

LINCOLN'S BEDROOM

I MAKE THE TREK TO SAN DIEGO with a twenty-seven-inch Zenith as my passenger in my trusty Nissan sedan. In the back seat sits Mom and Dad's care package, which includes aspirin, tissues, canned collard greens and rolls of quarters for my first month's rent. With the anticipation of the breast implants and beaches that await me, the fifty-hour drive passes quickly—so quickly that I'm in jeopardy of arriving before the lease on my unseen apartment starts. Preferring to drive at night and rest in the day, I need a deep sleep in a comfortable bed. Just in time I spot an off-highway motel in Lincoln, Nebraska, advertising rooms for less than forty bucks.

I pull over to do a quick safety and cleanliness check of the area and decide to check in. I offer a weary hello to the pregnant clerk with dirty blond hair and a suspicious look on her face. She gives me the key to a tidy room that looks like it could belong to a fixed-income senior. Thanks to the germ protection provided by traveling with one's own linens, I can relax as I lie on the bed and click through the TV channels. Surprisingly, this motel in the stronghold of conservatism offers free access to the Playboy channel, but I'm just too tired to watch moaning blondes with landing-strip pubic hair. I drift off to sleep.

I wake in the late afternoon and decide to make my ritual trip to the mall. Not one for browsing through museums or making other cultural excursions, when I travel I simply go to

the mall or people-watch downtown to get the feel of a city. I find Lincoln to be a thinly populated and basic city that has been lucky to be saved by a large university. It's the type of place where you could earn a decent living, raise three happy kids (assuming one doesn't turn out to be gay) and look forward to weekend shopping trips at Wal-Mart and Home Depot.

I stroll through the mall and come across a group of black people. Thanks to the simple-America feel of Lincoln, I wrongly assume the blacks here would be stuck in the 1990s, with high-top fades and Hammer pants, only recently hearing about the Rodney King beating. But in actuality, these are modern and regular black people. The type with the African American predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories, like that Tupac is in Jamaica working as a scuba instructor or that hospitals inject blacks with tainted immunizations that cause cravings for unhealthy food such as fried chicken and hog maws. Shit, these people are black enough to make me instinctively switch from standard English to a more African American vernacular, saying "What's up?" instead of "How you doing?" just so they know I'm also "black enough."

As often is the case with minority groups or those who suffer from generational oppression, we stop and talk after overcoming the initial surprise of seeing each other. I find out that they're in Lincoln for a minority enrichment program at the university and that they're bored out their minds.

One of the guys, a frail but rough-looking man named Cliff, also happens to be my fraternity brother from another university. Unfortunately I failed to take enough fraternal beatings from extremist members, didn't meet the violence prerequisite and was ostracized from the group. As a result, I don't dance around in circles with the other members at parties or participate in their occasional community service activities, so to say

the least I'm a bit indifferent when I meet him. However, since we do not probe our shared fraternal history and since he has girls with him and I don't, Cliff and I exchange numbers and make plans to check out a few bars that night.

At 10:00 p.m. we're walking aimlessly through downtown Lincoln, with McDonald's cups full of vodka and orange drink. Whether due to his stutter, which I know from personal experience can make conversation difficult, or because we're two men who met in a mall hanging out together, we don't say much to each other. Finally, through the air of uncomfortable silence, Cliff randomly says in a deep Mississippian accent, "You ever ffff-fucked a-a-a pregnant girl?"

I snicker. "Nah, man."

"Tha-tha-that shit be good," he says.

This is the gist of our conversation.

After windowing a few bars we decide most of the nightlife is on the street. We come across three black women parked outside of a bar, each with the curly hair and pronounced cheekbones common among East Africans. Possessing the confidence of an NFL player with an extra Y chromosome, I lean into the car window.

"Hi. Is there anything going on tonight other than the parking lot?"

They're hooked by my corny joke that's not a joke. From the back seat, the youngest girl says, "No! What you do?"

I can't immediately figure out if she's speaking some strange Nebraskan slang or English with a foreign accent. I look over at the fraternity brother for clarification and see he's anxious to say something to the women. He's making dead-on eye contact and his mouth is moving, but the words do not come.

I jump in before he spit sprays the girls with any s-words. "Yeah, we'll find something." I add, "How's your night going?"