

ASYLUM

by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

OLUJIMI "JIMI" SONUGA	Nigerian, in exile in the United States. Early to mid 50s
RIC RUBY	Blackjack player. 30s
GARY BALLANTINE	Casino owner/philanthropist 40s-50s
CAROL SANDS	General Manager of the Institute for Literary Asylum. 30s-40s. Also plays Motel Manager.
CINDY	Jimi's girlfriend. 20s
DEALER	Blackjack dealer. May be portrayed as different dealers. Also plays Voice #1. 20s-50s

SETTING

Las Vegas, Nevada, present day. Various locations in the Luxor Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, and the offices of the Institute for Literary Asylum. Flexible unit set.

A small, clean, sterile meeting room in the offices of the Institute for Literary Asylum. OLUJIMI ("JIMI") SONUGA and CAROL SANDS are going through several files.

CAROL

He was in for thirteen out of the last eighteen years.

JIMI

(reading the file)

He's been out for only four months. How long has he been in St. Johnsbury?

CAROL

Three months.

JIMI

I haven't been to Vermont. I hear it's very beautiful.

CAROL

I haven't either. I hear it's beautiful but St. Johnsbury's a pit.

(beat)

It doesn't say if he's been tortured. He refuses to speak about his time in prison.

JIMI

He's been tortured.

CAROL

How do you know?

JIMI

The way his arms hang in these pictures. The way he's holding that glass. They hang you by your arms. It never heals completely.

CAROL

I've heard about that. They used to do that in prisons here. In the old days.

(beat)

I think his poetry's good. The essays, only a couple have been translated, they're lousy translations, I don't think you have to read them.

JIMI

I'll skim them.

CAROL hands him another file.

CAROL

This one, are you familiar with her work? -- she's been staying with a couple in --

JIMI
 (looking at the file)
 Wait -- I thought Gary said "No more Africans."

CAROL
 No, actually, that's not what he said, it's just the first two were colleagues of yours and --

JIMI
 I know, we want to mix it up a little. I agree.

CAROL
 I thought a woman would, you know . . .

JIMI
 Not part of my "old boy network," eh?

CAROL
 No, I'm not--

JIMI
 I'm teasing you.

CAROL
 Don't cop out, you said it.

JIMI
 (laughing, good-naturedly)
 AAH, you've got me pegged, you've got the old weasel pegged. That's right. Okay. No more Nigerian-fiction-writer-political-dissident--

CAROL
 Stop!

JIMI
 --prisoner-victim-of-torture-Old-Boy-Network. China -- China is hot, what do you have from China?

CAROL
 (re: the file she just gave)
 What about--

JIMI
 Forget her, I want to see the Chinese.

CAROL
 She's been through a lot of--

JIMI
 I'm serious, give me a Chinese.

CAROL
This woman has--

JIMI
Forget her.

CAROL
JIMI, with all due respect, you're being a pig.

JIMI
That's right. Correct. I am.

Beat. He picks up the African woman's file, begins to read it. Pause.

CAROL
I don't like being tested.

Pause.

JIMI
(reading the file)
It's a sad story. None of her work's been translated?

CAROL
Her first novel's coming out in English in May. University of Iowa Press.

JIMI
Torture?

CAROL
Doesn't appear to be torture. It's too bad, everything else is ... I mean, not ... you know. Shit.

JIMI
No. Torture is, what did you say last week, about the Chinese?

CAROL
I was a pig, I --

JIMI
No, it was a good point, seriously. You said ...

CAROL
I said it was sexy. China. Right now. I'm sorry.

JIMI
No, it was a good point. Seriously. China is sexy. Torture is sexy. It's easier to sell to the foundation. It's easier to sell to the patrons. It's easier to sell to the press. Nothing sexier than torture.

CAROL

I'm sorry.

JIMI

Shut up. Prison made me an activist, it didn't make me an idealist.

Pause as he reads.

CAROL

Oh, the National Distillers convention moves into the Luxor this weekend and it's going to be a zoo. I can move you to Mandalay Bay if you'd like.

JIMI

The Luxor is just fine.

CAROL

They'll probably keep you up all night.

JIMI

I'm up all night anyway. I have tickets for Don Rickles on Friday and I leave for the Hartford conference on Saturday. I won't even be around.

CAROL

Are you ever going to let us move you into a condo?

JIMI

I like the Luxor.

CAROL

It just seems a little ridiculous that we're finding places to live for these other people and you're still in that sarcophagus.

JIMI

I like the Luxor. It doesn't cost the Institute anything and I like it.

He finishes reading the file, closes it.

CAROL

What do you think?

JIMI

Let's see what you've got from China.

BLACKOUT

JIMI and CINDY enter JIMI's room at the Luxor, in high spirits.

CINDY is young enough to be JIMI's daughter, very pretty. The room is relatively small, with a sloped ceiling, as if it's on the inside of a pyramid. The decor has an "Egyptian crypt" theme and the lighting is dark.

CINDY

I can't believe you laughed when Don Rickles called you "Uncle Remus."

JIMI

I loved it. It's what they're all thinking, isn't it? When they see an older black man? Most of them. He just brings it out in the open.

CINDY

Don't get me wrong -- I love Don Rickles.

JIMI

Don Rickles is the perfect Vegas headliner. All the shit's just right out there.

CINDY

Thank you so much.

JIMI

You're very, very, very, welcome.

They kiss. They fall onto the bed.

CINDY

(looking up at the
ceiling)

Oh god, this dumbass pyramid ceiling, I always think it's gonna start closing in on me like in some Indiana Jones movie or something.

JIMI

I like it.

CINDY

This room is like, I dunno, a clubhouse for twelve-year-old boys. Did they really think couples were gonna want to fuck in these rooms?

JIMI

They don't want them fucking, they want them gambling.

CINDY

I bet you and I are the only people who've ever fucked in one of these rooms. Well, maybe a couple of S and M guys, y'know, guys with black latex masks and long braided wigs with Egyptian beads...

JIMI

... and they take the wigs off and whip each other with them...

CINDY

Right, you got it, those guys and us are the only people who've ever fucked in one of these rooms.

JIMI

You're proud of that.

CINDY

No I'm not.

JIMI

Yes you are.

CINDY

No I'm not, it means you're a twelve-year-old boy--

JIMI

Uh-huh, that's good, that's good--

CINDY

And I'm ...

(laughs)

... a *pervert*, I dunno.

JIMI

Does your mother know you're out seducing 12-year-olds?

CINDY

Don't you bring my mother into this. My mother loves me unconditionally.

JIMI

There's no such thing as unconditional love.

CINDY

My mother lives in a nice condo in Summerlin and so should you.

JIMI

Oh, oh, now you want to turn me into your mother?

CINDY

You're old enough to be my mother

JIMI

(with humor)

Aaaah!

CINDY

That's what you get for wanting to fuck in a sarcophagus.

JIMI

I don't want to fuck now. You've ruined me.

CINDY

Suit yourself.

JIMI

And I have to go to Hartford early in the morning.

CINDY

So? You never sleep anyway.

JIMI

I nap.

CINDY

Take me to Hartford. I'm off tomorrow.

JIMI

I'm there for three days. And you'd be bored out of your mind.

CINDY

Sounds interesting. Prisoner's rights.

JIMI

Three days on international prisoner's rights is ... well, I suppose it could be interesting. It tends to make me very ... tired.

LIGHT SHIFT to bright light. JIMI addresses the audience.

JIMI (cont'd) (CONT'D)

They would blindfold us and take all of us outside. Make us kneel. Then they'd press their guns against our heads. They'd say that some guns had bullets, some didn't. Then they'd fire. You lose everything -- all control, your bladder, your sphincter, you can't help it -- it all lets go. Then you'd be led back to lie in your soiled clothes. If you were one of the lucky ones, of course.

LIGHT SHIFT back to hotel room.

CINDY

It's hard for me to get that this guy right here and that guy are the same guy. I still don't know how you got through all of that.

JIMI

It's called "dissociation." I would disassociate. That's what the psychiatrists call it, anyway. They classify it as a disorder. I prefer to think of it as what I do when I write. If I'm having a really good day.

BLACKOUT

LIGHTS UP. JIMI is playing blackjack. ACTOR 1 is the DEALER. It's roughly 4 a.m. WE HEAR the low-volume cacophany of electronic slot machines blooping and bleeping in the background.

JIMI and the DEALER play silently, gracefully, JIMI signalling for a "hit" or "stand" with his hand.

RIC, a man in his thirties, enters. He appears to be drunk. Ric slams some bills onto the table.

RIC
(loudly)

I'm buying in.

The dealer does not respond to RIC

RIC (cont'd) (CONT'D)
You got a problem? I said I'm buying in.

DEALER
Sir, I'll give you your chips when this gentleman's hand is finished.

RIC
That hand looks finished to me.

JIMI signals for a "hit." The DEALER deals an eight.

RIC (cont'd) (CONT'D)
(crowing)
Aaaah! Busted! Shoulda' listened to me, man, fuck this etiquette shit, dealer plays etiquette while he's cleanin' you out.

The DEALER takes RIC's money, pushes a stack of chips to RIC.

JIMI
Actually, the proper etiquette is to ask if you can join a table at any time except when the dealer's shuffling. So the dealer's cutting you some slack -- etiquette-wise.

Beat.

RIC
You're shittin' me, right. You didn't just mean that.

JIMI
Yes I did.

RIC

You're the only fucker sitting here, it's 4-in-the-morning, and I gotta ask your permission to join the table?

JIMI

According to gambling etiquette, yes. Especially at 4-in-the-morning.

DEALER

Place your bets, gentlemen?

RIC slams some chips down. JIMI places his bet. The DEALER deals. RIC keeps his eyes on JIMI

RIC

Is that a threat?

JIMI

It's an opinion.

RIC

'Cause guys can get meaner at 4-in-the-morning. I like that.
(to dealer, loudly)

Hit me!

(JIMI signals for a hit.)

Hit me, hit me, hit me. Say it loud, say it long, "Hit meeee."

(The DEALER deals, flips his own card over. RIC's won, JIMI's lost. RIC crows.)

AAAH! Shoulda' doubled down. But I'll take it, I'll take it.
(To JIMI)

Too bad, man, maybe next time.

RIC and JIMI both place their bets. The dealer deals. RIC looks at JIMI's hand.

RIC (cont'd) (CONT'D)

Ouch. Fifteen. Tell you what -- I'm feeling lucky. I'm gonna ride your bet. And you're gonna hit. And I'm telling you, my rider's going to turn your bet into a winner.

(to dealer)

Hit me. And hit him too.

JIMI

(ignoring RIC, to dealer)

Stand.

RIC

No, fuck it, hit him.

JIMI

Stand.

(to Ric)

When this hand is over, I'd like you to join another table.

RIC

(dismissively, quickly)

No I'm not, nah, I'm staying right here.

DEALER

Sir, if you don't stop disrupting the other players' play, I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

The dealer deals himself a card.

RIC

(ignoring the reprimand,
to dealer)

Aaah, 21, you lucky sonofabitch, you beat both of us!

(To JIMI)

And that 5 would've been yours if you'd hit like I said. 12 to one odds say you win. If you ride my rider. Put *that* in your next book.

DEALER

Sir, please leave the other players alone.

RIC comically looks all around him. Then, gesturing to JIMI.

RIC

You mean him?? I don't see no other players here. Just the writer.

(to JIMI)

Yeah, I know you. I know who you are. I *know* you inside out.

DEALER

That's it.

(signals offstage,
presumedly to Security)

JIMI

(to dealer)

No, that's allright.

DEALER

Not with me it isn't.

RIC

Okay, Mr. Vice-Principal, I'm--

JIMI

It's allright see--

DEALER

Security!

JIMI

(tongue-in-cheek)

-- look, I can't afford to lose a reader.

RIC

I'm outta here.

JIMI

Let me ask you--

RIC

Nope, I'm done for the night. Don't want to deal with Mr. Vice-Principal's flunkies.

RIC points at JIMI and mouths silently, "I know you," then exits. Silence. JIMI and the DEALER resume play. Then:

DEALER

Insurance?

JIMI

No thank you.

BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS UP. JIMI at a symposium. He addresses the audience.

JIMI (cont'd) (CONT'D)

They would hang you by your arms so that your feet dangled just above the floor. You stretch your feet toward the floor, but they don't touch, it only makes it worse. No matter how much you begged -- and I did beg -- all they do is laugh. When they finally release you, they put a bowl of food on the floor. But you can't lift your arms -- not even to lift a small bowl. So you have to crouch on the floor and eat out of it like a dog. They weren't entirely stupid. They had a talent for metaphor.

VOICE #1 (O.S.)

Did they waterboard you?

JIMI

No. I was never waterboarded. But drowning on dry land -- that's another clever metaphor.

BLACKOUT