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Young, Slender, Blond, Blue-Eyed

By **Édouard Louis** January 22, 2024

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FROM *INTERIORS*, CLAUDIA KEEP'S PORTFOLIO IN ISSUE NO. 246 OF *THE PARIS REVIEW*.
PHOTOGRAPH BY CARY WHITTIER, COURTESY OF CLAUDIA KEEP AND MARCH.

I climbed the stairs two at a time. I no longer know what I was thinking about in that stairwell, I imagine I was counting the steps so as not to think of anything else.

I arrived at the door, caught my breath and rang the bell. The man approached from the other side, I could hear him, I could make out his footsteps on the wooden floor.

I'd first met him on the Internet just two hours earlier. He was the one who'd contacted me. He'd told me he liked boys like me, young, slender, blond, blue-eyed—the Aryan type, he'd insisted. He'd asked me to dress like a student and that's what I'd done—at least his idea of a student—with an oversized hoodie I'd borrowed from Geoffroy and sky-blue trainers, my favorites, I'd done what he wanted because I was hoping he'd reward my efforts and pay me more than he'd promised.

I waited

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* * *

Finally, he opened the door and at the sight of his body I had to tense my face to keep from grimacing—he didn't look like the photos he'd sent, his body was flabby, heavy, I don't know how to put it, as if he was sagging or rather oozing to the floor.

Just coming to the door had been a strain for him, I could see his fatigue, his shortness of breath, the dozens of tiny drops of sweat shining on his forehead. I tried to look at him as little as possible, I wanted to avoid seeing the details of his face. In less than an hour you'll be out of here with the money, I thought. His odor reached me, a synthetic smell of vanilla and sour milk. I focused on that sentence—In less than an hour, the money—when suddenly I heard voices behind him in the flat. They belonged to men, several of them, maybe three or four. I asked who they were, he smiled and said: It's nothing. Pretend they're not here, they're used to it, I often bring in whores, you're not the first. We'll go to my room and you ignore them.

* * *

I thought: I don't want other people seeing my face—the shame began to rise inside me, from the tips of my fingers to the nape of my neck, like a warm, paralyzing fluid, I recognized its burn. I threatened to go home. I thought it would hurt or irritate him but he didn't try to stop me. Calmly he offered to give me fifty euros for the trip if I wanted to turn and go, and I hated him for not getting angry. I needed more than fifty euros. Okay, I said, we'll go straight to your room, they won't see me, I'll pull up my hood.

He promised me his friends wouldn't try to see my face, they don't give a shit; he was already turning around, I could see his fat white neck. Think of the money, think of the money.

* * *

I crossed the living room with him. He walked in front of me. I lowered my head, the hood hiding my face. In the bedroom he sat on the edge of his bed, the weight of his heavy body on the mattress produced a high-pitched creaking sound.

The mattress screamed in my place.

I stood there, facing his body, I didn't dare move, he looked at me. Fuck you're a turn-on with your little Nazi face. I didn't say anything, I knew my silence would please him, that was what he wanted and what he was paying me for, my toughness, my coldness. I was playing a role. He asked me to undress, he said: As slow as possible, and I did.

Now I was naked in front of him, waiting. He just said: I want you to fuck me like a slut. He straightened up, pulled his trousers down to his knees, without taking them off completely, turned and got on all fours on the bed—his ass in front of me too white and too red, flaccid, limp, covered with little brown hairs. Go on, fuck me, fuck me like I was your little slut, he repeated. I rubbed my cock against his body but nothing happened, my cock remained inert. I failed. I wasn't able to think of anything else. to imagine myself in another situation.

impossible. Can't do it? he asked and to save time I said Shut the fuck up. I felt his body shudder under my fingers, he loved it.

I tried again, rubbed against him, on him, desperately, forcing myself to imagine another body in place of his body, another body under my body, or rather on my body, because I knew that was what usually turned me on. I concentrated, but the contact with his dry, cold skin brought me back to the truth and his presence. He started to sigh to show his impatience. I told you shut the fuck up and don't move, I repeated, but I knew it wouldn't work as well the second time. He wanted something else. I rubbed myself even harder against him but I knew I'd already lost, I'd lost from the start, today I look back and I think I knew that the moment I entered his room.

I thought of the money I needed, the shame the next day if I had to tell the dentist I couldn't pay him, the look in his eyes and the words he must have known by heart, Can I pay you next time, I'm sorry, I don't have my wallet, I forgot it, he'd have known I was lying and I'd have known he knew, and I thought of the shame this infinite game of mirrors would cause—it was as simple, as banal as that, that was why I was in this man's house, naked against him. He was still in the same position, motionless on all fours. I backed up a bit, walked round the bed and came to stand in front of him. His features were drawn, his face was pleading, exhausted from waiting. Suck, I said, and he took my still soft cock in his mouth. I closed my eyes. I don't know how I managed, but after about twenty minutes standing there in front of him my cock bulged and I came, I pulled out of his mouth to cover his face, and looking down I saw the thick, white liquid on his forehead, his cheeks, his eyelids.

My breath shook.

I got dressed. I thought: It's almost over. Almost over. He grabbed a towel from the bedside table that he'd probably put there knowing I'd come, wiped his face and walked over to a small chest of drawers. He took out a wad of notes and came over to me.

He gave me a hundred euros; I didn't move. He knew exactly what I was expecting and why I didn't move but he pretended not to understand. He was playing with me, he knew full well that I saw what was going on, that I knew he was playing with me but that I was too afraid to say anything. Finally he said You did half the job so I'm paying you half the money. You should have fucked me, you didn't. A whore who doesn't fuck isn't a whore. You can be glad I'm giving you a hundred. He didn't say it aggressively but more as an observation, the way you cite a rule or the terms of a contract. I'd learned to recognize how rich someone was at a glance, I could see it, I was never wrong, I knew he was rich and that paying me a hundred euros more wouldn't have changed a thing for him, that having a hundred euros less in his wallet wouldn't have made the slightest impact on his life. My heart was pounding in my chest (it wasn't my heart that was pounding but my whole

everything, the shame, the dentist. That wasn't his problem, he said, when you do things by halves you get half what you bargained for. You have to know what you want in life. You're young, you have time to learn.

* * *

It was when he said those words that I decided to back down. His friends in the next room could get worried and come in to see if everything was all right, they couldn't see my face—They mustn't see your face, Other people must not see your face.

* * *

I took the money and left, walked through Paris in the night, and went home. Outside, the pavements were shiny from the rain, reflecting the streets like a second city projected onto the ground. I walked. I didn't think I hated him. I didn't think anything.

When I entered my flat I sat on the edge of the bed and cried. Even when I was crying I didn't think anything. I no longer knew my name. I wasn't crying because of what had just happened, which wasn't such a big deal, just the sort of unpleasant thing that can happen to you in any situation; rather, what had just happened allowed me to cry for all the times in my life when I hadn't cried, all the times I'd held back. It's possible during that night, in that room, I let my eyes cry twenty years of uncried tears.

I walked to the shower. I didn't take off my clothes. I turned on the warm water and felt it run down over me, from the top of my head to my ankles. I tilted my head back, stretching my throat, and opened my mouth as if I was going to scream, a long, beautiful scream, but I didn't. The water soaked my clothes, my white T-shirt turned the color of my skin, my soggy trousers grew dark and heavy.

I stayed under that shower for a long time, watching the water running down over me. When I got out morning was breaking. I think it was then that I asked myself if one day I'd be able to write a scene like that, a scene so far removed from the child I'd been and his world, not a tragic or pathetic scene but above all one that was radically foreign to that child, and it was then that I promised myself I'd do it one day, that one day I'd tell everything that had led up to that scene and everything that happened afterwards, as a way of going back in time.

Translated by John Lambert.

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Édouard Louis is the author of The End of Eddy, History of Violence, and Who Killed My Father.

John Lambert has translated Monsieur, Reticence, and Self-Portrait Abroad by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, as well as Emmanuel Carrère's Limonov.

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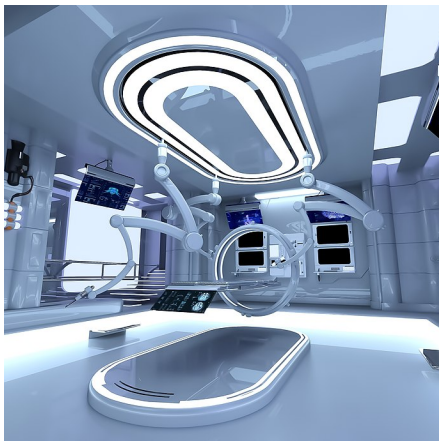
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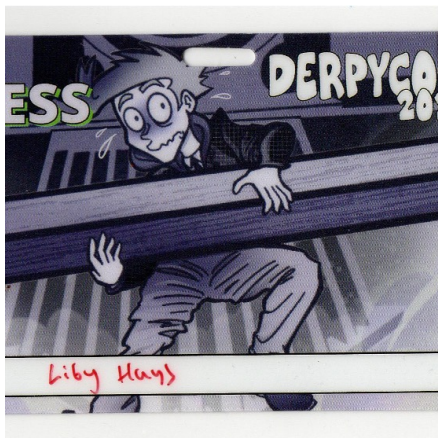
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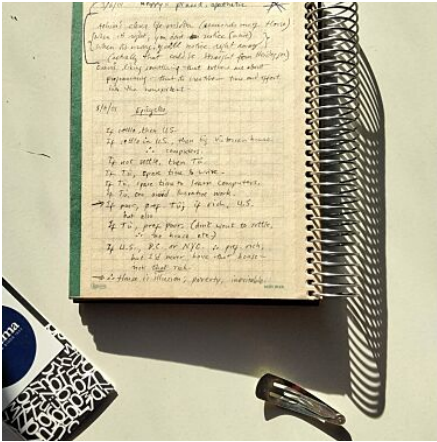
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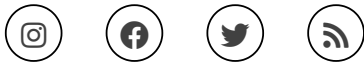
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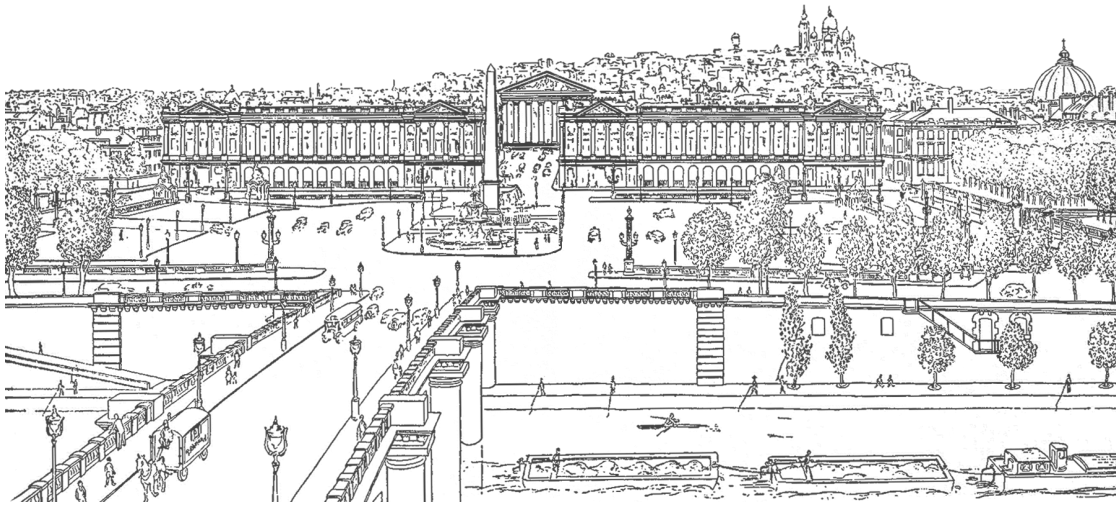
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