

In his looks, Raines was practically the living double of Walter Pater, the 19th century aesthete, according to old friends; and Pater just happened to be the subject of Raines unfinished doctoral thesis at Colombia U. The phrenology of his skull replicated Pater's small, elliptical head. Like Pater, he was very bald for his age, thirty-one. Raines had Pater's fine aristocratic nose, his quiet mouth. A tight mouth had a set of evenly spaced, small, and yellowish teeth. They resembled two rows on a cob of his Connecticut sweet corn picked in the dog days of August. Raines was always clean-shaven. His complexion was rose, like Mother's, and compared to Dad, was shorter and slimmer. Raines preferred to dress casually. Today, he wore a cream-colored shirt open at the neck, a pair of un-creased white ducks, and the brown-and-white saddle shoes.

In a room temperature of ninety-five with the AC on the bum, Raines locked the office door behind him with a twist of the wrist. He was waiting for Albert to revolve back from the U.S. Embassy across the street with the Ambassador's copy of a letter in hand. Apparently, it was a dangerous, threatening letter, Raines understood. It threatened his career in the United States' diplomatic service. No longer pacing the polished floor here in his small office, he gazed diffidently into a shaving mirror. Raines hung this small, circular mirror behind his office door here at the American Cultural Center a month earlier, doing it quite out of character without Albert's help. Its tertiary purpose was a quick shave. Its secondary value to Raines was as venue for his personal vanity. Firstly, it was to offer a self-portrait. A self-portrait was to help Raines in the reading of his scattered thoughts, with the hope a little self-understanding might come of it.

The glow of the afternoon sunlight danced through the room's one large window, throwing a gold patina on the shaving mirror. Its gilded light was so powerful it obscured the image of Raines' face there too much for his liking. The large window had a set of dark baroque curtains that gave the office a displaced antique accent. Annoyedly, Raines yanked the curtains shut, closing off the sunlight from the room.

In the small, round mirror, a worried New England face was dripping sweat. Very sweaty, it looked like the local jungle washed in the spring downpours. Raines lacked the classy good looks that were Mother's once no doubt, the handsome head and ominous pit-bull smirk of Dad, he himself agreed. To what was he to tie his precocious success in the American diplomatic service at thirty-one then, he imagined an outsider asking, as he smoothed the reddish hair of an eye brow? It was not to his appearance, surely.

Was it not his personal charm and his overall savior-faire that succeeded him, Raines surmised, staring into the mirror? It was his knack for sizing up any scene or any situation quickly. Yet for an Ivy League intellectual, so to speak, or rather a *former* nerd of a Ph.D. candidate, to have joined the pedestrian American diplomatic service in the first place ... It was a betrayal, a come-down, and a great slump in his professional (or did he mean his *social*) status and self-image, he said to himself on this day. It was a crashing Niagara of a fall, especially from the sublime ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites and the spiritual brotherhood of Rossetti and Swinburne, Burne-Jones and the great Pater himself that wrote such beautiful sentences.

Ah, to burn always with a hard, gemlike flame!

Rather than illuminating the world with a diamond-like clarity of mind, as Pater would've wished of him, Raines risked the possibility of a professional snuff-out at the moment. It was

the letter. His diplomatic career might be KO'd all too soon by the stilted, exaggerated complaints of his former pal, Hugo Blackmon. At the least, he might be facing a black mark on his now very clean record, or worse a stiff demotion, he feared. Blackmon was this year's damned Fulbright in Magombe, and he was under Raines' supervision.

Complaints? A prose masterpiece? What was the Ambassador trying to say to him only minutes earlier on the telephone, Raines was asking himself, gazing into the shaving mirror on the back of his office door? Bull-pucky to all of it, he answered, defiantly! Power of the written word, said the Ambassador? We'll see about this and see about it good, thought Raines, staring back menacingly at the grimace on his sweaty, mirrored face. No, he was not handing himself or his career over Blackmon easily, nor having it slip into the hands of fate. He'd be taking some serious and high-handed action in this case, if needed. He'd act like a mature adult.

Now where was Albert? When you called on the guy for a triviality, he lingered like a slug. You needed him, he dragged his damn ass, thought Raines.

Abruptly, Raines was tired of staring at his freckled rosy face. If during a crisis personal or professional Lenny Raines looked inwardly and he introspected at all, it was typically pulled off by taking time like this to stare into the mirror closest by. It was a habit he'd worked up during his teenage years in Westport. Turning from his worried face reflected on the glass, Raines glided over to his spacious window on the second floor of the Center. He had a quick look at the sunlit Rue d'Independence below, opening the heavy dark curtains.

In the steamy downtown of Caesarville, Magombe's modern capital city, the quiet hours of the afternoon siesta were over. The city was waking up. It was on the move. The equatorial

sun threw a yellowish light on a local named Belinda. She was opening her small novelty stand on the sidewalk opposite the American Cultural Center. Belinda was no larger than one of the pygmies from a rare tribe in Magombe's green jungle three hundred miles inland from Caesarville. Raines liked to stop at Belinda's rickety stand for cigarettes, talk a little casual French with her. The stand was built of panels of a thick, green glass and lumber from the local okoumé wood. A pink umbrella was draped over it. The umbrella was streaked with a water stain in the shape of a fish. Belinda sold a variety of cigarettes, Chicklets, a gummy fruit candy called the *itana* in various flavors, skinned peanuts in small glass jars, pieces of a shredded coconut, and also an icy fruit punch from time to time.

Wearing a short-sleeve shirt and dark shorts, a slim black African bought a handful of the kola nuts. They were set out on a scrap of paper in a small pile. Next, he sampled today's *itana*, Raines observed. It was a glossy purple jungle fruit, the size of a walnut. Boiled and salted, it tasted like the fruit of the guava. A taller black rolled a pack of Gaulois into his sleeve, a third client picked up a white-and-red box of Marlboros. Watching this panorama of comings and goings, Raines ached to smoke. He lit the last cig from a pack of Gaulois with his last match.

Standing at his second-story window with a panoramic view of the action below, Raines eyed the coconut palms and the rosy papayas shading the Center's first story. Here Archibald, the Embassy chauffer, waxed Raines' special-order, white Chrysler convertible with its decorative gold trim. Harry, the Embassy gardener, trimmed the bushes around a weedy flower bed. On the Rue d'Independence dividing the Cultural Center from the Embassy itself, the first of the afternoon's young prostitutes looked like withered dark flowers in the African sun. They were fourteen or fifteen years old. The girls wore a flimsy tank-top and tight dungaree shorts,

strutting the street half-naked. Raines turned his normally horny eyes away from their pointed tits and grabby asses. He'd bigger fish to net at this hour. As for the fishiest, most dangerous barracuda in his diplomatic ocean, M. Blackmon, what was the guy up to, accusing him of insensitivity?

With an urbane, Princeton man's aesthetic take on things, he was a sensitive man, Raines trusted, seated behind his GI (government-issue) desk now. How anyone might think otherwise was beyond him, he asked to himself, feeling idle and restless? He was a cosmopolitan. When Blackmon showed up in Caesarville eight months ago? He hustled up the best housing for the Prof and his picky wife, Sarah he might locate within his budget constraints, Raines recalled. Why the complaint? Why now, Raines had to ask himself, chewing on a pencil? Were they living in a palace? No. Had the dweeb expected to live in a diplomat's hilltop colonial villa like Ambassador Brill somehow? Or to have a modern one-story like his own ice-box by the sea, the sea, the beautiful sea, Raines asked himself, staring out the window again at the svelte hookers?

It was the worst of times for a crisis, what with his mother and father hitting town on the 747 this morning, a fussy mom, a belligerent dad, and then the required cocktails at the Ambassador's villa this evening, followed by a doubles match in the early morning scheduled with Blackmon of all people. Now Raines had to handle the dark trajectory from the Blackmon story (whatever it was), he feared, while baby-sitting his parents at the same time.

Like a swirling ocean wind, Albert swept into Raines' office. A smoker too, he panted violently. A line of sweat raced down Albert's studious forehead. It looked like a tributary of the nearby Congo River, slipping into the edges of his black eyes, filling the corners of a wide mouth. Albert handed the Ambassador's copy of the apparently dangerous letter to Raines

directly. Raines opened its colorful envelope. His hands were shaking. He then unfolded the letter itself. In Albert's quiet presence, he read it to himself.

The letter was surprisingly brief. It consisted of five paragraphs, not a word more. It was an example of a prose nearly perfect, Ambassador Bill had informed Raines on the telephone. In Brill's opinion, the letter perfected the form of the notorious freshman essay "of his day," he'd said to Raines. By the form of the essay, Brill meant of course the dummy of five paragraphs, upon which so many naive college Frosh and advanced American high schoolers have draped their simple thoughts for generations.

The letter mastered the bare form to which Brill had referred. The lifeless form of the dummy was vivified. It was, to Raines, inarguable. It was given a monstrously active life in this case by Hugo Blackmon, Raines' casual tennis buddy.

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