



The Formative Years of an African-American Spy: A Memoir

Odell Bennett Lee

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This story traces the childhood experiences of an African-American C.I.A. officer. Poverty and racism were lesser evils than the Cinderella-like experiences in his dysfunctional family. He endured the volatility of a no-nonsense mother who used the rod at his slightest infraction, and the loathing of two stepfathers that sought to isolate him from the family. By age fifteen, he was the primary caregiver for six half-brothers and sisters. The twists and turns of growing up in a dysfunctional family forced an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual renaissance in his life. Through adversity and chance, at an early age he learned to decouple his self-image from his turbulent childhood experiences. More importantly, he learned to keep a cool head in the face of antagonistic and ambiguous situations, and refused to let others define his personal worth. At sixteen, an unbearable home situation caused him to drop out of high school and join the U.S. Navy. He welcomed the Navy's carefully constructed value system that demanded teamwork, courage, and personal confidence. On his seventeenth birthday he was sailing across the Pacific Ocean to such far off places as Japan, Hong Kong, Guam, and Australia. He discovered that the world was big, complicated, and very different from the one he had known. Yet, he felt safe for the first time in his life. After the Navy, he worked at several dead-end jobs. Friends and colleagues convinced him to complete his education. He received his high school diploma at age twenty-three, and attended undergraduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.), and graduate school at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (S.A.I.S.). He worked for several international businesses before coming to the attention of the C.I.A. The Agency offered him a unique opportunity to serve his country that he could not refuse. Unlike most books about C.I.A. spies, this one is deeply personal and offers an insight into the mind of an African-American C.I.A. officer. It traces many of his positive and negative childhood experiences that, in hindsight, proved essential to his success as a case officer in the covert services of the Central Intelligence Agency.



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