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Coffee with the CIA

His smile approaches kindness, but stops short of it. I have tried to put him at ease—made a point of saying I don't care about the state secrets he might, or might not, be privy to; its' personal secrets that fascinate me. But I see a distinct possibility this man has no secrets of any variety. Everything in him gleams with duty and obligation, much like his navy sport coat that boasts its designer label.

I push toward what lurks beneath the smile. It is a sin I commit repeatedly, searching for edges and prying beneath them—some delayed rebellion from my missionary childhood.

“How did you know where the next attack would be? I mean, they were random—I don't see how you predicted anything.”

A door in the back of his eyes shuts—not slams. The door in his eyes is made of a substance firmer than I expect, with hinges to it. His hands hang off the edges of his chair. He says nothing. I study the hair on top of his head, black hair receding from a central bald spot. The comfort of duty and obligation don't keep this man immune from aging. His face is clean-shaven, an illusion of openness. Does the CIA make it a prerequisite for agents to blend in with the masses? Wanted—people who do not stand

out in a crowd, who blend into walls and tables, people who make themselves invisible and take comfort in what they are told to take comfort in. Wanted—people skilled in silence. I might qualify.

This particular agent is a friend of a friend of a friend. I asked for an interview about his time in Liberia during the civil war. He said he was no longer with the CIA; he could talk about certain things but not others. He said the business of law now preoccupied him; he defended criminals. It seems a distinct possibility that the defense of criminals fits with the personal secrets hiding beneath the state ones that he refuses to talk about. Does he talk to his wife? I picture the smile when he unbuttons his shirt and hangs it on a bed poster. It would be a four-poster bed. I am quite sure of this, although I have never thought about it before. I feel sorry for the wife who is visible in the gold wedding band. She is certainly pretty—long hair (of course), bottled blonde with a precision cut, and definitely skilled with make up. I do not qualify; I am not cooperating. I asked for this interview, and I must now attempt to be nice or I will get nothing. I smile with what I hope is a closer approximation to kindness than the one he has made.

“I don’t mean who told you about the attacks. The war wasn’t like a regular war or anything—I know what it’s like over there.”

He rubs his eyes. “Yes, where was it you lived?”

“Gbanga.”

A wedge in the door before it shuts. His hands wave; his voice rises. Gbanga was where Charles Taylor had his main headquarters. Did I know Charles Taylor? I shake my head—after all, I do not know Charles Taylor in any way other than the newspaper way—anything to keep this man talking, keep the door in his eyes from closing and the

words tumbling onto the coffee table between us. I have no cup of coffee. He does. I had planned to get my coffee in a hypothetical relaxed moment. But I am slipping back—missionary kid on a mission station in Gbanga, the town where Charles Taylor lived—Charles Taylor who used any means imaginable (and those that are not) to get where he wanted to be.

All that is over. It is 2005. Charles Taylor has been banished to Nigeria, in spite of his almost-reputable time as president of Liberia. Somewhere along the line the United States saw fit to bless his cause. That is, after the United States cursed Charles Taylor, it blessed him, and then cursed him again. For things like blessings, it is good to be among the last in line.

I lived under a president by the name of William Tolbert when I was there. The United States also blessed Tolbert, even after the little incident with rice. Tolbert proclaimed a cost of rice increase to fund yacht repairs or something. People did not take kindly to this, but got killed for saying so. A man named Samuel Doe captured Tolbert in his pajamas, disemboweled him, and tied his cabinet members to telephone poles on the beach to be shot. The name Doe says a lot—it sounds pretty good. But crucifixion disillusioned almost everyone. Doe got himself killed by a man named Prince Johnson—which is also a name with something to say for itself. The United States blessed Johnson, even after his little incident with the video. Johnson tortured Samuel Doe on camera, cutting his ears off one by one. This was not a secret, state or otherwise. Prince Johnson shared the video across Africa. Taylor came along after that. Maybe the United States was just relieved to have another candidate to bet on. Liberia is a type of power-hold in

Africa. If the United States doesn't bless a key-player, another country will. Of course the CIA agent could tell me otherwise. He knows more about such things than me.

"You remember the embassy," he says.

I remember nothing about the embassy, other than its general location in Monrovia on Mamba Point with other embassies and security officers and clean pavement and landscaping. I nod.

"Tennis courts were great," he says. "Overlooking the ocean. Hit a ball wrong, you never see it again."

Doe buried Tolbert's cabinet members on the beach right where they came off the telephone poles. Sand digs easily. I know about the burials in the same way that I know about the embassy, by imagining them from what I heard. Missionary kids went to mission schools and stayed in mission guest-houses if they went to Monrovia. Mission guest-houses had clean polished linoleum floors and electricity and running water and a pantry stocked with harlequin romances and canned goods. Across the fence, ten people huddled into a shack built of recycled oil drums. They ate rice by the light of a kerosene lantern.

The smile has returned to the CIA man. I find myself relieved, as if it hides both of us. He tells me that he didn't play tennis much. His boss played. His boss was a Vietnam vet who was serving his time until retirement. But the tennis courts were great, and the golf wasn't bad. His voice lowers. He tells me that the war was bizarre, nothing he would ever understand. Tribal members turned on each another. Children turned on parents. If a soldier was fighting in a ditch and his side was losing, he would shoot his

companions with his AK 47, then stand with his hands over his head to join the other side. Survival.

He says there was someone he worked with—and suddenly gets vague. This someone was already afraid, Vietnam or Korea—some form of combat somewhere. This someone did something with radio in a locked room. The man from the CIA played a joke on him; broadcast false radio information on closed frequencies as if the war was approaching Monrovia long before it did. This someone developed a wounded leg, self-inflicted wound. He had to be med-evaced for his fear.

The agent laughs. I make a great effort to laugh with him, as if I do not know about powerlessness and the tricks of mind over body. My laughter shakes his cup.

I had been ill in Liberia. I used Ghandi to my own ends; I thought of him constantly. I terrorized everyone with my rope-thin arms and protruding cheekbones. I only had to look outside to get motivation to fast, or so I said. Everyone in Africa was skinny. This was not my real motivation, but it worked. I wanted out. I wanted to go to a school where I could have phone calls with girl-friends, maybe even dates. I wanted to live where I wouldn't feel guilty for my change of cloths. My motives were entirely selfish.

I do not tell the agent this. It is the door in my own eyes. After all, we are sitting in a coffee shop where it costs three dollars for a medium cup of coffee and people have the money to buy two, buy three cups of the brew, and throw it out. We are in a world so far from the world of starvation that they do not touch. Except that the two of us are crunched into these tiny chairs, and I am trying to listen. I am trying very hard to listen

and to be nice and to keep the agent talking. I am afraid that if I say anything, it will be much too much for this tiny table and the air between us.

I am becoming less skilled in silence.

The house my family lived in Gbanga was on top of a hill with a bush airstrip in front of it and a rubber plantation behind. The rubber trees had been there fifteen to twenty years, trunks as high as a cathedral with a leaf canopy and a powder leaf-brown carpet. Tiny cuts circled round the trunks with white sap that dripped like blood. The sap was collected into hollowed coconuts at the base of the cuts. It coagulated into brown threads if I smeared it on my hands. When I rubbed my hands together, the threads clumped to balls. With one bounce, those balls could soar above the cathedral of trunks, above the canopy of leaves.

If I were Charles Taylor, I would have lived in that house with the rubber plantation behind it and the airstrip in front. From the windows of that house, one could see the world. But not the world of this coffee shop; one could never see that far.

“You know I wasn’t supposed to get involved,” the agent tells me. “That’s one of the rules. We get information. Anything else you hear is false.”

I wonder whom he says this for, him or me. I wonder how skilled he is at his task of gleaning information if he cannot see my lies. He keeps talking.

“The man who ran the generator at the embassy didn’t come to work one day. When he showed up, I gave him shit. He never missed a day of work for seventeen years, and I gave him shit. He said his wife and children had been killed—murdered by Taylor’s boys. That night, I went home with him to prove it. Couldn’t help myself—didn’t believe him. There they were, dead. Sprawled over his house with throats cut, arms off. His wife

was half-naked, blood on her thighs. He came to work without even burying them.” The agent pulls at what is left of the hair on his head. “There were choices.”

“Yes, hard choices.” It seems the thing to say, but I wonder who made the choices. Was it he or I? Or was it the man who found his family dead when he got home from work? What kind of choice is that?

“You know, the American family who was killed—”

Or maybe he doesn't say that. Maybe that is only the way I hear it, because any family that was killed is so close to me and to my family that it all becomes confusing. Anorexia is a family disease; that's what the books say. This might or might not be true, but it is a killing disease. It kills the one who is killing, and the ones who want the one who is killing to be dead, and the ones who don't understand any of it, but somehow get themselves involved. My sister wanted me dead. There wasn't enough time or attention to go around with a world that needed saving—and our world needed a lot of saving. So my sister wanted me dead and I obliged by trying to die. It seemed the least I could do. Death was another beginning. I could start over, do it right, get out of where I was into another place that might be a whole lot better, or at least not the same. But now when I think about it, all that is another lie. I could have killed my family with my illness. I drained everything out of them and took it for myself. It was all about me, look at me.

“At least that made the papers here,” the agent says. “Got people's attention. Americans wanted the bodies back. I had to go out and pick up bones. Either that or insane relatives would show up in a war zone. Then I would have had more to answer to. But how did I know what bone belonged to whom? I could get the general shape—rib, thigh, skull. Beyond that—I threw them into bags, labeled the bags: boy, girl, man,

woman. At least there was something to bury. I put the bags in my fridge when I got back to Monrovia. Not that there was much flesh on them—all that humidity. You know how it is. Decay is more rapid in West Africa.”

I hope I appear to be someone who knows. After all, that didn’t happen to me. Or if it did, I was too lost in my own game of counting the calories in bites of papaya to know if it happened or not. Papaya is pretty low in calories. And collard greens, but they were usually smothered in palm oil so I didn’t eat them. I had to be very careful of calories to keep my weight at sixty pounds, to keep myself dying, to keep myself thinking of myself.

“You know the British ambassador,” he says.

I have no idea of any ambassador from any country. My nod keeps him going.

“I saw him out one day, hunting. Bird hunting, or butterfly watching, or maybe just taking a walk. I don’t know what the hell he was doing. He had that British hat on. Why the hell do they wear those goddamn hats? He was always wearing his goddamn hat and those khaki pants.”

The agent is wearing khaki pants. Does he even see himself? I am wearing jeans—clean jeans that look like all the other jeans, but the label is on the outside and the shirt is tucked in so I don’t have to mention it to anyone. It is not a cheap label, and does not need to be a secret. I have five pairs of jeans, all with good labels.

The CIA man leans toward me. His voice is matter-of fact. “Over here, hardly anyone knows about the war.”

Lack of acknowledgment is the slogan of the CIA; at least that is how I understand it. I like him more when I think this. It makes him more human, more approachable. I nod a bit too vigorously.

“I asked that Ambassador if he knew where the hell he was. He looked at me like I didn’t know what I was talking about. My official position was Minister of Human Development—but he knew who I was. What is a goddamn Minister of Human Development doing in a country where everyone is killing everyone? If people weren’t dying from bullets and machetes, they were dying of starvation. Dogs were fatter than people. They don’t eat dogs. They should have—but dogs ate all the dead bodies. Anyway, this goddamn British ambassador was out where not even a dog was sniffing. If you’re where nothing moves, you better get out. It’s the front line—if you can call anything in that war a front line.”

“Why didn’t he get shot?” I wonder if the question pushes too hard at whatever it is the agent can’t talk about. For some reason I no longer want to push at anything. I want to let it stay where it is. Hidden.

“You know—the heritage of colonialism. That’s what I didn’t plan on—being able to say things and have people listen. I was the US government. Or as close as they were going to get. I hadn’t expected that. Driving down a road in the middle of nowhere I’d see three people. One of them would turn, just look at me. Maybe it was a kid. Maybe the other two—the ones with guns—maybe they were kids. One of them would be dead in the next minute, over the next hill. But how did I really know? I mean, if I intervened, what if it was the wrong thing? White skin or US government or whatever, how much protection was that really? —Once I got stranded with a group of Taylor’s boys. They

had a prisoner, man about my age. All night he asked me, 'please sah.' I can still hear him. He was going to be killed in the morning, not quickly either. That's not how they did it. Those soldiers were kids. Taylor took in orphans, gave them food, a place to stay. It made for insane loyalty. Anyway, maybe they let the prisoner go."

Charles Taylor gained his soldiers by conscripting children and forcing them to kill their elders and parents, so there was nowhere for them to go home to. I know the agent must know this. It was never a secret of any kind. I read that some agent from the CIA asked Taylor to hold back from invading Monrovia with Prince Johnson, and promised the US would support him. Then the US supported a man named Sawyer instead. Sawyer got out of the country, with or without the help of anyone from the CIA. It was only after Sawyer disappeared that the US supported Taylor. I wonder if this is true. I wonder if this agent is the one who asked Taylor not to invade Monrovia, then backed Sawyer instead.

Someone from the CIA locked Taylor in prison when he came to the States—at least so Taylor announced to more than one reporter on more than one occasion. Taylor also announced that the CIA orchestrated his escape from that US prison to get him back to Liberia. It's possible. Anything is possible. The stories all come from somewhere—stories of men becoming spirits so that the bullets wouldn't hurt them, stories of arms as long as snakes whipping across a room to pull a trigger. Just about the time the stories are too incredible to believe, they are true. As a child, I heard that diamonds were lying on the ground just waiting to be picked up across the border in Sierra Leone. I thought it was a lie. Now look. Dream and real are never far apart in Africa. They grow into one another.

The man from the CIA is saying something about traveling from Monrovia to Gbanga until the war made it too difficult. Ambushes. Even his informants didn't know where they would strike next. He didn't know what he was getting into, going over there. Not that he would have changed his mind once he got there, but he didn't know. When he had started, Liberia was just a little county on the coast of West Africa. There were rumblings, of course.

My mind skids away to the stone house on top of the hill with the bush airstrip in front of it. My father tried to teach me to drive on that airstrip. It was filled with a foot of red gravel, ditches to either side. My father insisted that his daughter learn how to start and stop the little square car with a stick shift. Lesson number one—starting and stopping in loose gravel. I never got to lesson number two. Every time the car rolled, I faced toward the bottom of the hill where a propeller plane glared from its resting spot in a huge pond. One wing had submerged; the other stuck at an angle to the trees. Vines grew from the tip of the wing into the trees like a net, a veil hiding what was the end of any foolish lesson.

“You know, I saw them,” the agent says. “Those warriors in bathing caps and wedding dresses right in the middle of Monrovia. They must have raided some Bridal salon. It's a terrible sight, men in white lace with machete's raised. It brings on terror just to look at them. They used old rituals for their benefit. Some raided stark naked. Some raided in huge devil masks. Almost makes you believe in magic to look at them.”

I can no longer even pretend to nod. It is the way he says 'magic', as if it is something that does not exist, as if no matter what he says, he will never believe in it.

When I was ill, I had visited a witch-doctor in Liberia. To say that I visited her makes it sound too voluntary. I had been roped and carried to her because I refused to go. I had gone to psychiatrists willingly enough. After all, there were only two in the country. No one could understand why I wouldn't eat, and I knew there was nothing anyone could say to me that would make me change. I wanted to die. But an African witch-doctor was someone I didn't know about, and I didn't feel sure that I could decide anything in her presence. I lay up on the floor of a VW combi for the trip to her village. The chickens to be offered for sacrifice lay next to me with their wings tied behind their backs. I had my arms tied behind mine. We all had our legs tied.

The witch-doctor herself spoke no English. She laughed at me. She laughed and then put me in a tiny dark hut where she chanted with her hands on my head. Things happened in that hut that I do not understand—that I can't find words to fit next to. But it was like I met myself. I met some part of myself I had been separated from, and it gave me the courage to go on

I think I should say something. I should tell the CIA man that I believe in magic, that some things don't fit neatly in our way of understanding life or living. I think I should try to explain that warriors in wedding dresses might speak more clearly than we do, if we listen. I open my mouth. He is still talking.

“—not far out of Monrovia, three miles on the coast. Too late for me to get back to the Landrover with soldiers on either side. I didn't even know which side owed me loyalty—but it wouldn't have made a difference if I had. They weren't going to stop shooting. I started running, but there was nowhere to go. I jumped into a sewage pit—you know those open pits. I held my breath and stayed under as long as I could. It might have

been one hour, or five. When the firing stopped, I crawled out and threw up until it was only water. Then I stripped, ripped off my clothes. I ran down the coast stark naked. I was never more glad to be anywhere in my life. I have never felt more alive.”

He keeps talking, as if he has said nothing of significance. He tells me of a newspaper article about a fish that told everyone to ‘stop fighting.’ It was in the national paper, a reputable article. People gathered at the beach in the midst of the shallow graves in the sand, the graves that were eroding open. They gathered to listen to a fish opening and closing its mouth—a fish telling them to stop fighting. The stench of rotting flesh forced everyone to keep handkerchiefs on their faces even with the ocean breeze, and still they stayed to listen. The journalist who wrote the article didn’t hear the fish himself, but that did not make it untrue.

I want to interrupt the agent and ask; if the truth is too unbearable, why not believe in what is not true, what is difficult to conceive of? I want to explain that the death of reality is hard enough, but the death of a dream is a killer. Dream and real must stay together to stay alive. Without that, there is nothing—no reason to go on.

And then its’ like I can see him, the naked white man with his central bald spot. He is running down the beach, swerving round driftwood, stepping in gobs of tar. Old sewage mats his hair, clings to his chest and chin and elbows, drops from his eyelashes. I see his muscles jiggle. I feel his heart beat.