

CONTACT

A short story

AYI KWEI ARMAH

HE STOOD BY THE DOOR a long time trying to make up his mind. For the first time in four months he was having to think of what to wear. All winter, whenever he had had to go out, he had automatically reached for the thick green Loden. It was the warmest overcoat he had. Now he was hesitating between it and a light trench coat.

It had been a warm day; not just warm by contrast with the winter cold before, but really warm by itself. The dull grey-white screen that had been the sky for months had disappeared. The sun now came down with a clean light that made everything seem new. Coming back to his room from the College Yard he had felt ridiculous with so much clothing on. From somewhere within his breast a certain gentle but persistent pressure seemed about to force him to laugh. He felt constrained just walking on the sidewalk. He had wanted to jump and touch the dripping awnings in front of the little shops along the road. Most of all he had wanted to tell the people in the street, to whom he was feeling very friendly, to take off their heavier clothes and enjoy the coming warmth and light.

Finally he decided to stick to the Loden. It was warm now, but he was in a mood to stay late at the party. And the night might turn cold.

Instinctively, as he stepped out into the street he braced himself for the rush of cold air he had come to expect; but the air was easy to breathe. The thing he had dreaded most about the winter was that it pushed him from one extreme of discomfort to the other. The cold had driven him into himself, into the awkwardness of all that mass of clothing and into the desiccated heat of his closed room, in the search for artificial warmth. The heaviness of the workload had accented this general sense of strain, the feeling that he was living against himself, forcing himself to do things he did not particularly want to do, working against his own pleasure.

Now the exams were over and he was left feeling wound up, exhausted yet straining forward in the expectation of some new excitement. Within himself he felt as if something that had been locked up for a long time was now striving to be free, that his congealed being was beginning to flow again, demanding contact with things outside of himself. The American students seemed to know what was happening and to find it vaguely funny, even indecent. In the Dining Hall they were all joking about a lewd poem in the morning's issue of the College paper calling Spring the time when every potent young man felt the urge, as the ending stated it,

To merge
With all that's female in the world
And some.

Most of the general interest was focused on the last line. Though this insistence on perversion made him slightly uncomfortable he had to agree that at a time like this those theories about man at his best wanting to be at one with the whole universe — theories that seemed utterly far-fetched in the inhibiting cold of the winter — seemed most reasonable, indeed obviously true.

AYI KWEI ARMAH now doing research in sociology at the University of Accra, Legon, studied at Harvard on a Nieman Fellowship.

HE HAD PASSED THIS WAY several times in the fall and winter and had always thought everything he saw depressing: the houses with their dull weathered exteriors, the brick pavements clogged with muddy piles of old snow. But now everything seemed to have ceased being a hostile grimy thing and to have become an almost friendly being. At street corners he waited without impatience for the lights to change, counting the number of seconds this took. He saw the tail lights of passing cars as confidential eyes winking their intended direction, or as wide grinning mouths as the cars came to a stop. The neon advertisements he passed did not look so offensively aggressive anymore, just energetically welcoming. People's faces looked no longer so hostile. Everything seemed to be beckoning to him to come along, not to be running away.

At the apartment house he climbed up to 3B and knocked. When the door opened he saw a tall, light brown fellow standing just inside. Obviously the Afro giving the party.

"Come on in!" The Afro closed the door again and held out his hand. "You're new. We haven't met. I'm Lowell."

"Kobina," the visitor said.

"Cob-eena, Cob-eena, that right? Great." He led the way to the bedroom. "The closet's full up. Put your coat on the bed. That's right." Then, "You didn't bring a chick?"

"Pardon?"

"A chick. You didn't bring a girl?"

"No, I didn't."

"That's OK," Lowell said, "we got some here. Black, brown, hiyella, white. Take your pick. Just go on up to some lonesome girl real friendly like. You can take care of yourself. Let's go get a drink first, and I'll introduce you."

The bathroom door was wide open. On the shelf above the sink stood stacks of large coloured paper cups pushed one into the other. The bath was filled by a large beer barrel with a long curved pipe leading out of it. Lowell took one of the paper cups, filled it with beer and offered it to Kobina.

"Thank you, no," he said. "I thought you were getting it for yourself."

"That's OK," Lowell said, "I'll give it to someone else. What will you have? There's all sorts of liquor but it's in the kitchen."

"No liquor," said Kobina. "Just something soft." Lowell grimaced.

"OK. Over here."

After finding Kobina a bottle of Seven-Up Lowell led him back into the corner of the large room where the girls were. Two of the girls, Afro-Americans, were flipping through a pack of records, reading the literature on them and saying nothing to each other. On a straw mat beside them an overdressed student, no doubt an African, was sitting facing an Afro-American woman talking with exaggerated seriousness. In the far corner a white girl with long dark hair was intensely fingering an oversize guitar that made her seem even frailer than she was. Near here was a mixed crowd of men and women most of whom seemed attracted to something going on in the centre.

"Anyone want some more beer?" shouted Lowell.

The two Afro girls continued to be fascinated by the record covers. The African dandy and his girl looked up a moment then went back to talking. Lowell moved over to the girl with the

guitar and the long hair.

"Want some beer?" Lowell asked her. The frown of concentration slowly faded from her forehead and she smiled.

"Sure," she said, and reached up for the cup. "You didn't get it just for me, did you?"

"No, I didn't. I got it for this cat and he doesn't drink. Nothing but soft drinks." He winked down at the girl. "Oh, Carin, you haven't met this cat, have you? He's an African. A new one, Cobeena. Cobcena, this is Carin. She wails." Kobina said hello and the girl said "Hi!" Then she added: "Don't pay any attention to Lowell. He just loves to irritate everybody."

"I just tell the truth," Lowell said. "And the truth about Carin is she ain't satisfied being what she is. She wants to be a wailing Negro."

"Do you play the blues?" asked Carin, ignoring Lowell. "Could you teach me to play the blues?"

"Carin, he's a Aafrican. They don't play the blues in Aafrica. Jesus, if you're going to try to be black you better learn. The stuff they play in Aafrica is all different. Hot and spicy like."

"I've been trying to play the blues and no one will teach me," said Carin.

"You've tried everything, Carin," said Lowell. Then turning to Kobina, "Carin's tried everything. She's tried to be a proper white lady and it bored her stiff. She's tried to be a beatnik. She couldn't dig all that lying around being depressed. She's tried folksinging, but she thinks even that is dull. Man, all that girl wants is to suffer. Just listen to her jazz about the blues. She loves suffering."

"Look, Lowell, I like the blues because it's beautiful. Some of the songs say things I've wanted to say all my life. What's so wrong with that?"

"That's not all. You don't just want to listen to the blues singers. You want to i-den-ti-fy. You're aching to be a low down oppressed Knee-grow. Now I call that greedy, yes greedy. White greedy. You know why? Because you've exhausted the pleasures of being privileged and white and now the next thing you want is a taste of the pain of being black."

The girl did not answer back. Visibly she retreated into herself. She hugged the guitar closer to her bosom and the frown of concentration returned to her brow as she slowly strummed across the strings. Lowell looked down at her and then at Kobina.

"Take care of her," he said, as he moved away.

Kobina sat on the window ledge near the girl, watching her. She was trying to play something complicated and her mind was obviously not in it.

Soon she gave up, put the guitar down beside her and looked at Kobina.

"I'm not very good at names," she said. "What's yours again?"

"Kobina."

"Carin."

"Yes, I know," he said.

She smoothed her skirt with both hands. It was black, and she had a close fitting brown sweater over it.

"How long have you known him?" she asked.

"Known whom?"

"Lowell."

"I just met him."

"Oh!" She sounded surprised. "He treats everybody the same way. Always bitter, trying to make you feel dirty whatever you do. He can't see anything beautiful anywhere."

"I don't really know him," Kobina said.

"Well, it's true," said Carin. "I try to understand. I try to imagine what I'd do and say if I were in his . . . if I were him. I know I'd be bitter, but I'd also try to find some goodness in my private life. I've often told him that's all we're all left with. All Americans are really in the same soup, black and white."

"What do you mean? White people have the advantage, don't they?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that. That's politics. I mean that's what happens in public. I think it's naive to expect anything but hypocrisy and corruption there. But we have our private lives. We can make something beautiful out of that. I mean we can choose our friends and know that they aren't bigots. But he doesn't believe even that."

"Maybe he's tried."

"Tried what?"

"To find sincere friendship. Maybe he's tried and failed."

"Oh come on. He doesn't try. It's his whole attitude. He's constantly pushing people away!"

"He's afraid, then."

"It's not just fear. He's positively hostile."

LOUD, RANDOM DRUMBEATS broke the general quiet. Lowell was carrying a large round conga across the room, slapping the skin enthusiastically. When he came to Kobina and Carin he put the drum down.

"Look, Carin," Lowell shouted, "this is what they play in Africa, not the blues. Every kid plays like a macstro, Cobcena, no?"

"Well," Kobina answered, "they have to be taught."

"Come on, play something."

Kobina smiled feebly and shook his head, but Lowell was not looking at him. He had turned round to face the mixed crowd.

"Hey, you all!" he shouted, "come on over here. You aren't all repairing that tape recorder. Here's a Aafrican going to give us some of that au-then-tic drum rhythm. Come round. Listen to him make the drum talk!"

A number of people detached themselves from the crowd and walked over to the drum. Kobina, so suddenly become the center of attraction, felt trapped, inadequate, about to be exposed as a fraud. Then he remembered that after all he did know a little something about the art of drumming and with that he saw a graceful way out of his difficulty.

"Back home," he began, "the talking drums come in pairs. Low tones and high. One male, one female. The dialogue between them. . ."

High, loud laughter cut into his words. It was Lowell's, and it was followed by nervous titters and knowing smiles from those near him. Lowell leaned forward to put his arms around the shoulders of the two Afro girls who had been examining the records.

"Man," he said with conspiratorial seriousness, "this thing is everywhere." There was more suppressed laughter. Carin leaned over toward Kobina and whispered in his ear, "Lowell's on a vulgar Freudian kick, too. He sees sex in everything." In the unexpected silence after the laughter Carin's last words were clearly audible.

"I don't see sex in everything!" Lowell protested. "It's just there by itself. I look at reality, and if it's got sex built into it that's not my fault." Someone from within the crowd shouted, "Lay off her, man!"

"Cobeena, it's the same idea with the bongos," continued Lowell with a knowing smile. "Only the . . . what did you call it . . . di-a-logue is a lot faster, more frantic. And more explicit." Lowell moved closer to the drum and squatted beside it, opposite Kobina.

"You don't have to play talking drums," he said. "Play anything rhythmic." That was simple enough. Kobina began to play: three full notes, two short, three again, then two.

"Good," said Lowell, "that's a good female rhythm."

"How come?" Carin asked. And someone snickered.

"Because it's circular, goes round and round, always comes back where it began." Then, triumphantly, he went on, "Now I suppose you want me to tell you why a circle is female?"

"Hush your dirty mouth, Lowell," said one of the record-studying Afro girls. "We all know that."

"OK, OK. Don't fight me," said Lowell. "Keep it up, Cobeena, and play it on the side. That's it." Kobina maintained the simple rhythm he had started. Lowell watched intently.

"See, there's gaps in your circles. What I'm going to do is fill 'em up. I'll be playing the male pattern. Anyone want to know why it's male?" He did not wait for an answer. "Because it's hard and straight and aggressive. The female plays in soft gentle passive patterns. It's incomplete. It wants completion." Now his face had gone serious. "Then the male comes in and brings completion, with power and action and aggression."

He hit the drum hard, with a series of straight beats that made

a full pattern with the softer, smoother background played by Kobina. The two forgot about their audience and became engrossed in the rhythms coming out of their common drum. Lowell struck harder and harder, until, reaching the end of the sustained crescendo he hit the skin ecstatic times with his full palm, each beat taking a fraction longer than the one before, all ending with two muffled, satisfied notes, leaving Kobina's feminine rhythm going on underneath, softly as before, then softer, then softer.

Lowell straightened up. "Good old Freud!" he said. "He was so right. Everything's full of it."

"Full of what?" asked the same record-studying Afro girl, with a giggle. Lowell turned on her. "Thecth, little baby. Eth, ee, ekth: thecth."

"Come on, you're exaggerating. That's not the theory!" the girl persisted.

"If it isn't it should damn well be," said Lowell. He looked at Kobina. "They understand these things in Africa. They don't have to be taught *that*. Take Cobeena there, for instance. He knows."

"Leave him alone," the girl said. "He's smooching."

"Already?" Lowell laughed. "Well, didn't I say it? He understands." His voice trailed off in a prolonged low chuckle, then rose again. "Hey, Cobeena. Will you stop smooching for a second and tell me why you came here?" Kobina smiled with embarrassment and looked away from Carin. "Here?" he shouted his reply. "To study!"

"No, no!" said Lowell, "I didn't mean that. I meant what did you hope to find *here*, at this party?"

"That's some nosey question, Lowell," Carin said.

"Contact," said Kobina. "Meaningful contact."

"Man," said Lowell, "they are real high words for low desires. In plain, unintellectual language, you have an appetite, you need someone to satisfy it. So coming here is search behaviour. Kaput."

"Why do you have to make it all so crass?" demanded Carin.

"Look," said Lowell, "I don't think it's crass. I don't think it's anything. I'm just not going around giving it any noble names, that's all."

"I don't see what the argument is about," said Kobina. "Isn't everyone looking for someone they can understand?"

"Someone they can use!" corrected Lowell.

"Christ!" Carin let her guitar drop and she sat staring disgustedly up at Lowell.

"That's right," continued Lowell, ignoring Carin and fixing his eyes on Kobina, *that's right*. Don't let anyone kid you, and don't kid yourself. I've heard a lot of you African students talk. You all talk like preachers. Always this bootlicking idealistic stuff about the brotherhood of man and the respect of everybody for everybody else. Look at reality, man, and you'll see all that talk is baby talk. Only fools believe it. The way this world is run, it's people using people. We Afros may act dumb, but we know it, and it's something you Africans ought to know. But you think it all ends with your crude politics. Exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed, that's only Lesson One. It goes beyond, into all of life. *Everyone fighting whoever gets in his way*. People using people. Men using women and vice versa, and it's childish romantic nonsense to try and escape that fact. You can't. You use or you get used."

As if for the first time, he became aware of everybody listening and looking. He looked around and his eyes came to rest on Carin. She had a hurt, incredulous look on her face, as if everything Lowell had said had been one protracted personal insult directed at her. Perhaps in response to this look, Lowell's face hardened into an expression of contempt.

"It's our fault," he continued, "it's our biggest fault as individuals and as a race, that we've made ourselves so easy to use. We've been too soft, too relaxed. Hell, we've been lying there, open and greased, inviting the aggression of some erect phallic culture."

Abruptly the full-volumed sound of amplified music drowned out the monologue. Someone adjusted the volume and a dozen people paired off and began to dance. Now Lowell's audience was reduced to Kobina and Carin, Carin still wearing her shocked expression.

"Listen to that music," Lowell said, less tense now. "It's yours. Soft, like ballads. Or worse, like Christian hymns. Round gaps waiting to be filled with something aggressive. We have that too. Spirituals. Soft self-pitying blues, wailing endlessly for love lost or never found, crying eternally for completion. Mush." He looked down at his hands and shook his head slowly. Then suddenly he added: "But we're outgrowing that. We're making aggressive music too."

He rose heavily, like a very tired man, and went over to the tape recorder. He stopped the machine, then wound the tape forward, stopping now and then to listen, until he found what he wanted. Jazz. A lone saxophone pierced the half silence, shrill, energetic, angry. Lowell walked back to Kobina's side.

"Get what I mean?" he asked. "That's a good run. A phallic melody. The cat feels stretched in pain, and he's telling it straight. No messin' around, no soft invitation. Just one long frustrated extension, reaching out." The solo shot up high, then exploded downward, ending in an exhausted series of bass notes. Lowell did not stop.

"It's what living in this culture does to you. It toughens you. At least makes you want to be tough. You want a prick even if you don't have one. Even our girls want to be men. They can't have that, so they want to control men. Penis envy. Poor bitches, they can't help it. This culture is dedicated to the externalised, oversize phallus. It's all around us. The cowboy hero and his potent gun. The American nation and its nuclear missiles. Iron pricks tipped with contraceptive uranium. And New York's skyscrapers. The biggest phallic symbols ever made."

Kobina opened his mouth: "Well, if American culture . . ." he began. Lowell cut him short.

"It's not just America. It's everywhere. You Africans and Asians talk of imperial penetration, imperial withdrawal. That's no choir boy talk. *Rape of Africa*, yes. Man, it's not just here. That's our mistake: refusing to see that this male-female user-used thing goes on everywhere, all the time. Those who don't know get used."

"But Lowell," came Carin's exasperated voice, "we aren't talking about masses and history and things like that. We're talking of person-to-person relationships. In personal relationships you can't put everybody into your cynical categories."

"I can and I will," Lowell replied. "People get used all the time. *Especially* in personal relationships." Again, Carin seemed to cease to exist for him. He talked to Kobina softly, bitterly, confidentially.

"Them symbols fly high, man. But the battle is with each of us right here. We use what we have. Let's face it. As a race we got licked. We got used. And we're still being used. But we can keep fighting on a personal level. So they raped us collectively. We don't have to let them rape us individually too. Let's be the ones on top, now." He seemed to have emptied himself. Without much effort he now switched his attention to the music, and to the couples dancing in the centre of the room.

"I'm going to dance," he said, and got up. He went over to a little knot of girls. In a moment he had pulled one of them away from the group, and they were facing each other, writhing lazily in effortless co-ordination with the beat of the music.

KOBINA LOOKED AT CARIN. She was staring downward at the abandoned guitar. He was thinking of what to say to her, when she spoke first.

"After listening to him, everything sounds dishonest and trite. Unless you say hard things, like he does."

"You don't sound trite to me," said Kobina.

"You're nice," said Carin.

"No, I mean it."

She stared downward again, looking at nothing. Then their eyes met.

"Some time ago," she said, "I found nothing wrong with the kind of sentiment he calls childish and romantic. Now I'm not so sure. I don't trust my own motives anymore. At times, just to not have to bother with it all, I feel like stating every thing at its lowest level, just like he does. If I find I like someone I suppose I'll have to say to them: 'I want to sleep with you. I need a stud.'"

He smiled at her. "That's not the way you feel and you know it.

Don't be afraid to say it the way it comes to you. Express yourself."

"OK," she smiled back. "I too want the same thing. As much meaningful contact as possible. No hurting, no being hurt."

"The important thing is," said Kobina, "do you think it is possible?"

"What?"

"No hurting, no being hurt?"

"I don't know," she said. "I suppose it is terribly difficult, but I don't know if it is impossible."

"I doubt if it happens to one couple in a thousand."

"That's cynical. So you're also a cynic. What do you mean? Sexually?"

"Yes, sexually," Kobina answered. "But that is only the physical expression of what happens on every level, isn't it? There is never a real meeting, a simultaneous letting go."

"You sound as if you've given up on sex," she said.

"I never said that. I suppose I'll always be trying. For that thousandth chance."

"You believe in trying, then," she said.

"Yes."

"Same here," she nodded. "It's my personal utopia. Undress a cynic. . . ."

"TELL ME," HE SAID, "what do you find?"

She was looking around his room. She had not heard.

"Carin!"

"Uh huh?"

"What do you find?"

"Here?"

"No. When you undress a cynic. You were about to say."

"Oh," she said absently, "I don't know." Then suddenly, "Perhaps . . ." she looked straight at him, "an erotic perfectionist?"

For some time he stroked her hair, following it down her back. Then fumbling with the skirt he found the little zipper on the side and pulled it. It opened quietly. She raised her arms as he pulled the sweater over her head.

He walked over to the closet with the clothes and was there a long time, hanging everything up very carefully. And then he came back and found her seated on the bed, her underclothes at her feet on the floor. She moved over for him.

His body did not belong to him any more. He could not control it, though in his mind he knew it was terribly terribly important for him not to rush on ahead of her. And yet the conscious efforts he made to tread slowly only made everything strangely stilted and mechanical. And all the time his body was threatening to find its own premature completion. He knew he couldn't hold himself back any longer.

"I won't be a conquering invader," he said. "That's exploita-

tive." She said nothing, but held him close to herself and wordlessly she took him and brought him in.

From the beginning he was never very far from the end. Several times he had to force himself to a full stop. Then he came, and it was despite himself, so that what he had hoped would have been climactic was only apologetic. At first she did not seem to have noticed, but kept moving, trying to match his dead erratic rhythm. Then she felt him irrevocably relaxed, and she too stopped her movement. She lay there uncertainly by him. Then when he rose to go to the little bathroom she followed him. While he washed himself at the sink she caressed his back. From him there was no response, no feeling.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You know," he answered. "It . . . I was lousy."

"I didn't think so." But she was aware her voice lacked conviction. Involuntarily she added: "You want the moon every time. It's a beginning, this."

He was a long time washing himself. She followed quickly and joined him in the room. She knew she could not change a thing by just talking, yet all the time she was dressing she felt compelled to talk to him, to try and reassure him.

"It takes a lot of, well, experimenting. And then you find out lots of things about each other. Besides, it's not surprising that the first time it's not very good. So much anxiety, so much unnecessary excitement."

"It makes me hate myself," said Kobina.

"That's because you're unrealistic."

"No." He shook his head. "I feel so selfish when it happens like that." Silently he went to the door and held it open for her.

As they stepped out into the street one distant clock, then another, began to strike the hour, twelve. It had gotten considerably chillier now. A young couple, closely huddled together, passed by them. The girl's shoes scraped the brick sidewalk with every step.

Carin squeezed Kobina's hand and said, "I bet they can see I had more fun." He said nothing. She gave up trying to make him talk and they just walked on.

JUST INSIDE THE PAMPLONA they ran into Lowell. He was with a new girl, someone they had not seen at the party.

"Hey!" he called, "Come sit with us. What will you have?"

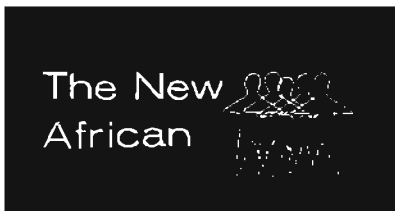
Carin sat down. "Coffee," she said. "Black."

"Milk," said Kobina.

Lowell stared at the two as if they had made a joke. Then he laughed.

"That's a real switch," he said. "Conspicuous symbolic consumption of each other!" He looked brightly into their faces, but they were both looking nervously down at the polished Formica top of their table. The waiter came and Lowell ordered. Then, with his eyes fixed on the back of the disappearing waiter, he asked: "Just as a talking point, who used whom tonight?"

No one answered.



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