

Telephone Conversation

- By Wole Soyinka

The price seemed reasonable, location
 Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
 Off premises. Nothing remained
 But self-confession. "Madame," I warned,
 "I hate a wasted journey—I am African."
 Silence. Silenced transmission of
 Pressurized good breeding. Voice, when it came,
 Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
 Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, foully.
 "HOW DARK?"... I had not misheard... "ARE YOU LIGHT
 OR VERY DARK?" Button B. Button A. Stench
 Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.
 Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered
 Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shamed
 By ill-mannered silence, surrender
 Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.
 Considerate she was, varying the emphasis —
 "ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.
 "You mean — like plain or milk chocolate?"
 Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
 Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
 I chose. "West African Sepia" — and as afterthought,
 "Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic
 Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
 Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding
 "DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."
 "THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.
 Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see
 The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
 Are a peroxide blonde. Friction, caused —
 Foolishly madam — by sitting down, has turned
 My bottom raven black — One moment madam!" — sensing
 Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
 About my ears — "Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather
 See for yourself?"