

Translated excerpt

Eckhart Nickel
Punk

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What She Said

Lambert opens the door with great affectation, waving us through, and at last I am able to take a look around the rest of the apartment. The hallway is tiled along its wall in square plastic sleeves with record covers in them and, at the far end, leads to a light-filled kitchen.

He hastens to shut the door behind us and traces a square in the air.

“Sadly, that’s also the only form of decoration in which we indulge. But shhh! We of course don’t show contraband stuff like this to anyone else. Plus: there’s only one band we think is genius enough to risk our necks for: The Smiths!”

This immediately makes me think of my favorite film scene. There’s a girl riding an elevator beside a boy wearing a cardigan and tie, listening to “There Is a Light That Never Goes Out” on his headphones, oblivious, when she starts speaking to him. At first, he doesn’t even catch that she’s talking to him about his music. He just nods and keeps his headphones on. Then, as she keeps talking, he finally removes them. She ends her profession of love for the band with a vocal interlude and the sweet compliment about what great taste in music he has. By then, however, she’s exiting the elevator, leaving the boy behind in stunned amazement, unable to comprehend what had just transpired.

It’s the beginning of a pretty tragic love story and so enchanting that I immediately put the boys to the test about whether they know the film, quoting: “I said *I love the Smiths*. You have good taste in music.”

Despite expecting the *White Noise* to intervene at any time, I continue my singsong, not half as charmingly as the actress: “*To die by your side, it’s such a heavenly way to die*. Love ‘em.”

Both shoot back in one voice: “*Holy shit!*”

From this point on, nothing else can really go wrong.

Ezra bursts into laughter. “You’re not for real, are you? You’re the first person who really gets our little obsession on the wall here.” Lambert nearly cuts him off. “Here, look, the super rare

maxi single: ‘What Difference Does It Make?’ with Morrissey *himself*, holding his eerie glass of milk.”

He points to a bluish-white cover in the middle. Since all the record sleeves feature multicolored photographs, the wall makes me think of a gigantic game of Memory, or a kind of art installation in a gallery. The phrase “temporary exhibition” pops into my mind because of the practical protective plastic pockets.

“Do they stay just like that, or do they ever get moved around?”

Ezra sighs. “You bring up a currently very sore subject. I’d like to just leave it hanging like this since, as with all aesthetic phenomena, an ideal combination does, naturally, exist, but Lambert views it as a deck of tarot cards to be reshuffled every Monday. That way he can set the tone for what’s in store for us over the coming seven days. *Knight of Cups?* Cheers!”

Lambert immediately objects: “Ezra dear, where in the world did you get that idea, from one of your weird art zines? I protest, and in the strongest of terms. Everything concordant in its constituent parts ‘naturally,’ as you put it, allows almost infinitely many aesthetically perfect variations. For me, it’s purely a geometry of chance, as consummate as those miniature crystal palaces within the most beautiful snowflakes.”

Ezra removes a record right from the middle with Truman Capote on it, leaping through the air with outstretched arms, and switches it with one from the bottom that shows a man sleeping languorously in the sand, his face mirrored in a patch of water.

“And now? Everything still just as subtly configured and balanced as before? Rather not, I think. Just as in real life, Capote always needs to be the focal point, lest he immediately lose his rollicking cheer. Down below, he’s not just leaping out of the image, but off the whole wall, and if we fail to look for even a second, will probably quit the party next, and we’ll have one guest of honor fewer in our home.”

I try to imagine how a run-of-the-mill kitchen conversation might unfold in the mornings and for the first time am beginning to harbor doubts about whether I even want to move in here. I mean, who wants to find themselves before even the first cup of coffee of the day in a Romantic dialogue novel that demands a maximum of quick-wittedness and knowledge of cultural trivia

from anyone earnestly hoping to keep pace? The peculiar conversation between the two unsteadies me because I cannot shake the feeling that it may all be part of their game of twenty questions which Anna had predicted. Unfortunately, I can't figure it out. That, in turn, totally pisses me off because I am neither able to nor wish to accept that I, for a change, might lack insight. To remedy the situation and regain the upper hand, it occurs to me that it might appear clever to turn the tables and ask questions myself.

“Have you two ever pondered whether humor is something people can have solely unto themselves without having to share it with others?” While Ezra carefully slots the maxi singles back into their original places, he mumbles almost absentmindedly to himself: “There, Monsieur Charming Man, now you can once more project into the wall from outside our imagination to probe its reflection while you sleep.” And, turning to me, a bit louder: “Yet another thing the pictures are good for: as an explanation for a phenomenon you're thinking about or discussing. One can simply query them in all potential circumstances, so to speak. We need only take Jean Marais here and his likeness in this sandy pool. I'd say he doesn't need any company. And he's capable of amusing himself. Who knows, perhaps people incapable of laughing at themselves or even by themselves are also generally never funny or amusing, which is to say without any talent for comedy.”

Lambert gestures for us to come to the room at the end of the hallway. “For once I have nothing to add, Ezra dear, you're quite right. Although, how does it go in Kafka at the end of that exquisite short story? *And he turned away like someone wishing to be left alone with his laughter.* Or something like that. Well, here it is, cleared for inspection, the room in question.”

Just as I am considering whether I can even regain the advantage here, something unexpected occurs. A familiar voice shouts the word I couldn't recall earlier, and more than once at that. It's not just the word she's shouting though, but an entire sentence, the word, however, louder than the rest. Its echo makes it up from the street through the slightly open window: “This is just CRAZY, this is just CRAZY.”

Then I hear a few more snippets of filler that vaguely sound like *you're also here?* I haven't the faintest idea what Anna is thinking, but it's *my* safe word she's bellowing about. Do I have to rush off to *her* aid down there now? I simply act as if I were curious and walk across the

room, which, I immediately realize, has truly nice light and generous proportions: “What ever is that noise down there? You’d almost need double panes if you wanted to study here in peace. Hahaha, or what do you think? Am I right, or am I right?”

The two have installed a kind of thin paper curtain over the tall casement windows which rustles like raw silk when you push it aside. So as to make my gander at the street below as inconspicuous as possible, I simply keep talking. “But, as one quickly learns while looking for an apartment: everything is always *either-or*: either beautiful or practical, either nice or cheap, either a good location or a bargain.”

Lambert clears his throat all too obviously, as though I’d taken the wrong tone, which doesn’t bother me one bit, though, because what I see down below consumes all my strength. Despite my attempt to maintain outward appearances at least, the unmistakable feeling creeps over me that all the color has drained from my face in a second. Oh. My. God. Kirsten. It is my sister, of all people, down below with Anna. And to judge from the way she’s gussied herself up, she’s either on her way to a date or, what I am afraid of, is the next showing up here with the brothers right after me—which, it occurs to me, is one and same thing.

Without a second thought, I shut the cracked window with brio and note that I am blushing because that is, once again, rather intrusive. I am also turning red, however, because I’ve already, as they say, developed a crush on Lambert and Ezra, even though I initially found the two of them completely ludicrous because they came off as immature and kooky at the same time. Or is it precisely that which so appeals to me about them?

No sooner has Kirsten left than there is a buzz at the door. I flinch because of course it is no normal buzzer, but, dearsweetgodalmighty, a melody. And again I wonder where *The White Noise* is, as before with The Smiths. Is this perhaps some autonomous zone immune to the evils of that mighty noise? At this point I remember the coatrack, and now I also recognize the song obscured behind those five notes: “Strawberry Fields Forever”! Every arriving guest is thus formally announced with the words: *Let me take you down*. You have to give it to the brothers: in the context of an interview, of course, that is extremely funny and telling. Not only will we—which is almost certain at this point—properly take you down a peg and really roast you.

No, we'll even accompany you down the stairs afterward like the good boys we are so that we can be a hundred percent sure you vanish from our lives once and for all. And the best part about this: of all people, the person concerned cannot hear the melody that portends this rather unpleasant future prospect. Instead, this sequence of pitches is only designed for the originators of such villainy, who thereby attune themselves to what is announced by that musical battle cry. Brilliant out-of-the-box thinking.

Anna, please tell me that I'll never have to leave here. I'll take the room, of course. In principle, though, I'm no longer quite so sure whether it's for rent. Ultimately, all of this is merely, as my clever French teacher had called it, an *acte gratuit*. Which is to say: a purely purposeless as well as highly entertaining event that has no meaning beyond its own inherent amusement, the very opposite of seriousness, but by virtue of its theatrical character very much an artform. As a declaration of war against omnipresent boredom, at once ephemeral and highly diverting. And the best part? This here had just been my guest appearance on this show.

"Oh, good gracious me, someone has definitely arrived too early, and by more than a whopping five minutes!"

Lambert opens a golden pocket watch fastened to the side pockets of his vest by a chain and ogles the antiquated clockface in emphatic criticism.

"For me pretty much a reason to cross them off, what do you think, Ezra?"

Ezra looks at me inquisitively. "We're still not done yet either. Do you even like the room, Karen?"

With an indifferent expression, I let the paper curtain slip from my hand with marked listlessness, despite feeling complete panic spread within me. Ezra definitely notices, gazes at me inquisitively, and for the first time looks me over from head to toe—a gesture which I cannot stand, even in good friends, and which makes me totally nervous because I always assume there's a stain I've overlooked somewhere on my clothes. Or there's something on my face, and my interlocutor is refraining from pointing it out to me out of misinterpreted tact and a lack of genuine empathy. In such situations, I can never decide which I find worse: the embarrassment

of being so slovenly as to have overlooked something on my outfit or the shame of unwittingly taking a monstrous faux pas on my head out for a stroll.

“Is everything okay, Karen? Your face is as pale as if you’d seen an apparition.”

I attempt an apologetic smile. “Oh, it’s nothing, I just went to bed a bit late yesterday, and then I always have this sort of brief afternoon lull. It’ll pass. But I do have one request: I know it will sound strange to you, but I promise I’ll explain it all later. Is there perhaps any second exit I could use?”

Under absolutely no circumstances must Kirsten find out that we are both interested in this room. My perceived odds of actually getting the room dwindle with every misstep in this behaviorally disordered minidrama. If Kirsten cottons onto the fact that it’s me with whom she’s in competition to move in here, within minutes she’ll turn in such a showstopper performance that I might as well just move straight back home into the dorm.

A broad grin settles across Ezra’s face. “Even we hadn’t yet thought of a second exit, had we, Lambert? A terrific idea you’re giving us, actually. Here, too, in our beloved stronghold, there are certainly recurrent circumstances from which one might like to extricate oneself discreetly and without being seen. Particularly when unloved visitors—who were usually never invited of course but had found their way to us in tow via for-this-reason-likely-soon-to-be-former friends—absolutely did not notice when they had long since overtaxed our hospitality. Such individuals like to ignore all those still so pedestrian gestures for ushering someone out, like demonstrative yawning or obstinate glances at the clock. An especially tenacious specimen indulged in the height of brazenness: somebody actually refilled—and generously—a dirty glass, which I myself had placed in the sink earlier, from a bottle of wine that had already been cleared from the table and put back on the shelf. And this, after I had returned to the kitchen from my bedroom in my pajamas, having specifically already gotten bed-ready, so to speak!”

Lambert laughed out loud and waved me out of the room into the hallway. “Although we have unfortunately not yet installed this emergency exit for leaving the century of courtesy – it was probably the eighteenth, right? – we do nevertheless have an all the more pleasant solution: in-house, as it were. And this, now, really is quite a large vote of confidence.”

He raises a sleeve of the Smiths Memory Tarot deck and presses against something that looks like a small soot trap for a chimney running behind it. The opposite wall starts to move like a revolving door, leading to a room beyond in which the light immediately turns on.

“If you’re going to challenge us with such surprise moves, we might as well show you the literal door, I thought. Voilà, our small but first-rate STEREO LAB. More on that later, once the next candidate has left. Which, if I adhere to my inquiries and put her much too early arrival time in the balance, should not take all that long. By the way, for people with marked curiosity—please don’t take that the wrong way; it also applies to Ezra and me, which is why it is there in the first place—there is analog peephole through which you can follow the interview. But only if you should grow bored here, which, though, I am hardly afraid you will. The peephole is exactly in the middle of the wall on the right. Incidentally, the room is temperature-controlled and absolutely soundproof. Just in case you were to contract a case of the giggles.”

I step into a bizarre cross between a limestone cave and an egg carton, its floor all glass with stalagmites underneath and projecting outward uniformly from all the walls like mini pyramids: definitely, it flashes through my mind, a torture chamber for claustrophobics. In order to calm anxious characters like me, the two have placed a glass cabinet in the middle of the room with a mixing desk and an old-fashioned cassette recorder on top and inviting womb chairs beside it. There’s that door buzzer again! In my thoughts, I rip Kirsten another one: “Are you insane? Look at the time! Anyone who shows up early has no right to be impatient if nobody answers the door straightaway!”

Yet immediately I think, genius, the double buzz was definitely Anna’s idea so that Kirsten would promptly make herself disliked.

Solidarity to friendship is how Anna explained her most important principle to me very early on: “There are ‘friends,’ and there are friends. There are the ride-or-dies. And there’s you. In exactly this order. The closer, the more loyal.” How lucky I am with her. It’s not just that I can blindly rely on my new best friend. It’s more that I am nearly certain I’ve got this room in the bag, so to speak—irrespective of all impertinences, overreaching, panic, and second exits.

The door latches behind the two with a muffled click, and for the first time in my life, I am locked up in a completely soundproof room without a visible exit—without any fear whatsoever, actually. Even the glass floor seems to have been laminated in a special coating; at least I can walk without hearing my footsteps, as though I'd suddenly gone deaf. For that reason, I say—just to say something, yet very quietly so as to conceal, even from my myself, all doubts about the veracity of my perception—the safe word: *crazy*.

But that, too, sounds pretty weird, as though the utterance were taken directly out of my mouth and swallowed by an invisible being that is all around me, everywhere at once. I've heard from travelers how unsettling air without any humidity is high in the mountains because we don't know how best to adjust our breathing to such dryness. Almost automatically, I begin swallowing at the thought, and my mouth feels as if there were hardly any spit left. This place here seems to be both at once: extremely dry and absolutely soundless. A vacuum. Surely quite helpful against *WHITE NOISE*.

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Natural's Not in It

Like most fundamental social changes, *The White Noise* also sounded more like whimpering at the beginning than it did a boom. Its spread happened in passing and seemed to me like a series of coincidental occurrences that did not necessarily have anything to do with one another. There was, for instance, this graffiti that showed up overnight on the side wall of the Alte Oper, not sprayed, but in white paint, although the three words in question had been brushed on in a child's spidery handwriting. In those days, we would always play Frisbee on Opernplatz, and for us, at first glance, it looked more like one of those ads for youth musical theater performances. Because the paint had apparently been a product custom-manufactured to be difficult to remove, the traces of which still unmistakably showed the outlines of the words even after their removal, there was a humorous discussion in the local press about serious versus popular music. Our parents found it crazy funny because the question about the average half-life of the pop music Kirsten and I listened to and how it would stand the test of time in relation to classical music was central. *Here to stay or should it go?* was the headline of the

region's most popular daily newspaper, in English for a change in order to make reference to "The Clash" and the origin of "White Noise." Hahaha.

Then the impacts hit closer to home. For an hour, the frequencies of all the popular radio stations went off the air during peak listening time. We could only tune in to the informational broadcaster and to all-day news programs, and my father told us how his evening drive in rush-hour traffic felt like one big extended hour of conversation without any musical accompaniment. Even with the help of a special commission from the Bureau of Investigation called up specifically for this incident, they couldn't identify the jamming station. The public was unbelievably worried because, in the words of our minister of domestic affairs, this was "clearly an attack on the nation's critical infrastructure." A short while later, there were television reports about a wall of sound that according to eye witnesses—or better: ear witnesses—"appeared completely out of nowhere." The thing we found coolest about open-air festivals as teenagers, this super-special effect everyone called the *wall of sound*, for which the bands had to amass entire mountains of speakers, was right in the center of our city, where this wall of sound grew louder and louder around midday, a deeply disturbing effect. It was not even music, but a tremendous, ear-splittingly loud hissing static. I thought it sounded like a heavy storm had taken hold of the ridges in the surrounding Central Uplands, which were always mentioned in the weather reports when it got windy. And now the treetops churned by the gale-force winds were simply being broadcast into the inner pedestrian zone via invisible speakers, with volume knobs turned all the way up.

Kirsten thought the incident had something to do with the simultaneous demonstration against the driving bans issued throughout the entire city area. In particular she had made fun of the fact that the old biker anthem "Born to be Wild" by Steppenwolf was played repeatedly at the rally between the speeches as musical accompaniment, and that, said Kirsten, deserved to be punished. Then, when another incident occurred during the most highly rated primetime evening talk show, no one could argue it was coincidence.

Just before the upcoming elections, the investigative TV host had assembled on his show representatives from every party to discuss the crisis topic "Education on the Brink," and thanks

to his legendary chameleon-like capacity for empathy, he had again succeeded in drawing his guests fully out of their shell. We sat before the television, riveted, when it was just about to come to fisticuffs between the ultraconservative candidate and his adversary from the environmental party. They were also discussing which values from our own cultural milieu were still being taught in school and what effect that would have on adolescents, meaning us. Right in the middle of the broadcast, a sound no one had heard in ages suddenly filled the television studio. According to our parents, it was the noise of the black-and-white screen snow from the previous millennium that would accompany the end of nightly programming. Due to the overmodulation with which it blared from the speakers of our totally antiquated Marantz set, however, the scratchy sound took on the impression of a hail shower pelting down onto the studio's roof. It so shocked the belligerent politicians that the ultraconservative, seemingly paralyzed, let go of his colleague's batik dress, which he had only just harassingly held up to the camera, berating it as a bellicose eco-camouflage uniform that would immediately disqualify its wearer from any assessment whatsoever on the topic of morality.