

# Goodbye Lucille

Segun Afolabi

*Jonathan Cape, 2007*

West Berlin, 1985. A permanent reminder of the Cold War tensions between communist East and capitalist West, it personified the worst of both worlds. Economically depressed and dependent upon financial handouts from the West German Government, it was a city with a depressing past and an uncertain future. The Kreuzberg district epitomised the malaise precisely: partly encircled by the Berlin Wall and filled with cheap, drab housing, it was largely populated by the dispossessed and the outsider: Turkish immigrants, West German youths avoiding the military draft, anarchists and drifters.

For Vincent, the protagonist of Segun Afolabi's first full length novel, *Goodbye Lucille*, Berlin, and Kreuzberg specifically, is the perfect place to lose himself. Overweight and unhappy, he sabotages his fledgling career as a photographer by continually rejecting the encumbrance of paying jobs.

He abandons himself to the dubious pleasures of Berlin's nightlife, drifting between drink and one-night stands, anaesthesia against the demons that drove to him there. In the past is London, still home to the eponymous Lucille, his cool, and cold girlfriend. Unable to commit to a meaningful relationship with her, he is nonetheless terrified at the thought of losing her.

What makes *Goodbye Lucille* so engaging is Afolabi's deceptively light, subtle touch in developing the narrative and the characters that populate it. So what seems to start as a standard murder thriller – Vincent is caught up, as a potential witness, in the murder of a charismatic German politician – elegantly morphs into an absorbing meditation on personal identity.

Gently, Afolabi leads us to a significant event in Vincent's youth that colours his worldview, and more importantly his sense of identity. Unobtrusively, Afolabi constructs a portrait of a man lost even to himself, so damaged that he would rather let his nihilism destroy him than allow others to come too close and perhaps, just perhaps, hurt him emotionally. We feel Vincent's pain, utterly and completely, so much so that even the predictable climax, the point where he is obliged to confront his demons, comes across as fresh and convincing.

The supporting cast – a transsexual ex-marine with ambitions of breaking into porn; a Kurdish refugee haunted by the terrors of his past; a Nigerian libertine with a new beauty on his arm every night; and others – come across as credible complements to Vincent's journey, rather than the cartoon pastiches that they could have so easily become.

The themes of rejection and abandonment are subtly reinforced through references to locale and contemporary events rather than overstressed. So, oblique references to Nigeria's deportation of two million Ghanaians in 1980 for example, or Vincent's Kurdish friend's paranoid conviction that he was being followed by the police, are all deft brush strokes that enrich the canvas.

Many years ago, some wise fellow wrote about Berlin: '*Berlin ist eine Stadt, verdammt dazu, ewig zu werden, niemals zu sein*' – 'Berlin is a city condemned forever to becoming, and never being'. Pretty much like Vincent. Highly recommended.

*Alex A Ajayi*