



JUST ANOTHER HOT DAY IN TUCSON

Slamming car doors and loud shouts awakened the little boy in his upstairs bedroom. A moment later, the front door disintegrated into splinters and dust from a barrage of machine gun fire. He sprang out of bed and rolled under it as a deep male voice announced, “Kill these Krahn dogs.” More gunfire ripped the house and family.

The boy under the bed heard the screams of his dying Grand Mama and Uncle Walter. He could also hear his own heartbeat thumping loudly against the wood floor. They hear my heartbeat; I will die.

And then all was quiet as the stillness of death blanketed the house. The boy heard the door open as the killers announced they would find them at their business. They had missed their real



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targets, the boy's parents. In that moment, the boy knew he would soon be an orphan. These men would not stop until the family was dead and their wealth stolen.

He remained under the bed several excruciating hours until he knew the house was safe. Then he slowly climbed out from under the bed, crept down the stairs, and walked through the slaughterhouse; Grand Mama and Walter's bullet-riddled corpses lay in the blood-splattered living room. The stench of blood permeated the house.

The boy left his childhood in that bloody room as he ran to the safety of the forest.

I am sitting in the very plush waiting room of my company, gazing into the eyes of the young Liberian man telling me his astounding story. As tears flow down my face, I realize he might as well be from Mars; the distance between us could not be greater.

In addition to the stark contrast of our skin colors, I look back over a life that had been a very sweet ride. Great genes, excellent parents (to their only child), and a face-to-the-wind brashness that charmed many and pissed off a few. Most people considered me good looking, smart, and even fearless and daring; I always swung for the fences. I have managed to build some wealth.

For most of my life, I lived in a dazzling swirl of fine restaurants, beautiful women (I dated many and married some), gorgeous golf courses, and exotic lighting reflected in gin martinis and through laughter and the aromatic smoke of fine cigars.

Two hours ago I knew nothing about this man sitting in front of me. Yet, I feel a kinship with him. His story reverberates through the corridors of my heart. In this young man and his story, I have collided with part of my own destiny. I know I am changed because of this story and the man telling it.

Two hours ago, I only knew that May 27, 2011 was another hot day in Tucson. Nothing under the cloudless blue-white sky alerted me to a change as my black Yukon rolled to a stop in front of my office. Over the hood, I watched a gleaming white Mercedes sedan of golfers glide through the entrance to the Tucson Country Club. I wished I had time to join them. Shrugging off my disappointment, I stepped out of my SUV, walked through the front door and straight into my office. I did not notice the man in the waiting area.

After slowly reading the morning paper, I walked out into the waiting area. That's the first time I ever saw Roland Deah. He was sitting quietly, reading a Bible. Just

over his head was a wall collage, containing a whisper of change: “Think of the possibilities.”

For some reason not grasped at the time or now remembered, I sat down near him.

As we began to talk, I learned that he was in my Christian Companion Senior Care office to apply for a job. Roland had driven past our office, saw the sign, and decided to make an appointment to apply for part-time work. He had been looking for a job that would permit him to attend Pima Community College in the coming fall (2011) semester. Our Director, who had scheduled the interview, had been delayed.

Roland is a large and a young man. His black eyes are older and wiser, while his round cherubic face is younger and more playful, than his twenty-nine years. His hair and goatee are cut very short. His skin is as black as ivory is white.

As I listened to his musical voice, I could not identify his deep African accent. When I asked, Roland smiled.

“Liberia,” he answered.

“What brought you to America?”

“The Civil War.”

LIBERIA

Most Americans do not know anything about Liberia, even though it is one of the most pro-American countries in the world.

The Republic of Liberia is located on the southwest corner of western Africa, between Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. Liberia has approximately three hundred and fifty miles of “ocean-front property” on the Atlantic. The country is about the size of Tennessee.

The nation of Liberia came into existence as a solution to a largely American problem. As slavery slipped toward its inevitable collapse, America needed to find a place where freed slaves could carve out new lives in freedom and equality.

Of course, as with any historical convulsion, the origins and motives were mixed. The abolitionists wanted to see the slaves find genuine freedom – freedom from oppression and ownership, and freedom to their own opportunities. But another perspective was anxiety about the growing number of free blacks in America. Within twenty years, from 1790 to 1810, the number of freed slaves in the colonies increased from about 59,000 to more than 180,000. That 300% increase brought understandable concern and social tumult.

The founding documents of The Society for the

Colonization of Free People of Color of America clearly saw and instituted the Republic of Liberia as a refuge for freed American blacks.

Although the venture represented the grand and celebrated “birth of a nation,” the area was already home to thousands of native people. In fact, the area (called, at that time, Pepper Coast or Grain Coast) had been inhabited since the 12th century, perhaps longer. Of course, those indigenous people resented the incursion of the United States into their land. The resentment gave birth to derogatory names for both groups. “The Country People” were the descendants of the natives. “Congo People” referred to those who came from America (many disembarked at the Congo River).

In 1847, the Republic of Liberia was born. The government of the country remained in the Americo-Liberian hands for more than one hundred and thirty years. The United States backed the Americo-Liberian “True Whig Party” throughout various conflicts and crises during those years.

However, in 1980, the long-simmering contention between the indigenous “country people” and the Americo-Liberian rulers finally exploded into a very bloody coup d’ état against the government. President William R. Tolbert was assassinated on April 12, 1980. Ten days later, thirteen of his cabinet members were executed. The leader of the insurrection, Samuel K Doe,

a member of the Krahn tribe, became the first non-American-Liberian President in Liberia's history.

President Doe did not – perhaps could not – lead Liberia into the promised peace, prosperity, and freedom. Instead, he established a military regime that smothered all opposition. However, he said the military regime would be temporary; civilian government would be restored. It never was.

In 1989, the American-educated Charles Taylor, a former Doe government official, formed the National Patriotic Front of Liberia. With the NPFL, he launched an insurrection against the Doe government on December 24, 1989. Nine months later, on September 9, 1990, Doe was captured and killed. As a warlord, Taylor controlled much of Liberia. But an internal power struggle produced a new force when Prince Johnson, a key Taylor supporter, broke away from the NPFL and formed the INPFL, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia.

At that point, Liberia fell into a full-blown civil war. Both sides – Taylor's NPFL and Johnson's INPFL – committed horrendous acts of terror and barbarism. They roiled and destabilized the country with fire, rape, murder, and cannibalism. The warlords lived out the African proverb – “When the bull elephants fight, the grass always loses.”

The civil war would result in the death of 250,000

people – 10% of the entire nation. It was also estimated that 70% of all Liberian women were raped during the war.



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On September 12, 1990 (three days after the murder of President Doe), the civil war exploded into Zwedru, Liberia. The fury of that day fire balled right into a peace-loving family named Deah.

That is where Roland's story begins.