Draft

Dick Hacks the Hoodoos

Richard Avery

A Dick Avery Adventure Story

Foreword

The trick deck was being stacked against the Americans in their own backyard. And the game wouldn't be played by Hoyle or anyone else's fair-minded rules. The Russians, with help from the obsequious Cubans, had launched a daring, robust campaign against the U.S. Embassy in Haiti, the second salvo in a clandestine war to counter American influence in the Caribbean. It was all about disrupting diplomatic relations and making the U.S. suffer for its imperious ways and a decades' long trade embargo of Cuba. Most importantly, it was a concerted effort by the conspirators to expand their geopolitical influence throughout the entire region. If they had their way, Uncle Sam would no longer speak softly while carrying a big stick with his neighbors to the south.

American diplomats had already been surreptitiously and viciously attacked with ultrasonic beams or microwaves in Havana causing many Foreign Service officers and their families to leave the country. Now it was the Americans in Haiti turn for retribution, but in a quite different manner. It wouldn't be sound or microwaves this time around. Oh no, it would be through a fury of violent actions by a voodoo cult called The Family which loyally served its Cuban masters.

Once again, I was recalled to active duty to serve and protect our nation. Sure, I was a true red, white and blue patriot, right down to the core of my overdrawn checkbook.

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 M. Avery III

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Diplomatic Security Service

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Reading Entrails

Chapter 1

The bloody entrails of a chicken adorned the tiny, front porch of Jean-Claude's modest home in Port-au-Prince. He knew the meaning as similar things had happened to his embassy coworkers over the past few weeks. It was a death hex, an evil curse and a clear warning that if he didn't obey the message, he and his family would suffer the consequences. And those would mean agonizing pain or death to his loved ones. Of that outcome, he had no doubt. The gruesome calling card at his doorstep was unambiguous.

He was a devout Catholic and wasn't a particularly superstitious person, but the message had more meaning beyond simple juju. It was an unveiled threat and one he took seriously, knowing what had already happened to those who didn't heed the message. And the happenings likely resulted in a brutal death of the employee, his wife or a close relative. But it wouldn't be so for Jean-Claude. He liked the Americans and valued his job with the embassy as a General Services clerk with over 20 years service. As a U.S. government employee, he'd be eligible for Social Security payments soon and didn't want to lose the benefit.

However, he was torn between his loyalty to his employer and his pension as well as the safety of his family. So, he chose to obey the message and stayed home from work. He decided to call in sick and see if his boss would accept his excuse for absence. Well, perhaps so, because others had caught the insidious virus making the rounds of the embassy staff. It was becoming an epidemic with work piling up and fewer Foreign National employees to handle the load. The backbone of the embassy workforce was rapidly growing atrophied. And no one was able to stop the terror campaign wreaking havoc on the U.S. embassy in Haiti.

Sketchy Mumbo Jumbo

Chapter 2

It was the best assisted living employer one could hope to work for: the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service. Although recently retired, I was occasionally invited back to Mother State's generous trough now and again to take a sip. Of course, that was only when my sometimes boss, Jersey Briggs, needed a convenient scapegoat to handle the tough cases that no active duty agent would willingly accept. No surprise, this was one of those times.

Retread, alpha silverback, mutant and other similar, demeaning names were applied to those of us who returned to the fold to protect and serve our nation yet again. Reemployed annuitant was the proper term for our employment status, but that was rarely used by the rank-and-file to describe former special agents a little long in the tooth, but who still had some bite left.

Jersey was the Director of Investigations and Counterintelligence for the outfit, the same position I held before being put out to pasture. Now I had to genuflect and kiss his ring if I wanted to continue getting a bone from him on those occasions when it suited his whims and purposes. And getting boned was the apt descriptor for what I received in the one-sided relationship. We both knew our respective roles and played our parts accordingly.

Jersey's office was on the 6th floor of the new Diplomatic Security Service World Headquarters building in Arlington, Virginia. It was a corner office with several, large windows that looked out over the Washington, D.C. skyline. I sat opposite him in a nicely upholstered chair. Now, new government offices were replete with color coordinated carpeting and walls, some real potted plants, along with wood furniture ensembles. It was a pleasant change from the cheap, mismatched stuff ordered from the General Services Administration suppliers in the prison industries. So, gone were the days of gunmetal gray furnishings that most bureaucrats in my time endured. Things had changed for the better, but not necessarily me. I was still a stubborn, unrepentant soul down on his luck and life.

Jersey thought the décor suited his so-called lofty status and importance nicely. Regardless, it was a nice change of scenery and I was envious. The only drawbacks to the

furnishings were the numerous, framed certificates, awards and plaques for this or that he'd received during his career. I think I spotted his baptismal certificate hanging near one corner of the room. It was all the detritus one collected and usually kept at home to entertain the grand kids. It was called a Wall of Shame by the less pompous wags in the building. Jersey was not one of them.

"Richard, sit still. I need to go to the john. Oh, by the way, don't you dare read any of the documents on my desk. You know you don't have the tickets for the ultra classified stuff anymore. I know I can trust you to do the right thing," smirking as he departed the office.

Of course, Jersey's disingenuous admonishment didn't fool me for a second. He exited so I could read what lay atop his well-ordered desk. The document he wanted me to read would be on top so I didn't have to rifle through the stack. Sometimes Jersey could be so damn courteous and lame at the same time.

So I did as intended and sat down at his desk and began reading the cable. I knew I had plenty of time since Jersey was a notoriously constipated bureaucrat in more ways than one. Okay, so why all the drama? I wondered. The answer was obvious. He wanted to protect his butt against an allegation that he furnished highly sensitive information to an unauthorized person. I had the basic security clearances, but not the special access ones for such rarified, government skinny.

The document had more security markings than a gangbanger had tats. Top Secret/NODIS was stamped at the top and bottom of the front page. NODIS was a bit of a misnomer meaning no distribution. The term eyes only would have nicely sufficed. SCI or special compartmented information followed indicating sensitive intelligence sources and/or methods were contained in the text. Other caveats and warnings were added to the mix to indicate the document was hot property. I didn't see a USDA meat stamp anywhere, but supposed the reading was still choice.

It was two pages in length and contained some jargon I wasn't familiar with. No need to know as the saying goes. So there were some blanks to fill in later. But the overall gist of the cable was close enough for government work, even for a reemployed annuitant.

Project Monte Cristo was the subject line, a very apt tag for a situation that was now unfolding in the Caribbean. The U.S. was the target of a highly sophisticated and dangerous plot to destabilize U.S. interests and diplomatic relations in the region. Details of the incredibly devious scheme were sparse, but I believed Jersey would add to the context.

I already knew I had a role in this drama or I wouldn't have been here at his beckoning. We never met on an equal footing. I was clearly the subordinate in the relationship and that suited Jersey's ego just fine. I didn't have one of those things or a career anymore and I needed the money since I had trouble making ends meet on my paltry government pension. Jersey understood my predicament and neediness. All-in-all, it was a mutually beneficial and highly symbiotic relationship.

I didn't bother to ask Jersey how things came out during his restroom break. That was too scatological even for his taste. I'd played his game and now waited to hear his spiel. I didn't have to wait long since he jumped right into the topic de jour with both feet.

"Cuba is up to its old tricks again, Richard. I thought with the reestablishment of diplomatic relations things might improve, but I was wrong. Perhaps Russia is supporting the op behind the scenes. We don't know, but suspect so since it makes geopolitical sense from its perspective."

"A disruptive campaign is being waged against us in the Caribbean and it's starting to affect our ability to carry out important, bilateral relations. Case in point is Cuba itself. The sonic or microwave attacks against our American staffers in Havana have already caused 26 of our diplomats to be medically evacuated to the U.S. for treatment."

I was familiar with the incidents, but let him drone on since it was his show and I was on the clock. Take all day Jersey, I mused.

"Our embassy's intelligence operatives were targeted for the most part and that's caused irreparable damage in our ability to collect against the Cuban government. The medical authorities concluded the symptoms suffered are real and not psychosomatic in nature. The brain chemistry of those targeted has been measurably altered by the microwaves."

"Given the technical sophistication of the operation, we suspect Russia is responsible with the Cuban Directorate of Intelligence, the G-2, either witting or culpable as well. Of course, the Cubans deny any knowledge of the attacks. No surprise there. Why they're doing this is anybody's guess. Maybe to simply harm our employees or maybe it's a technical operation designed to flood a specific area with high energy, acoustical waves in an attempt to eavesdrop on conversations. We simply don't know what's actually going on."

"But Jersey, why would the Cubans cooperate in such a venture in the first place? With the reopening of relations, it seems like a counterintuitive act."

"Yes it does, but many in our intelligence community believe the hardliners in the Cuban G-2 leadership weren't in favor of reestablishing normal relations with the U.S. and are trying to undermine, sabotage if you will, the efforts of those Cuban officials acting in good faith. Add to that the fact the G-2 and the Russian Federal Intelligence Service have been in bed together for decades and you'll see the logic being posited. The Cold War has heated up again it seems."

"Now let me turn to Haiti. That's a horse of a different color, but part of the same campaign in the region to make life difficult for us."

I admired his metaphor and horseplay with the English language. That was highly unusual for Jersey who was a sports junkie, one who typically thought and spoke in terms of athletic teams and games. He could recite stats, scores and player names with ease.

It was also rumored he liked to place large bets on sporting events in Las Vegas and, if true, he needed to be careful during his next reinvestigation for security clearance. That activity was frowned upon in the State Department since gambling debts could make one vulnerable to coercion. The element of coercion could lead to loss of clearance. And in his case, the odds were stacked against him if the rumors were true.

"The situation with our embassy in Haiti involves the same element of disruption, but with a different modus operandi," Jersey continued.

I liked the fact he could speak a little Latin since he was otherwise mute when it came to languages that didn't speak to his ego and self importance. Everything else was Greek to him. And it was tough for me to stay tongue-in-cheek around him. My tongue was raw from biting it so often in his presence.

"Our foreign national employees, our Haitian staff, are being terrorized by a shadowy group called *La Familie* or The Family in plain English. It's a large and seemingly well organized voodoo cult headquartered in Port-au-Prince."

"The Family is reputed to be engaged in various illegal enterprises such as facilitating drug smuggling, extortion and kidnappings for ransom. It's now intimidating our local employees with threats of injury or death if they continue to work for the embassy. Roughly 20 percent of our Haitian employees have called in sick or used other lame excuses to justify their absence. The Family reportedly uses voodoo charms, spells and the like, along with all the mumbo jumbo that goes with them, to frighten our staff. It's a classic psych op and it's working."

"We believe the Cuban G-2 is calling the shots on the ground using The Family for its purposes with the Russian Federal Intelligence Service pulling the strings from above. Once again, the Cubans are acting as surrogates for the damn Russkies."

"Oh, come on Jersey, voodoo in this day and age? You've got to be joking!"

"No, Richard, I'm serious, dead serious in this case. There are already two reports of missing locals who ignored the warnings to stay away from the embassy or suffer the consequences. Our Regional Security Officer presumes they're dead, but the search for them continues. So this is a serious situation and that's where you come into play. I want you to go Port-au-Prince and find out what's going on and put a stop to it. It's a simple and straightforward proposition and I know you need the money."

Oh sure, easy-peasy, I thought, but he was right about the money. It was always about the money, specifically the lack of it in my checkbook. That's the reason I came back for these

dangerous assignments. My pecuniary neediness trumped my patriotism every time. I was like a penniless whore with no self esteem and I knew it.

"Why can't the embassy handle the case?" I logically asked the obvious question.

"It could, but it can't for political reasons alone. Things have been strained over aid issues for many months. The country's a basket case, the poorest in the Americas, and the need for humanitarian assistance and for infrastructure development is endless. The donor nations, including the U.S., are getting tired of pouring money down the proverbial drain. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and massive corruption siphon off much of the money meant for the people. But more importantly, the embassy is leery in dealing directly with the various ministry officials since The Family has bribed many of them. They're essentially on its payroll and would thwart any overt inquiries. That's why you need to go undercover."

"By the way, you have to go totally naked this time. No diplomatic passport, no immunity, no gun and no official cover. Yes, you will be an illegal so to speak and subject to the laws of Haiti. You'll travel as a tourist on vacation in the eyes of the host government authorities and nothing more. So be damn careful and stay below the radar! We might have a tough time bailing you out if you get into a jam."

"We've alerted Langley and it, in turn, has instructed its station chief to prepare an extrication plan, if it comes to that eventuality. That's the best we can do under the circumstances. The powers have decreed that you operate independently and stay away from the embassy. So don't look for any support there. It's to be an undercover operation, plain and simple. It's also the old, odd-man-out approach to an investigation. Since you were the oddest man I could think of, that's why you're here," Jersey snickered at his little bon mot at my expense.

Jeez Jersey, that was a reassuring statement and slap in the face. I then began calculating how much I could make off the gig. It was more than chump change, yet I'd play the role once again!

Before Jersey told me to leave and not let the door hit me on the way out, he handed me a slip of paper with a name and telephone number. It was to be my contact in Port-au-Prince. Maybe my lifeline as well, if I got into deep do-do or voodoo.

Muddling Through a Mire

Chapter 3

I pulled a Marlboro from the crushproof pack in the breast pocket of my leisure suit. I lit the cigarette and drew in the smoke several times in quick succession to calm my nerves. After accepting the assignment, I was having some third thoughts about what I'd just agreed to do for God, country, Jersey and my checkbook, but not necessarily in that order.

So, a diabolical conspiracy was underway orchestrated by the Russians, facilitated by the Cubans and executed by Haitian voodooists. Could it get any more confusing and multinational in scope and design? I hoped not for my sake.

I needed some insight into the voodoo religion; its history, rights, rituals and significance in the modern world where such things shouldn't exist. I knew many people in West Africa and the Caribbean still believed in its power and wondered if it was more than mere superstitious nonsense. I was to learn the hard way it was more than met the ole eye.

And the funny, State Department tag for the project: MONTECRISTO. They were cigars supposedly hand rolled on the inner thighs of virgins as I recalled from popular lore. At least that was what I wanted to believe. Although I had doubts about the claim since I suspected there was a dearth of them in Cuba. And I didn't mean cigars.

Jersey kindly arranged a meeting for me with Dr. Emil Jenkins, Professor Emeritus at Georgetown University's Department of Comparative Religions. More relevant was the fact he was a recognized authority on voodoo. His office was only a short distance from my studio apartment in Foggy Bottom in the District. The walk and my cigarettes helped clear my mind for what I thought would be an important introduction to the mysterious religion, at least a mystery to me.

I introduced myself to the gentleman and mentioned sotto voce that I was from the government and here to help him. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to use the old saw and it elicited the laughter I expected. In response, he said he got such help last year when his taxes were audited by the IRS! It was my turn to laugh, although he probably saw nothing funny.

He wore a tweed sports coat with the de rigueur, leather elbow patches and clenched an unlit pipe between his teeth. He looked...well, he looked professorial! He probably thought my houndstooth leisure suit looked tacky by comparison. No matter, not everyone could be a dashing fashionista. Only those of us lucky enough to have the huevos and panache could qualify.

"I understand from your friend Mr. Briggs you're researching the subject of voodoo for an upcoming trip to Haiti. Is that correct, Mr. Avery?"

"Yes, it is and I'd appreciate learning the basics of the religion. I'm a freelance writer and my friend Jersey volunteered to help me find someone knowledgeable on the topic. I think I hit pay dirt with you as a recognized expert. That's more than I expected."

I was trying to schmooze since he might have taken offense with my laughing about his tax situation. I was actually pretty good at it because it was an essential attribute if one wanted to survive in the Foreign Service. And I was a survivor and schmoozer par excellence.

"Okay, I have a few minutes before my next class so I can at least impart the basics of the religion. Let me know if I start going off on tangents as I tend to do from time to time. My grad students always chide me about the habit. Old age I guess," laughing as he mentioned the last line.

"It's best to start at the beginning, as the pundits say, and that would be in West Africa in the 1400s, specifically in the region of what is now called Nigeria. Voodoo is a monotheistic religion with one God head or a supreme being. He is a rather benign, unknowable figure called Bondye who does not directly interact with humans. Rather, humans develop relationships with spirits called Loa who control and influence everyday

activities through their powers. So, the Loa serve as intermediaries or messengers between humans and Bondye."

"There are many different Loa, as many as there are human desires, emotions and needs. And each has a specific role to play in the religion to the believers. However, the Loa are finicky spirits which not only want to be prayed to, but served by the humans who beseech them for intervention in their daily lives. For example, each Loa has its own favorite dances, music, prayers, animals and other totems that the beseecher must satisfy in order to have their wish or desire or plea delivered to Bondye and hopefully granted."

"From West Africa, the religion spread to the Americas through the slave trade. The plantation owners, particularly in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Brazil, needed labor to harvest the sugar cane crops. With the later movement to convert heathens into good Christians, Roman Catholicism, especially some of its rituals and rites, became intertwined with voodoo."

"However, the Catholic and protestant churches renounce any association with voodoo. Yet certain Catholic practices continue as part of the religion to this day. I did my master's thesis on the subject and it's available in the university library if you wish to read it."

I didn't and needed the professor to stay on track and tract.

"Do you believe in voodoo professor?"

"Yes, I do and don't. Since this is Washington, D.C., I can get away with that answer. I do believe in the power of voodoo over the true believers. In Haiti, I saw many strange rituals and the effects they had on those present during ceremonies. People entranced and speaking in tongues. And people throwing their bodies about and writhing in either joy or agony. And I saw more that I don't want to talk about. There's a certain hysterical element in many of these ceremonies that both fascinated and frightened at the same time. I've witnessed things that I can't explain. One time, I saw a man supposedly raised from the dead, a zombie. He appeared to be totally comatose at first, dead by all

appearance, and then gradually awakened, convulsing several times and then appearing normal. Maybe it was a cheap, theatrical trick and nothing more."

"So, I'm unsure of its purported supernatural powers. However, even those who don't believe in voodoo still are psychologically influenced by it. It's the old shtick: don't walk under a ladder and avoid black cats sort of superstitions we all laugh about. But the nonbelievers in Haiti still respect the powers of the religion and the influence it exerts over their countrymen. It's not something to be ridiculed or demeaned there. That would be bad karma, as they say," giving me a big wink as he said it.

"Sorry Mr. Avery, but I'm already late for class. I hope my brief monolog helped in some way. I only began to scratch the surface of this fascinating subject. You'll have to do much more research before you get a good understanding of the religion. I wish you well."

"Oh, just a word of caution, be careful poking around the religion during your visit. Voodoo has the elements of both white and black magic and there are unscrupulous people who use the religion for their own purposes. And remember that voodoo is real as long as people believe in its powers. And many do."

I thanked the good professor as I helped him put on his sports coat and his blue and gray scarf: the official colors of the Georgetown Hoyas.

I sat on a bench outside the professor's office and lit up a ciggy. It was a nonsmoking section of the campus, but I didn't mind as long as no one complained.

I pondered what I'd just heard along with what I'd already read online about voodoo. I tried to reconcile the bizarre trappings and rituals of the religion such as animal sacrifices, votives, zombies, spells, hexes, offerings to the Loa and the like. I found everything strange and unsettling. Perhaps, as an agnostic pragmatist brought up on the teachings of science rather than spiritual beliefs, I would never understand.

A Capital Quagmire

Chapter 4

The captain flashed on the sign to fasten our seatbelts since we were starting our descent to Toussaint Louverture International Airport. This was my second trip to Haiti and I hoped the last one. It wasn't my favorite country by a long shot and reminded me of several, impoverished African nations I'd visited during my career in the Foreign Service, only much worse. The words Fourth World came to mind as I looked out and saw a large chunk of the island of Hispaniola.

The island was discovered by Christopher Columbus during his first voyage to the New World. Spain colonized the island until 1697 when the Spaniards ceded the western portion to France. So, the ceding resulted in French speaking Haiti and Spanish speaking Dominican Republic.

As I walked down the plane's hardstand to the tarmac, I immediately felt the overwhelming heat and humidity. Fortunately, the smog was swept away by the constant sea breezes. I'd forgotten just how hot and muggy the weather could be here. However, I'd remembered to pack several of my better, short-sleeved leisure jackets with matching pairs of Bermuda shorts, so I could better weather my visit. My pair of black wingtips rounded out my trendy ensemble.

I readily admitted to being an unabashed clotheshorse, but bridled when someone called my attire a safari suit. That simply wasn't chic or geographically accurate. And I'm a stickler for detail, except when it came to my investigative reports and expense vouchers. Thank God Jersey was shortsighted and myopic too!

The taxi didn't have air conditioning and all the windows were rolled down, much to my discomfort and dismay. The stench emanating the piles of rotting garbage strewn either side of the road was simply offal. The recent rains, combined with the runoff from the open sewers, created a pungent stew that assaulted my senses. But the driver didn't seem to notice or mind. It was just normal life and business as usual.

The shanties of the city came into view and were a deplorable sight. Shanties were a polite way of saying a large slum. Sheets of plastic or tarps of one kind or another typically served as roofs. The wealthier abodes used corrugated metal to keep the rain out. Siding consisted of anything and everything imaginable: cardboard, scrap wood from boxes and crates, cinderblock chocked with newspaper. Windows, where they existed, were pieced together with makeshift wooden shutters or sometimes glass, but most often with plastic. Seemingly nothing went to waste. Seemingly nothing had changed for the better since my previous visit.

Telephone and electrical wires hung above the shanties like a maze of spider webs that crisscrossed one another in no discernible logic or order. Piped water, if available, wasn't potable or drinkable either. Sewerage was mostly nonexistent creating cesspools in some instances, especially during the rainy season. Basic municipal services and infrastructure had simply crumbled over time. And the residents continued to suffer the vicissitudes of life in the decaying city.

Most of the residents lived cheek by jowl in these conditions. To make matters worse, the hurricanes, earthquakes and mudslides easily leveled these fragile homes on a fairly regular basis. And I just didn't foresee any improvement to the horrendous living conditions. To the point, many people were still living in tented camps set up after the last earthquake several years ago. It was like God was punishing the Haitians for past sins. And voodoo hadn't seemed to help the situation one bit or wit as far as I could tell.

Given the horrible living conditions, the capital of the country, Port-au-Prince, had been dubbed Port-a-Potty many years ago by the wags in the State Department who had experienced the sights, smells and sounds of the impoverished city. It was considered unlivable by western standards. And I wasn't referring to Albuquerque or Flagstaff. It was a basket case without the pretense of a basket since wicker was in short supply like much of everything else in the beleaguered country.

Mama Mambo

Chapter 5

"Cher, you have some business to attend to. Gather up your zombies, my son, and teach Jean-Claude a lesson he won't soon forget. He's returned to the embassy despite our warning. We're getting good money from the Cubans and need to keep up our part of the bargain."

Mama Mambo was the ruthless, high priestess of The Family and someone to be reckoned with by all concerned. Her reputation for violence was well know throughout Haiti and everyone feared her and for good reason. She was one crazy bitch who stopped at nothing to get her way! And that indisputable fact made her very unpredictable and dangerous.

Her real name was Marie Claire Dumont and her imposing size scared the bejesus out of almost everyone who came into contact with her. But Mama Mambo was the name she chose, mambo meaning voodoo priestess. She stood over six feet and weighed more than 300 pounds, although no one was sure, even Mama, since she refused to weigh herself. She believed her own potions and lotions would protect her against a heart attack, stroke and other ills besetting ordinary humans. She truly believed in her own powers and invincibility. So did others, especially her many followers.

She was speaking to her son, Desmond, who people called the Poison Dwarf and the name was apropos. He was a hunchbacked dwarf who dabbled in the black arts of poisoning, not only for the arcane purposes of voodoo, but as a discreet means to eliminate those who crossed him or his mother. Marie Claire thought him an abomination, an embarrassment and a weakling who would never rise to become a Houngan, a voodoo priest. Perhaps a Bokor at some point, a sorcerer who dabbled in dark spells. But she thought him useful as someone who would unquestionably carry out her orders. That meant beatings, mutilations and killings to further The Family's lucrative enterprises involving smuggling, drug trafficking and extortion. So, in her mind, he served a useful purpose. Moreover, he was usually pretty good at what he did!

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