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Excerpt
English Translation © Eric Trump

It is already dark when a taxi comes to a stop in front of an office building at the edge of Accra's business district. A feeble light bulb illuminates the signs of competing NGOs on the building's façade: TSTS (Taking Steps Towards Sustainability), ReUse International, Electronic Waste Watch, Urban Miners Relief, fairecycling Ghana.

"Urban Mining," Christina says. "Sounds like the latest trendy sport." I toss a few bills to the driver in front and get out of the car. Immediately, the scent of burning plastic greets me. I breathe it in with pleasure.

"Smell that?" I ask. "That is the smell of a good story." Disgusted, Christina makes a face and holds a handkerchief to her nose, which I take to be a remarkably subtle imitation of a princess in a film visiting her empire's slums for the first time.

I look down the street. All the office buildings on our side are studded with brightly-lit logos of important environmental- and human-rights organizations. Some have even spent their donation money on lavishly animated neon advertisements. Even a few Chinese characters are up there. *With great power comes great responsibility*, as Mao once said. A few lefty organizations have printed out banners and hung them from windows: *Stop the E-Waste Crime; Europe, take your trash back; Respect Basel*. On the other side of the street are a few market stalls

piled with fruit and vegetables. A motorcycle rider speeds past, honking. Antique PC towers are strapped to his baggage carrier.

“Welcome to Agbogbloshie.” Celina Belz is suddenly standing in front of the building, her arms are akimbo and a checkered blouson hanging loosely over her shoulder. I sneeze loudly.

“*Nyame nhyira wo*—Bless you,” says Belz, pushing her dyed-blond hair from her face. I’d say Belz is about fifty, though her high cheekbones and narrow nostrils suggest she might have been very attractive at one point. Nonetheless, her open leather sandals, which reveal her black feet even in the dim light of the street lamps, irritate me.

“Christina Madlung. Mars & Jung. We are here to verify whether you are conforming to the recycling measures you have contractually agreed to with fairtronics.” Christina thrusts out her chest and stretches her hand in Belz’s direction.

“We are apparently not the only ones here.” I point to the signs adorning this charity ghetto.

“‘Only in Sodom and Gomorrha can the holy shine.’ That’s the motto of fairtronics, if I’m not mistaken,” says Belz, and leads us to her office. Other than a desk (from which papers rise in heaps), a filing cabinet, and a bed with rumpled sheets, the office is empty. A UNICEF calendar hangs on the wall—Belz probably filched it from an office a few buildings down. Hard-core charity porn. February’s girl of the month is an Asian excitedly shoveling rice into her mouth.

“Hungry?” asks Belz as soon as we sit down. Without waiting for an answer, she disappears, leaving behind a fruity fragrance, perhaps Un Jardin Sur le Nil from Hermès. I take out my smart phone and write Marina that we are back in Accra and we’ll see each other later at the hotel. Christina leafs through a few papers on the desk and pulls out a slip from the very bottom of a pile.

“A recipe for baked bananas,” she says, shaking her head. She opens a drawer of the filing cabinet. It is completely empty.

After about ten minutes, Belz returns with a plastic bag filled with Styrofoam boxes. She removes a drumstick from one of the boxes with her fingers and with the other a heap of rice. When she sees how appalled Christina is, she says, “‘*Traditional customs*’: that’s what Jens always called them.” Christina takes a tiny bottle of sanitizer from her

bag and rubs some carefully into her hands. I don't want to appear squeamish in front of Belz, so I put my unprotected hand into the box.

"You know Jens Mars?" Christina asks casually, using her pursed lips to pry a piece of meat from its bone.

"I have had an excellent working relationship with him in the past," answers Belz.

Christina's eyes narrow. Her jaw gnaws vigorously on a bone. "We'll see how successful that relationship is this time around," she says, tossing the chewed bone back into the box. She stands. "Then you can show us where the 100,000 dollars have got to."

Belz licks her fingers and takes two flashlights as long as forearms from the desk drawer. "You've just eaten two dollars worth," she says.

When we leave the office, a young man appears from the shadows. He approaches us slowly and blinds us with a flashlight. He shines it directly into Christina's face and then mine. I shield my eyes with one hand. His tank top stretches over sinewy muscles, which are glistening with sweat. His eyes are red, though I cannot tell whether this is from the stinging fumes outside or from drugs. "Our bodyguard," explains Belz, gesturing at him to turn off the light. "Without one, we'd go missing in Agbogbloshie." She pats his arm a little too long, and I can't help thinking of an article I'd read about older women traveling to Africa to take young lovers by the dozen.

[...]

Directly behind the market stalls rise mountains of wrecked electronic devices.

"They say you can't be in Agbogbloshie for longer than two hours without permanently damaging your health," says Belz, as though she were our tour guide. Her statement is almost certainly just a transparent ruse to add some narrative zing to our tour and to limit our time here. Still, I glance nervously at my watch. We've been here almost an hour. "It's not good for the lungs," she says, lighting a cigarette. I set my smart phone timer for forty-five minutes.

We wind our way along a narrow path between three-foot-high heaps of freezers, waffle irons, and video recorders. Circuit boards, shattered satellite dishes, and loudspeaker cabinets crunch beneath my

feet. In the distance, countless fires blaze. Pitch-black billows of smoke rise into the hazy night sky. My mucous membranes burn from the thick, acrid smoke. A few figures carrying piles of cables in their arms scurry past us and toward the flames, rather like priests on their way to a sacrificial altar.

“That’s where they melt the metal from the devices,” says Belz.

A horn penetrates the darkness, and headlights grope their way along the mountains of junk. It’s a truck with units of hardware piled as high as a man on its loading bed. Its wheels smash the pieces of plastic laying around into splinters.

“1,000 containers a day,” says Belz.

A few boys run past, climb on the back of the truck and throw the devices to the ground where they shatter with a bursting sound.

“They are declared second-hand in order to circumvent the Basel ban on exports,” says Belz. “But only the devices in front of the container function properly, in case customs decides to inspect. Behind the operational ones it’s all junk.”

[...]

A narrow bridge made from monitor casings leads across a stream. The fires burn on the other side. We balance our way carefully from screen to screen. The water shimmers in all the colors of the rainbow beneath my flashlight.

“Before, this was all marshland. The elderly still talk about how as children they would hunt fish and birds in the lagoons here.” Belz points downstream. “Almost a mile away is where the sea begins.”

I have to think of the people who fish there, those who this afternoon will launch their boats and go to sea. And suddenly an image forms of them, pulling in their nets with a catch, but among the malformed fish with exploded swim bladders the only things that thrash around are fan blades and refrigerator components.