

Gains and Losses in the Slaughterhouse District

(4587 wds.)

The four of them were sitting out back, in the new gazebo, just before sunset—Snow, Antonella, Billy, and Snow and Antonella’s *momité*, Frey-ahlem. *Momités* didn’t sit in gazebos, but Frey-ahlem sat in this one.

Snow and Billy were back from a week-long trip over “sort-of” roads to the ruins of an ancient city, and Snow was happy now, writing monographs and sending them off to journals of archaeology. Antonella was teaching English and Italian to little children. Billy was doing *pro bono* work for an organization that was training young women to operate a machine that bent wire into lampshade frames—a skill that the organization hoped would help to shepherd them away from lives of prostitution, and so, early deaths.

Billy was getting his bed and board from Snow and Antonella *gratis*. Billy was marginally archaeologically informed, and he and Snow were old friends. Snow loved the companionship, (not thinking of it as love).

Antonella was “sort of” interested in what Snow and Billy did on their trips. Frey-ahlem couldn’t have cared less.

Billy had drained his glass without setting it down. “Beely, you want more orange?” Antonella said.

“No, *cara*.” Billy said. Frey-ahlem was there—next to him—and he was taking more than glances at her; they were more like short-lived gazes—her face, her neck, her limp sleeve.

“Beely, you are *thirsty*,” Antonella said.

Frey-ahlem was a servant. The group was out of “orange,” and she felt obliged to get it. Billy wanted her where she was. “*Cara*, that’s *okay*,” he said.

But Frey-ahlem was on the move. He watched the back of her.

When Frey-ahlem returned—and was standing there—she didn’t glance at Billy when she returned, but Billy knew that Frey-ahlem knew that glancing might lead to something that the two of them wanted to hide, still. But Frey-ahlem knew that the other two knew.

Frey-ahlem worked five days a week, ten hours per day, not six and twelve like the other *momités*. She had had a home, but Snow and Antonella gave her one that was better: now she lived in one of the cottages that were on the compound’s grounds.

Frey-ahlem was missing an arm.

But that had nothing to do with Snow and Antonella’s magnanimity. Antonella told herself this. Snow told himself this. Frey-ahlem knew better.

Billy put his hand on an arm-rest, the one that was nearest to Frey-ahlem’s limp sleeve. On weekends they were sleeping together.

Now Snow became the center of attention, brontolating like an old lion annoyed out of slumber, having a ponderous kind of fun telling “Billy anecdotes.”

“Two hundred kilometers from home. The poor Rover had been in high—”

“It was in low, Snow—and it was one hundred and fifty.”

“Now how can you know what spot it was when you’ve no idea which thing I’m telling?”

Frey-ahlem looked up into the sky. Antonella followed.

“You’re telling the teeth thing, Snow.”

“Christ, you’re right—though God knows how. In any case, there we were, nothing in sight—”

“Biblical beauty in sight.”

“Yes, Biblical beauty in sight. First we were discussing the intractability of African poverty—”

“Not discussing it—batting it around.”

“*Wait*, Snowden. *Wait*, Billy ” Antonella said. “They’re letting someone in.”

“*Quiet*, Beely!” Antonella waved at waved Billy. Billy didn’t think this was fair.

There was the sound of the chain rattling, the sound of the dead-bolt sliding, the sound of Gashau and Shetu speaking to a visitor in a language that would always be beautiful and strange. Then on the flagstones the sound of crutches.

“*Porco*—it’s Shumi,” she said.

Snow put a hand on hers. “We’re out here, dear. So supper is late, anyway. The missionaries close at five-thirty, so he’s already had his supper. Shumi won’t be staying long. If need be, I’ll make certain of it.”

His nationality? The color of his skin? The fact that he had been mutilated? It was as a person that Snow and Antonella didn’t like Shumi.

The sound of crutches on the grass. Frey-ahlem stood up. With his gaze Billy followed her. Standing, she was silent.

There were two books wedged under one of Shumi’s crutch-burdened arms. As soon as she was able, Frey-ahlem put the books on the table.

Billy thought that she was even more beautiful next to another African: her brown eyes lightened toward hazel, her skin reddish-bronze in the nascent dusk, her face so nearly congruent with those of the women who had starred in his visions of African sex. Frey-ahlem’s dress: it was flimsy, it was pretty, it came from Antonella. It

was special, it was meant for special occasions. But if Frey had never worn it while working, Antonella would never have seen how good it looked on her.

Billy smiled at Frey-ahlem's vanity. She could be so marmoreal. But there was a crack in the one-armed statue.

Frey's tragedy had happened just three years before—a manageable infection that rapidly became unmanageable. She had never been a prostitute. She didn't have AIDS. The hospital didn't have wards; most of the adults and children in her sight had AIDS.

Shumi, when he saw everyone, said, "Oh, I am sorry."

"No, Shumi, please sit down. Would you like an orange?" Antonella said.

"No," Shumi said.

"Would you like an iced tea?"

"Yes."

Shumi dropped his crutches. He sat down. And though he looked like a boy struggling, he didn't breathe hard. He was dusty, he smelled of burnt dung. He blinked irregularly but often, like someone bothered by a flickering light. His mother was dead, though she had never been a prostitute. His brother was dead. He had frequented prostitutes.

The largesse of and people like Snow and Antonella—this was Shumi's only source of steady food.

There was only "orange" on the table. Frey-ahlem went for the iced tea.

Billy didn't know Shumi—unless knowing how many others, how many damaged children with smiles—in the hospital, or in the roads—there were for whom he could be mistaken—unless knowing that was knowing him.

At first Shumi spoke softly, and Antonella encouraged him to raise his voice. Shumi was studying computers. "Others, they have no good profession. Is only simple," he said. A polite comment raised his faith—"We're glad you're liking it"—

and he began to elaborate, tracing symbols on the palm of his hand. His voice did get louder.

After a while Snow said something in Shumi's ear to quiet him. Nothing more was said until Frey-ahlem returned with the iced tea, holding Shumi's glass with two fingers and a thumb, and with the same hand's other fingers holding a plate of Italian biscuits.

"Here," she said.

A manageable infection that became unmanageable—the origin of Frey-ahlem's tragedy was the origin of Shumi's. She and the three *farenjis* watched Shumi eat and drink.

When Shumi was finished he leaned back and asked Antonella a question: "Your school is good?"

"No, Shumi, my school is bad," Antonella sighed. Snow put down his glass.

"Is bad? *Why?*" Shumi asked.

"Not the children, I love the children, but I am being tortured. One person tortures me."

Snow knew who this was. Frey-ahlem knew who this was. Billy knew, too.

"Who?" Shumi said.

"His name is Bellalo. He is another teacher, and he is a *cretтино*."

"Shumi, this subject will upset Antonella. Let's change the subject," Snow said.

"*Upset! Yes!*" said Shumi.

"I say *cretтино*, but in fact he is evil."

Antonella's judgment—it had arisen from some primary source. This sense came to the *farenjis*, and it came to the indigenous ones.

Shumi was aghast. "He is *evil?*" he said.

So many of the country's people spoke very little English. So many of them seemed to know the English word "evil."

“I told you, Beely, I told you, Frey-ahlem, this man has a family in Italy but here he bought another wife. He is fifty years and she is twenty, and she has had a child by him. He is *insupportable*! She is like a prisoner! He gave her parents money. He has connections with criminals. In his classroom he reads the newspaper, he smokes cigarettes. In his classroom he does *nothing!*”

“He is evil man,” Shumi said. Frey-ahlem was looking at Antonella when Shumi was looking at Frey-ahlem.

Antonella’s love for her little children was legendary. Every morning at six-thirty she was at the dining-room table—finishing puppets, or pouring French or Italian finger-paint into child-sized jars.

Snow tried to change the subject and thought that he would succeed when he asked Shumi’s opinion on the country’s most important issue. Would the Council keep its promise to treat the people better? The Council had named itself after a beast out of myth, one that supposedly was on the side of man. Shumi didn’t answer the question, and Snow no longer need a strategy for easing Shumi away. Shumi gathered his crutches.

When Shumi was standing, he said, “The evil man drive what car?”

“*What’s that?*” Snow said.

“The evil man drive what car?”

To every *farenji*’s surprise, Frey-ahlem answered him. “A Mercedes, white,” she said. Antonella and Snow stared at her. Billy stared at her.

So Antonella had discussed this man with her *momité*, probably when mistress and *momité* were in the kitchen together and the mistress couldn’t contain her anguish.

Snow didn’t speak. He said nothing to Frey-ahlem.

Billy loved talking to her—her variable voltage. And the challenge of keeping going her comprehension of his English: he didn’t want to restrict his vocabulary, he didn’t want to avoid subtlety. He never condescended. Condescension was noxious,

condescension was predicted.

It was his third day there, the first time Billy spoke to her. Snow had left with Shetu and Gashau to shop at the Merkato (no newcomer was to brave it, this was one of Snow's rules). Antonella was at her school. Billy came out of the guest room jet-lagged, still feeling that hell from the trip from western America to eastern Africa. He heard no movements and assumed that the *momité*, Frey-ahlem, was out at the clothesline.

Billy was parched. He went into the kitchen, and there the *momité* was. Her back was to him. She was stirring a pot on a burner. She looked quite nonchalant with only her spoon-arm raised. And then he remembered: she didn't have another arm.

Frey-ahlem turned around when she heard him at the doorway. Billy was in his boxers. "Oh," he said.

"You want water? I will get it," Frey-ahlem said. (Snow, with movements he never failed to make, in an interval whose length never varied, boiled up a volume of drinking water every night.)

Billy said that water would be great, "thank you." said Billy. When the situation arose, he preferred that people not ignore his underwear—but in this case he understood. Frey-ahlem handed him a glass, he thanked her, he didn't walk away. "It's been a long time, but that smells like Antonella's minestrone."

Frey-ahlem said, "Yes."

"You have to make it perfectly or there will be a *tiny* problem, yes?"

Frey-ahlem chuckled and said, "Yes," and she lowered the flame and stirred.

From behind it looked like the *momité*'s missing arm wasn't missing, it looked like she was holding it out. "Do the people here like foreign food?" Billy asked her.

"*Momités* often— other women, sometimes— men, never. Men like African bread with African meat, only."

"Often," "sometimes," "never." This *momité* was no dope.

“Do *you* like African bread?” Billy asked.

Frey-ahlem said she did. Billy had tasted it in an African restaurant at home and he hated it. Two more conversations, both on Merkato days, and Billy knew well her opinion of African men: they were close-minded bullies, and the value that they placed on themselves was far from what was real. American men, English men, other *farenji* men, many of them were terrible also, but some of them were not: you had to look at the way they treated their women.

It was toward the end of their fourth conversation when Billy walked up to the oven and asked Frey-ahlem if he could help. In her best English, Frey-ahlem said that Billy said that tiny problems must be avoided. Billy let a decent interval pass and then he kissed her. Frey-ahlem cut the kiss short.

Billy *loved* their first real kiss. What Frey-ahlem thought about it, Billy would never know.

Shumi bent forward, dispersing his odor anew. He echoed Frey-ahlem. “A Mercedes, white,” he said, nodding. Then he said to Antonella, “I will pray for you, and against that evil man.”

Crutches on flagstones. Shumi was at the gate. Antonella wondered why he wanted to know the car, and she said, “Will he *do* something?”

“What *can* he do?” Snow said. “Don’t concern yourself, my dear.”

Snow was concerned.

“I don’t know. But I must tell him that this is not his business. I must tell him that everything will be okay, I must.”

Snow didn’t stop her from running to the gate. Running, Frey-ahlem followed her. Billy had never seen Frey-ahlem run. Snow hadn’t, either. But he and Billy managed to take some pleasure in the silence.

Antonella returned alone. “Frey-ahlem wanted to speak to Shumi, too,” she said.

“They’re near the wall. I could hear them but I couldn’t understand.”

“Yes,” said Snow, “that is the language that they talk in.”

When Frey-ahlem returned, her face betrayed nothing except her intelligence. Billy’s eyes went from her face down to her sleeve. They had dealt with that sleeve, one night, in their room, in their “hotel.”

This “hotel” of theirs was in an indecent part of town. And only when the wind was right—but it was right often—a certain smell arrived. It was the smell of a slaughterhouse.

Billy called them “my half-homes”—Snow and Antonella’s guest room and the room in this “hotel.”

A bottle of not the best Italian wine on a side-table, and lentils in an open wrapper.

Fifty or sixty women worked in the city as *momités*, and every year, mainly in June, some of them lost their employers because their employers left the country forever. To solicit new work, mainly in September the women went to several places. One of those places was the school’s parking lot.

There *were* dregs among the teachers. What they wanted was a free ride in a foreign country. “Back home they’re nothing, too,” Billy had said to Frey, once.

“Yes,” Fre-ahlem said.

Frey-ahlem withdrew to the side. Teachers who were looking for someone were stopping their cars to talk to candidates. Frey-ahlem made a bet to herself. The woman talking to Mariam—a woman with a look of integrity, with wire-rim glasses and possibly empathetic—was, *would be*, most likely the best employer. “I saw you speaking to Mariam,” Frey-ahlem said, “but now I want to talk to you. I am the best *momité*. This is difficult for people to believe me, I know, but I will work the hardest. Where do you live?”

The next day, Frey-ahlem demonstrated some things to Snow and Antonella and

they hired her on the spot.

“Frey-ahlem, you are sly,” said Billy. “You know this English word, ‘sly’?”

“No. *Yes.*”

“Antonella is a very honest person.”

“Yes.”

What had Frey-ahlem and Shumi said next to the wall?

Antonella had never known what to think of Shumi. He was a student, but so different from her own. But she *nearly* believed that she’d convinced him that this was not his business, so she *nearly* appeared incurious when she returned to the gazebo.

But Frey-ahlem?—who remembered Antonella’s anguish in the kitchen? Frey-ahlem, who had volunteered the answer to Shumi’s car-query? However much Antonella wanted it—that her *momit * span the distance between her own place and a *farenji*’s place—certainly Antonella knew that Frey-ahlem couldn’t do this.

But whatever Frey and Shumi had discussed at the wall, Antonella’s love for Frey could never be diminished.

Frey-ahlem returned. Something in the sky caught her attention before she sat down. Two birds were flying low. “Oh, ibis,” she said.

“I like them,” Snow said. “They shit on our gazebo, Frey-ahlem.”

Billy always said that he’d “made friends” with some people in his organization, people who liked to give parties on Friday nights, and these people liked their guests to stay late. Antonella and Snow were early people, Billy always reminded them.

Frey-ahlem had never not been free on Friday nights. Antonella and Snow told themselves didn’t really give a damn, as long as Frey-ahlem was happy. They knew Billy’s history with condoms, so they believed that they had come to a fair conclusion, and that was that.

One Friday evening, when Billy and Frey were driving to their “hotel” in Billy’s

two-seater and one of the city's traffic lights actually turned red, Frey-ahlem thought about reaching across and stroking Billy's blond hair, but her stump made it difficult, and then the car lurched forward.

On Saturday mornings they shared a shower, and only once after that had they gone downstairs to eat food at a table. Frey craved African bread. They ordered lentils, coffee, and African bread. Billy would never deny her *any* food. He looked closely at Frey's corn-rows—the lapidary, perhaps vanity, where for the most part dirt and hunger overruled it. When Frey-ahlem and Billy looked around they saw reviling eyes. They wouldn't eat downstairs again.

But on this one occasion she had, and

On their way back up to the room, Billy caught a reflection of the two of them in a mirror.

“Black”?—not really.

“White”?—not really.

But something else was clear, wasn't it? The two of them wanted to blend.

They made love that Saturday morning, and they made an erotic discovery.

Frey put pressure on Billy on both his sides, her good arm and her stump. She did this every time, but this time Billy reached across and *held* the thing. Frey shuddered. She felt him holding an elbow, and then she felt this hold making fingers twitch.

“You have a phantom limb,” said Billy.

Frey didn't know the word “phantom,” but in seconds she didn't have to be told. And when Billy asked Frey, were the feelings good or bad? Frey said she wasn't sure, but Billy thought that her phantom-limb feelings *must be* good.

Neither Frey nor Billy could sleep on the Friday night following Shumi's Mercedes visit, and they decided that one would be good.

There was an intersection near the “hotel” that shone like a movie set. Bare bulbs

over fruit stands and inside shops lit a dozen people and the tarmac just as spotlights would have done. The people were standing motionless, in groups of two or three, or singly—posing, it seemed, or exhausted and kept from collapsing by something unseen. Billy saw himself and Frey moving among these common people, and he said, “Let’s walk.”

They had never taken a walk before. They parked and went arm-in-arm down the middle of the road. As they passed each person, each person, in threadbare clothing, stared at them. “They hate love between white and black,” Billy said—softly—to Frey. “No,” Frey said. “They think I am a whore. A white man is going with a woman she has one arm.”

“Your face says, ‘I am not a whore.’ They hate love between white and black.”

Frey walked on ahead and Billy stared at the back of her. For an instant he was disoriented, for an instant he forgot where he was on Earth. He looked farther up the road. Out there nothing was illuminated. But there was never total silence. In the distance, all over the city, pariah dogs were barking.

Frey was looking away from him and he didn’t know why. “Frey— ” she said.

“I say we can kill that man for Antonella and you say nothing,” she said.

“You said that? *When* did you say that?” he said.

Frey didn’t answer. Billy stepped closer to her. “*Should* we kill that man for Antonella?” he asked.

Frey didn’t answer.

“So we murder Bellalo. That’s great,” Billy said.

“ ‘*Murder*’?” Frey said.

“Someone is not attacking you, but you kill him. That is murder.”

“He is evil. He attacks Antonella.”

“Will he *murder* her?”

Frey began walking, walking away from Billy, fast.

“*Frey!*” Billy shouted, but she walked faster. Billy didn’t want to see her among those people—but that was not his terror. She could go right past the car and disappear into her country.

He saw her reach the car, and then she seemed to see something. She stopped and Billy caught up with her, and he was joyful.

“*Look,*” Frey-ahlem said, before he could speak.

Beyond the intersection two crouched rolled up a body in a sheet, and they swung the body without great effort up and into the wooden bed of their decrepit truck.

“We have to follow them,” Frey said.

Billy didn’t think it over. They got into the car. Zero traffic at this hour: prime time for a morgue van, and they had no problems shadowing it. They passed rows of huts that were made of plastic, mud, and cardboard. Yards beyond, Billy turned off the headlights, and he and Frey watched the men take another corpse.

“They take dead bodies,” Frey said.

Why would Frey say the obvious? “Frey, are you saying something?” Billy said. “We can drive right up to that wagon? Do they stop for coffee at the bar at the Hilton? So we drive up and put Bellalo in?”

“You think that I am stupid.”

“Frey, you know I don’t. So at the right time we put him on a road?”

Frey didn’t answer. “We will follow them some more,” she said.

The men were driving again. Their truck turned and picked up speed, but not a lot of it. It turned, then turned again, then, beyond a flood-lit sign, it turned into a driveway studded with rocks.

Billy stopped the car. In three languages the sign read, “CITY ABATTOIR.” The slaughterhouse. Up above, the building’s smokestack looked damned busy. What was burning? The fat of bodies? No one was fat. Was it gristle and bone?

Dictatorship’s effect on hunger—it’s a shambles.

In the light coming off the sign, Frey's face looked like an astronaut's, a woman facing the sun.

They couldn't see the truck. "Follow them," Frey said, and Billy drove in. There was no truck alongside the building's back side.

"*There,*" Frey said. The truck was in an open area thirty meters away, looking like it was on the edge of a large circular space. It was on the edge of what looked like a large circular space. The men were out and moving around. Billy parked quietly, then he and Frey got out and made their way closer.

The circular area was not cleared ground. It was a tarpaulin secured with stakes, large enough to batten down a small skyline of crates. The men had un-staked a section and had pulled the tarp away, making a pitch-black hole in the world. As Billy and Frey watched, the men unloaded their cargo, corpse by corpse. They pushed each corpse over the edge and into the hole, and then they checked what?—the suitability of the random pile for an up-coming inferno?

Billy wanted to be sure of something: that he and Frey were hallucinating.

One of the men went into the truck and came out with a fuel can. "We should leave," Billy said.

"No," Frey said.

The flames were visible. The men were holding wooden poles. Probing and pushing with these, they kept the flames away from the tarp.

"The smell—you are okay?" Frey said.

"No, I'm really not. Frey, let's go."

"We both are not, but we could—"

"Get used to it?"

"Get used to it. To return here with Bellalo for the men to see—it is impossible for you?"

"*Frey-ahlem.*"

“Bellalo burned her with a cigarette. Antonella is suffering.”

“Does Snow know?”

“He knows a little. She has this.” Frey pointed to her palm.

“A *scar!*—and Snow doesn’t know?”

“Small. She hides her hand.”

“*Murder?*” Billy said. He wanted to believe that he was hallucinating. He smelled the corpses and remembered the abattoir. He turned and looked up and saw the thick smoke rising. “At least they don’t put bodies in there,” he said.

Frey looked regal. She looked angry. “An evil man isn’t in there, a good man isn’t in there. Ordinary man—not in there. You think my country is Hell?”

Billy bent and kissed Frey’s stump. “No, I don’t, Frey, but can we go now?”

Frey nodded yes. They walked quietly back to the car. They had a last glance at the scene, then they departed.

Billy took a long way driving back. They passed through the Kirko district. Dawn was just beginning. Billy had to stop for a caravan of dump-trucks. His window was open. He looked down.

A little girl and her mother were laying out pieces of fruit on a blanket—small tomatoes, shriveled oranges. The little girl rearranged, and rearranged, the fruit. Was she was hoping to find the one configuration that buyers couldn’t resist?—and Billy realized something: his car was only the first of the day that would cover her fruit with dust.

They slept that Sunday. They made love, and when they did, Billy thought that he had discovered a ledge for both of them, a ledge from which to drop timelessly together. Billy thought that he had found this.

They left the “hotel” very early Monday morning.

On a Tuesday, midday, Frey-ahlem was just inside the wall, sweeping some

flagstones, when Shumi came up to the gate and Frey let him in. He told her where Bellalo lived, and when Bellalo left for school, and when he came back.

Just before sunset Frey asked Antonella if she could visit a friend that evening. She didn't tell Billy. She knew that Billy was tired that day. She hoped he'd lack the presence of mind to give a second thought to the favor that she knew Antonella would grant.

That next Thursday the four of them were sitting in the gazebo again. Bellalo had missed four days of work. Césare, the school's director, had called Bellalo's home and had spoken to Bellalo's wife, who reminded him that Bellalo (she called her husband "Bellalo") had gone missing before, had gone missing more than once.

Antonella had reported nothing. The man had gone off before. She didn't want to know.

Gashau and Shetu went running past, laughing and talking in their strange and beautiful language. Soon Snow would be planning a trip to a site that was difficult to get to, more difficult to get to than the last one they had visited. But Snow wasn't thinking about that now. He was looking at Billy's hand, the one so near Frey-ahlem's stump, and he knew full well that she would hear him when he spoke. "It would seem, my friend," he said, "that you're adapting pretty goddamn well to your second country."

Billy smiled a small smile, knowing that Snow would get over it—or most of it, anyway.

Frey was staring away, somewhere.

Billy knew he would soon convince her—together they had been seeing things. And they would not kill that man.

So he smiled, and he touched her, he touched her *there*.

The End