Tram 83

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| DR Congo |

translated by Roland Glasser

excerpt of Tram 83
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First night at Tram 83: night of debauchery, night of boozing, night of beggary, night of premature ejaculation, night of syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases, night of prostitution, night of getting by, night of dancing and dancing, night that engenders things that exist only between an excess of beer and the intention to empty one's pocket that exhales conflict minerals, this cow-dung elevated to a raw material, in the beginning was the stone…

"We walked through the darkness of history. We were the cash cows of a system of thought that profited from our tender age, that crushed us completely. We were a piece of shit."

"We had an ideal, innocence…"

"Innocence," echoed Requiem, bursting into laughter. "You really mean innocence? Innocence is cowardice. You have to move with the times, brother."

“You haven’t changed a bit.”

“You don’t age here. You simply exist.”

“Requiem…”

“It’s New Mexico, here. Every man for himself, and shit for all.”

Tram 83 was one of the most popular restaurants and hooker bars, its renown stretching beyond the City-State’s borders. “See Tram 83 and die,” was the regular refrain of the tourists who blew into town from the four corners of the globe to conduct their business. During the day they wandered zombie-like through the mining concessions they owned by the dozen, and at night they ended up in Tram 83 to refresh their memory. This gave the place every appearance of a true theater, if not a massive circus. Here’s the kind of thing you might hear as background noise: “I want to massage you by way of foreplay, then slowly suck you off, suck your whole body, suck you till my mouth runs dry.”

Not only at Tram 83, but even at the university and in the mines, unmarried women didn’t hold back from accosting potential clients with the same psalms.

Inadvertent musicians and elderly prostitutes and prestidigitators and Pentecostal preachers and students resembling mechanics and doctors conducting diagnoses in nightclubs and young journalists already retired and transvestites and second-foot shoe peddlers and porn film fans and highwaymen and pimps and disbarred lawyers and casual laborers and former transsexuals and polka dancers and pirates of the high seas and seekers of political asylum and organized fraudsters and archeologists and would-be bounty hunters and modern day adventurers and explorers searching for a lost civilization and human organ dealers and farmyard philosophers and hawkers of fresh water and hairdressers and shoeshine boys and repairers of spare parts and soldiers’ widows and sex maniacs and lovers of romance novels and dissident rebels and brothers in Christ and druids and shamans and aphrodisiac vendors and scriveners and purveyors of real fake passports and gun-runners and porters and bric-a-brac traders and mining prospectors short on liquid

assets and Siamese twins and Mamelukes and carjackers and colonial infantrymen and haruspices and counterfeiters and rape-starved soldiers and drinkers of adulterated milk and self-taught bakers and marabouts and mercenaries claiming to be one of Bob Denard's crew and inveterate alcoholics and diggers and militiamen proclaiming themselves "masters of the world" and poseur politicians and child soldiers and Peace Corps activists gamely tackling a thousand nightmarish railroad construction projects or small-scale copper or manganese mining operations and baby-chicks and drug dealers and busgirls and pizza delivery guys and growth hormone merchants, all sorts of tribes overran Tram 83, in search of good times on the cheap.

"Would you gentlemen care for some company?"

Barely sixteen, trussed into a couple of tiny corsets, the two girls welcomed them with inscrutable smiles. Requiem settled on the one with hair like wooded savannah.

"Your breasts quench my thirst."

"Sir."

"How much for a massage session?"

The girl stated a figure.

"You know the Tokyo stock market is in freefall?"

She held him by the wrists.

"Profit equals retail price plus wholesale price minus packaging."

A large sign on the Tram's frontage stated:

ENTRY INADVISABLE FOR THE POOR, THE WRETCHED, THE UNCIRCUMCISED, HISTORIANS, ARCHAEOLOGISTS, COWARDS, PSYCHOLOGISTS, CHEAPSKATES, MORONS, THE INSOLVENT, AND ALL OF YOU UNLUCKY ENOUGH TO BE UNDER FOURTEEN, NOT FORGETTING THE ELECTED MEMBERS OF THE TWELFTH HOUSE, PENNILESS DIGGERS, SADISTIC STUDENTS, POLITICIANS OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC, HISTORIANS, KNOW-IT-ALLS, AND SNITCHES. Requiem took the girl's phone number. They entered the establishment. There was nothing special about Tram 83. It was dark all around, like the Lascaux Caves. Men. Women. Children. All with glasses and smokes. At the back, a combo was shamelessly massacring a Coltrane number, "Summertime," no doubt. They headed toward the bar. Two girls with massive-melon breasts immediately followed them; it's called "shadowing."

"Do you have the time?"

Nothing. Requiem's eyes patrolled the brassieres. One of them was the girl who'd accosted him at the station whose metal structure…

"Do you have the time?" hammered the single-mamas, stern and resolute.

It was a mammoth task to identify all the women who entered Tram 83. They struggled fiercely against aging. Difficult to venture a distinction between the girls under sixteen, called baby-chicks, the single-mamas or those aged between twenty and forty and referred to as single-mamas even when they don't have children, and the ageless-women whose fixed age begins at forty-one. None of them wanted to gain a single day. They piled on the makeup from morning till night, wore fake breasts, employed strong-arm tactics to entice the clients, and used foreign-sounding names, such as Marilyn Monroe, Sylvie Vartan, Romy Schneider, Bessie Smith, Marlene Dietrich, or Simone de Beauvoir, to make their mark on the world.

"Go check your papa's watch!" Requiem retorted.

They took the third table on the left, at the corner of the bar, which afforded an unbeatable

view over the front doors and the jazzmen continuing to prostitute music and the restrooms and the bar counter and a row of antipathetic, aggressive, and somewhat mature single-mamas. In his moments of madness, Requiem would tell anyone who'd listen that in order to monitor the comings and goings, and the baptism albums, it was preferable to choose a table affording a panorama of the aforementioned areas, to recap: the bar counter, the sanitary facilities, the lone women, the front doors, the musicians, even when they rushed into the dressing rooms to smoke their marijuana, the waitresses, the busgirls, and so on. They remained for several minutes without speaking to each other. It was a feat of courage to attempt a dialogue amid this pandemonium created by a deviant music and the yelling of the tourists and other upstarts who identified with the atmosphere, waxing ecstatic, grooving, whispering, howling, and pulling out money they threw in the direction of the musicians.

"Give me a real cuddle."

"Do you have the time?"

"I give you my body, chain me up, make me your slave, your property, your private hunting ground."

All of which fueled the fervor of the band, and consequently the lynching of that beautiful melody. In the labyrinths of the City-State, you don't listen to jazz to get a whiff of sugar cane or reconnect with Negro consciousness or savor the beauty of the notes: you listen to jazz because you have to listen jazz when you make your bed on banknotes, when you deliver your merchandise daily, when you manage an extraction plant, when you're cousin to the dissident General, when you keep a little mistress who pins you to your bed in a dizzy haze. Jazz is a sign of nobility, it's the music of the rich and the newly rich, of those who build this beautiful broken world. Such people don't listen to rumba, which they find dirty, primitive, and unfit for the ear. Between rumba and jazz lies an ocean, they say. You don't listen to jazz the way you'd fling yourself into a Zairian-spiced rumba. Jazz is above all a precipitous slope, a cliff you can only climb if you possess a notion of its origins, its development, its major figures. Jazz is no longer the story of the Negroes. Only tourists and those who master money know the foundations of this music. It's the only identification for a

certain bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie of the eleventh hour. Consequently, when the musicians get jazzing, all of Tram 83 stirs from its sleeping sickness. The slightest saxophone, and it's the great masquerade. The diggers and the students adopt the manner of the tourists. They watch, smile, raise their beer glasses, walk, blaze a trail to the dance floor, hail the waitresses and busgirls in the manner of the tourists, take on the haughty bearing of samurai, the gestures and attitudes of a Maharaja, the poise of the Dalai Lama. The honeys, the waitresses, and the busgirls don't let themselves be browbeaten.

Smiles like the Queen of England, they mime imaginary empresses. Jazz is the only lever used by all the riffraff of Tram 83 to switch social class as one would subway cars.