrong, what they could have done to

alter the events that have left them in their current – desperate, albeit rather comic – predicament.

“You don’t suppose it’s anything I said, do you?” Harry asks his wife, who is directing her attention to a yellow, low-flying single engine plane weaving in and out among the banana fields spraying a white substance that covers everything in its path.

“What kind of poison do you suppose he’s spraying?” she says aloud, momentarily ignoring his question.

Below the spot where Harry is sitting, a goat complains – possibly its rope twisted around a tree. In the distance, a van races along the narrow road that passes over the mountain carrying passengers into town, its radio blasting the latest soca tune, a pre-carnival refrain called “Piece-a A Me Brass” that laments the money stolen by local vendors who copy CDs and sell them illegally on the street.

“You don’t *really* think I had anything to do with this, do you?” he says, her silence impugning his guilt. “I mean, how could you? The trouble started as soon as we arrived.”

“I didn’t say you had anything to do with it,” she says at last, looking at him, the weariness in her voice a further accusation of his responsibility for their current predicament.

"Well then, everyone was at fault", he counters. But it's not true that the trouble started as soon as we arrived. We liked Dawn and Russ right from the beginning. It was because of them we came back, remember?"

Harry loves his wife dearly, and he knows she is right, it was his fault, but he is not yet ready to admit his role in the breakdown in communications that led them to their current situation. So he continues with his rant.

"How can you say that it was my fault?" he asks. "Our intentions were noble from the beginning." He pauses momentarily then adds, self-righteously, "We should have seen right through them."

"Noble?" she replies. "I wouldn't call accusing a man of being a racist, noble."

"But it's true," Harry says. "He is a racist."

"I know it may be true, but you didn't have to say it to his face."

"I didn't call him a racist..."

"No, but you implied it," she says interrupting his tirade.

"Yes, but..."

"You can't expect to call your employer a racist and expect

him to keep you in his employ," she adds, ending the discussion.

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From the moment Harry and his wife arrived on the island, it was a love affair, a marriage made – if not in heaven – then along the shores of the upscale eco-resort resort that Dawn and Russ had labored seven years to create. It had all the charm tourists imagine when they think of a quintessential Caribbean vacation: access only by boat; a private beach with crystal clear water, perfect for swimming, snorkeling and diving; six simple, but elegant thatched cottages, each with total privacy; a candle-lit, beachfront dining room with exquisite Caribbean cuisine; and elegant service. At a distance from shore were six moorings, where sailboats, anchored for the night, their chains clanking gently, could take advantage of the fine dining at the restaurant.

Harry and his wife had been on vacation from their jobs at a resort on a neighboring island. They heard about Eclipse on the Internet, and from the description they knew they had to see it. It was expensive though, so they came for one night only. They ended up staying a year, returning home just once to sell all their belongings.

Russ was in his mid-sixties, hale and hearty, though a tad on the wiry side; American, a former Scientologist, Harry later learned. Dawn was barely forty, blonde, Canadian, elegantly attractive. She was mistress of the dining room, chatting with guests, putting finishing touches on dishes coming out of the kitchen, directing the all dark-skinned staff, while Russ, forever reinventing himself and the resort, was always on the move, filling dive tanks, fixing pumps, or rerouting water through a maze of underground pipes that flowed from 500 gallon tanks that littered the hillside.

The four of them hit it off right away and by the time Harry and his wife were ready to leave, barely twenty-four hours after they arrived, Dawn and Russ had invited them back to house sit for a month while they went to the States on a shopping trip. The resort would be closed and all Harry and his wife had to do was take care of the dogs, pay the wages of the staff and make sure there were no disasters. When they returned, Russ said, if they liked the situation, the four of them would talk about the future.

Harry couldn't believe their good fortune. For one glorious month, they swam, they dived, they cooked elaborate meals for

themselves and the staff, with nary a care in the world. The house, only recently completed, jutted out from the hillside a hundred feet above the restaurant from where they could see the entire bay. It was completely open to the sea on one side so that every night the sun appeared to set just for them. There was a bathtub and shower outdoors. They had access to a skiff, which they quickly learned to maneuver, and on the calmest days they motored down the leeward side of the island to coves where there was not a soul in sight. They cared for the property as if it was their own.

When Dawn and Russ returned, they invited Harry and his wife to come back in the fall and try their hand at co-managing the resort for a season. If it worked out, the arrangement could become permanent.

Harry and his wife were ecstatic. It was just the opportunity they had been looking for. They paid their dues for four years at one of the most popular eco-resorts in the Caribbean. They worked hard and had a lot of fun, but it was time for something new and challenging.

Dawn and Russ decided to take advantage of Harry and his wife's presence to take an extended summer vacation, leaving

Harry and his wife to run the resort on their own for two months. They all agreed it would be a good opportunity for them to learn the ropes in the off season when there were few overnight guests. They could keep the restaurant open if they wanted, catering to the yacht crowd that traveled on the "cheap" during the summer.

For nearly ten weeks, Harry and his wife worked like they never had before. They cooked, they gardened, they did repairs, they ran the dive shop. Most nights, they collapsed in bed, too tired for sex. But they were happy, and surprisingly they found themselves earning far more money than they expected. With news that the restaurant was open, the yachts came and they found themselves serving twenty to thirty dinners every night. Since there were few overnight guests, they decided to advertise a Sunday brunch in the local papers, making it affordable for locals. They kept tight control over the money so there would be no questions when Dawn and Russ returned. The staff, accustomed to being laid off during the summer, was happy to be working.

In hindsight, Harry and his wife should have picked up on the signals from Dawn and Russ when they returned. Something unspoken clouded their relationship. First, Russ couldn't find a substantial amount of cash that he had apparently hidden before

they left. There was an implicit accusation that hung in the air even though neither Harry nor his wife knew anything about the money. After the second day of their return with a sense of gloom hanging in the air, Dawn found the cash right where Russ had left it. He had forgotten where he put it. While the situation improved somewhat after that, something was still not right. At the beginning of August, Harry and his wife left, planning to return at the beginning of October, before the start of the high season.

At home, they announced their intentions to family and friends. They settled their affairs, selling most of their belongings, and prepared for a new life.

In late September, unbeknownst to Harry and his wife, the waves from a freak storm far from any land mass pummeled the leeward side of the island. There was nothing about it in the media. When they returned in early October, they were shocked at the extent of the damage. The recently completed cruise ship dock was nearly destroyed; the airport was a mess. Their driver informed them that the skiff used to transport guests to and from the resort had been destroyed by the waves. The only way to reach the hotel was on foot. When they finally arrived, hot and sweaty

from the overland hike, anxious for a shower and a rest, they discovered the cottage that Russ had promised he would build for them was not finished; they had no place to live. The beach, which was the primary attraction, was strewn with boulders carried in by the sea; several of the units had been damaged. Understandably, Dawn and Russ were angry and depressed. They had done nothing to prepare for Harry and his wife's arrival; nor were they optimistic about the prospects for a successful tourist season. But Harry exuded optimism. He was sure that between the four of them they could make things work. They could stay in one of the guest cottages temporarily.

After the initial greetings, which were cool but cordial, Dawn and Russ spent the next three days avoiding Harry and his wife. They, in turn, spent most of their time in one of the guest cottages staring into a dismal, albeit turquoise, future. When finally they decided to sit down and talk, the conversation went badly. Instead of just admitting they could no longer afford to have Harry and his wife stay on, Russ took his anger out on Harry and his wife. They argued, and, like a couple in the throes of divorce, they said things they regretted. Russ accused them of withholding money from their earnings during the two months they

ran the hotel and restaurant. He said their Sunday brunches weren't in accord with the image they wanted the resort to uphold. Harry was livid. "I interpret that to mean you don't want black people on your beach." He abandoned the term "dark-skinned" under the circumstances. He didn't want to give Russ a chance to weasel his way out of what was clearly a racist remark. There was a couple staying at the hotel well within sight of the arguing pair. Harry didn't care.

The "marriage" ended before it had even been consummated. Harry and his wife found themselves stranded.

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Their savior who was responsible for their taking up residence at Lord's Gate was a young, attractive, dark-skinned woman who was hired while Harry and his wife were away to manage the kitchen. She also suffered Russ' wrath and now found herself out of a job. The house at Lord's Gate belonged to her family and she, if the truth be told, was spending most of her time at another family-owned home in the city and they could stay at Lord's Gate as long as they needed, rent-free. They didn't blink before saying yes.

And that was how they came to be sitting here, on a spacious verandah overlooking Lord's Gate, with the mountains and the sea in the distance. With their drinks in hand, it seemed life couldn't be better. In just a matter of hours they had gone from the depths of despair to the height of optimism.

Harry couldn't help but smile. "Wha...a...t?" his wife asked, in an all-too-knowing way, mimicking the popular whine of the day.

"It's just..." and he stopped, at a loss for words.

"You don't have to say it. I know. It's just – life." She was repeating the words of their dear old friend Tissie, who they met many years before in the Lake District of England. It's what Tissie would say when a situation was more than she could grasp: "Life." Just a single word contained within a long, evocative sigh.

Life. From the ancient Greek meaning to anoint with oil. So there you had it. After all their trials and tribulations, Harry and his wife were anointed. Blessed. Sent to Lord's Gate to marvel at the irony of this thing we call Life.

As the sun set and the full moon rose over the ocean in the eastern sky, the wind seemed to make room for Harry as it swept past, inviting him into its space. Harry rode along with it for a

while, enveloped by the ever-present trade winds, warm and welcoming. No hurricanes now; just a cool, steady breeze. November. Winter on its way. The best time to live in the Caribbean. Long time come before the next hurricane season. No storms to worry about now. Just the soft tropical breeze blowing over the Caribbean Sea, over the island, over Lord's Gate, a truly blessed place.