

Telephone Conversation

from *African American Literature Voices in a Tradition*

By Wole Soyinka

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. “Madam,” 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 clangd 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 fee
Are a peroxide blonde. Friction, caused—
Foolishly madam—by sitting down, has turned
My bottom raven black—One moment maddam!”—sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
About my ears—“Madam,” I pleaded, “wouldn’t you rather
See for yourself?”

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