

Beginning at the End

August 8, 1990, Liberia West Africa

Massive Embassy gates clanged shut behind us. My heart filled with joy. In several weary steps, my family and others with the good fortune of surviving the trip to the American Embassy in Liberia, had instantly been transported from the barbaric civil war in West Africa, to the United States of America. Throngs of starving, ragged, and terrified Liberians, along with Africans from various tribes, clamored outside the gates. I could only say a prayer for them.

I am not sure what made me—maybe the adrenaline from fear and anxiety—but I looked up, and out of a dozen faces, I focused keenly on one particular marine perched on the perimeter wall of the Embassy. I was struck that he looked more like a red-faced teenager than a soldier. In the next instant, I saw him transform from a relaxed young man into a man preparing for battle. A shrill alert blared from the siren, his eyes widened and jaw hardened. The sound of speeding jeeps and machine gun fire permeated the air. The rebels were boldly attacking the Embassy of the United States of America!

Instinctively we hit the ground. Crawling along the concrete walkway toward the U.S. Consulate's office was no easy task. The sound of machine gunfire assailed our eardrums. When all was quiet, only the coppery smell of spent ammo prevailed, we received the “all clear” and rose cautiously.

“Ms. Rahm!”

I spun around coming face to face with Ray, a Peace Corps worker once assigned to the Liberian National Red Cross. Today, he was dressed in civilian clothes, but wore a sidearm and the hardened gaze of a man accustomed to killing. Secretly, I had always believed he was CIA. Grinning, he revealed the familiar cracked front tooth as he waved a quick hello. Dazed at seeing him out of context, but relieved at the renewed feeling of safety, I feigned a smile.

Once inside the U.S. Embassy Consulate's office, he lingered, personally expediting our group's paperwork. His rank spared us the bureaucratic cruelty of repatriation, ordering that my children and I were not to be separated under any circumstances. Good never loss. I reflected upon the Liberian adage which, simply put, means the good you do comes back to you.

Ray had been a complete asshole as a Peace Corps worker. Supposedly, he had been stationed at the Red Cross Headquarters in Liberia to help develop additional revenue flow to confront our ever-growing financial problems. He came in like a whirlwind and was quickly promoted to Senior Staff where his brashness and lack of tact wreaked havoc on everyone's nerves. Yet, whenever he visited the Red Cross Day Care Center, he seemed to transform into a softie, displaying a gentle, patient attitude. I was the Director of the Center, and during the children's naptime, he would often stop by my office to sit and express his frustration with Liberia and its people. We would chat about the things we missed about good ole America, a place I had secretly vowed to leave behind forever.

Today, Ray's face and squinting brown eyes brought a feeling of relief and gratitude for his influence.

Ray, with my youngest daughter in his arms, led my bedraggled family to the ocean side of the Embassy.

“Well, now I know the answer to why you aren’t married, dude,” I quipped.

“Yep, war is what I do.” “So what now?”

“I’m on my way to Somalia,” he said instinctively, feeling for his holster. Our final words were clipped short as two C-130 military helicopters landed, making the palm trees bow low and our clothing blow against our bodies. As we boarded, I looked back one last time and thanked him from the bottom of my heart.

The copter crew was swift, outfitting us with helmets to protect our ears from the deafening sound of the propeller blades slicing through the humid air. Relieved and unafraid, I peered through the portals as we took off, looking down on the ground and then the ocean below.

It was unlike any experience my children ever had, but then the last few months had been full of uncertainty, most of it terrifying. My youngest son, Zefron, dressed in a yellow and black Haywood Academy uniform that complimented his honey hued skin, sat wide-eyed, scanning the inside of the copter. The gunner, positioned to squelch enemy ground fire, added to the surreal effect.

In moments, we were flying over the Atlantic Ocean. A crewmember mentioned that two rescue copters would be making multiple trips to airlift delinquent refugees out of Liberia that day. I was grateful that Ray had used his influence to enable my family to leave

together since that was not always the case. A woman and her son were huddled across from me, he seemed like just a baby compared my children. The child gagged, then vomited, perhaps from motion sickness, but more than likely from fear; while my girls, EliTikvah and Zevah, sat poised. I could only wonder what they were thinking.

This morning they had risen, like any other day, with the sun shining through their window of our cozy home on Chubor Road. Would that be the last time they slept in their beds in the place they had called home for so long? Where would we go from here? What was in store for our futures? War had changed us. War had changed everything.

Occasionally one of my children would look around; anxiety in their dark brown eyes, and in the tense set of their young shoulders. “Are you all right, baby?” I would ask. They would nod and all would be fine until their next anxious moment.

Sitting in the copter, I bore the full burden of my decision to remain in Liberia when all other American citizens, including my eldest son, daughter, and granddaughter, had been evacuated two months prior. How had it come to this? Amidst the relief I felt for my family, I also harbored deep feelings of remorse and shame for leaving friends behind, including “Ma Seeton” who had been like a mother to me; my granddaughter’s father; my business partner; and Chris, who was so much like a son to me.

“Several months earlier, Liberians listened by candlelight to a man describing the fate of their beloved country. Rumors abounded that a U.S. submarine was harbored off the coast of Liberia. The people hoped and prayed that America would intervene in the war and spare their country, colonized by free Blacks from America in 1821, from a Civil War that would catapult it backwards fifty years. However, trouble had erupted in the Middle

East and America rushed to protect its oil interest in the Persian Gulf, turning its back on its friend, Liberia. Now months later, I closed my eyes and thought of the ancient Ghanaian symbol, 'Gname,' that means, "No one knows the beginning or ending of anything except God." For the remainder of the helicopter ride, I repeated the mantra over and over, trying to find a sense of peace, which would take years to come.

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