

## 1/ The Octopus

No longer was he firstly a private individual, but a public servant as a member of the American diplomatic service. He was the face of American culture in the African nation of Magombe, the Director of the Center. The local news media loved to feast on the warm blood of trouble around the American Embassy, when the extent of of the American empire these days was an octopus with its arms reaching into every nook and cranny of the world. Raines hardly wished a dark story told about himself, the Center, or the Embassy to appear on the evening news back home in the States, his trouble the nation's trouble, while his reactionary parents, aghast, watched the episode on their big screen TV.

Raines gazed into a circular shaving mirror that he'd hung behind his office door without Albert's help. The mirror had two uses beyond offering a spot for a quick shave. The glass offered a venue for Raines' personal vanity, then a self-portrait. A self-portrait was to help him in the reading of his scattered thoughts, to answer his hope that a little more self-understanding might come of this reading, or maybe the practical wisdom he needed at the moment.

Raines' tight mouth had a set of small, yellowish teeth. His teeth, when he smiled, resembled two rows on a cob of his Connecticut sweet corn picked in the dog days of August. Thirty-one, Raines had a fine aristocratic nose, small blue eyes, a weak chin, and was always clean shaven. His complexion, like mother's, was rose. His reddish hair was thin. He was shorter and slimmer than dad, the corporate attorney. According to old friends, he was practically the living double of Walter Pater, the 19<sup>th</sup> century English aesthete, when it came to

his looks (Pater, the subject of Raines' unfinished doctoral thesis at Columbia), especially the phrenology of his skull, his worried, elliptical brow. Raines dressed casually. Today he wore a cream-colored shirt open at the neck, a pair of white ducks, and his favorite brown and white saddle shoes.

The glow of the afternoon sunlight danced through the one large window in Raines' second floor office, while throwing a gold patina onto the shaving mirror so bright, it obscured the image of Raines' face on the glass. The large window had a set of dark curtains that gave the office a displaced accent of the Victorian age. The spacious office had a light-green carpet and walls of light blue with framed photographs of Joyce and Debussy, a print by Edward Hopper. Raines stepped over to the window. He yanked the curtains shut, closing off the sunlight from the room. He stepped back in front of the mirror.

The small oval mirror captured the image of a tight, worried New England face, its forehead and cheeks sweaty. The air-conditioning was down on the second floor of Caesarville's American Cultural Center, the room temperature ninety-five degrees in the Director's office. His face resembled the local jungle, Raines imagined, when it was washed in the equator's eternal downpours. Lenny Raines lacked the onceclassy looks of mother, the handsome head and the pit-bull smirk of dad. To what, then, was his precocious rise in the American diplomatic service to be tied, an outsider might ask, as Raines smoothed the reddish hair of an eyebrow? His success was not to be linked to his appearance.

Was it not his personal charm and his *savoir-faire* that succeeded him, Raines surmised, staring into the shaving mirror, with his knack for quickly sizing up any scene or situation. He gave himself a big plus here. For a guy like himself 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 however a betrayal, a comedown, and a great slump in his professional (or did he mean his *social*) status and his self-image, a crashing Niagara of a drop from the sublime ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite painters and the poetic 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 presently risked a professional snuff-out as a result of the impossible ... well, unlikely letter sent to his superiors by Blackmon. The situation frightened him. His rising diplomatic career might be KO'd by the exaggerated complaints in the letter by his former pal, or he at the least be faced a thick black mark on his very clean record, Raines feared, or maybe given a stiff demotion. Hugo Blackmon was this year's Fulbright scholar in Magombe. He was under Raines' supervision.

What was the Ambassador trying to say on the telephone minutes earlier, Raines asked himself? Blackmon's letter was addressed to his superiors at headquarters in Washington? It was full of complaints? About what? About him. The letter was a small prose masterpiece? Bull-pucky, Raines mumbled. It exemplified the power of the written word, said the Ambassador. We will see about that! See who and see what has the real *omph*, thought Raines. He stared at the grimace on his sweaty face. He was not handing himself nor his budding career over to Blackmon, nor letting it slip into the hands of fate. He expected to be taking the high-handed action of a mature adult and a Machiavellian, as needed.

Where was Albert? When you called on him for a triviality, he lingered like a slug. When you needed him? He dragged his damn ass, Raines mumbled, an irrational thought. Albert was as steady and dependable as a Longines watch.

Whenever he might face a crisis either professional or personal, Raines tried to find the mirror closest by, a habit worked up during his querulous teenage years in Westport, yet he by now had tired of staring at his rosy face. He glided back to his office window on the Cultural Center's busy second floor, opening the heavy dark curtains. He stared at the sunlit *Rue d'Independence* below. This modern-four lane was the main drag in the steamy downtown of Caesarville, Magombe's capital city. The quiet hours of the traditional siesta after lunch in the formerly French Africa were over. The city had awakened by the middle of the afternoon. The equatorial sun threw a yellowish light on the crowded streets and the sidewalks, the pink buildings, and the steady traffic. Downtown was moving and shaking. A local named Belinda opened for business. She worked a makeshift novelty stand on the sidewalk opposite from the Cultural Center. A graying Belinda was hardly larger than one of the shy pygmies that dwelt three hundred miles inland from Caesarville in Magombe's green jungle. Raines regularly stopped at the rickety stand for cigarettes, talking a casual French with Belinda. The stand was built of okoumé wood and panels of a thick green glass. Streaked with a waterstain shaped like a squid, a pink umbrella hung over the little shop. Belinda sold a variety of cigarettes, Chiclets, a gummy fruit candy called the *itana*, skinned peanuts in small glass jars, pieces of a shredded coconut, and an icy fruit punch. Months ago, Raines eyed a sticker on one side of her stand that said, "Go away, USA." He politely asked her to remove this trash, Belinda quickly complying with his request. Her son had placed the sticker there, she said.

Dressed in a pair of dark shorts and an orange muscle shirt, a slim black man bought a small pile of Belinda's kola nuts sitting on a scrap of white paper. He next sampled, Raines observed, today's *itana*. The *itana* was a glossy, purple jungle fruit the size of a walnut, tasting 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 Marlboro. Raines ached to smoke, peering at this panorama of the comings and goings at Belinda's stand. He lit the last cigarette from a pack of Gaulois with a wooden match, the last left in a small red, white, and blue cardboard box.

Raines studiously took in his panoramic view of the action below. He eyed the coconut palms and the rosy papayas shading the Center's first story where Archibald, the Embassy chauffeur waxed Raines' special-order white Pontiac convertible with its decorative gold trim. Harry, the Embassy gardener trimmed the green bushes around one of the beds of the Center's lush flower garden. The *Rue d'Independence* was packed with action. Three young prostitutes worked this wide boulevard that divided the Center from the Embassy. They were fifteen, sixteen years old, withered dark flowers under the African sun. Each girl wore a psychedelic tank-top, a pair of tight dungaree shorts, and was strutting the street half-naked. Raines shifted his not so horny eyes away from these pointed tits, grabby asses. He had bigger fish to net today, like the fishiest barracuda in his diplomatic ocean, M. Blackmon. What was the guy up to, accusing him of insensitivity and worse? Raine dropped his slim body into the black leather chair behind his GI (government-issue) desk.

He was a sensitive man, Raines told himself, if he were anything. Indisputable. He had an urbane Princeton man's aesthetic take on things. How anyone might at all think otherwise was beyond him. Idle and restless, he swiveled around in his stylish chair. He was a cosmopolitan. When Blackmon showed up in Caesarville eight months earlier, Raines recalled, he hustled up the best housing (within his budget constraints) he might locate for the professor and his picky wife Sarah. This was the first apparent problem for him to solve, first mess to clean up. Then, suddenly, Blackmon's dangerous dig about his running of the Center? Why now, Raines asked himself? He chewed on a white pencil that was inscribed with the words, "The American

Cultural Center, Caesarville.” Were the Blackmons living in a palace? No. Had the effete, intellectual snob of a professor expected to live in a hilltop villa like Ambassador Brill’s palatial digs? In a modern one-story like his own icebox by the sea, the sea, the beautiful sea, Raines wondered, standing and staring out the window at the svelte hookers?

His mother and his father were to hit town on the 747 on this very morning, fussy mom, belligerent dad, followed by the required cocktails at the Ambassador’s villa on this evening with three of Magombe’s major politicians on the guest list, then a doubles match scheduled for the next morning to include of all people, Blackmon. Today was absolutely the worst of times for a crisis, with Raines abruptly forced out of a state of relative security and serenity into one with two major battles on his hands. He had to deal with the dark trajectory of the Blackmon story wherever it might be going, he feared, while simultaneously to babysitting his zealous visiting parents.

Albert swept into Raines’ office like a swirling ocean wind, panting loudly. He too was a smoker. Lines of sweat raced down Albert’s studious forehead, flowing into the edges of his bright eyes and into the corners of a wide mouth as rapidly as the not distant Congo River. The sweat dripped onto the monogrammed envelope gripped in his hand, while Albert tossed it to Raines unsealed, the envelope holding the Ambassador’s copy of the apparently hurtful letter. Raines’ pale hands were shaking. He vigorously opened the envelope, unfolded the letter, and read it silently in Albert’s quiet presence without moving his lips. The letter was surprisingly brief, consisting of only five paragraphs, not a word more. It was an example of a prose style nearly perfect, Bill earlier informed Raines over the telephone. The letter showed a mastery of the required form of the college freshman essay “of his day,” Brill said, referring to the standard *dummy* of five paragraphs upon which first-year college or advanced high students have draped

their simple thoughts for generations. Yes, the letter was extremely well-written, Raines had to agree, sitting at his oversized desk. The lifeless form of the dummy, in this rare case, actually was vivified and its words given a monstrously energetic life by this year's damn Fulbright scholar, Blackmon, his casual tennis buddy. The letter was likely going to be a source of trouble for him alone, Raines understood, and maybe for the Cultural Center, but if the Center, then the Embassy.

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