

1/ Blackmon

His tight mouth had a set of small yellowish teeth, resembling two rows on a cob of his Connecticut sweet corn picked in the dog days of August. His reddish hair was thin. Thirty-one, Raines had a fine aristocratic nose, was always clean-shaven. His complexion, like mother's, was rose. He was shorter and slimmer than dad, the corporate attorney. He was practically the living double of Walter Pater, the 19th century aesthete in his looks, according to old friends -- Pater the subject of Raines' unfinished doctoral thesis at Colombia -- the phrenology of his skull replicating Pater's worried, elliptical brow. Raines dressed casually. Today he was wearing a cream-colored shirt open at the neck, a pair of white ducks, and the brown-and-white saddle shoes.

The AC was down on the second floor of Caesarville's American Cultural Center, the room temperature ninety-five in Raines' office there. He closed the office door, nonetheless, locking it with a twist of the wrist. He was done with his pacing of the carpeted floor in the square room. He was waiting for Albert, his assistant to revolve back from the U.S. Embassy across the street with the Ambassador's copy of a letter. It was, Raines told himself, a dangerous letter. It threatened his young career in the enigmatic United States diplomatic service. He gazed into a circular shaving mirror he himself had hung behind his office door without Albert's help. It had three purposes. It offered a spot for a quick shave, it was also a venue for his personal vanity. It, thirdly, offered a self-portrait. A self-portrait was to help Raines in the reading of his scattered thoughts, and in the process of reading them, to answer his hope that 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. The gilded light was so bright there, it obscured the image of Raines' face on the glass. The large window had a set of dark curtains that inevitably gave the office a displaced accent of the Victorian age. Raines yanked the curtains shut, closing off the sunlight from the room.

The small, oval mirror captured the image of worried New England face that was dripping sweat. It, in Raines' imagination, resembled the local jungle when it washed in the spring downpours. Lenny Raines lacked the once classy looks of mother, he agreed, the handsome head and the pit-bull smirk of dad. To what then to tie his precocious success in the American diplomatic service, he imagined an outsider asking, as he smoothed the reddish hair of an eye brow? It was not his appearance.

Was it not a personal charm and a savior-faire that succeeded him, Raines surmised, staring into the mirror? It was his knack for quickly sizing up any scene or any situation, and he gave himself a big plus for it. Yet to have joined the pedestrian American diplomatic service in the first place -- an Ivy League intellectual or rather a *former* nerd of a Ph.D. candidate -- was at the same time a betrayal, a come-down, and a great slump in his professional (or did he mean his *social*) status and his self-image. It was a crashing Niagara of a fall from the sublime ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites and from 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 to illuminate the world with a diamond-like clarity of mind, as Pater would've wished of him, Raines was presently at risk of a professional snuff-out. It was again the letter by Blackmon that scared him, his diplomatic career maybe KO'd by the stilted, exaggerated

complaints there by his former pal. He might be facing at a thick black mark on his very clean record at the least, Raines feared, or worse, given a stiff demotion. Hugo Blackmon was this year's Fulbright scholar in Magombe, and he was under Raines' supervision.

What was the Ambassador really trying to say on the telephone minutes earlier, Raines asked himself, gazing into the shaving mirror? Blackmon's letter to his superiors in Washington was full of complaints about him? It was a small, prose masterpiece? Bull-pucky, Raines mumbled. Power of the written word, said the Ambassador. We'll see about that, thought Raines, staring back at the grimace on his sweaty face. He was not handing himself nor his budding career over to Blackmon, nor was he to have it slip into the hands of fate. He was to take some very high-handed action, if needed, perform like a mature adult and a Machiavellian in this affair.

Where was Albert? When you called on him for a triviality, he lingered like a slug. You needed him, he dragged his damn ass, Raines said to his image on the glass. It was an irrational thought. Albert was steady and dependable as a Longines.

If Raines looked inwardly at all, introspected during a crisis professional or personal, it was typically pulled off like this by taking time to stare into the mirror closest to him. It was a habit he had worked up during his teenage years in Westport. Raines by now had tired of staring at his rosy face. He turned away from it, gliding over to his spacious office window here on the Center's second floor. He opened the heavy dark curtains, having a look-see at the sunlit Rue d'Independence below. It was the main drags in the steamy downtown of Caesarville, Magombe's modern capital city.

The quiet hours of the afternoon's siesta were over in downtown Caesarville. The city was waking up. It was moving and shaking, the equatorial sun throwing a yellowish light on its streets and sidewalks, its pink buildings and its now steady traffic. A local named Belinda was

the first to open for business. She worked a small, make-shift novelty stand on the sidewalk opposite from the Cultural Center. Belinda was hardly larger than one of the shy pygmies from a rare tribe living in Magombe's green jungle three hundred miles inland from Caesarville. Raines daily stopped at Belinda's rickety stand for cigarettes, talking a casual French with her. Her stand was built of okoumé wood and of panels of a thick green glass. The pink umbrella hanging over it was streaked with a water stain shaped like a fish. Belinda sold a variety of cigarettes, Chicklets, a gummy fruit candy called the *itana*, skinned peanuts in small glass jars, pieces of a shredded coconut, and an icy fruit punch.

Dressed in a pair of dark shorts and an orange muscle shirt, a slim black African bought a handful of the kola nuts displayed on a scrap of paper in a small pile. He sampled, Raines observed, today's *itana*. It was a glossy, purple jungle fruit the size of a walnut that tasted like the fruit of the guava when boiled and salted. A taller black rolled a pack of Gaulois into his sleeve, a third client picked up a white-and-red box of Marlboros. Raines ached to smoke, peering at this panorama of the comings and goings at Belinda's stand. He lit the last cig from a pack of Gaulois in his shirt pocket with a wooden match, only one match now left in its red, white, and blue box.

Continuing to take in this wide and this panoramic view of the action below, Raines eyed the coconut palms and the rosy papayas shading the Center's first story. Archibald, the Embassy chauffeur waxed Raines' special-order Pontiac convertible with its decorative gold trim. Harry, the Embassy gardener trimmed the green bushes around a weedy flower bed. There was action on the Rue d'Independence, where three of the afternoon's young prostitutes paraded this wide boulevard that divided the Center from the Embassy. Looking like withered dark flowers under the African sun, they were fifteen, sixteen years old. Each girls wore a psychedelic tank-top and

a pair of short, tight dungaree shorts, strutting the street half-naked. Raines shifted his horny eyes away from their pointed tits, grabby asses. He had bigger fish to net. As for the fishiest barracuda in his diplomatic ocean, M. Blackmon. What was the guy up to, accusing him of insensitivity and worse?

He was, if he were anything, a sensitive man, Raines told himself, sitting now behind his large GI (government-issue) desk. It was indisputable. He had an urbane Princeton man's aesthetic take on things. How anyone possibly might think otherwise was beyond him, he had to ask, idle and restless, swiveling around and around in hard wooden chair? He was a cosmopolitan. When Blackmon first showed up in Caesarville eight months earlier, Raines recalled, he hustled up the best of the housing (within his budget constraints) he might locate for the professor and his picky wife, Sarah. Why the complaint? Why now, he asked himself, chewing on a pencil? Were they living in a palace? No. Had the dweeb expected to live in a veteran diplomat's hilltop villa such as Ambassador Brill's palatial digs? Or in a modern one-story like his own ice box by the sea, the sea, the beautiful sea, Raines asked, standing and staring out the window again at the svelte hookers?

It was the worst of times for a crisis, his mother and father hitting town on the 747 on this very morning, fussy mom, belligerent dad, and then the required cocktails at the Ambassador's villa this evening, followed by a doubles match scheduled for the next morning to include of all people, Blackmon! Raines suddenly had gone from living in a state of serenity to having two major battles on his hands. He had firstly to deal with the dark trajectory of the Blackmon story, he feared, whatever it was to be, while he simultaneously was to baby sit his zealous, visiting parents.

Albert swept into Raines' office like a swirling ocean wind. He panted loudly, he too a smoker. A line of sweat raced down Albert's studious forehead, flowing like the nearby Congo River. It slipped into the edges of his black eyes, filled the corners of a wide mouth. It dripped onto the envelope gripped in his hand. Albert handed the envelope over to Raines that encased the Ambassador's copy of the seemingly hurtful letter. Raines hands were shaking, while he studiously opened the colorful envelope. He unfolded the letter itself, reading it silently in Albert's quiet presence without moving his lips. The letter was surprisingly brief, consisted of five paragraphs, not a word more. It was an example, Bill earlier informed Raines on the telephone, of a prose style nearly perfect. The letter perfected the form of the freshman essay "of his day," Brill said. Brill was talking of course of the notorious dummy of five paragraphs upon which many a college Frosh or an advanced American high schooler has draped his simple thoughts for generations. The letter was extremely well-written, Raines had to agree, sitting at his oversize desk. The lifeless form of the dummy was vivified there, was given a monstrously energetic life in this case by the damn Fulbright Blackmon, his casual tennis buddy.

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2/ "A Small Prose Masterpiece"

"I've some not so good news for you, Raines. It's not something you'll want to hear," said Ambassador Brill to him twenty minutes earlier.

The telephone connections were not always clear in Magombe. It was the case today. Raines asked Brill, please, to repeat himself. He tightened his grip on a black telephone receiver, spinning around in his upholstered chair behind a desk of light oak. Brill repeated the same sixteen words, same order.

Irritated by static of the iffy phone connection, Raines asked, "Some not so good news, sir? Something I'll not want to hear? What's on?"

Raines and Brill were stationed together in this small nation on the west coast of Central Africa. They were members of the U.S. Foreign Service in good standing, friends enough to trust one another, Raines believed, when it came to professional business. Raines had always talked freely with his superior. It was thrilling to exchange ideas with a man like Brill, in fact, a veteran diplomat, no fool. Suddenly Raines was not thrilled, though, nor was he feeling free and easy about anything. He was uncomfortable in his own office and skin.

Raines' office was prestigious, home to the Director-in-Chief of the American Cultural Center's. Raines was nooked behind a sturdy American-made desk, when he took this strange telephone call from Brill, his chair recently re-covered in a black Moroccan leather, and while Raines swiveled in it, the skin above his right cheekbone twitched. The serious tone of Brill's voice had put him on high alert. Raines' large desk had a set of dull brass handles on each of three side drawers. The bottom drawer to Raines' left was open. Left-handed, a sweaty Raines

searched for a pack of cigarettes there. The floor's AC unit had been on the whack for hours on this late February afternoon.

While a dozen or so high rises in the center of Caesarville's coastal metropolis stood at eight or ten stories, the plain building that housed the Cultural Center was but two levels of a creamy white concrete. It had a glossy green paint on the exterior doors, the trim of six symmetrical windows on each side and on the shutters. On one side, the Center faced the wide mouth of the westward flowing Ogouwe River that emptied into the Atlantic Ocean a few miles on. A second side stood (again) directly across the street from Embassy, where Brill had telephoned Raines with his preamble to the letter's bad news.

Raines muscled the telephone receiver under his chin with a nervous hand. He attacked one desk drawer after the next with his freer hand, searching for a smoke. The dark tone in Brill's normally flat, laconic voice was scaring him. Raines had taken the post of Director here only ten months earlier. He was a suave type, it was thought at the Center, but a nervous soul. It was his given and natural temperament, co-workers agreed. He was a young man likely to heed his feelings, falling into moods of melancholy or inertia in times of stress.

On the phone, Brill said, "This little affair, it needs ... how shall I say it? It demands some taking care of."

Raines asked, "Excuse me, sir, what *exactly* we talking 'bout here? Then, can it be taken care of, I am wondering? I'm clueless," he said, using a last match to light a broken Gaulois he luckily found on his crowded desktop. It held a mountain range either of plain or of monogrammed envelopes and a backlog of manila folders. They were envelopes to be sealed or to be opened, folders to read or else to stuff with who knows what?

"Can it be taken care of, you ask? We'll see about this," answered Brill.

The precise tone of Brill's voice was not easy for Raines to identify now or at any time really, nor was he readily able to classify Brill's accent as typical of any American region, and Raines had a studied ear for it. It was one of his hobbies. Brill's voice was neither northern nor southern America, nor a colloquial mid-western or a flat California, and it was to be explained only by knowing that Brill had spent most of his adult life in the American diplomatic service. Either living abroad or in the heterogeneous D.C., Brill had lacked a permanent address or home for thirty-two years, and the same might be said for his voice. Its tone was merely professional. It typically was steady and quiet, if not indifferent, unless a serious or a shocking event elevated it with what's called *gravitas* these days.

. "What d'you have for me?" Raines asked of his superior, pacing his sweatbox of an office.

"I've a copy of a curious kind of a letter. Have it here in my hands." Brill said. "It is written by your acquaintance, Professor Blackmon at the Institute. He himself dropped it off with my secretary, Ashley, late this morning. The letter is directed to your Head of Division in Washington," the Ambassador said. "In so many words, it how might I say this politely? It accuses you of professional incompetence, Raines, incompetence," Brill repeated. "It absolutely scours you for a lack of responsibility. It takes you to task severely, young man. It accuses you of a rank insensitivity, Raines. Now if it is even halfway true ... Is it true, you ask? How might I know? It is a bit of a dangerous document. It stings. Big time. Has an emotional punch, I ought to know. It's something of a small prose masterpiece, in my view. Words are powerful, Raines, they run our lives. Run the world," Brill concluded.

Raines asked, "You've a copy of a letter to my superiors in Washington? From Blackmon? A masterpiece? Accusing me of incompetence ... and insensitivity? What are we talking about? It's the first I've heard of it. You're not joking, of course?" asked Raines.

“Not joking,” said Brill.

“Might you read it to me?” Raines asked. “I need to hear what it has to say.”

This telephone call from Brill had caught Raines with his proverbial pants at his ankles. It was a bewildering downward swing of fortune’s wheel, swiftly putting Raines on a high alert, aware of danger close by. He punched the lit butt of his Gaulois into a green turtle shell on his desktop. He groped vainly anywhere and everywhere for a fresh smoke. Not finding it, he knocked over a photograph in a gold frame. It was of his wife Lisette and daughter Miré, fifteen months.

“I’m not able to read it to you ... not over the phone, at least,” Brill answered.

“Too long?” asked Raines, guessing Brill’s time always at a premium, not thinking of the unsafe phone connection full of static.

Brill said, “Too long? No. Too tough. You will want not a part, but the whole of it. But it is not my immediate fear. It’s our telephones. They are not always private in Caesarville, as you know. The local gov is not above listening in, even here,” Brill said.

Raines asked, “Then summarize, paraphrase the contents for me, sir. Then I will have Albert fetch it *tout de suite*. I am right to assume you will show me your copy?” asked Raines, searching the open drawer.

“You will see it, of course. Otherwise would I’d ’ave phoned you?” said Brill.

Raines begged, “Might you tell me something more. I’m concerned. Anything,” he said, shuffling through the papers on his desk, he hoped, for a Gaulois hidden there.

“Here goes,” said Brill. “The letter speaks primarily of the horrid living conditions under which you put Blackmon and his wife Sarah. Does so in chilling detail. Describes all of it in a pointed language. What sort of home, of housing have you put them in, Raines? I have naturally not seen it. It seems quite damning, though, from the contents of the letter. Sounds like you put

them in a doghouse or a chicken coop. Is this anything close to the truth?" Brill asked. "When they first moved into this ... chicken coop, was it really lacking in screens? No mosquito screens? In Central Africa? The wife caught a nice dose of malaria, as a result, from our juicy mosquitoes. Almost died? The letter hits with a heavy punch, Raines. If your superiors in Washington get a look at it, could do you some damage. Accuses you of a rank insensitivity," reported the Ambassador again.

"Now way! Insensitivity?" asked Raines, more than stunned to hear it. If he were anything at all, he reminded himself, as a person, was a sensitive soul.

"It's all here in the words, Raines," Brill answered. "You like me to read you a couple of the particularly ... demonstrative sentences from it?" he asked.

"A couple of sentences would be better than nothing," said Raines.

Brill now read two of the more damning sentences from his copy of Blackmon's letter, reading steadily and evenly. With the telephone to his ear, Raines rose from his polished swivel chair. He intently listened to what the letter had to say, while he circled the standard government desk, the black receiver tucked crookedly under his chin. When Brill's brief reading closed off? Raines was shivering in the office's equatorial heat of ninety-five degrees. He shook so violently it had him time-travelling back to the family home in wintry Westport. He was a ten-year-old. He had fled their five-bedroom brick house in order to escape a spanking from his red-headed mom, only to cut across the snow fall that covered the nearby Stinker's Pond, slipping into the icy water below.

"Mr. Ambassador," Raines asked, "the original letter?"

"Where is it?" the two men asked, simultaneously

"Must be in the Embassy mail system somewhere, I'd guess. Don't you think?"

asked Brill.

“It’s in the Pouch, maybe. It’s the likely place,” Raines suggested. “It is the normal channel for Blackmon’s postings.”

Brill replied, “Raines, are we not thinking alike?”

“What is that, sir? Are you suggesting I listen to a little traveling music? I might go and see if it is in the Pouch now? Maybe the letter there, unmoved?”

“If it *is* there?” asked Brill.

“If it’s there and I decide to grab it, you’re suggesting, sir?” said Raines.

Brill said, “If you do decide to grab it, *if*, I said, do not open it. Do not unseal it, under any conditions. Do not make me have to say later on, fated boy, or anything like that. You are an educated man, Raines. You get my reference here. And by the way, I personally am not suggesting anything, get it,” said an immaculately cautious Brill.

“I get it sir, don’t worry. I’m with you,” Raines answered. “Maybe the original is in the Pouch. It is only four-fifteen. It means, potentially, there’s time. Hang on. I’ll be back with you. Don’t hang up on me,” said Raines. Flipping the receiver onto his desk, he sprinted from behind his desk to the office next door that kept the mail pouch.

The Center’s out-going mail gathered on the desk of Raines’ secretary, Doreen. It collected there in a white plastic bin on every Monday through Friday. This plain bin was called the Pouch. It, legally, was a part of the U.S. postal system. Doreen allowed the mail to pile up there indifferently, busy with her many tasks and then half of Raines’ work. The mail was daily hoisted away from Doreen’s desk at four-thirty p.m. Postmaster M. N’Tumbo carried it to the post office on the Embassy’s first floor, accompanied by a single Marine guard. The week’s

mail then skyed to the States from Caesarville's International Airport on a 747. It was at nine-thirty on Friday morning. Today was a Thursday.

Raines cut into Doreen's office only seconds after asking Brill, please, to stand by. The dangers and the risk here tempting him rose through Raines mind like a dark fog over a coven of pagan spirits. This plain plastic bin was a U.S. mailbox, no kidding. Tampering with the Pouch was therefore a federal crime, Raines reminded himself, not yet standing in front of it. If, however, the original letter there? The moment to seize it was now or never, not later. It was a Thursday afternoon, he told himself, there really was no tomorrow in this case. It was perhaps too late even now. Maybe the letter was no longer there. If the out-going was unluckily picked up early today, ported across the Rue d'Independence to the Embassy P.O., and sealed off there to be sent to Washington in the morning, he was duck soup.

Raines shimmied up to Doreen's desk, wishing to be quiet about it. He breathed deeply, as if beginning his early morning workout. Raines had not prayed since his reluctant first communion in Westport's St. Mark's Episcopal decades ago, not sincerely. He was not the spiritual type. That the letter be in the Pouch, he prayed docilely. If it were there? He was to follow his instincts, and the strongest of his survival instincts told him to grab it surreptitiously, despite Doreen sitting inches from it.

The letter was there. Raines quickly recognizing its envelope. He knew it to a certainty by the green and gold letterhead of the Institute of African Studies. It was the visual give-away. Blackmon taught at the Institute, no other person at the Center used its colorful stationary. Only Blackmon might posted this envelope here.

Doreen Bouquet was a well-groomed and matronly fifty. She was a small, genteel woman, her hair was gray, her features broad and pleasant. She dressed plainly. She was part

Cameroonian, part Algerian, another ex-pat. She sat behind a lacquered bamboo desk in a matching bamboo chair, her head bent over busy work, proofing an office memo. If she had heard Raines footsteps, she made no sign of it. It was typical of her work habits. Doreen was a see-no-evil, hear-no-evil sort.

Raines was not of course altogether happy about the moment, not keen to be behaving so recklessly as this. He was risking his career in the diplomatic service over an iffy letter he had himself not read. He had, however, a plan. He gave Doreen a good afternoon's *ca va*. Fetch the student Fulbright file for me, please, he asked her. It is in the three-tiered cabinet at the back of the room. Immediately, he added.

“Immediately, M. Raines?” asked Doreen, staring at the Center’s boss.

“Now,” said Raines.

Doreen rose from her cushioned bamboo desk chair, turning her back to Raines. She proudly strode like a younger woman, to a dusty green cabinet that cornered a back wall. She began to dig out the Fulbright file that was alphabetized in the top drawer. It was Raines’ moment to pull off his iffy strategy. He snatched the letter from the Pouch with only the slightest stir of conscience, jamming the envelope into a front pants pocket, as if he the ten-year old that had once filched an Almond Joy from the CVS candy counter in downtown Westport.

Doreen hobbled back from the cabinet to her desk like an old lady. It was a sudden flare in the arthritis, Raines guessed, that hobbled her. Doreen gripped the bulging manila file in two small hands, handing it to Raines over her desk. Raines thanked her, shaking with fright, hoping Doreen had not noticed it. Without another word said, he sprinted back to his office that was twice the size of Doreen’s. Loosening the fat manilla Fulbright file from a bony hand, Raines

tossed the useless thing onto his desktop. He jerked the stolen envelope containing Blackmon's original letter from the waist of his white ducks where he had stashed it a minute earlier.

Raising the telephone to his face, he said to Brill, "Sir, I have the original here in my hand. In my hand! No, do not worry. I will not open it. I will not do *anything* more with it, exactly as you preached. But I will be sending Albert for your copy *toute de suite*. Want to read it carefully, top to bottom. After I am done with this, I do hope, we will discuss it. You will advise me on a next step," Raines said, suddenly feeling intoxicated at this hour.

Raines was on a psychic high. It was the sudden boost to his spirits coming from his triumph over circumstances that was doing the job. It was a rush of joy hurrying through his slim body over the courageous act he had so dauntlessly pulled off in his secretary's office.

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