



## OLIVER AVELING — 2021

Most people call me ‘Olty’. I turn thirty today, the first of January 2021. I enjoy my birthday on New Year’s Day. It wasn’t so great when I was a child, but since reaching my teenage years, I’ve had a lot of fun with extra celebration after the partying on New Year’s Eve. This year’s a bit special of course: thirty is a major number and a dozen of us have planned a big bash for tonight. But I want to make a start on this project first. It’s going to be a challenge.

I’m a diplomat by profession. I’m white, single, straight, solvent. I work with a great bunch of people and I’m lucky with my friends. I travel a lot, but I love coming home to this apartment with its brilliant view over the ocean. I have company from time to time, but there’s no one really serious in my life.

I was born in England, but I’ve lived here since I finished school twelve years ago. ‘Here’ is Century City, Capital of Millennium, a country occupying a landmass on the West Coast of Africa as old as time itself, although our nation was born only twenty-one years ago today.

Millennium’s struggle into existence is the kernel of my story, but there’s a more personal element to it as well. Our country’s founding president was David Heaven who’s been long gone from life and much longer from that post. I was twenty-two when he died and I knew him a bit because he had been close to our family since I was a boy and he features in my earliest memories. He was gruff but kind, and to give him his due, he was a pretty good communicator with all age groups. Plus of course, David Heaven was for a while the *man* of Millennium and was therefore a significant figure. Until his death, I thought of him as an important family friend and after he had gone, I



simply thought about him less and less. I certainly had no idea that he was my biological grandfather, the father of my mother. So this news hit me like a thunderbolt.

A little over a year ago, I was spending a lot of working time in New York and I had a visit from a Frenchman called Guy Labarre. He's not a relative but our families have been intertwined over many years. Guy is a human rights lawyer and we did have a bit of business to do together, but that was not the reason to bring him calling. He bought me lunch and took the opportunity to hand over a letter written to me by David Heaven. It doesn't say much, just a simple message addressed to me in his handwriting which I recognised on the envelope.

'To my grandson, Oliver Aveling.'

The letter inside is not dated. It reads as follows:

'Dear Olty,

I do not know when you will receive this, neither do I know who will give it to you, but I leave it in safe hands and in confidence that it will reach you one day. I could not acknowledge you in life, but here is my legacy in death. Here is a record of my time and my efforts. There is untold history and there are unrecorded facts. Above all, Olty, I leave you my memories. I am certain that you will become the man who will make the most of them.'

There is no signature.

With this letter came a small suitcase, full of photographs, newspaper cuttings, memorabilia of all sorts. And there was a journal. I have one volume in front of me now. It's not a diary and it's hardly a memoir. It's not 'it'. There are eleven hardback books and the lined pages of all of them are filled with Heaven's neat handwriting. There's no concession to modernity. He might as well have drawn a pirate's map with a quill pen. There's no index, no summary and only a few of the photos are dated. But

the journal is compelling and I was hooked from the moment I started to browse.

It's recorded history that my grandfather started a revolution. He raised an army and planned an invasion. He came in from the ocean with three ships and three thousand people in the small hours of the new century. He aimed to take over an established sovereign state and to replace it with a new country, a new order and a new society. Human engineering on a grand scale.

It's people who shape events on this planet and the personalities which drive the people are formed from background, relationships, opportunity and sheer damn fortune. It's the 'humanity of history' as my grandfather calls it somewhere in this tome of his. Mostly, however, he keeps his emotional side in check. He writes in facts and figures and dates. He uses terse language, abbreviating his inner feelings.

I could have tidied this up and published his journal as a posthumous autobiography. But I wanted more. I wanted flesh on the bones of his sparse account and so I have spent the past year in research and conversations with survivors of the era.

This is an extraordinary story of momentous times. It starts with a relative of my family friend Guy Labarre – his Uncle Michel.



## MICHEL LABARRE — 1963


On the evening of the fourth day, the young man standing on tip toes accepted that his death was imminent and found that he was quite looking forward to it.

When he was snatched from the hotel, his first reaction had been disbelief larded with a sheer, raging terror. He liked to talk as tough as any red-blooded young man when a bit taken in drink and surrounded by his mates, but that would have been in Paris or in his home city of Limoges. Out here he was in strange territory, without the familiar points of reference and he had felt both excitement and isolation from the moment he had stepped off his direct flight from France into the arrivals hall at Niamey International Airport in the Republic of Niger.

Michel Labarre was twenty-three years old with a reasonable degree in chemical engineering from the University of Sorbonne. He came from a quality family, possessed of money, status and standing. He was an enthusiastic sportsman, a good looking, fun-loving young man, with a lively and likeable personality.

The oyster of Michel's world was opening up as he arrived that day from Paris. He was joining, as a management trainee, a substantial French conglomerate in civil engineering called Georges DuLame & Cie which had global interests but especially in the former French colonies of West Africa. Newly recruited university graduates could expect to spend at least half of their first three years on short term postings overseas, and for most of them, this was a significant attraction of the job.

Michel was therefore one of a kind and he relished the chance, following his inaugural stint at the DuLame training centre outside Nanterre, to cut his teeth on some proper work in Africa. For the first couple of months, the company's well established




practice was to apply a regime of strict acclimatisation. The young men, and there were precious few women of any age, were required to knuckle down to big company discipline, to work diligently and to get their bodies used to the extreme climate with its 40 degree heat. They must tolerate the sometimes dodgy food and accept the basic accommodation. The incentives were that expatriate life offered decent money, infrequent but long leaves, and satisfaction for the Beau Geste spirit if that turned you on.

Michel loved it all. He liked the work, liked the heat, liked his fellow workers be they French or Nigerien, especially liked the feeling of accomplishment that he was doing something different, and doing it well. The French management at the DuLame compound took to him also, congratulating themselves that they had an asset in Michel Labarre, all the more impressive as he came from a pretty toffee-nosed background. And all his colleagues appreciated his ability to keep up with the pace of beer when they had a night out in the bars and dives of Niamey, especially as he was something of a musician and could play a reasonable guitar even when several sheets to the wind.

That single talent led to his undoing. A group of them finished up one night at La Chatte, a lively club in the red light ghetto, notorious for its innovative band which was delighted to welcome Michel into an impromptu jamming session at which his playing ability shone out as brightly as his face whilst the drinks poured down and the heat of pressing bodies mounted. It was during a beer break that he talked rather loosely to the double bass player who encouraged Michel in his account of learning to play the guitar at his exclusive school in France and applauded him for working hard in the Sahara despite obviously coming from a pretty wealthy background. Michel was well past picking up any danger signals from this trend of conversation and his new friend took care that their little talk did not include the other members of Labarre's group from the company.

Half an hour after that, the girl arrived. She might have been from Mali or perhaps from Mauritania, but she was actually a




Senegalese and strikingly beautiful — tall, very slim, angel face and totally poised. The entire package was white hot sexy, and Michel was overboard when she came straight over to talk to him. She gurgled with the claim that word of his excellence had reached her from her friends in the band and she just had to see him perform. She delivered that line with such clear innuendo that Michel felt as if he had been that kicked in the groin.

A little more music was played and a good deal more beer lowered before the senior DuLame man announced that their group was leaving. That was an absolute instruction. No one got left behind, certainly not Michel Labarre with his hormones pumping, but the girl, who called herself Salacia, managed to whisper that she could not say adieu and just must meet him two nights hence in the main square of the city at 6:30 pm, and that he must come alone.

The following day was a Sunday and Michel spent it in a fever of indecision mixed with lust. Company instructions were explicit. No employee to leave the compound without a pass and never alone in the evening. But Michel knew, like everybody else, that the wire perimeter was holed like a Swiss cheese, that many of the inhabitants went out from time to time and that the African workers in the camp brought their own women in through the selfsame holes. So practicality was not an issue. But then there was risk assessment, and he made a steadily less objective job of this as his animal instincts drove his brain south.


Monday was therefore passed with the electricity of planning and anticipation, with the enticing body of Salacia ever dancing before his eyes. He finished his work, showered, grabbed some cash and slipped out of the compound. He picked up a flea bitten cab immediately which was surely a good omen and was in the square by 6:20 pm feeling relaxed and sure of himself. She would be pleased to see him and he paused by the fountain to light a cigarette with luxuriant pleasure.

Salacia was indeed delighted to see him. She had a good feeling about this one, but you still needed the proof that the fish was on the line. She was sitting at the back of an open fronted




cafe across the square, hidden by the awning overhead and pleased to see her mark exhibiting the body language of nerves drowned in expectation. Now she whispered a final instruction to her companion, a huge man in a flat white cap which obscured a little of his beard, unusually luxuriant for an African, and then she rose to slip away, lithe in her sea green dress with the skirt just a bit too short. Minutes later, she could be seen approaching Michel from the other side of the square having circled around. The big man shook his head. She was almost too sharp and sexy this one, but she knew her business and made more money more easily than any of his former partners. Plus she liked a bit of rough and brawny occasionally, so no way was he going to complain about taking orders from Salacia.

Meanwhile, Michel was in heaven. This gorgeous girl was treating him like manna from heaven, a little decorous kiss on his cheek, smoothing his hair, compliments on his appearance and her finger nails skittering down his arm in a gesture of welcome and possession. Supremely sexy.



She slipped her arm through his and led him away out of the square into the main street and towards the misnamed Hotel du Parc, which was nonetheless the best establishment in town. As they walked, she explained that she worked for the Foreign Service of Senegal, she had flown in a week ago on a visit mixing business with pleasure and that she always stayed in this hotel. Michel was entranced and questioned none of this. They went into the foyer, in which he felt instinctively that he should be discreet if not furtive, but Salacia continued their conversation uninterrupted as she waited for her key, saying that their plan should be to go and listen to some more music, but first perhaps, a refreshing drink and a little relax. She looked demurely at him with a twinkle in her eye which would have debauched a monk.

Upstairs in her spacious room, she poured him a cold beer, lit a cigarette for them both, kicked off her shoes and slipped gracefully onto the double bed, patting the sheets alongside her in invitation. Michel put down his glass and moved towards her, his throat, despite the lager, already dry with expectation.




‘Cheri’, she invited him calmly, ‘I think you should first remove your clothes ... just like me’.

She smiled encouragement as she let slip the dress from around her neck and lay back in the middle of the bed, hair spread out, breasts high, nipples thrust in excitement, legs ajar, the whole marvellously naked. She held out her arms to him and Michel stumbled awkwardly out of his trousers, almost tripping as he simultaneously ripped off his shirt. In his fevered state, he didn’t notice the lift whirring to a halt on their floor, neither did he hear the door to the bedroom being gently opened, nor sense the large man with the white cap enter with a silence which belied his bulk. But at that moment, Michel might not have noticed a rampaging bull — he was one himself. With a groan of delight, he got onto the bed and leaned forward to rest his belly against Salacia’s knees which she had drawn up into her chest. Michel supported himself on his arms, his hands palm down on either side of his lover. Classic missionary stuff, he had time to think to himself as he pushed forward quite gently and was thrilled to feel her knees begin to part before his thrust. Nirvana, here we come, he thought.



But in an instant, his every instinct turned from slaking lust to fighting panic as he seemed to levitate in a manner which defied all his senses. Michel was suddenly powerless, overcome by extraordinary strength. One large human hand gripped his throat so he could gurgle but not breathe. Another slipped between his legs and gathered all his rampant genitalia in one massive grip which would have made him scream if he could have used his larynx. He felt himself being swung effortlessly into the air, the same two hands in the same two places, but now he was being held upside down and then lowered into a heavy hessian sack with fumes which drove the breath from his nose as he started to choke. But neither hand released its hold until Salacia, who had snatched the bag from under the bed and opened the neck to receive its human burden, pulled tight a drawstring which laced the bottom of the sack around Michel’s down-stretched neck so that the giant could pull out his hand and permit the cord and the fumes to stifle any cries which the






captive might make. Without delay, the big man stood on the bed, lifted up Michel by balls and body and thumped him head down on the wooden floor. The lights went out for Michel.

The giant and Salacia looked at each other. There was a prevailing silence, with only the normal sounds of street and public building to reach them. White Cap had a sheen of light sweat on his upper arms but his breathing was steady and normal. Almost effortless work for him. But Salacia was snorting and throwing her head about, cascades of glittering black hair whirling around her shoulders and her limbs trembling as if in trauma. White Cap recognised the symptoms, not of fear or crisis but of battle lust and he proposed the remedy with one uplifted eyebrow. She nodded at him. Michel lay like a donkey's dumped burden. White Cap scooped up Salacia with one arm and released his jeans with the other. He chucked her on the bed, face down, bottom up and pulled her roughly back onto him. She cursed at him to go harder. He grunted and went at it. He was over in a minute, she was dressed in two more. They left the room without a backward glance, the hessian bag and its unseen occupant slung casually over the giant's shoulder. He passed through the lobby with a direct but unhurried gait whilst she lingered briefly at reception to pass over an envelope which made good a prior agreement. They joined up again at the front door and walked into the car park to retrieve a battered Nissan pickup. Salacia drove. White Cap tossed the sack with casual abandon into the load bed. He got in beside her and they drove off without a word.



Michel Labarre came to briefly around midnight but lapsed in and out of consciousness during the early hours and it was not until the African dawn came blazing up around 6 am that he was able to take any stock of his position. It was not good.

Vision for him remained very faint. He was being held in the middle of a warehouse which permitted scant daylight through its few dusty windows. Worse, he was still inside the heavy, musty sacking and his head was splitting from its treatment the previous evening. It took him some time and freshly rising panic to understand that although there were no bindings on




his limbs, he was still trussed like an animal for market as he remained upside down, one drawstring still around his neck at the bottom of the sack, and a second below his feet, thus sealing him in a hessian tomb. He struggled with a desperation born of horror and this action made him swing. He fought his claustrophobia and regained just enough self control to work it out. The sack was suspending him from some fixture above, but he had no means of knowing at what height nor whether there was any sort of help within earshot. He tried to shout, but the resultant noise was feeble and blanketed. The effort also caused him to suck in more dust and he started to choke, causing yet greater panic. Mercifully, this led him to pass out again and he spent the next few hours in a state of semiconscious delirium.

Meanwhile, there was progress of a sort. At 5 am, a ragged urchin had scrambled through one of the holes into the DuLame compound and, as instructed by Salacia, who remained at a safe distance sitting in the old pickup, left an envelope under a heavy stone at the door to the main administration block. It was addressed to the senior French executive of the company. Inside was a message from a fictitious revolutionary group demanding a ransom in CFA francs for the safe return of their captive whose battered and unconscious face was quite recognisable in the poor photograph enclosed. Cash payment was to be made according to precise instructions within forty-eight hours or Labarre would be executed.


By 9 am, the telex lines to the DuLame Headquarters in Lille were chattering and by the end of the day, it became clear that retired Colonel Joffrey Labarre, a wealthy man in his own right and with considerable experience of the African colonies, would personally underwrite the price of his son's return. With a speed and pragmatism of which the French are most capable when roused, the details were arranged and a note left out for collection by another small boy, which requested an extension of twenty four-hours simply to get the cash together and to parcel it as instructed.

Salacia relayed this to Paulus, the personable double bass




player from the club La Chatte who had provided the brains and the organisation behind the kidnap. He ordered an agreement to the extension. He had anyway been planning for it. Meanwhile, they were to keep young Labarre safe but scared, not fed but watered, secure from any possibility of escape and Paulus did not want to know where they were holding him.


The other parties to the agreement were content if not happy. DuLame management did not want to rock any commercial boats by running for help to either the Niamey Police or the Niger Government. Colonel Labarre knew best and would pay for his preference to be respected. Payment would be made and young Labarre recovered. He would have to leave Niger immediately and the employ of DuLame just after that, but the parents would get their first born back – very severely chastened but nonetheless intact.



Whilst this process took its course, Michel's circumstances improved, if only a little. On that first day, he returned to some normality just after noon, had the beginnings of a further panic attack but fought it down and was just starting to think through the desperation of his position when he heard a heavy footfall and felt his sacking prison being first lifted and then lowered roughly to the floor. The strings were untied, the material pulled back and the unaccustomed light battered his brain. He was hauled to his feet. He made out the all too familiar features of the giant above him as his arms were swept together in front of him and bound palm to palm by White Cap using insulating tape over which he placed a heavy rope tied in a noose. The big man thrust a plastic bottle into his mouth and upturned it, waiting almost patiently while Michel choked and gurgled to get some of the warm and dirty water down his throat. Then he threw the end of the rope over the rafter from which Michel's sack had been suspended and heaved until the prisoner was obliged to take his weight on his arms or to stand on his toes. The rope was secured to a stanchion in the floor.




Michel was looking around as Salacia came sashaying out of the shadows, a slight smile playing over her sexy features,




another slinky dress, long legs, long black hair. The nightmare returned to him and he felt simultaneously a terror at his prospects and humiliation at his filthy nakedness which he could do nothing to hide. She came right up close to him and gripped his head in her two hands.

'You were never too attractive,' she said, 'and you'll look and smell horrible by the time we're finished. But you'll be alive at least. So do as you're told. No shouting or you go back in the sack. No complaining or Claude here will beat the shit out of you. And he'll enjoy it'.


Behind her, White Cap gave a slow, broad grin, full of infinite menace. She looked into Michel's face for a long time until he could no longer bear her gaze and he dropped his eyes in abjection. Only then did she turn on her heel and walk off into the darkness of the building's extremities.



And so began for Michel Labarre a terrible test of endurance which had brought him, four days almost to the hour after his abduction, to a point of suicidal despair. By day, they left him roped up to a height at which he could choose to give some slight respite to either his arms or his feet. But not both together and increasingly he came to stand on tip toes. At night, they placed a stool by him on which he could climb to rest and try to sleep vertically, overcome by exhaustion until he fell over or was disturbed by the rats which crept out of the shadows to sniff around the droppings from his increasingly nauseating body and even to nibble at his feet. They kept him alive on water only. He saw only Claude whom he once asked for something to eat to be rewarded with a kick in the groin and belt welts to his back and buttocks. Sometimes, he thought of home and wept. He tried to keep his hopes alive, knowing that he was worth money and that money would be found and paid if only the communications would work.



Michel could not know that they did work, and pretty smoothly in the circumstances. The delay stretched beyond the deadline, but Paulus was not fazed by that. An intelligent man, well educated in Kinshasa, he had spent some years living in France. He knew the systems and could read the characters. He had seen




the opportunity and acted decisively. But this was a big job — the largest which they had pulled together and as soon as they had the cash safe, it would be time to move out. It would be best to be on his own for a few months, give the band a rest, let Salacia go back to a little whoring in the expatriate community somewhere, encourage Claude into more body building. While for him — well, perhaps a trip back to France would be good. He was relaxed.

But then it all went horribly wrong.

The ransom sum was assembled and packaged as demanded. It was delivered to the petrol station and truck stop on the route out of Niamey towards the border with Mali to the north. Inconspicuously parked amongst the big vehicles, Paulus could see the drop made, just another 45 gallon oil drum amongst so many others, and he could see Claude arrive five minutes later to collect the drum with the big red stripe and sweep it into the back of the old Nissan whilst Salacia waited at the wheel. They did as he had told them, and went to the pumps to buy fuel so that he would have some minutes to see if there was any suspicious car looking to follow them. Nothing and no one. Salacia and Claude drove out of the truck stop to circle the city back towards the warehouse where Michel was hanging from his rope, shortly to be released to find his way towards help and home, filthy, naked and lost whilst the three perpetrators and the rest of the band would make their way quietly from the city, dividing their takings and then go their separate ways.

But as Salacia drove at modest speed with Claude beside her, she put an alternative scheme to him which he liked very much indeed. They had done all the work and taken all the risks. Why share the profits and why anyway on such an unequal basis as Paulus proposed? As a partnership, they felt confident together. She the style and brain, he the unstoppable bulk. But they had to be ruthless, with nothing left behind to assist either Paulus or the authorities. And thus was sealed the fate of Michel Labarre.

They drove the pick up into the warehouse and shut out behind them the waning sunlight. Michel was unmoving and looked at them through a face masked with the pain of standing on his



toes. Salacia walked right up to him, just as she had done when she left him three days before. She wrinkled her nose at the smell but managed a sexy, secret smile. Michel was far gone in fear and exhaustion, but he opened his eyes as she stroked him gently and gazed at her as she stepped back a pace, lifting her arms above her head, pushing her hair out onto her shoulders, striking a provocative pose with one leg cocked in front of the other. Michel was never conscious of White Cap circling behind him.

'Well Monsieur', said Salacia, 'most men say that I have a body to die for. I hope you agree?' She smiled as Claude broke his neck from behind with the speed and indifference which a farmer might use on a chicken.

Claude stuffed the corpse of the young man into the sack in which he had arrived. He put this next to the oil drum with the red stripe in the load bed of the pickup, and then took the wheel himself as they drove sedately out of the city towards Ouagadougou, capital of Upper Volta. Eighty kilometres later, and by now in complete darkness, Claude took the body in its sack and carried it a further kilometre over rough desert ground away from the road and there abandoned it in a slight depression in the ground.

Claude returned to Salacia with the keys of the car in his pocket. You can never be too careful. But probably, they did not go much further together. Not only had they made an enemy of a brighter man, but they had also made a serious mistake. Paulus had no cause to suspect them, but he was ever cautious. Thus, they had collected the drum with the stripe as he told them, but that was not the drum with the money. Paulus himself had awaited their departure from the fuel station before moving in to find the correct article and even now he was counting the money to share with his confederates. But two of them would not now dare to return.

The body was never found. Over time, decay and vermin stripped away the flesh, whilst the searing sun and desert wind bleached the bones. There was never to be Christian resting place for Michel Labarre, and it was to be many months before his family could accept that he was forever gone from them, and in circumstances which they would never know.