



Philip Lewis Henderson

from "Berlin Asylum,"

...The lobby was decaying blond-wood, tacky furniture and old, goofy pictures hung everywhere. A couch was to his left, filled with people he didn't want to see, but saw, anyway. It was impossible to avoid them. They were too loud upon his entry—and upon his approach, too silent. Carl sighed. He was going to get fucked, no doubt about it.

All the furniture was old, he saw: throwbacks to the fifties and early sixties, save for the old standing lamp (which looked Victorian). Carl noted a free PC sitting nearby from where one could access the internet. Okay, he thought, it's okay, when he made it up to the reservation desk again. However, in place of the young German girl with the Betty Page hairdo he found a middle-

aged, burly, graying, Italian-looking guy, who was looking askance at him. Carl wondered what was up this time...

“Ja, kann ich helfen?”

“I’d like a bed,” he said. “For twelve euro.”

“Sorry, no more beds,” the burly man said, abruptly. “We only have rooms available.”

“I know,” Carl said. “I want a bed in a room with other people.”

“Not anymore,” the burly man replied. “We don’t do this anymore. Too much problems with the people.”

Carl raised a brow, largely to himself. “So where do we sleep here, then?”

“Sir, you sleep in the room, because the room with more than one person is finished. We have too much problem in this hotel in the past.”

“Oh, okay,” Carl sighed, deeply worried about his wallet. “So how much is the room?”

“For you? Lemme see...”

Carl cursed to himself. 44 Rooms was the cheapest place he knew that was fit for human habitation. He guessed that the management was fed up with the bullshit, trying to re-establish order. Each time he bunked at 44 Rooms the place looked increasingly chaotic: the accumulated trash, papers, bottles (including shattered and cracked ones) was so heavy that Carl felt he had returned to Cairo. And the vibe was strange, too. Not unfriendly—Carl had run across a few amicable faces—but there

was always an air of hostility so thick, one could cut it with a knife. It had not disappeared: to his left, seated on the couch were a bunch of black-booted, black-haired, black-jacketed punks with smug-looking faces. Their speech was full of derision, with “fuck” and “bollocks” punctuating their every sentence. Carl thought he heard one of them say “jungle bunnies” but maybe, he felt, that was just his bitter imagination.

“Sir?” the fat receptionist had come back. “We have only one room for 16 euro. Nice small room. It would be good for you.”

Carl sucked his teeth.

“What happened to the beds?”

“We change the policy,” the fat man added. “There was a problem with the girls here.”

“A problem? So you changed the policy—“

“Listen, there was a problem here because a forty year old man was trying to talk to some of the girls here...”

Huh, Carl shrugged to himself, indifferently. Old, leering perverts exist in every city in the world. His mind took him up blind alleys before it dawned on him who that “forty year old man” really was. During his last stay in the one of the ten-bed rooms, Carl met a cute, young blonde. She bunked beside Carl Lomax and politely said hello and goodbye to him each morning and each evening, respectively. The woman (unlike many Berlin girls) was elegant, well-dressed, well-proportioned. Carl Lomax naively assumed he had a sure thing; he slipped his phone number into her duffel-bag. The woman never called.

“I get it,” he then thought, aloud, directly into the face of the old Italian—whom Carl assumed was really Turkish or Kurdish. “You don’t want niggers in 44 Rooms, is that it?”

“Excuse me?”

The old man’s jaw dropped in indignation. “What—no, what did you just tell me a moment ago? That we don’t allow WHAT—*negers*—here? Get out of here, right now. Go. I own this hotel, this is my hotel. Okay? I am the manager here. I offered you a room here for 16 euros. Did I tell you that you could not stay in the room because you are black? Take it or you can leave it. But for your information mister, all of my friends here in Berlin are black. *All* of them!” Yeah right, Carl thought, with bated breath—and all my friends are Turkish or Arab hoods. Sure, pal. “You want me to get on the phone and call them here so you can talk to them? You want I show you the records that prove they have stayed here? Honestly I don’t know where you are getting this shit from, sir. Maybe you stay in Marzhan too long...”

“Okay,” Carl sighed, “where is the room for 16 euros?”

There was a slight pause in the man’s screed, upon which he demanded Carl’s passport. The room was on the third floor. Carl discreetly bit his lip when he thought about lugging those two heavy suitcases up three flights of stinky, cold, rickety stairs—there was no elevator in the building. As for the long-winded screed, Carl (naturally) believed not a word of it.

Just before huffing and puffing with his suitcase, Carl decided to leave one at reception. “No,” said the fat man, “you can put it

in storage. 5 euro per day.” Carl shrugged his shoulders and proceeded to haul both of his suitcases up the cold, rickety, noisy staircase. Carl was getting screwed. The last time he bunked at 44 Rooms, storage space was free.

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He unlocked the door at 3-139. The room was in its usual state: bedsheets unchanged on both bunks, the trash can un-emptied; and the single small table by the bunks was cluttered with empty beer, gin and whisky bottles. In addition, the Ikea bunk bed could barely fit into the little hole; it blocked off half the window. On the disorderly table he found a blue plastic tab. He picked it up—it read “3-139”. Great: some asshole had ripped the key loose and pocketed it. He must have been British, Carl thought. He remembered the Brits in Prague some years back: all dressed to the nines in fancy suits and leather jackets, cavorting up and down Charles Square, completely ripped on cocaine. Carl was surprised that they didn’t attempt to kill him.

Thank God the house had a WLAN connection; he could safely stay indoors and not lug his laptop up and down Oranienstrasse. Online, he found the stats to his porn website. It was his only real source of income in the city. There had been two signups yesterday; zero today. The day before yesterday had been a zero, too. Last week he had only pulled in 179 dollars. To somebody living in the streets of Berlin, that would be a hefty

chunk of change...if it were 179 euros. On the upside, however, Carl's article, "Goodbye to Berlin," had been rejected by *Harper's*. "Dear Carl Lomax," the rejection began, "we have published a few of your things in the past, and have always held you in high esteem as a writer. However, this particular article seems to be a step down in quality from your previous assignments from *Harper's*. We find the subject matter fascinating, yet we were less than enthusiastic about the way you presented this material. It simply needs more work. If you have any other articles to submit to us, please feel free to do so."

Okay, he thought, looking at the email. That's okay. They didn't say the article was shit. And it isn't a form rejection letter. So you still have your foot in the door, at least. They want your things; you're a great writer. You were right to trade New York's filth for Berlin's, even though nothing here has ever panned out, even though by now you have lost all your furniture, your apartment, most of your possessions, and both girlfriends. It was cute of *Harper's* to acknowledge that you still existed, but all this "encouragement" doesn't hide that it's just another rejection slip. After the 16 euro charge for this shitty room, plus the 10 euro charge for the sheets and the five euro deposit for the key, Carl Lomax has absolutely nothing.

Not wanting to waste the dwindling credits in his handy phone, he took to using the in-house phone. He had to do literary readings, he thought; it was the only way he could survive without doing *that* again. Carl made a long list of all the English bookstores

and establishments in Berlin where he was likely to secure a gig. Only three establishments seemed interested; the one establishment that had hosted Carl Lomax before *was* willing to do a reading...in three months.

Carl hung up the phone.

Of course, he reasoned, if all else failed, he could go down to Max and Moritz and wash dishes. Or so Martin claimed; he wasn't always right about certain things. After all, it was from Martin that Carl got the idea to rent that shitty apartment from Skag *Immobilienverwaltung*.

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The station: all those strange, crude people standing or sitting everywhere, grumbling and cackling in either German or Turkish, occasionally in English, Spanish or Italian; if it wasn't their misshapen, withered faces that made Carl wince, it was certainly their foul tongues (or the stench of overflowing trash cans). Yet Mehringdam didn't fill him with the same kind of tension that, say, Alexanderplatz, or Grand Central Station, did. Not all of the people were white, as he could plainly see; that came as a slight relief—but only slight, since just the same, none of them were black.

The car for Rathaus Spandau arrived after three minutes. He pushed the button in the middle of the door and walked in. The car was cluttered mostly with stolid middle-aged Germans and

schlubby Turkish kids with gold chains and greased-up hair. The Germans, for the most part, remained dead silent while the Turkish kids talked, their speech sounding like it came from their entrails. A skinny, nervous, sallow-skinned boy wandered on; he was moving uncomfortably fast, a tension inside of him that reminded Carl of the black boys he knew in Baltimore. He wore a stark white hooded jacket fringed with white fur and a black baseball cap several sizes too small for him. He deposited himself at the rear of the train with the other Turkish kids and struck up a sullen, noisy conversation with them. Maybe just for his own amusement, or out of sheer contempt for his surroundings, he began casually kicking the rear door of the orange tram car. Once or twice, he kicked it roughly. (He's high, Carl thought.) The Turkish kid's cockiness elicited disgusted groans from some of the white-haired matrons seated near Carl, but Carl merely smirked with bemusement; as far as he was concerned, it wasn't *his* war.

He sat next to an old blonde with a badly made-up face. A leather clad, raven-haired Amazon engaged her in prickly German; her huge butt gave him a moment's thrill until he saw her sunken, paper-white face with its two piercing, unfriendly black eyes, and its monkey mouth. And then that goddamn mobile started ringing and wouldn't shut up, so Carl guessed was something urgent-- something to do with "home," he supposed. It had to be that fucking Skag. Who else would pester me so?

He picked it out of his bag again, and flicked it on....Of course.

“Hello, Carlos?!” Paula spluttered, sounding extremely agitated; he felt his stomach tighten... “How come you haven’t called?”

“Paula, please,” Carl sighed, in disgust. “What do you want?”

“You said you were going to the agency to find a flat! Right?!!”

“Yes, I did!”

“Why?”

Carl bit his lip. He knew why she was asking these stupid questions; she wanted out of the relationship. Okay, then: scram. Yet shockingly, there was something in him that desperately wanted her to stay. He couldn’t understand it. “What do you mean, why?”

“I mean, if you want to stay in a fucking youth hostel, it’s okay, Carlos, because I won’t be back when you come home,” she said, sharply. “I’m seeing someone else. You know, your friend, Ted, the big black guy. At least he don’t complain about everything I do.”

“You’ve been seeing him for some time,” he said.

“I knowwwww,” Paula drooled. “And he is *so* much bigger and faster and more intelligent than you’ll ever be. In *every* way.”

“So why are you calling *me*, then?” he spat, in a cold, flat anger.

“Don’t be angry with me, Carlos. Let’s be friends. I still like you. But I am not turned on by you anymore, baby. You’re just a little boy.”

“Paula,” he snarled. “I’m not joking. Get out of my flat. Get out. Get *out*. You’ve done *enough* damage as it is and you better *not* be there when I get back.”

“I dunno,” she continued, sounding dumbfounded. “I don’t understand why you are so *stupid*. You say that you’re an artist, but all you do is just sell your ass to German women. Yeah, I know, stupid motherfucker. ‘Cause I hear things through the grapevine. I know you’re doing it right now, aren’t you?!”

“Paula—“

“Don’t you fucking lie to me, you black sonofabitch!” Paula roared, causing a lump to catch in his throat; he curled up his lip in distaste. “Where are you now, Carlos? Can I meet you, wherever you are?”

He hated the patronizing new tone she had in her voice.

“Why do you wanna know?”

“I’m just asking.”

“I’m at Yorckstrasse,” Carl lied.

“What the hell are you doing over there?”

“I’m going to the bookshop,” he lied, again. Paula sucked her teeth... “Oh, my goodness, not there. Another place, like a bar. I HATE that place, with all those drunken white people, fucking English bastards!”

At this point he smirked. Baldwin’s is our place, he thought, our refuge from bitches like her. Paula is just typically feeling sorry for herself. She is highly attractive, and highly intelligent; in addition to all this, she is Brazilian. Actually she is really German

but is too proud to admit this simple fact about herself. Doors will open for her if she will only let them, he thought to himself. Let her find her own goddamn things. “What, Carlos? I don’t believe you when you say you’re going to that bookshop. And I *don’t* want you to go there.”

“But I thought you didn’t want to see me,” he said. “Make up your mind. Do you *want* to see me, or do you want to run me down for not having a dick as big as Ted’s?”

He heard Paula sighing over the phone, and got himself ready to hear an avalanche of sobs. Instead, he heard giggles.

“Paula, what the fuck are you playing at?”

Paula giggled over the phone....maybe she’s drunk, he thought.... “Nothing,” she said, puckishly. “I just want us to meet over some coffee, that’s all.”

“We’re not meeting,” he said, flatly. “I don’t want to see your face right now. You fucked up my flat.”

“Why? I like you. I wanna go to Slumberland with you. And is lots of black people there, not no fucking whiteys.”

Uh, huh, he thought, derisively. So Ted really isn’t all that he’s cracked up to be. Paula obviously wants to relive a happier time in her life. But he was definitely not ready to go there with her—not tonight. “Okay,” Carl lied, “Baldwin’s it is.”

“I see you at Slumberland. Okay?”

Carl angrily “hung” up on Paula by loudly snapping his phone shut.

He felt the car lurching to a stop at some nameless station. His mobile phone was beeping from inside his coat. Huh, he thought, cynically—Paula again. He picked his phone out of my coat, flipped it open and looked at it. It was a message—but it was not from Paula.

Dear Karl—

I am so sorry I did not respond to you earlier. But I was most distressed after your suddenly calling me after so many weeks of silence. In fact the more I think of it the more I feel we should not continue to see each other. I find too much sadness and problems with you just from hearing your voice. I hear this sadness in your voice all the time, and I assume rightfully that it is something to do with me? During our last meeting, you give no indication you is interested in me as a person. Only you, Karl Lomax, and your little problems. And YES, I know all about your South American girlfriend!!

*Maybe you are not ready for a proper relationship with a woman, ne?
Sorry, Ruth*

Goddammit, he snarled to himself, feeling the tension oozing into his guts like a sponge soaking up dirty water. He realized he was at his stop, but he didn't see anything in front of him but objects worthy of his hatred. Everything, in other words, that was German. But he still had to find a place to live.

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It was a quiet, elegant *kiez* full of stately, spired buildings, lined with massive trees that were just beginning to bloom. Carl had been down here before, of course; but he had seen it only in the dark. Gunter Grass, Rainier Maria Rilke, and Uwe Johnson had all lived here. The meticulous care with which the facades, fountains, sidewalks, bushes, and vines were kept was a stark contrast to Kreuzberg's filth. There were no phonies or hipsters, or Americans; he could concentrate, hear his own thoughts, and not the noise coming from the street (and much unlike Eylauer Strasse, there was no dog-crap). Of course, with the exception of the weekly farmer's markets and newspaper stands of Breslau Platz, there were little of those qualities in Friedenau that lent to Kreuzberg a certain rawness—and to be perfectly honest, it was those particular qualities which he truly liked about Berlin.

Handjerystrasse, number 72 was an odd building with broad, accommodating balconies and potted plants. Its exterior was lined with untrimmed bushes; the façade, though ornate and exceptionally well-constructed, was shabby, painted a strange exotic mixture of chocolate brown and pink. A rusting green water-pump stood in front, on the other side of the walkway; it was chained from top to bottom, and its ornate top had been removed and replaced with a strange-looking cap. The whole thing looked exactly like a rotting big house.

He saw the name on the plate he'd been told to ring:
BIGGERMEYER-KOSCIUSKO.

He rang it.

Now that Russell was gone, Carl was hoping that the scene was fit for human habitation. Thornton had promised he would be there to open the door for him. Carl waited by the stoop, watching the children gather and play in the street. The scene was very white-bread, very middle class, and in spite of his bohemian outlook Carl found himself oddly attracted to it. But nobody was answering the door. After ten minutes he rang the doorbell again. There was still no answer.

Carl looked up at the narrow side window which had the shade drawn down over it. He rang the bell again and then saw a hand pulling the shade up. A haggard, half-demented face peeped out from under the shade, saw him, drew back, and then set the blinds down. It was Caitlin Kosciusko.

After receiving absolutely no replies after endlessly ringing the bell—Kate had come back to the window, looked at him and through him—Carl gave up and walked away. A few minutes later he dialed up Thornton on his handy but he didn't answer, either. There was a bar down where Hauptstrasse turned into Rheinstrasse, just at the mouth of Schmargendorferstrasse. It was called the Café Breslau. The terraces were set out next to the café entrance and most of its tables were unoccupied. Carl picked one at random, sat down in it and saw Thornton inside, at the bar, quaffing down a fucking beer. Carl got out of his chair and walked into the bar to confront him.

“Hey,” he said, “what about that room?”

Thornton looked up at Carl and frowned. “What room?”

“The room you promised me at Handjerystrasse,” he said, irritated.

“Oh,” Thornton then said, laying down his beer mug, “that room. Well, I tried to call you—“

“Really?” Carl snorted. “I don’t remember....”

Suddenly he realized he left his other phone at “home.”

“Shit, it was my fault. I have two phones. You must have called the wrong one. But I was there at 4:30 like you said.”

“Was Ralf there?”

“No. I saw Kate, though.”

“Kate?” Thornton barked. “You saw Kate?”

“Yeah. Through the window—she never opened up the door, even though I pressed on the doorbell—“

“Don’t worry about her, Carl. I’ll deal with Kate. Or rather—look. You can come back tomorrow when I actually feel like confronting this bitch—“

“But I need a place to sleep tonight,” Carl panted.

Thornton shrugged. It began to brown Carl off about how casual he was concerning his predicament. “Maybe you can find a hotel,” he purred, lifting the beer mug up to his lips.

“Or maybe I can go back and confront the nutjob with you,” Carl said.

“Well, if that’s what you want,” Thornton then said, “fine. But really, my friend? Do you *honestly* want to sleep *there* tonight? In all that SHIT?”

“It still can’t be as bad as it was when Russell was there, is it?”

“It’s worse!” Thornton shouted. “Well, no—it’s not quite as bad as it used to be when *Kate* cooked our meals. Not as many flies. But we found a couple rats in the building, and you know the landlady is already very pissed at all of us because of Kate’s bullshit. You can not *believe* how filthy it was before I moved in there. Unbelievable, man. Her children were living in that shit, and every day they used to see Russell on the couch fucking Kate, or Kate sucking his dick, or he and all of his friends, right in front of the fuckin’ kids. We had to call the police on the motherfucker....”

“I don’t believe it,” Carl drooled.

“Hell, it don’t matter whether you believe that shit or not. It happened. In fact it’s still happening. If you think this is bullshit, then you can stay overnight and see for yourself.”

Of course: what did he have to lose?

Within two hours, and with a couple of beers under his belt, he was back at Handjerystrasse 72 with Thornton. Carl felt braced by the presence of the diminutive, raggedy-looking old man, who unlocked the door to the flat, and let him in. (Thornton, of course, had to go to the liquor store.) Carl felt a strange, cautious elation: it was going to be tough, but hell, anything was better than the last hole he was in.

Yet Carl was hardly prepared for the scattered papers, shoes, underwear, dolls, empty folders and other nameless crap cluttering the foyer. Baby-pictures and macramé designs were all over the wall. Most of them were covered with massive cobwebs. Loud

music was booming from the opposite room; Carl recognized it as Rimsky-Koramazov's *Scheherazade*. The door to the room opened and Kate appeared, eyes burning with a strange, cold fire; a foul smell came from within. Carl peeped inside for a second and saw that the disorder was worse than anything he'd ever seen, anywhere.

“Oh, hi, Carl,” Kate said, clutching her torn black fur coat about herself... “I didn't notice it was you. Have you heard from Russell lately?”

“Nope,” he breathed... “I came to take a look at the flat.”

“So you want to move in here, is that what you're saying?”

“Yes,” he said, noting how Kate's words seemed to blend together into one. “Don't tell me,” she added... “This was Thornton's idea, wasn't it?”

“Actually, it was mine. I need stuff stored here.”

“Fine,” Kate said, rather flippantly. “Take a look around the flat, see if there's anywhere you can flop.”

So, he thought, *that's it?*

Carl saw she had her fur coat hanging open, and that she was nude underneath; he resisted the temptation to look. He was not in the mood to be sexually stimulated. The living room was just like the foyer, only larger, and stunk of cat piss. The white walls were grimy with dirt and a lone piece of paper stuck to the ceiling was completely covered with dead flies. The enormous armoire was laid open and overflowing with clothes. Another piece of furniture was filled with children's games. On the windowsills Carl noted

five ashtrays completely filled to the brim with cigarette stubs. The whole ambience, he felt, could not have been better conjured up by Monty Python.

There were seven rooms in the whole flat. The two front rooms, by themselves, were bigger than Carl's old Eylauer residence. One of them was so filled with decades of Herr Biggermeyer's junk that it was uninhabitable. The other front room was Kate's; her room was so filled with trash that one could no longer see the floor. Other than the few times Kate went out to score dope, or go to a rock concert, or a jazz concert, or bring home a partner, she never left her room, and (as Carl unfortunately discovered) never turned down the volume on either the radio or the television. In the far back there was a very small room to the left that once housed the servant, and at the very end, a semi-detached two-room apartment, where Thornton now lived. Herr Biggermeyer was planning to move into the servant's room, even though he'd been leasing the flat since 1960.

There was a kitchen with an old-fashioned gas stove and a row of little trash cans that emitted too many flies. It wasn't bad, Carl thought...certainly far bigger than Ted's old flat, or Percy's; all it needed was a decent cleaning. Carl knew from Thornton that the Biggermeyer's were trying to force Kate out, back to Vancouver, or Warsaw, whichever was best for her; everybody despised the woman.

Kate then showed him the bathroom. Thank God, he thought, it had a bathtub; Carl was sick of washing up in bathroom

sinks. He also noted that Kate had forgotten to drain out her old bathwater. Not even the living room could have prepared him for seeing the filthy crud floating about inside the tub. But Carl felt adamant. He could do this, he thought—what the hell was a filthy bathtub? And the filthy, stinking couch. So what? He'd slept on worse in Cairo, hadn't he? All he needed was a blanket to cover those stains and another to cover himself, and he was okay; it wouldn't cost him a thing.

He began to reconsider when Thornton returned and Kate decamped to her filthy hole. Thornton's bladder was bursting so he immediately headed for the bathroom. Carl suppressed an urge to laugh when he overheard Thornton... "Jesus, what the fuck is this...I don't believe this. I do not *believe* this shit—KATE!!" Thornton rushed back out, zipping up his pants. He rushed up to Kate's door and began banging on it hysterically ...Carl looked away towards the ash-trays... "Kate! KATE! OPEN THIS MOTHERFUCKING DOOR RIGHT NOW!"

"Thornton, I told you—"

"Told me what? You bitch! You *deliberately* refused to clean out the bathtub! You dumb motherfucking—"

"I was going to clean out the bathtub before you came back—"

"BULLSHIT!"

"Thornton—"

“Don’t give me that shit, you stinking cunt! I’m going to kick your motherfucking ass back to Krakow!! Maybe they do that kind of uncivilized monkey shit over *there*, right, but you do not—“

“Shut the fuck up Thornton, I’m from fucking Vancouver, not Krakow!! Fucking racist asshole—“

“Look who’s talking about racists,” Thornton then shouted. “Look who’s talking! You called me a ‘black kike’ two weeks ago, do you remember that?”

“Thornton—“

“You called me a ‘black kike,’” Thornton barked, loudly. “You remember that? Remember that? Or is your motherfucking memory so goddamn *selective* you can’t remember the shit you call people, can you, you fuckin’—“

“Thornton—“

“And TURN THAT FUCKING MUSIC DOWN, YOU MOTHERFUCKING ASSHOLE BITCH!!” Thornton shrieked.

Carl stretched out on the couch. He was exhausted; the music was pounding in his ears. He did not dare take off his coat lest his skin come in contact with the filthy couch, which had hosted countless orgies. The stains were still there; Russell always boasted how on good nights, he could shoot a liter of come, and unfortunately parts of the couch looked as if he had.

As the days passed, Carl tried to carve out a life for himself on that couch. The arguments could be quite entertaining. But they happened all the time, and very frequently in the middle of the night, when he was trying to sleep. More than once he was

awakened by Thornton battering Kate's door with a baseball bat. It was revolting. He thought Thornton was a bit too extreme in dealing with Kate (who, after all, was suffering from schizophrenia), but—unlike Julian Hawkes—Carl had no love for the bedraggled, narcissistic red-head. And then one night he awoke feeling an intense pinching sensation on his right leg. Carl fearfully turned the lights on and saw something black, noisy, long-tailed and flea-ridden scampering under the couch.

So it was back to 44 Rooms for Carl Lomax, writer-extraordinaire. The rabies shot took him further down an economic hole. There was an upside to it all, though: Harper's had promised to re-read his revision of "Goodbye to Berlin." But in the meantime, how was Carl Lomax going to earn his bread?

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Of course. Years of rejection, years of hurt, bitterness, disillusionment and disgust with people, places and things had hardened him, pushed him to the brink of despair. Carl used to joke privately (to his friends) that if royalties from his book weren't forthcoming he'd have to peddle his ass. As usual, he was being facetious. There were more creative outlets for making money in Berlin. He could have taught English, or tutored it, or taught or tutored creative writing—or better yet, he could have gone back to music. But it all seemed too risky to his despairing and desperate mind.

Besides, Carl needed a new shtick. He was never much of a hipster, nor had he been a thug, pusher or a pimp. And the Rasta thing was out of the question (one of the first things he'd done upon coming to Berlin was cut his dreads—the better to stave off fat, drunken white women). He tried to refashion himself as a black sophisticate. Naturally Carl didn't quite look it with his clumsily greased hair, or those musty second-hand jackets and baggy corduroys. The only thing “new” he ever had, other than his underwear, was a scuffed-up pair of black Reeboks. Carl Lomax always wound up looking just how he felt—what he truthfully was: a scruffy, uptight, forty-one year old pickaninny.

Yet these new women dutifully answered his ad—they were much, much more interested in the 9-inch dick he claimed he had than his “sophistication”—and dutifully met with him in countless dingy bars. Almost to a woman, they dumped tons of political anxieties on Carl, who often struggled to keep his eyes open. (In some cases, he struggled to keep from screaming.) He tried to be patient, listening to the bad music on the intercoms, enduring the silly patrons in their weird glasses and sneakers and too-tight jeans, their tousled hair that looked like it was soaked in piss. He got his money, all right—chump change intended to help him with a meal or bus or taxi fare back to the fucking youth hostel. But after every meeting—there was one every other day—he began to think that each of these tiresome monologues about how fucked-up Western society was, or how lousy white men were in comparison to black men, were taken from some goofy internet blog. He even worked

it down to a kind of science, wherein he could jerk himself awake the moment the woman in question stopped talking—which meant he had to respond to them. He almost always responded with a question, of course. But after the eighteenth or nineteenth encounter, Carl woke up actually thinking he was in bed with one of those stupid girls and found himself alone, groggy and disoriented, seated at a rear coffee table. He found something scribbled on a napkin in front of him. It read, in crude English, “Of kourse. You are a N-E-G-E-R. Remember this. What decent woman would want anything to do with the likes of you?”

Yet the day after, his anger was mollified when a new woman called. Her name was—“Inkuka.” An immigrant, he assumed, looking for some fun on the side. The woman had a high-pitched, heavily accented voice with a mildly sexy edge to it. Hopefully, she would be less narcissistic than that last bunch. Hopefully, too, she had some money to spend on Carl Lomax.

The first question she asked him, naturally, was the usual—“you are from America, yes?”

“Of course,” he replied. And then, quietly, to himself: another idiot. How could she not know?

“Oh,” Inkuka added, “I just wanted to make sure—it was hard to tell from your accent, because you sound like an African.”

Red flags began going up in his brain. Just how “African” did a Maryland-Chesapeake twang sound?...

“Hello? Hello?”

“Yes,” he said, “I’m still here....” Half of him actually wanted to go back to bed—whatever “bed” was for Carl at that time. “Now, can you tell me something about yourself?”

As “Inkuka” talked, this is what he gathered from her. Forty-two years old, “163 meters,” which was about 5 feet 3 or 4, a schoolteacher in Potsdam (meaning, she was an Ossi), and, most importantly—“I have a very nice ass,” she giggled. “I am looking for some fun, not a long time, well—Maybe a long time, but it—ich muss, how do you say, I must see if we are compatible, if it is right between us that it will be for long or short time, eh?”

“Fine,” he said.

“Do you have time today so we can meet?”

Her voice sounded full of anticipation. That was a very good sign. Thank God for Germany, Carl thought—a land where women told you to your face what they really wanted from you and didn’t play silly games like American or British women, all in the name of “love”. He told her two o’clock. “Better if it was four o’clock,” she then purred. “Ja? So where do you live in Berlin?”

“In Kreuzberg.”

“Good,” she said, “very good. Sehr gut. I work not far away in Kotbusser Tor, so maybe we can meet at the Corona bar at the corner of Skalitzer and Wiener Strasse. Are you close by?”

“Yeah,” Carl said. Skalitzer and Wiener were at Kreuzberg’s ass-end, in 36; that was virtually right next door from 44 Rooms. It would be easy....or so he assumed.

He put on his best sport jacket—a Joseph Abboud with salt and pepper wool fabric—dark-blue corduroys, dark brown well-ironed cotton button-down shirt, tan suede casual Oxfords and atop that, his old Schneider’s overcoat, which he’d purchased back in the 90s. It was still his best overcoat. Carl thought he needed a tie, and he fretted about it in the bookshop where Max prated on over the phone about the cost of purchasing a new hair gel. He wasn’t listening, because (of course) his mind was filled with visions of well-fleshed Afro-German buttocks.

Carl arrived at the corner café around 3:48. The sky was so suffused with clouds that it seemed as if the clouds made up the sky itself—nothing but a thick, unending mass of grey as far as the human eye could see. It seemed to infect everything else around Gorlitzer Bahnhof. The café was just across the street, over the railings, where three skinny Kurdish kids in backwards-cocked caps and white, fluffy-fringed jackets stood shoving each other about like professional wrestlers.

“Inkuka” wasn’t there yet. Even though he was early, he naturally assumed that if a woman was as eager to get bonked as she sounded, she would be there before him. The perpetual lateness and procrastinating of Berliners was getting on his last nerve.

The café was filled with a few patrons, mostly hipster types and social climbers who still wanted to look cool by wearing skinny jeans and chunky glasses and South American ponchos. It was clean, well-lit (the windows were big) and the ambience was chilled. Carl sensed no hostility directed towards him; in fact, people ignored him, kept droning idly over their teas. Martin Taylor had said some shitty things about this café—that he had been interrogated by the bartenders for simply being there, as if he were a common thug. So he had reservations as he sat down at a table.

The staff, however, was quite pleasant and well-mannered. One of the waitresses—a plump young woman with a pinkish-peach, kewpie-doll face—handed Carl a menu. He sat nursing a peppermint tea (good for your breath) and wistfully waited for her, wondering exactly which woman breezing through the front doors was his lover/client-to-be. He had a system in dealing with these women; he felt he had to be delicate in stating his true intentions towards them, for the former best-selling author was too proud to admit that he was simply a prostitute.

Fifteen minutes passed, and finally he noted, coming towards his table, a half-mummified face framed by graying blond short-cropped hair. The body was short, almost squalid, wrapped in a cheap thrift-store imitation wool jacket, and had a long, colorful scarf wrapped around its chicken-like neck. Actually, when she got closer to him and obviously noted his being the only black in the café, the only man who could conceivably be in question,

the sudden guarded look that crossed her face instantly reminded Carl of a chicken. He was disappointed. Maybe he should have learned his lessons from Paula, or Ruth, or, God forbid, Victoria. “So!” Carl thought he heard “Inkuka” spit, looking as if her feathers had been unduly ruffled, “it is you? Carl? The man who speak to me over the phone, ne?”

“Yes,” he said, “it’s me.”

More chicken mannerisms, and then she just stood there, clutching her purse, as if she was going to pull something out of it—like pepper spray, or a taser gun. “I can see right now I am NOT going to sleep with you!” she suddenly exclaimed, throwing her hands up.

Carl winced. Maybe she saw him, but she did not react to it. He wished she had; he did not need to be told by some strange-looking white woman with a chicken-neck and chicken-face that he, Carl Lomax, America’s Greatest Black Writer, bestseller chart topper and critically acclaimed celebrity novelist, was unworthy of her attention. And naturally, everybody in the café had heard her, too. Again, with the hands, gesturing towards his person— “What is the meaning of all this?”

“Are you high?” was what Carl Lomax said—on the inside. Carl Thompson simply said, rather meekly, stunned by her insolent ignorance—“the meaning of what, exactly? What’s going on?”

“The way you are dressed,” she snapped.

“What about it? Is there a problem? Is the suit not expensive enough for you?”

“I don’t feel,” she sighed, cocking her head to one side, “that you are being honest, whoever you are.”

“I thought I told you I was Carl Lomax,” he said.

“No,” she continued, still looking at him and shaking her head, “I don’t feel that this scene is right. Something—I am just not feeling anything for you right now. I’m sorry, Carl, but that is just how I feel. Maybe I should get to know you a bit better before I—hmpgh!—even think about it a little bit....”

“Inkukua, I described—“

“You pronounced my name wrong,” she snapped. “It’s Inkuka. Already, I can see things are not going as I had expected them to go!”

Carl now noticed she was really gesturing towards his clothes; she gave off a mirthless chuckle.

“Why this?”

“Why what?”

“Your clothes,” she said. “Did you really need to be so formal when meeting a person? Are you always like this? Do we have to be so formal, so, so—I don’t understand—“

“Neither do I,” Carl groaned, turning his eyes towards the ceiling.... “I think these things are totally unnecessary. And I hate to say it, but they say a lot about you. You don’t know what you want.”

“What the hell are you talking about?!” he exploded, louder than she’d ever been. People in the café turned and looked askance at him. “Have you seriously lost your mind? I mean—really?” He

watched her face; it was like marble, the blatant, arrogant stupidity as permanently chiseled into it as that on the bust of an Ancient Roman empress. It figures, Carl thought. Fucking German bitches.

“You don’t, Carl,” Inkuka continued, sitting down at the table, still tenaciously clutching her purse. “I can see it in your eyes. I—right now—would not even consider having an affair with you.”

“So,” he sighed, pursing his lips with a shrug, “why’d you come?”

“I thought—I thought I was going to see a different Carl,” she half-stammered, in obvious repressed rage.

Something was eating up this foolish old woman inside, he thought. Sounds like a deeply frustrated idealist. But he knew it was no excuse to take digs at his manhood. Of course, he had heard this kind of drivel before—idealistic drivel from the lips of some German women, who always expected blacks to fit their strange fantasies. Well, he thought, I am not a fantasy: that’s why you’re too afraid to touch me. In the old days, when Carl first came to Berlin, it was easy. Better an American Negro fantasy than an African Negro one, or worse, an Arab one. But all that implied that there was somehow something wrong with being an African or an Arab—wrong, of course, in the eyes of a German. It also implied that there was something wrong with him, because Carl did not, never did, and never would fit any of their ridiculous fantasies concerning black men.

Inkuka then consented to lay her purse down—it had not occurred to him, in his anger, that she did not fear his stealing it; apparently the woman was a bit too smart to fall for those old-timey prejudices. In fact, as Inkuka gradually calmed down and spoke a bit more rationally Carl discovered she had a black son. Carl was unaware that having one did not automatically mean you were free of prejudices towards blacks. Neither did he realize that even if you were free of these particular prejudices, it did not automatically mean you lacked a chip on your shoulder the size of Brandenburg. He could tell that not only was he failing to get through to her about who he was, as a person, as a writer—he left out the part about the pornography—but, judging from the way the muscles on her pinkish-grey face seemed to be slowly tightening, tightening, like a big, fat, white knot, he was simply making things worse. The dead silences between his pauses said more than any of her shrill liberal rhetoric. “Excuse me,” Carl then said, out loud, politely pulling himself up from the table—“I need to use the toilet.”

Corona Café was shaped like an upside-down “V”, or a boomerang, which meant that the toilet was on the other end of the bar, where she could not see him. He wanted to go pee. Or, perhaps, he really didn’t; he guessed he was fooling himself. Reality was calling him from outside, across the street, on Wiener Strasse; Carl skipped the toilet and in full view of Miss Chickenshit, sailed out the door...

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