

DICK FADES THE ALBINO

RICHARD AVERY

A DICK AVERY ADVENTURE STORY

FOREWORD

Puns and other wordplay can lighten an otherwise sad story. That's the case here. A little levity was sometimes necessary to tell a story that was decidedly grim—perhaps just black humor on the Dark Continent. Liberia was on a downward trajectory and had little chance of turning itself around. Hope and confidence were in short supply like everything else in the beleaguered country.

The entire population was suffering greatly and the government of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was largely helpless in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Rampant corruption, indifference and crushing poverty all conspired against breaking the death spiral. That's because a long, bloody civil war had drained the nation's resources and spirits. Now a human monster threatened her fragile regime and its democratic institutions. When it rained, it poured, especially in Liberia's wettest of rainy seasons.

There was only one potential bright spot on an otherwise bleak horizon—oil and natural gas. Huge fields had been discovered off the country's coast and in its territorial waters. The big energy companies were already licking their lips and calculating their outrageous profits. By the way, the prospective was good for a gusher. Unfortunately, Liberia was ripe for the picking and plucking given its weakened condition. The greedy vultures were already circling, flapping their wings and beating their puffed-up chests in anticipation of good things to come.

The monster had other plans for the nation that includ-

ed his taking power by force, hook or crook or whatever means necessary. His appetite for money and absolute power was insatiable. He was a ravenous glutton whose hunger for more could never be sated. Equally alarming was his sociopathic bent for ruthless and reckless behavior. The unholy union of aberrant desires and brutally coldblooded intentions spelled disaster for the frail country. Whatever the costs, he planned to topple Ellen Sirleaf and install himself as the next president of the fledgling republic.

My role in the drama was all too clear: bell the cat to prevent a coup and civil war. My employer of second-to-last resort, the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service, had ordered me to catch a monster while it was distracted or napping. I thought employment at a McDonald's was looking better and better by the moment. "How about some fries with the burger, ma'am?"

Please join me as I travel the world on behalf of the Diplomatic Security Service and uphold truth, justice and the American way!

Very truly yours,
Richard Avery (DSS Special Agent, Ret.)

P.S. May God bless America!

CHAPTER 1

DANKEST' AFRICA

*“Phil, you need to remember that Liberians
are wicked and vicious people.”*

—Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President, Republic of Liberia

The fasten seat belt sign flashed-on and the pilot announced we were approaching Roberts Field and to prepare for landing. The mostly black passengers and the few white expats onboard dutifully complied with the instruction. I suspected a number of people were returning home from the Diaspora after many years of self-imposed exile. Liberia was not a tourist destination by any stretch of the imagination. A positive, upbeat imagination and strong dose of hopefulness were necessary to emotionally cope with the current conditions in the desperately poor country. That was because Liberia was down on its prospects and almost down for the count. Its collective sanity and tenuous stability were quickly slipping away. Those who couldn't or wouldn't grasp the dire conditions and consequences of the situation were simply whistling past the

graveyard. I quickly stifled a yawn and an uncontrollable urge to purse my lips.

As the plane turned on final approach, I saw it was raining heavily, not surprising for the wet season that still had two months to go before the weather turned sunny and brutally hot. Regardless, it was always hot and humid here with the only relief offered by the intermittent breezes off the Atlantic. Monrovia had the distinction of being the rainiest capital in the world. I didn't bother to verify the claim because I didn't particularly care and forgotten to bring my hydrometer. In my particular profession, wet-work was always a possibility and an occupational hazard. Thank God I'd remembered to bring an umbrella and my rubbers!

The 30 mile trip from the airport to the city reminded me of my previous visit in 1992 when I served as acting Regional Security Officer at the U.S. embassy. Between then and now, the country had undergone 14 on-and-off again years of devastating civil war. The entire country was now in shambles and desperately trying to reestablish basic infrastructures. No commercial electricity existed in the country and other basic services and products were nonexistent, scarce or prohibitively expensive. Liberia was a basket case without even the pretense of a basket—wicker and rattan were in short supply too.

The United Nations, wealthy donor nations and non-governmental organizations were doing their best to prop up the newly-elected, democratic government and provide for the basic health and food needs of the people. In most respects, it was an uphill battle with Sisyphus leading the charge. Bureaucratic inefficiency and endemic corruption within the Liberian government conspired to keep the boulder from making much progress. The coun-

try's viability and very future were in serious question. Otherwise, things were just hunky-dory.

Jersey Briggs, my former colleague and erstwhile friend, had convinced me to come out of retirement and take the assignment. It didn't take much convincing since I was bored and broke. His offer gave me the opportunity to overcome both desultory conditions. I readily agreed before hearing the details and considering the dangers involved in accepting the job. I could be especially impetuous when money was involved. Patriotism came in a distant second but still served as a plausible excuse for my desperate, dissolute and pecuniary desires.

Jersey was the Director of Investigations for the U.S. Department of State, Diplomatic Security Service; the same position I held until I retired some years ago. We've had an on-again, off-again relationship for years. That meant I didn't fully trust the fucking bastard! He had suckered me into dangerous situations before and had no compunctions about doing so again. Hiring me was a no-lose situation for him. If I succeeded in solving a tough case, he'd garner most of the kudos. If I failed, he would tell his superiors that old Avery had lost his touch and should be removed from the reserve rolls for future assignments; put out to pasture like a broken-down dray horse. In any case, DS would effectively distance itself from any political pratfalls by not assigning an active duty agent, just a retread who had obviously outlived his usefulness to the outfit.

Sometimes loyalty and camaraderie were also in short supply among those who protect and serve.

My notional assignment was to conduct an in-depth

review of DS's antiterrorism assistance program in Liberia. It was a suitable cover under the circumstances and one that would hold up under scrutiny by the local security services, the U.S. embassy and the DS advisory team providing assistance to the Liberian Special Security Service. I only prayed my beard stayed intact long enough to get the job done so I could get the hell out of here. If it didn't stay put, I risked much more than losing face.

The Special Security Service was the Liberian government organization charged with protecting the president, senior officials designated by the president and visiting foreign dignitaries. Its mandate largely mirrored that of the U.S. Secret Service but that was where the comparison ended. The SSS or Triple S, as commonly called, had been used by previous regimes as an instrument of terror and repression, largely a goon squad that reputedly had murdered, raped and kidnapped opponents and ordinary citizens alike without concern or consequence.

During its history, some of its agents had been characterized as sadists who engaged in gruesome acts of torture and cannibalism during the country's darkest hours. Some of these men, the worst of the worst, were assigned to the SSS Special Antiterrorism Unit. Now the entire organization was being restructured, equipped and trained by the U.S. government—all in the name of fighting international terrorism.

An important change occurred with a democratically elected president in 2006—Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. She was the first woman elected to such high office in Africa and represented a bright ray of hope for the people of the Godforsaken country. One of her first acts was to request personal protection from the U.S. government. She didn't trust the Triple S since many of its senior leaders op-

posed her candidacy and reportedly were involved in thwarting her election to office. She'd also been hunted down by the SSS during the war years and had never forgiven them for that little episode in her life that almost caused her execution at its hands.

Moreover, there was the issue of the Triple S reputation in Liberia. She needed time to purge the organization of those members she considered undesirable or disloyal. President Sirleaf had even gone so far as to recommend changing the organization's name to the Executive Protection Service to remove the stigma that still haunted the peoples' minds and memories. That and other positive changes affecting the SSS were pending passage in the Liberian congress. She was one bound-and-determined lady who had publically vowed to professionalize the SSS, even if it killed her. The fellow members of her Unity Party constantly worried about the same outcome.

President Sirleaf had initially requested the U.S. Secret Service to provide agents for her security detail. The Service turned down the request noting it was outside the scope of its duties and authorities. She next asked the State Department to send Diplomatic Security Service agents to provide similar protection.

The department declined but offered to fund a modest-sized security detail comprised of American contractor personnel for a limited period of time for her personal protection—just enough time for her to purge the senior leadership of the Triple S. The department also agreed to field an antiterrorism assistance team to Liberia to mentor and advise the reconstituted Triple S in achieving an acceptable level of professionalism and proficiency. The team would work in Liberia until the Triple S reached that

magic level of competency or antiterrorism funds dried up or a new U.S. administration decided otherwise. The protection team had departed many months ago, but the advisors might be on the ground for years to come. Respect for basic human rights could be a difficult concept to accept for an organization that for many years had a free-hand and sometimes itchy trigger finger.

The undesirables in the organization were quickly replaced by the president's trusted friends. Unfortunately, personal loyalty sometimes took precedence over experience. That had serious repercussions regarding the Triple S achieving a level of viability consistent with the advisors' mission, U.S. government objectives and the president's own desire. A five person team, comprised of retired DS special agents, now tried its best to coach, cajole, mentor, monitor and help transform the organization into a professional security service. The going was tough and progress was measured in tentative baby steps rather than leaps and bounds.

Regardless, the one thing the advisors never ever did was to protect, or suggest that it protected, the president or anyone else in Liberia. There was simply too much potential political fallout to assert such a claim. So, the Americans were merely advisors and nothing more. The Triple S maintained sole responsibility for the president's safety and most certainly not the U.S. government. It was an important distinction for political correctness and PR spin alone. God forbid something should happen to her on America's watch!

While the advisors roles and responsibilities were clear, at least in their minds, the State Department and the administration's decision to field an advisory team and fund an antiterrorism program in Liberia was less so.

That was because there wasn't any terrorism as defined by the U.S. government or serious threat of terrorism in the country. The threat from what were called *former combatants* was of some potential concern since most possessed combat experience and access to arms that hadn't been recovered by the government at the end of the fighting. However, the fear had not materialized although crime was another matter altogether. That was because former combatants had been responsible for much of the violent crime throughout the country. That distinctly antisocial disease remained the most pressing public safety issue of the day.

If there was no credible terrorist threat to Sirleaf or the government of Liberia, why would the U.S. government provide antiterrorism assistance? I wondered.

The answers I believed could be found in the unique and special relationship between Liberia and the United States. That and the fact that Liberia had just elected a democratic government headed by a very capable woman no less, a first for Africa. Perhaps there was another, less charitable motive too.

Liberia was founded by the abolitionist movement for freed American slaves in the early part of the 19th century. Many former slaves and freeborn blacks migrated to the country over the next century or so as part of the back-to-Africa movement. It didn't take long for the newcomers to subdue the indigenous tribes and dominate political life in the country. The Americo-Liberians as they were called had little in common with their backward, native brethren. Their social customs and cultural perspectives had been forged in the United States. As a result, many American icons and institutions were adopted by Liberia. For example, the U.S. dollar served as official

currency and its flag closely resembled that of the United States. It was the only foreign nation that had named its capital after a U.S. president—James Monroe. Even its executive, judicial and legislative branches of government were patterned after those in America.

Many other examples of Americanisms and Americana existed throughout its culture and institutions. The special bond between the two countries had not been broken for almost two hundred years. Perhaps it was because the slavish nature of the White Man's guilt tended to die hard in the lopsided relationship. Perhaps it was something altogether different nowadays.

Ellen Sirleaf had been educated and worked in the United States for many years and was a friend of President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Bush had visited Liberia twice during a two year period while in office, both short day trips. For a sitting president to visit a backwater, West African state was largely unprecedented. Visiting it twice was considered highly suspect by many of the pundits and politicians who tracked such things. *Eh, what's up Doc?*

Liberia held no geopolitical or other interest for America, except one—potentially huge, off-shore oil and gas fields that hadn't yet been tapped and exploited. These large reserves, now owned by former American slaves, offered temporary relief to energy hungry Americans. The exploration and mapping of the fields had been completed and preparations were underway to begin drilling. Coastal, West African countries from Nigeria to Angola had already sprouted offshore oil rigs. It was now Liberia's turn to cash-in on its natural resources in a big way. It was the country's sole hope for economic salvation. The avaricious players on both sides of the Atlantic were

gushing about the bright prospects on the horizon.

The decision to aid the new Liberian president with her personal safety concerns was a laudable and predictable act. It was another example of democracy building in action and a shrewd business move that would likely result in more obscene profits for the big U.S. oil companies. The United States most definitely wanted President Sirleaf to have a long and successful stay in office. So much so that it had already urged her to run for a second term. She would be seventy-two if that should happen. Her continued tenure was good for Liberia and good for America: a win-win situation for both countries. The Liberians desperately needed oil money to rebuild the country and the United States desperately needed the energy. Friendly, bilateral relations didn't get any more symbiotic or cynical than that—just business as usual and another foreign policy success. Chalk one up for the good guys!

Speaking of being bushed, I was dead tired from my flights and the six hour wait between the Brussels to Monrovia leg of the trip. My embassy driver dropped me at Sea Suites where the embassy leased several furnished apartments for temporary assignees like me. I was too exhausted to even unpack. Instead, I chain-smoked several cigarettes and listened to the rain pound on the corrugated metal roof of my apartment. The pummeling sounds, Mother Nature's soothing white noise, had a relaxing effect and I slept soundly for the next twelve hours.

Sometimes those who protect and serve were so wet behind the ears they didn't anticipate the dangers intimidating or inundating them in Liberia's dampest season.

CHAPTER 2

MUMBO JUMBO

My first appointment of the day was at the U.S. embassy located in the Mamba Point section of the city. The driver deftly avoided the numerous potholes, pedestrians and other vehicles we encountered along the route. The intervening fourteen years hadn't improved the road or living conditions and things were actually much worse than during my previous visit. And they certainly weren't great back then. The lengthy civil war had set the country's progress back at least a generation. Fortunately, there were no stoplights to contend with because there was no municipal electricity. Like the chaotic, dizzying streets, Liberia was stuck in a seemingly bottomless vortex in which only the strongest and most aggressive would likely survive.

The entire passing scene was thoroughly depressing and seemingly hopeless. The government was overwhelmed by the severe economic and humanitarian situation and could only beg for help from outside sources. However, largesse only came in small packages these days. Countries in the region couldn't help much because they had economic problems of their own. So, the new president undertook missions to the capitals of the richer nations of the world to appeal for money and equipment needed to rebuild her nation. Washington, DC, Beijing,

Berlin, Tripoli and London were favorite stops on the frequent itineraries abroad. Hat-in-hand diplomacy was now the order of the day. But getting the country back on its feet again would be extremely difficult and problematic at best. Truthfully, it needed a damn miracle or very rich uncle to survive. Maybe some oil to grease the wheels of progress would help too.

I wore my best leisure suit to the meeting—the crimson one with faux pearl buttons. My black wingtips were shined to a high gloss. I stored my pack of Marlboros and Bic lighter in my pants pocket so as not to create an unseemly bulge in my jacket. I wanted to appear presentable and professional to my colleagues. I thought I looked particularly spiffy as we said in certain, closeted circles. Perception and self-delusion, rather than substance, counted for a lot in the State Department.

Following the perfunctory security screening, I was promptly ushered into Jackson Smyth's office located on the ground floor of the chancery. I immediately shook hands with him and then turned to Phil Jensen who was sitting on a small sofa next to the window. Jackson was the embassy Regional Security Officer or Security Attaché. Like his counterparts around the world, he was a DS Special Agent who simply changed monikers while assigned abroad. The title was less important than the function—the U.S. government's top cop and security official for Liberia. Since he was many years my junior, I only had known Jackson by his corridor reputation in the department. It was a solid one.

Phil Jensen was another matter altogether. We'd been contemporaries in the Diplomatic Security Service, although never directly worked together during our careers.

However, we had carpooled for a number of months from the Virginia suburbs to Main State and had gotten to know one another fairly well. He had a long and distinguished career with DS having served many years overseas as a Regional Security Officer in some of the world's hotter spots. By the way, that didn't refer to the locales climatic conditions unless you counted the incendiary security and political situations in Lebanon and the Philippines during the tough times. Phil was retired but had returned to harness as a contractor serving as the senior security advisor overseeing the State Department's Anti-terrorism Assistance program for Liberia. That meant he was the number one guy on the proverbial hook and responsible for professionalizing the Triple S.

Phil had two masters to satisfy in that role: the DS Anti-Terrorism Assistance Office in Washington for general policy guidance and the embassy RSO for operational matters within the country. He had to walk a fine line between the two and keep both organizations informed and content. The balancing act wasn't always easy given the internecine battles that flared-up from time-to-time.

Sometimes those who protect and serve needed the presence of mind and a couple of ambidextrous alter-egos to cope with bureaucratic tugs-of-war and clownish juggling acts.

Phil Jensen spoke first. "Hi Avery and welcome to the bottom of the third world. Why would you volunteer to come to a shithole like this when you could be kicking-back in the real world with the drinks and the ladies? As I recall, you liked both very much and occasionally to excess."

Phil was well aware for my penchant for wine and

meaningful, casual sex. I had earned a certain reputation over the years for those weaknesses, along with a few days of unpaid leave for some of my more outrageous indiscretions. Despite my flaws, I was also universally recognized by my peers for my work ethos and tenacity as an investigator. Those qualities had saved my tenuous career and skin on more than one occasion.

“Phil, dedication and patriotism would be my first explanation, not the fact that I’m flat broke and need the money. My few virtues and many vices are getting expensive these days, my friend. Besides, I had nothing better to do and looked forward to escaping the Washington winter for awhile,” I quipped.

“Also, I haven’t seen you in about 15 years and thought it high-time to renew our acquaintanceship.”

Both laughed at my silly answer. However, the money part was absolutely true. Nothing else I’d say today would be because I’d been sworn to secrecy by Jersey Briggs. Only the ambassador and President Sirleaf had been briefed on the true purpose of my visit to Liberia via a NODIS, eyes-only cable from Washington. I didn’t care for the fact that I couldn’t reveal my mission to trusted colleagues but Jersey was adamant that I maintained cover for as long as possible to avoid any inadvertent leaks. The consequences of premature disclosure of why I was here could be disastrous for the mission and me personally. Given his logic and my innate instinct for self-preservation, I didn’t bother arguing the point.

“Avery, we received notice of your arrival from ATA and understand the purpose of your visit is to conduct a program review of the Liberian SSS operation in terms of our assistance. However, a two-person team was here less than 10 months ago and did the same thing. We

came out smelling like roses. So what gives? Why's there another review so soon?" Jackson pointedly asked.

Jackson was sharp and asked the logical question. I was sharper though and had a bullshit, but wholly logical answer.

"The reason is the Hill. The oversight committees are breathing down the backs of all government agencies providing foreign assistance to make sure Uncle Sam's monies are being spent properly and judiciously—the old waste, fraud, mismanagement stuff again. It's a direct result of the reported widespread abuses in Afghanistan and Iraq, not so much the nickel-and-dime programs like in Liberia and elsewhere that DS funds."

"It's a matter of the small fish getting caught up in Congress's big dragnet. Regardless, DS, with its relatively modest dollars to fund the programs around the world, is on the spot. We're required to provide a report to the Hill within 90 days on each of the programs along with a certification that each is in full compliance with set spending limits and that funds are being expended as authorized. There's no mystery here, just more bureaucratic rigmarole."

"But couldn't I have done the same thing and submitted a compliance report?" Jackson retorted.

"Sure, you could have, but how much credibility would it have if challenged by the Hill staffers? Jackson, you and Phil are part and parcel of the program here and not exactly unbiased observers. Look, I'm not, nor is DS, questioning your honesty or integrity. That's not what this is about. DS headquarters correctly concluded that both of you are much too close to the situation and that's why an outsider must conduct the review. It's certainly nothing personal. Similar reviews are scheduled for Afghanistan,

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