

Living Liberia

Laughter, Love & Folly

PROLOGUE

Africa has a special place in my heart, for it was there, in the rain forest of Liberia, in a village called Kpaytuo, I spent my twenty-second and twenty-third years.

Liberia lies on the West Coast of Africa, slightly above the equator in the region once called, in a more Eurocentric age, “the white man’s graveyard.” Founded by former American slaves and free-born blacks in 1847, “the great object for forming these colonies being to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed children of Africa,” Liberia has always had a unique relationship with the United States: indeed, its capital, Monrovia, is named after President James Monroe.

When I lived there, Liberia was, in many respects, two countries: one was composed of the descendants of the approximately twenty thousand former American slaves and free-born blacks repatriated to Liberia from the United States in the nineteenth century. Known as Americo-Liberians, they dominated the political, social and cultural life of the country, even though they made up only about three to five percent of the population of one and a half million. The “other” Liberia—the one in which I lived and functioned—was made up of the indigenous tribal people, sixteen groups in all, speaking eleven dialects in a country the size of Tennessee.

From February 1966 to late December 1967 I lived in Kpaytuo, pronounced by most Westerners who can’t duplicate the “kp” sound of the Gio dialect as “PAY-too-oh.” I was the second non-African to call it home. The first was a Lebanese merchant who left

when he realized he was not going to make his fortune selling onions, salt and bouillon cubes to the seven hundred barely literate residents of the village. Kpaytuo had no electricity or running water, no indoor toilets, no medical clinic, never mind a nurse or a doctor; and very little of anything else, except the cone-shaped mud and thatched huts in which people lived, six to ten to a hut.

Like the other villages in the country's interior, Kpaytuo had been carved and hacked out of the rain forest, the most dense and imposing in Africa, save possibly the great jungle in Zaire. In these remote hamlets and villages Liberia's indigenous tribal people practiced back-breaking subsistence agriculture, barely raising enough rice by this primitive and inefficient method to feed their large, extended families. There was a conservative, communal life regulated by powerful secret societies, the *Poro* for the men, the *Sande* for the women—the violation of whose taboos, not that many years before I arrived, meant death. They worshipped their ancestors, whose spirits were reputed to reside in rocks and trees. They believed in the efficacy of witchcraft, permitted a man as many wives as he could afford, and were by Western standards promiscuous—although I was happy to overlook their trespasses, especially those committed by unattached tribal women, whom I found beautiful and alluring.

When I think of Liberia and Kpaytuo, the person who first comes to mind is my houseboy, Samuel Dahngbae. (I'm aware that the term "houseboy" smacks of nineteenth or mid-twentieth century colonialism, but in 1967 that was the name all of us, including Liberians, used to describe the position.)

Sammy was around twelve or thirteen years old when we met (and I was twenty-

two). I estimate his age, for birth and death records were not kept in a village like Kpaytuo nor by the central government, which had neither the means nor the inclination. Samuel is hardly a Gio name—Gio being a dialect and the name of the tribe. Gaylah, which means “the man who lives on the hill,” or Sueme, which means “son of the best hunter,” are Gio names. But like most young Liberians of his generation, when he entered school Sammy selected a Western or *kwi* name, this to appear modern and sophisticated. (*Kwi* is the term tribal Liberians used to signify an educated person or the modern world and its practitioners. It comes from *kwipoo*, the word for a white person.)

It was not uncommon for Liberian schoolchildren to change their Western names frequently, and for a few weeks Sammy announced that his name was Augustus. I was grateful he didn't call himself “Pencil” or “Saturday,” the names chosen by two of his friends. All the children in Kpaytuo had tribal names, but most of the children also selected Western names: the most popular being the Biblical names Mary, Esther and Rebecca among the girls, and Peter, Joshua, Paul and Samuel among the boys.

Sammy was short, wiry, muscular and pitch black. Although he was around thirteen, he was in the second grade. That had nothing to do with brains, for he was clever. In the mid-1960s, all too many of Africa's children entered school around age twelve, if not later. (Sadly, this is still the pattern for many in the twenty-first century.) Tribal Liberian parents, subsistence farmers who managed to get through life without this new thing called “book,” saw no urgency for their children, who were needed to perform domestic chores in the village proper and on the families' nearby small farms, to attend school. Consequently many parents refused to allow their children, especially their

daughters, to attend school until age eleven to thirteen (when their young siblings took over their responsibilities on the farm).

Sammy's official job was fetching water for me from the well in our quarter of the village. Four or five times a day during the dry season, which lasts roughly from December to March, he walked to the well and returned thirty minutes later with a bucket full of water expertly balanced on his head. Aside from enabling the Liberians to carry loads of up to fifty pounds as adults, balancing endless buckets of water and bundles of firewood on their heads as children gives them stately bearing, perfect posture, and for the women, a sensual gait. I paid Sammy \$5 a month for his labors, a princely sum for a boy his age in a country where the annual average per capita income was about \$300.

Helping Sammy run my household was Kamah Fendahn, a shy, sweet-tempered girl of about fourteen who cooked for me. She chose the *kwi* name Anna, but since her country name was so lovely, I always called her Kamah. The third member of the household staff was Peter Menlae, a fifteen-year-old student who, after school once a week or thereabout, washed my clothes in a nearby stream. Once they were dry, Peter pressed them exquisitely with an iron filled with hot charcoal. But it was Sammy, younger than Peter and about the same age as Kamah, who ran the show.

Sammy was with me from 6:30 A.M., when with a soft tap on my bedroom door and the phrase "Teacher, it can be time" he woke me, until 8:00 in the evening, when he (and Kamah) returned to their families' huts for the night. I taught him during the morning. After school, and after he had returned from fetching water, he helped me dispense medicine, an antiseptic powder to treat foot and ankle infections, to which the

tribal children were prone from often going shoeless—usually the poorest or the youngest—or wearing only cheap, flimsy, plastic flip-flops. Eventually I taught him how to clean and dress wounds and infections, and he and a friend, Samuel Gweh, relieved me, except in the most serious cases, of this task.

Liberia's official language was English, the mother tongue of the Americo-Liberians, who would not be caught dead speaking one of the tribal dialects. English is the language of government and commerce and is also used for situations as commonplace as arguing over a bus seat in Monrovia. Most of the tribal people, aside from their native dialect, spoke a lilting, colorful Pidgin English often adding the sound of “oh” to the last word in a sentence.

“Teacher Cherry, the sun, he coming to sleep soon-oh” was the poetic way Sammy described the setting sun. “A fork is a spoon with teeth,” he once explained to me. He called my kerosene-powered refrigerator “the machine that cooks ice.” And like all the children in Kpaytuo, he called the eraser on a pencil the “pencil's nose” and described a flat tire as “the car's foot is broken.”

It was Sammy who was always vigilant in spotting a freshly killed antelope, a hindquarter of which I would buy from a hunter, once I—with Sammy interpreting—had negotiated the price. (Though I picked up a smattering of words, I did not speak Gio.) Sammy cut the meat into chunks, which we stored in the freezer of my kerosene refrigerator, and each night Sammy, Kamah and I ate rice and meat for dinner.

Day and night tribal children—many of them Sammy's age—congregated in the front room of my house, which Liberians called “the piazza.” They joked or sang or

silently sat on the floor (there were never enough chairs) and looked at the pictures in American magazines, the photographs in which astounded and fascinated them. When I was not present, everyone knew Sammy was in charge.

Sammy, like most Liberians, believed in the supernatural, and in the power of totems, incantations, witches, and most of all in the medicine man, called in Liberia a *Zo*. There was a little man named Duna who lived in our village, and as a result of an illness or injury, he waddled like a duck. Sammy spoke of Duna with reverence and used to tell me, “When that old man dies, we all die.”

“How do you know Duna can be a powerful medicine man?” I would ask Sammy.

“Look at the fine, young wives that ugly, old man has,” Sammy answered. “Look at his fine clothes and so-so big farm.” How but through “medicine,” Sammy contended, had Duna acquired these luxuries? And how could I, who knew “American book,” be so dense as to fail to see the obvious?

While I doubted Duna’s powers, the Liberians did not. People in Kpaytuo and from nearby villages and towns flocked to Duna’s hut. A young man wishing to win a young woman’s fancy asked Duna to concoct a potion for the young man to rub on his body, presumably making him irresistible to the young woman; someone setting off to prospect for diamonds in the Nimba mountains paid Duna for “medicine” to increase his chances of striking it rich; and if you wanted to bewitch a greedy relative, Duna was the man to see.

One day an old man, in tattered clothes and obviously down on his luck, came to my house to ask for a favor. As was the tribal custom in such situations, the supplicant

brought a gift, a mangy, unhealthy looking chicken. The old man stated his case, which Sammy translated; but while the man spoke Sammy and I avoided making eye contact, lest we burst out in laughter over the man's well-intentioned but pitiful offering. I'm sure I granted the man's wish—exactly what it was I don't remember. Yes, Sammy and I were disrespectful, but it was a funny moment, one of many he and I shared.

Sammy had a devilish sense of humor and a cackling, infectious laugh. Everyone, regardless of age or position, took to him. He considered himself a Christian, although he had never been baptized. He liked to listen to the Western-born missionaries from a nearby town and their Liberian converts recite Biblical tales, and he loved to look at illustrated Biblical storybooks; the depiction of the bearded patriarchs from the Old Testament, with their colorful robes, fascinated him, reminding him of powerful old tribal chiefs.

Sammy and Kamah ate dinner with me almost every night. Sammy said a Christian prayer before the meal, while Kamah and I abstained. One evening as Sammy prayed, his eyes closed and head bowed, Kamah reached across the table, took Sammy's plate of rice, and hid it on her lap. When Sammy opened his eyes, momentarily stunned to find his plate gone, he said to Kamah, who was on the verge of bursting out laughing, "You will not be smiling so when Jesus reaches Lowyee." Lowyee was the village before Kpaytuo on the road from the capital into the interior. Sammy envisioned Jesus bringing salvation to each village in Liberia, beginning, of course, in Monrovia, the head and heart of the country, and traveling up the only road into the interior. No doubt he expected Jesus to do likewise in neighboring Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast, and in Mali,

Ghana, Nigeria et al., and once finished with every hamlet, village, town and city in Africa, moving on to the rest of the world, of whose existence he had only the foggiest notion, save for that magical land America, from which rich white people, who knew book, came.

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At twenty-one I sought to right the world's wrongs. I also, not incidentally, wanted to see foreign shores and to experience foreign cultures, so I joined the Peace Corps. Why were young, liberal arts graduates from American colleges, most of us, like myself, without teaching degrees, sent to Liberia to teach? Because the Liberian government had requested us, as there were insufficient numbers of qualified Liberians to do the job. Most Liberian teachers, especially in the interior, had the equivalent of about a ninth-grade American education, if that. And teachers were desperately needed: ninety percent of the tribal population was illiterate.

When I arrived in Kpaytuo from Philadelphia in February 1966 as a freshly-minted Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV)—after a two-month crash course in teaching—I found the school had no chairs or desks, few books (those we had were outdated American textbooks with bucolic scenes of Vermont), no blackboard, until we fashioned one by painting a piece of insulating cardboard black; and no paper, chalk, pens or pencils. We collected five cents from each student and commissioned the village carpenter to build benches, as otherwise the students would have had no place to sit. In the time I lived and taught in Kpaytuo, the village received nothing from the Liberian Department of Education, except the principal—who also taught—and another teacher,

both, in my opinion, dubious contributions to the educational program.

Although we were supposed to hold school five days a week, I was happy if we managed to get in four: no country in the world, I would wager, has more national holidays than Liberia. And when there wasn't a legitimate holiday, the principal, a cad named Otto Whern, thought nothing of making one up. Then there were the numerous days when either the principal or the other teacher was absent, often to defend himself in an adultery suit; or they had traveled to the county headquarters, there to seek, mostly without success, that month's or the previous month's pay. Their salaries on such occasions had been embezzled by one of their superiors; if not that, then the government had been unable to make its payroll.

Besides these man-made disasters, there were natural impediments: we couldn't hold school regularly during the rainy season, roughly from April to November, because of copious rain—about 120 inches a year—and no one could walk to school without being soaked.

On the mornings when school was in session, it began around 7:30 A.M. I say “around,” for I was the only person in the village with a working timepiece, and after six months in Liberia's humidity and heat, my watch, like everything else in the country, worked irregularly. (The principal owned a battery-operated radio, which broadcast the hour, but he was no stickler for starting on time.) We all stood at attention in the dirt compound in front of the school, and the hundred and twenty or so students pledged allegiance to the Liberian flag. God help the poor villager, on his way to his farm, who, on a few occasions, failed to stop walking and stand at attention during flag raising. The

principal and a few of the more obnoxious older schoolchildren considered this a serious affront to the national honor. The principal seized on the moment for a demagogic sermon on the importance of national pride, and if he needed money for palm wine, often fined the farmer.

Every day after the flag was raised, the principal turned to me and sighed, “Ah, Life, Mr. Cherry. Ah, Life.”

I taught the first and second graders, who ranged in age from eight to sixteen, from 8:00 A.M. to 10:00 A.M. in one small room, following which we had recess until 10:30 A.M. Then I taught for one hour each the third and fourth graders, ages around ten to twenty. By 12:30 P.M. the tropical sun was too strong to endure, especially under an uninsulated corrugated metal roof, and the school day ended. The students dispersed, usually to help their families around the home or farm.

I instructed my students, whose mother tongue was the Gio dialect, how to read, write and speak English better. Most were the first members of their families to attend school. An American friend of mine marvels that there are men and women in Liberia who may pronounce some words in English—like “water,” “gasoline” and “no”—with a Philadelphia accent. (Whether he thinks this is good or bad he has never said.)

As is true for other teachers in any place or circumstance, on many days for me teaching in Liberia was beyond the scope of the most dedicated and talented educator—not that I placed myself in that category. But then there were the frequent days when I saw my students’ desire, against steep odds, to learn; and the days when they “got” my point; and the days when they were exposed to a story for the first time and enjoyed it.

On those days, teaching was the most wonderful job in the world.

There were also moments of unforgettable pathos. I remember the day in my fourth grade class when we were reading a story from an old American textbook about a boy and his horse. The horse lived in a big, clean, white barn, overflowing with bales of neatly-stacked hay. There was a picture of the horse asleep, covered by a pretty red blanket. After looking at the barn and the horse and the pretty red blanket, one of my students said, without rancor, “Horses in America live better than Africans.”

And then there was the school’s principal, Otto Whern, who had few administrative duties, so his main job was teaching. He and the other Liberian teacher worked in a recently built rectangular shed, sixty feet long and thirty feet wide, adjacent to the main “school”—the principal at one end of the mud-walled room, his Liberian colleague at the other. One taught kindergarten, the other history, science and mathematics to grades one through four. They often switched or combined their classes. We had no history, science or mathematics books, and the principal and the other teacher knew little about the subjects, so theirs was a formidable task. Making matters worse, both were ill trained, poorly motivated, lazy and venal. On the rare occasions when they were actually present and conducting classes (one act did not necessarily follow the other), they taught and required the students to sing hymns; not that the teachers were pious: it was the easiest way to pass the time.

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Liberia was the first sovereign black republic in Africa, and after Haiti, the second in the world. When the European powers divvied up Africa in the nineteenth century, the

heyday of European colonialism, both Britain and France desired, and eventually secured, small parts of Liberia. But somehow the tiny, weak, isolated and impoverished black republic survived, an accomplishment for which the Americo-Liberians deserve credit. However, Liberia's indigenous people paid a price for Liberia's survival as an independent country. The ruling Americo-Liberians cut off the hinterlands from European commercial, missionary and other influences during much of the nineteenth century, limiting foreign commerce to the coastal ports, where the freed slaves had settled and their descendants lived and ruled. No surprise that in 1906 the Africanist Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston called the interior of Liberia "the least known part of Africa."

By the late 1960s, about twenty Americo-Liberian families ruled Liberia, and through intermarriage perpetuated their reign. Well into the 1970s there were two sets of laws in the country, one for the approximately thirty thousand Americo-Liberians, who were referred to in court and law as "civilized"; and one for the million-plus indigenous tribal population, who were referred to as "aborigines."

What the Americo-Liberians did not control was the economic life of the country. That was controlled by Europeans and Americans who ran the few big corporations in Liberia (such as Firestone rubber and several mining companies that extracted iron ore); and at the wholesale and retail level by a few thousand Lebanese businessmen; and finally on the lowest rungs of the commercial ladder, by a smattering of Africans, ironically most of whom were not even Liberians, but members of the Mandingo tribe from nearby West African countries.

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The day arrived when my assignment was over and, sadly to be sure, I left Liberia. I corresponded with Sammy, telling him about my life: that I had become, in turn, a teacher in Philadelphia, my hometown, and then a journalist in Phoenix and New York City. He reported on events in Kpaytuo: who was attending school and who was not (as the years passed, more of the latter than the former); which of my former female students were pregnant or mothers (within a few years, literally every one); about the progress of the new school being constructed in Kpaytuo; and, best of all, which of my friends in Kpaytuo sent their regards.

Given the nature of the Liberian postal system—dreadful in the capital city, nonexistent at that time in the interior—and the nature of life in Liberia, getting letters to and receiving letters from the interior was difficult. (Forget about a package; about 30 percent got through.) It was common knowledge that postal employees, who might not have been paid for months, opened letters and packages from the United States, and sometimes stole the contents. So I was not surprised when, five years after my departure, I lost touch with Sammy and the few other Liberians with whom I had been corresponding.

But a few years later I met an ex-Liberian Peace Corps Volunteer who knew one Volunteer still in the country. That Volunteer was stationed in a village five miles from Kpaytuo. I wrote Sammy a letter, in care of the Volunteer, telling Sammy, among other things, that I hoped one day to return to Liberia.

My letter was delivered, for in August 1977 I received a response from him, an excerpt from which, with the punctuation intact, follows:

Father, please make your coming formal. I mean the actual date, time, month and year. I want to inform everybody so that we can all await your arrival. It would be a swell party. I beg you—please make it formal. Also, please tell me the type of soup [sauce] you want to eat that day. Maybe an African soup like cassava leaf, palm butter or potato green. Which one is good for you?

Everybody here is alright. Only that some of the people you ask for have drop from school because of hardship. Some moved to other places to obtain living. The hard cost of living here in Liberia cannot allow poor people to learn. I'm not even ready to tell you about myself. For example, the following persons are not going to school again. Andrew, Kamah, Peter Lankah, Moses Grant, etc. They all left school because there is no body to help them. For the girls, some are living with boy-friends and consider themselves married women. (smile).

Father, I have really been trying to talk to you through letter, but have always been a failure. I've been out of school for two years. I tried all my best without help (except from you) and stopped as far as the 10th grade. I did not spend the whole year in school that year. I was able to stay for only half semester. It was not easy then. I would have gone through high school and even to college by now, but poverty was another big trouble behind me. He would kill me if I didn't leave.

I wrote back, suggesting he attend the Booker Washington Institute, one of the two trade schools in Liberia and sent him some money. He responded in October 1977 with another letter, part of which follows:

Father, it was very nice again receiving your nice and encouraging letter. At this

time I felt as if I had entered heaven. Not because I received money from you, but that you are too concern about my learning. You don't want me to suffer. You want me to become somebody in life. This is why I felt as if I had entered the kingdom of heaven.

I would prefer agriculture and electricity at the Booker Washington Institute. My first choice is electricity. This is what I'm doing presently. I am an electrician helper at my part-time job. I could stay to complete the job with my boss, but the job is not a permanent one and also my boss is a French man. Sometimes we talk through sign. So it is not easy for me to learn this job well. However, I have an idea about light. This is why I chose electricity. This is one idea.

Another idea is that if there is any way for me to come over, I will be happy. Maybe I can work with your father and learn business or go to any trade school in America. I am happy to learn in America. Usually when people leave Liberia and go to the United States to learn trade, when they come back, they can make heavy money. The respect is too great. They can assign car to you right away. This is why Liberian boys want to learn at the U.S. Maybe I will be one of those boys. (smile).

My mother extend her warmest greeting to the family. She says that if there was any way she would send some new rice. I say hello to your family too. I've stopped seeing you for a long time. So I would like for you to send me a picture. If mine is ready, I will send it.

I answered his letter and sent him a bank draft for \$400, more than enough for one year's tuition at the Booker Washington Institute. No other letters arrived from him. I never knew if he received my letter or what had happened to him or my money.

Scant was the news—public or private—from Liberia over those years.

Nevertheless, I followed keenly whatever was reported in newspapers and magazines. President William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman, after twenty-eight years in power, died at seventy-five. He was succeeded by his vice president of nineteen years, William Tolbert, both of course Americo-Liberians. Then in 1980 the shock: President Tolbert was murdered in a coup. The world awoke to the news that the Americo-Liberians, creators of the first, and the oldest, one-party state in Africa, rulers of Liberia for *a hundred and thirty years*, had been toppled in hours. Liberia was now in the hands of young, noncommissioned tribal officers, few of whom had graduated from high school. Liberia's new masters called themselves the People's Redemption Council. Their leader was Samuel K. Doe, a twenty-eight-year-old master sergeant whose name and politics were unknown to his countrymen, let alone the world.

Nineteen eighty-one was also the bleak year in which I lost my father—a good, kind, wise and gentle man. Soon afterwards, with expenses up and revenues down, I closed the weekly newspaper I had founded two years before in Philadelphia. Emotionally and physically drained, I needed change and rejuvenation. I knew just where to seek it.

But what would it be like returning to Liberia, especially when the country was ruled for the first time in its history by a military government, one that had come to power in a bloody coup? Fourteen years had elapsed since my departure from Kpaytuo. What was Kpaytuo like since the coup? My students were no longer twelve and eighteen years old, but men and women in their twenties and thirties, undoubtedly with families of

their own. What kinds of adults had they become? I was no longer twenty-two years old, fresh from the university, come to Liberia to save its people. (Given the situation, God Himself wouldn't have set such an ambitious goal; nor did I after a few months in Liberia.) What kind of adult, at age thirty-nine, had *I* become? What were Sammy, my houseboy, and Kamah, my cook, up to and like as adults? And what about my favorite student, Betty Leeleh, whose father, desperate for money, had married her off at fifteen? Was my good friend Tado Jackson—along with my houseboy Sammy the Kpaytuo resident with whom I corresponded most frequently, if irregularly—still eking out a living growing peppers and cucumbers? Did Andrew Karma still smile all the time? And was Zoelay Retty Sonkarlay, my lover, still beautiful? Would I even find them? Which of my ex-students and friends still lived in Kpaytuo? Which of them were alive, never mind where?

On a clear day in February of 1982, I boarded a jet in New York bound for Liberia to find out.

Chapter 1

I woke up excited if slightly anxious. Small wonder, for I was in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, and on this day, after fourteen years, I was returning to Kpaytuo.

Monrovia to Kpaytuo is 200 miles, a journey that took between ten and fourteen hours when I lived there, depending on how often the vehicle broke down, whether the driver had bothered to bring along a spare tire and an operable jack (most vehicles had one or the other, but rarely both), how long the driver and/or passengers dallied at the villages and towns en route, how many and how long were the arguments that ensued

between the passengers and the driver and among the passengers, and, finally and most crucially, the condition of the road.

One road, only a section of which was paved, penetrated the interior of Liberia from Monrovia to Kpaytuo, and that road had been completed in the 1940s. The paved section of it, when I lived there, extended 80 miles—from the capital to Totota, where, not coincidentally, President Tubman's farm (think of it as his Camp David) was located. During the rainy season, the extensive dirt section of the road, pounded by up to ten inches of rain a month and gutted by monstrous flatbed logging trucks, turned into a quagmire, making travel precarious and, at times, for hours or days, impossible. On many occasions the streams and creeks alongside the road overflowed. The news that in 1979 an Italian company had paved another section of the road, the stretch from Totota to Ganta (giving Liberia, including the coastal area, about 500 miles of paved road, one of the lowest totals in Africa) was welcome news, for it cut the tortuous journey from Monrovia to Kpaytuo, my Liberian home, by as much as half.

Two-thirds of Liberia had originally been covered by dense, tropical forest—almost the entire country beyond the coastal plain, which runs about 30 miles inland. With time large strips of the jungle along the natural trade routes had been cleared. It was through the rolling hills and the broad meadows of these secondary woodlands that we sped. But it was to the great forest, parts of which were still untouched and unmapped by humans, that I was heading.

We drove alongside the Firestone Rubber Plantation. As far as the eye could see were rubber trees—tidy rows of thin, fragile striped trees, looking like thousands of zebra

legs planted in the ground. Nineteen twenty-six was the year the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, of Akron, Ohio, signed an agreement with the Liberian government, then as always desperate for cash. Firestone lent the Liberian government \$5 million in exchange for which Firestone was granted a ninety-nine year lease on one million acres of land at six cents, then raised to fifty cents, an acre. On that land Firestone created the largest rubber plantation in the world. Rubber became Liberia's leading and just about only export crop, accounting in many of the pre-World War Two years for as much as ninety percent of Liberia's foreign earnings. What little social and economic development the government undertook in those years was made possible by the income generated by the Firestone operation. And after the Japanese conquered most of Southeast Asia's rubber plantations in World War Two, Firestone's rubber became one of the few sources of this crucial but scarce raw material available to the Allies: imagine tens of thousands of airplane and jeep tires, gas masks and life boats, all made from Liberian rubber. To gather it during the War, the United States government built an international airport outside of, and a deep water port in, Monrovia.

Given its long and ubiquitous presence in the country, it's easy to indict Firestone for exploiting the Liberian government and its citizens, paying the latter cheap wages and reaping large profits as a result of its agreement with the former. But until the 1950s, when iron ore became Liberia's most important industry, no institution, home-grown or foreign, was paying Liberians wages of any kind. It was Firestone that introduced the people to the cash economy. It was Firestone, far and away the largest employer in Liberia—with at one time twenty-five thousand Liberians tapping rubber—that set the

standard of wages throughout the country. And since the government was unwilling or unable to educate and train its healthy or take care of its sick citizens, it was left to Firestone from the 1930s to the 1960s to do so: and that it did, building housing and schools, even hospitals, for its workers and their families. To be sure, Firestone never has been a purely philanthropic organization: it came to Liberia to make money, and money it made. But in so doing, Firestone became, inadvertently, a revolutionary force for change in modern Liberia.

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The hamlets, villages and small towns through which we passed were much as I remembered them, save that the people, with but few exceptions, no longer lived in circular huts with thatched roofs: they now preferred houses of mud-brick with A-frame roofs of corrugated zinc sheeting—the type of dwelling only a small percentage of the people in the interior had lived in fourteen years before, including me.

There being no structures other than homes in the village—no banks or hardware stores, no clothing or furniture shops, no drug or shoe stores, no government buildings, no signs, neon or otherwise—the smaller villages of three hundred houses or fewer tend to appear rather similar, though by no means unattractive.

The scenes of daily life that flashed by were also as I remembered them: girls and women hauling loads of wood or buckets of water on their heads. Each wore a *lappa*, a long piece of colored cloth, formerly homemade, but now imported, wrapped around her body and tucked in under the armpit. Men in threadbare shorts, ragged T-shirts and plastic sandals were coming back from the small plots of land on which they raised rice,

the staple of the Liberian diet. The men carried cutlasses, the machete-like tools with which they cut the bush. Old ladies sat in the shade of trees and under the eaves of houses, minding children or weaving mats or fishing nets from palm leaves. Scrawny chickens, goats and hogs and a few flaccid cows wandered about. And the glare of the sun, high in the sky, grilled everything and everyone beneath it. Onward we went, the luxuriant and thick green forest to our right and left. The day still hot, I felt, once again, the torpor of the tropics, the air, to quote the author Joseph Conrad, “warm, thick, heavy and sluggish.”

About 20 miles from Ganta, the transfer point on the road to Kpaytuo, my luck ran out. The taxi lost speed and rolled to a stop. The car couldn't be out of gasoline—though the manner in which it gradually slowed to a halt suggested as much—because the driver had stopped for gas before we left Monrovia. (I could hardly have forgotten, given that it had taken about twenty-five minutes.) But I was giving the driver, an ill-tempered, devious member of the Mandingo tribe, too much credit. Rather than fill the tank, as we passengers had assumed, he had purchased only enough gas to go from Monrovia to Ganta—so he'd thought. He'd miscalculated, buying only enough gas to go from Monrovia to the point at which we now found ourselves, twenty miles short of Ganta. It was 4:00 P.M. I wanted to wring his neck. My chance of arriving in Kpaytuo before dark, slim though it had been when I set out, was now vanishing. Already hyper and anxious about my arrival, uncertain of what awaited me, I took my anxiety out on the poor driver, berating him for the delay.

Carrying an empty container for gas, the driver hopped a ride into Ganta with a

fellow Mandingo. I stood by the roadside, hoping I too might hitch a ride into Ganta. But the few vehicles that passed were buses and taxis from Monrovia, all of them full of passengers. My fellow passengers, used to delays of this sort, sat quietly by the road. A few wandered off, probably in search of water. After marching up and down the road, every now and then kicking the gravel in frustration at my being there instead of that much closer to Kpaytuo, I eventually sat down and ate half the roasted chicken that I had bought the night before, as much to soothe my nerves as to assuage my hunger.

The driver returned in about an hour and a half, smiling no less, and said, “It is good to have friends,” a reference to the ease with which he’d been able to hitch a ride to and from Ganta.

“It is better to have brains!” I said to him.

We arrived in Ganta at about 6:00 P.M., at least two hours from Kpaytuo. The paved road ends at Ganta, so the taxis from Monrovia go no farther into the interior—and knowing what the dirt road is like, who can blame them? A money bus was about to depart for Tappita, on the way to which lies Kpaytuo. It was probably the last bus heading that day to Tappita.

Money buses (called mammy wagons in other parts of Africa) are like the small buses or jitneys seen on the streets of Atlantic City, New Jersey. They hold about twelve to sixteen passengers comfortably; but in up-country Liberia, with twenty to twenty-four souls and their bags and the occasional goat and the ever-present chickens routinely stuffed and wedged into them, the money bus experience was just a little bit more comfortable than riding on an ox-cart. I don’t know why the Liberians called them

“money buses” as opposed to buses; for the same reason, I suppose, they called a train “the real bus.” In any case, it was by money bus that one traveled into and throughout the interior. Not everywhere, for there were still large areas of Liberia into which no road passed; if you wanted to reach remote villages in these areas, you trekked to them.

The money bus I found myself on that memorable day was typical of those I’d traveled on many times before in the interior: the shock absorbers were gone, the muffler shot, the front windshield cracked, the motor wheezing, the tires bald and wobbly. We passengers were jammed together on two unpadded boards that ran from behind the driver’s seat to the back of the bus. The large glass windows on the sides of the vehicle had been removed, for they would have cracked the first time the bus traversed the unpaved, pock-marked dirt road. A tarpaulin was draped over both sides of the bus, though it would not adequately shield us from the clouds of dust raised by our own vehicle and all the money buses coming from the opposite direction. Liberia’s rusty-red earth is laterite, a soil found in the tropics and rich in iron, from whence come the country’s rich iron ore deposits. Iron oxides give the soil a reddish cast. Hours of traveling on a laterite road leaves every exposed pore and orifice of one’s body filled with red dust.

Traveling on the road in a broken-down money bus without shock absorbers was, I remembered anew, like riding along an empty creek bed. The only compensation was—and this was no small matter—that the scene up-country, as the sun began its descent, was beautiful: the red-tinted road weaved through the immense, emerald-green forest, the light at that time of day especially enchanting. The sky was powder blue, with streaks of

purple beginning to appear. The country all around was peaceful, the labors of another day having come to an end as the people made their way on foot from their farms to their villages. There wasn't a factory or any other booming, polluting symbol of the modern, industrial world for hundreds of miles in any direction, though it seemed like thousands. The air was pristine, the atmosphere tranquil. All was radiant and quiet, save for the chirping birds. At that moment there was no other road in the world I wished to be on.

Though I expected to, I did not recognize any of the villages through which we passed. Even more to my surprise, when the bus sputtered into it, I did not recognize Saclepea, a town many times the size of Kpaytuo, that I used to visit often to buy supplies, and on the occasional weekends would visit to stay overnight with Peace Corps Volunteers stationed there.

It was dark as I began the last leg of my journey, the nine-mile stretch from Saclepea to Kpaytuo. Having no idea where I'd stay or with whom, I was playing Russian roulette, "Liberian style." I didn't know if I'd sleep that night in a bed or a hut; if my friend Tado Jackson were not in the village, I doubted it would be a bed. If I slept in a hut, it would be on a "country bed," which was a shelf of hardened mud constructed along the inside cylindrical walls and covered with hand-made mats. Nor, at that hour, was I likely to find food. It's not like there was a convenience store open; there would most likely be no store open, convenient or otherwise. Looking back on my state of mind, I'm surprised that I wasn't more anxious, even scared; but I was not. My adrenaline was surging at the thought of my "homecoming." And I looked on the brighter side of my situation: arriving in the dark, unannounced, after so many years away, added even more

wonder and drama to my return.

We made two or three stops after Saclepea, and then stopped at a dark place like all those before it. The driver told me this was Kpaytuo.

“Where do you want to get down?” he asked.

I figured I’d get off at the “school” compound, near which my home had been located, but in the dark I couldn’t see the compound—or much of anything else. It was obvious Kpaytuo still had no electricity.

So the bus stopped in front of a doorway from which emanated a dim glow. I walked around in front of the bus in order to see by the headlights how much money I was handing to the driver. I waited for the driver’s assistant to remove the tarpaulin from the top and lower my bags. I then entered what turned out to be a small shop selling cane juice, lit by a hurricane lantern.

“Can Tado Jackson still live here?” I asked of the two small boys standing inside.

“Yes,” one of them answered.

“Carry me to his house, yah?”

“I can do it-oh,” answered the small boy, in that lilting Liberian accent I enjoy hearing. I left my bags in the shop.

As we began to cross the road I heard someone shout: “Cherry, is that you?” And before I answered, three figures, whom I could not make out in the dark, gathered round me. Amazingly, one was Tado Jackson, the very person I had asked for; and the other two were Arthur Wonyou, one of my ex-students, and Albert Kpaye, one of Tado’s many relatives—all three old and dear friends. They had been standing and talking in front of

Albert's house, which was only about twenty yards back from the road, when they had seen my figure illuminated by the bus's headlights. It was Albert, he proudly said, who'd guessed it was I. We hugged and shook hands. Standing there in the dark, in the middle of the one road that passes through Kpaytuo, I would have sworn that I was dreaming.

We went to Tado's house—the very home the Peace Corps had rented for me when I lived in Kpaytuo (while Tado was away from the village upgrading his education). Since the home was built to Tado's size and budget, and he stood about five feet five inches, and I stood a smidgen under five feet eleven inches, instinctively I ducked as I passed through the doorway once more after an absence of fourteen years.

The first thing I did was walk about, even though with a small hurricane lantern I couldn't see much. I went into my old bedroom, tiny and insufferably hot. I walked about the center room, where my kitchen table once had stood; then to the back room, where Kamah had cooked and where we'd kept the kerosene refrigerator and kerosene stove, and the buckets of water for washing, cooking, cleaning and drinking. I saw no stove or refrigerator now. I made my way out back, once again bending my head at the doorway, and flashed the light upon the old outhouse and bathhouse, still standing—in what shape remained to be experienced.

Back inside I was greeted by a room alive with people: the news that I was back had already traveled. Some were former students of mine, others their brothers and cousins too young—or yet to be born—for me ever to have met. They had come to see the Peace Corps man.

A lantern was held up to a face, and collectively the group asked me if I knew the

name that went with the face. I recognized most, for they were only older versions of the pre-pubescent and sixteen-year-old children I had taught. We smiled, laughed, and shook hands, snapping our middle fingers at the end of the handshake, as is the Liberian custom. To my knowledge Liberians are the only people who shake hands like this, and as they are friendly and exuberant, they shake hands with everyone, often with the same person three or four times in the course of an animated conversation. Some days it took me an hour to walk through Kpaytuo, which was only about two hundred yards long, so many people was I expected to greet and shake hands with. Day and night in Liberia one hears the clasping of hands followed by the snapping of middle fingers.

Andrew Karma, a former student who was about twenty-eight, asked if I remembered the time he, then about age thirteen, had climbed a thirty-foot palm tree for me.

“Of course,” I said, adding that I also had the photograph of him doing it.

His cousin Johnson wondered if I remembered the night he came to my house—to the very room we were sitting in—to sing rice songs for me.

“Yes, I do,” I said, “and I still have the tape.”

Memba, another of the Karma clan, asked if I remembered the day a group of us had visited the farm where they pressed sugar cane for making “cane juice,” a low-quality rum, and how afterward we’d sucked on the sugar cane in the fields. Indeed, I cherished the memory of that day and of those children, my houseboy Sammy’s closest friends, whom I have always thought of as African Tom Sawyers and Huckleberry Finns.

Ernest Yourmie recounted how his father had wanted to take him out of school,

and how I'd persuaded the old man to let him remain. Peter Lankah, the goalie on the town's soccer team and the gentlest of people, who as a grown man stood before me with the build of an All-American halfback, wondered if I still liked to eat peanuts.

"Teacher Peanut," Andrew Karma sputtered in Gio, my nickname. Everyone laughed.

"Teacher, can you still throw the peanut in the air and catch it in your mouth?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, I can," I answered.

Someone said they'd heard I'd joined the army.

Not so, I said. "I can't like anyone telling me what to do," a declaration that made them laugh.

Looking around the room, feeling as if I had never left, I said: "My friends in America wondered if the people of Kpaytuo can remember me."

We all laughed. After twenty minutes back in Kpaytuo, it was obvious that their memories of my stay were as vivid and pleasant as my own.

I asked if other Peace Corps Volunteers (mispronounced as "Peace Corpse" by many Liberians) had been stationed in Kpaytuo. Other than my replacements, a California couple who lived in Kpaytuo from 1968 to 1970, none had.

They kept apologizing that more of my old students were not in the village to greet me, for many of them lived and worked elsewhere. Almost everyone in a village the size of Kpaytuo is a blood relative. So the girls tend to cohabit with or marry someone outside the village and usually live where their boyfriends or husbands live.

“When Sammy hears Bob Cherry is in Kpaytuo, he can come straight from Monrovia. For true-oh,” said Andrew Karma.

Sammy, my houseboy and Man Friday, ever impetuous, had joined the army only days after the recent coup, when Master Sergeant (now Five-Star General *and* Doctor) Samuel K. Doe doubled the army’s basic pay to \$225 a month. The People’s Redemption Council (PRC) may not have been composed of brilliant tacticians or theorists—one economist I met in the capital told me they couldn’t distinguish economic policy from a Mercedes-Benz—but they were smart enough to keep the army, their power base, happy. I was sorry Sammy had joined the army. Knowing Liberia’s army, I couldn’t conceive of Sammy learning anything practical in it.

All the visitors who had crowded into the front room of Tado’s home up to that point had been men and children. A woman then entered, Galonpoo, another of Tado’s relatives, and one of my dearest friends. Galonpoo was my age, give or take a year, with a pretty, soft, round face and a smooth, creamy, caramel-colored complexion. *Poo* is Gio for the color white, thus this light-skinned woman was called Galonpoo. She and her husband and their children lived with her mother in a one-room round thatched-roofed hut. Theirs was the first hut I came to whenever I left my house to go to the village proper and in no other hut did I spend as much time. Galonpoo was still pretty but now hearty and hefty, by no means an unwelcome condition in Liberia. While I was conscious of weighing about ten pounds more than I had in 1968, and five more than I would have preferred, the Liberians were happy for my enlarged girth, signifying to them my good health and prosperity.

Next in walked Zoelay Retty Sonkarlay, who still looked, as best I could discern by the lantern light, remarkably attractive, if considerably thinner. I was happy to see the years had been kind to my lover, whose age I estimate was thirty-six, give or take a year or two. There was much I wanted to ask of and say to Zoelay Retty, but with all those people in the room, I could only greet her and resign myself to waiting yet another day. Zoelay Retty and Galonpoo drifted outside, where, late though it was, Tado's wife, Mary, was preparing rice for me on the open fire.

As it was getting late, and my friends had to rise between five and six o'clock, they said goodnight, promising to visit when they returned from their farms the next evening.

Tado told me I'd be staying in my old bedroom, while he and his wife would sleep in the smaller room across the hall. No sooner had I shut the door, gotten into bed and turned off my flashlight than I thought I heard a rustling noise somewhere in the house and—even more upsetting—probably in my room. I heard the noise again, definitely in my room. Next I heard something like plastic tape cassette containers scraping along the floor. Then a gnawing sound, and something scurrying about. Tado's room is about twelve feet long by ten feet wide, so I lay no more than four feet from the spot from where it seemed the sounds came, though in dark I couldn't be certain. Was a bug or lizard trapped in the room? The problem with that scenario is that bugs and lizards do not make gnawing sounds. There was only one creature likely to make that sound in that place at that hour—a rat. Something fell to the floor, scaring the hell out of me. I jumped up in the bed, petrified, and unsure of what to do.

Tado and the rest of the household were asleep. I was reluctant to wake them. My flashlight lay on the floor next to the bed, but I was afraid to reach down for it, lest I brush against the prowling rat. I knew nothing of rat behavior, but it sounded as if this one was trying to eat its way into my Ghurka bag to get at the food contained therein. If I shined the light in its face I might scare it off; then again, maybe I'd arouse it to attack. I stabbed around in the dark, eventually locating my flashlight and one of my shoes—the latter a potential weapon. I shined the light around the room, even under the bed, but to no avail: I neither saw nor heard a thing. I turned the light off and tried to sleep, but within minutes I again heard the rustling and the disgusting sound of tiny feet scurrying around the room. I fished through my bag, the one the rat had been trying to eat into, and reluctantly took out a sleeping pill, fortunately a remedy to which I might turn about once every five years in the United States, and I swallowed it with the last of the cool water in my thermos. The devil with what was in the room if I could get to sleep.

Mercifully, at around 4:00 A.M., I drifted off.

But was I destined to wake up, like the character in Graham Greene's book on Liberia, with a rat sitting on my pillow, savoring the oil in my hair?