

Love in the Time of Global Climate Change by Josef Pánek

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Then at the conference you don't see her all day.

Ok, just between us, it's not like you weren't looking for her, quite the opposite, but you never ran into her.

You just didn't.

And now imagine that I'm not you, and you aren't you, and it's all about you, and you're really sorry. You are. Imagine that, ok? So it's the brown woman, who your colleagues said is dark and stinks, and only cares about getting the hell out of India.

Ok.

You bump into her that night when everyone is heading to the opening dinner of the conference, when the buses rattle their way into the Indian Academy of Sciences. Jesus, those buses, it's like they're made out of rusted cans, they shudder and shake like they're alive, and you, like the other participants at the conference, come out just to hear what's making all the racket and confirm that you've never seen anything like it before in your life. You haven't. And they, the organizers, want you to get in, please go in, they tell you, flashing you the broadest and brightest smiles, and all of them have brown faces and speak to you in the most mellifluous English, and when you respond, hey, it's fine with me, man, you sound like you're operating a bandsaw. You see her the second you step onto one of the buses, because she's sitting in the first row and there's an empty spot right next to her, so you sit down and the blue and orange of her sari are as loud as the rusted-out jalopy, and you ask her, what do you do...?

And she tells you, protein allostery. Spatial conformation. Her doctoral thesis is on the relationship between protein function and allostery, etc.

You talk among the clamor of the engine, because the driver is grinding the gears and revving the engine, and the whole heap of tin cans shakes and in it she sits in her formal sari, and you just cannot shake the thought that the colors perfectly match the giant Fanta can you're sitting inside, and you saw her in that slum right behind Queen's Road, and you sit next to her on the black bench-seat right behind the driver who cannot reach the absurd and curved gearshift that goes almost to the ceiling, he can't touch it at all, but occasionally he'll kick it with a bare brown leg, but it doesn't help, the bus doesn't even move, and the driver, brown as a boot, kicks the ever-shaking shifter, and the engine roars in the tropical heat.

And you yell at her, why are you doing a Ph.D.?

Because, she tells you, I want to get the hell out of India.

And it's not like they didn't tell you, before you left for India, that the one thing women in India want is to get the hell out of India.

You tell her.

I know, she says. And you, because you are not from India, cannot appreciate what I have told you just now.

And it's not like you didn't do your doctorate 14 years ago just to get the hell out of the Czech Republic, so it's not weird to you.

You tell her.

And she tells you that she is not surprised.

And that surprises you, and you tell her.

And she shouts to you that she knows that your country is a formerly Communist country, so everyone must have wanted to get the hell out. And you ask her what she discovered that will get her the hell out of India, and she tells you that she discovered that the reason bacteria appear alive or not alive is the difference in conformation of a single protein, as if the bacteria can do whatever they want.

She tells you this in the rusty, shaking collection of tin cans, where you can see grass and trees flowering and ornate bushes through the rusty metal frames of the non-existent windows and in the non-existent doors, and you have it on the tip of your tongue what's so right about her, you want to tell her this revelation that it's like she's in a cage, but then it really hits you that the bus doesn't have doors and it doesn't have windows, and you realize that from this rusted and dangerous heap of cans, the likes of which you've never seen before, you can step out anytime, you don't have to ask if they can open the window for you or the doors, or if it's your turn, you can stay and keep going, or you can simply fall out, it's all up to you, and at the same time it's always at your own risk, and you realize that European buses are so air-tight it's unsafe, while here in this heap of cans you're as free as a bird – which is absurd since birds in the sky follow invisible paths – but instead you tell her, that's great, you must be famous.

She answers that yes, she is.

Yes what? you ask.

I am famous. I have a phenomenal list of publications. But – so what? Do I really have to say it...?

Say it, you say.

I am famous today but tomorrow I won't be, kiddo, so while I don't give a damn about fame, I need to use it while I've got it. For what? you ask, and she explains, For a good life, kiddo, and not like in that Europe of yours where everyone longs for fame but almost nobody gets it, and for the one that does it brings everything but happiness. You're 43, even though you look about ten years younger, and she tells you, I, same as you, kiddo, never forget that science is just something they push on intelligent and receptive people to keep them from digging into stuff they shouldn't dig into. You yell to yourself and you yell to her, And just how do you know that I know that...?

I looked up, she yells, your publications on the internet, and the bus moves like a sloshed collection of rusty cans from the relatively quiet grounds of the Indian Academy of Sciences onto a road where the cacophony, chaos, and smog of real Bangalore traffic instantly crashes through the non-existent doors and the non-existent windows of the bus, through the ragged holes in the rusty can, and you are sitting right at the doorway on the black bench-seat, and the asphalt speeding past the non-existent door mixes with the rosy Bangalore dust and the poisonous exhaust of Bangalore traffic, and she sits at the window and you try to peek down her sari to look at her breasts, but she notices and wraps the top-half of the sari around her shoulders and chest, hiding herself underneath it, and you tell her that you weren't staring because you're an asshole, the type of guy who would pay for an underage girl in an Indian brothel, or even her, but, Jesus, the complete opposite, you were just looking beneath the yards of colorful fabric for what you photographed five days ago at the half-collapsed gate at the entrance to the Alliance Française de Bangalore, which to you looked like the entrance to a garbage dump or a junk yard, when you saw how beautiful she is, and now you're scared, scared that her beauty is getting away from you by some detour, just like the beauty of the receptionist in your hotel, but which...? Which...? You ask yourself.

You have no idea what the detour is, none!

None!

And meanwhile, as you damn well know, it's just your genes, what you got without wanting it, without standing up and choosing them, you know that some racist, fascist, or neo-Nazi who bases everything on his genes, would laugh right in your face, without knowing what genes are, without knowing what he bases everything on, without having any clue about the relationship between genes and instincts, but you know it, you know all about it,

everything there is to know – molecular genetics is your field – but right now, all that science of yours, what, is it doing for you?

What?

Meanwhile if a white girl, some bleached out English girl, a freckled Australian, or a pale Swede sat down next to you in the bus, you'd already have an erection, thinking of nothing but casual sex, because the three-quarters of a year before you traveled to India has been a dry spell.

So.

But something doesn't fit here, no! your mind screams out, but you have no idea what, and at the same time, you catch yourself praying that your own genes will betray you, as if you had gotten it without wanting it and being able to choose it, but incessantly, without even thinking about it, without thinking about it at all, you're looking at her sari trying to find the shape of her body underneath, like you don't want to even listen to them, those glorious genes of yours, which you didn't choose, which you would like to fight to the death in this stinking, rusting bus, as if you could suppress them, change them, and you remember clear as day – a simile that doesn't work at all in Bangalore, which under its veil of smog, its *ghoonghat* of smog, appears as if dirty, faded shades have been drawn before everyone's eyes, to the point that when you took her photo around midnight at the entrance to the Alliance Française de Bangalore, when she wore just an ordinary sweater and ordinary jeans, there was still some streetlight left and the glare reflecting off a nearby bonfire, rank and toxic as it was, appeared so gorgeous to you, and now you bitterly regret deleting her picture, and you cannot help thinking about how when you lived in Australia for three years, you flew back to the Czech Republic to see your family for Christmas, to the place where you were born and raised and learned your mother tongue, and you told your best friend from childhood that your girlfriend in Australia was from Bogota, from Colombia, and he said, ughh, you're dating some dirty brown indian, and – really, literally – he turned up his nose, despite never even seeing her, and you were so shocked at his way of thinking that you just stared at him with your mouth agape, for your colleagues at the university, your good friends, your girlfriend and future wife, were 75% Chinese and Colombian (6), one was Mexican with an Indonesian wife, and Lawrence Lau was from Singapore, and others were South American, so you knew that it's not just the age of multimedia, electronic communication and global climate change, but also the age of global emigration, and you knew it because you were living it, and had already known for a long time that racism isn't just nonsensical morally, but was already technically impossible, that it's technically impossible to live day-to-day without Indians and Chinese when a sixth of the world is Indian and another sixth is Chinese, and every big city in the world has a Chinatown, and three of your best friends were Chinese, whom you liked to tease on occasion about communism in their country, because you knew it just as well as them, and then on occasion you'd feel bad about it, and on occasion they'd go out for a beer with you because communism had brought you together – your past and their present, until they moved to Australia – and now the thought-process of your best friend from childhood shocked you so much that you didn't even tell him that your girlfriend from Bogota isn't brown, that she isn't indian, that her dad is Irish and that her mom is German, that her grandfather is Irish and her grandmother is German, that her great-grandfather is Irish and her great-grandmother is German, that her grandparents sailed to Latin America for opportunity, just like you flew to Norway and Australia, just like your girlfriend and future-wife left Colombia to study in the USA and Australia, so you went home drunk to your parents' house, where you were born and raised, and where your brother lives with his family, and you tell him, ok, yeah, your girlfriend is Colombian, and he gets mad and forbids you to be with her, and you say, what are you, nuts? she's beautiful, she's smart, and he tells you, and I quote, "You're not bringing any Machu Picchu gypsy into this family!" And you stand there staring at him with mouth agape, this is your brother, and you have a grandfather whose mother was killed in front of him by the Nazis, and when you think about this, you burst out laughing until you fall onto the floor, and your older brother tells you, You didn't just come home drunk, you came home from Norway and Australia a fucking idiot! And you were a professor of molecular genetics at the University of Queensland in Brisbane,

Australia, and you laughed and laughed because the absurdity of the racism was topped off by the paradox, which you didn't even try to explain to your brother, that your girlfriend and future-wife is just as white as he is, that she is from Colombia (not Peru!) but has Irish and German blood going back at least three generations, fluently speaks three major languages – Spanish (her mother tongue), English, and German – and taught you English, your second language, and that you didn't speak a single word the rest of the visit, Czech disgusted you, you never wanted to utter another word in that language of ignorant hicks, and you just counted down – in your mind – the days until you could fly back to Australia, and you still didn't understand that the place you were born had long ceased to be your home, no, you only realize it years later when you return to the Czech Republic from Australia, and you will never feel at home there, even though your wife told you exactly that in Australia, over and over, and it had no effect, and she left you, but more about that later, and now you, in Bangalore, India, you already know what she wanted to tell you, and the only thing that is important to you, that you want so badly, is for this Indian woman riding beside you to arouse you, but inside you, in your very depths, nothing is aroused, nothing is happening at all.

Then it occurs to you: What if it's because she's dark?

What if they're right? You think.

What if your best friend from childhood, your older brother, the neo-Nazis, the racists, the fascists, what if they're all right, and you with all your science, your genes, and instincts can just go fuck yourself.

And she tells you that from the entire conference she only really liked today's morning lecture about how to extract meaning from specialized literature. She tells you that the morning lecture is proof of science's ineffectiveness. It shows, she tells you, that all over the world science, 50% of the time, is bogged down with bias, from group interests and autotelism, it shows that it's been a long time since science strayed off course from the objective world, that it just follows the flow of money, just like everything in the world, and that includes art – the romance and magic of science is dead and gone.

I know, you say. And sincerely and dreamily you gaze out the non-existent windows of the bus, out the non-existent doors of the bus, through which the stench of exhaust penetrates, and you breathe with the one part of your lung that has remained undamaged, and the pink and ever-present dust from the streets of Bangalore flow around you, and the din, and she bares her soul to you.

Meanwhile if some pimply Polish girl, or a Czech or Hungarian, or a freckled English girl or Australian, since you haven't had any action for the year before this trip to India, the dry spell has been a full-on drought, well, if any of one of them were sitting next to you, you'd be thinking of nothing but casual sex, and the objectivity of science and the beauty of art would interest you not one bit.

Now the bus rumbles into the campus of Bangalore University on the outskirts of the city.

She gets up and gets out, and you get up and get out, but right before you do, through the non-existent doors of the bus and through the non-existent windows of the bus a gust of fresh air blows in and you suspiciously inhale, then you take in more and more, the campus is covered with grass and dew, you're far from the city-center on the outskirts, and for the first time in your life you delight in breathing, for the first time you savor the taste of the air, you could just inhale and exhale until you die, and meanwhile she's waiting for you in front of the bus, and you breathe and breathe and you can't inhale enough, and still you keep trying, you keep trying to make out the shape of her ass under that sari, and she notices and she tangles herself up in that heap of fabric even more, and more and more buses arrive at the campus, rumbling and shaking they stop and go quiet one after another, and through the non-existent doors appear more participants from the conference, and you ask her if she would like to take a walk with you...? Yes, she tells you, I would, and you still can't catch your breath, and she asks you, what are you doing...? You explain, I can't breathe in enough. And she asks you, why's that? And you explain, for the first time in five days I'm

breathing fresh air; she laughs and wonders, why's that? And you ask, can't you feel it? No, she answers you. And you ask her, do you ever go out to the five-meter high stone fence topped with broken glass that surrounds the campus, but not to just look, but to breathe...? And she tells you, yeah, of course, see we're different, I'm from India – I'm just teasing you. And she tells you, get used to this because it's the future.

What's the future? You're scared.

This, she tells you. This that's behind that wall – one day it will be the entire world.

Jesus Christ, you say.

And you better get ready for it.

Jesus Christ, you say.

But don't worry, she tells you, you've got a five-day lead.

And you?

365 x 26 days.

And you ask her, where do you want to get the hell out of India to, when you get your doctorate?

To the US, she says.

Why there?

Because, she tells you, I already have a job there—for part of the year. I mean I am famous after all. Unofficially, I have the rank of an associate professor.

And then she's quiet.

You just walk. You have the perfectly watered lawn beneath your feet.

Then she says, Why don't you tell that none of it's going to work out...?

Because, you tell her, you have to figure that out yourself.

It's just, she says, that I already know that, because what's behind that stone fence – and she points to it – I'll never rid myself of it. Am I right?

And you tell her, yeah.

Yeah.

Same for you?

The same for you, how you never rid yourself of your older brother, of the racists, of your best friend from childhood, of the neo-Nazis, of your first mother tongue. And what good did it do that you learned a new mother tongue, and you can do accents in English? What good did it do that you can speak English like a sailor and then like a professor? Still, it'll always, always, always just be your second mother tongue. It's the same principle, you tell her, which brought me back from Norway and Australia and Chile, although I had university positions in each of those places and learned how to conduct scientific research, but now I'm in the Czech Republic at the Academy of Sciences punished for being a good scientist, well, better than the world average, same as under the Communist regime when I refused to join the Communist party, because, you tell her, one of the greatest paradoxes in life is that the worse the misery, the stronger it binds you to it, it's impossible to explain, but it works that way 100% of the time – and now you point – and what is behind that wall is awful. If I had to choose between communism, which I lived under for 23 years, and that – hell, I don't know.

But I know, she says.

You know what? you ask.

That it's easy, she answers, to explain.

You ask, how?

It's because you have no idea what misery is.

What? you ask.

Because despite studying at university under communism, you still think that misery was your Communist regime. You still think that misery is beneficial because it throws obstacles in front of you. You think that either you surmount them because you are strong enough, or are crushed by them because you're weak. Still – even when you're here inside the campus with me looking out past the wall with its barbed wire and broken glass and the soldiers at the entrance – you naively believe that you can run from misery. You're still mistaking misery for the aggressive consumerism of your safe comfortable Europe. You still think that your older brother is racist, your best friend from childhood is a neo-Nazi, and that

your mother tongue is repulsive. And despite all that, on day 1 in Bangalore, you can't even buy bread.

How do you know that?

Ha, she says, I know. Look, even though I live in the USA half the time, I'm not the one who can't manage to buy water in India. Who's suffocating in India. Who wanders into an ordinary Indian neighborhood and thinks that he's entered a slum. Who's never seen an Indian slum in his life, and can't even imagine one. Who had to photograph a girl in jeans his first day in Bangalore to keep from crying.

I didn't cry.

Ok, she says, who would have died of hunger if the hotel didn't send him room service.

And you laugh.

You say, and you don't even know that I couldn't even get to the conference.

And she laughs and asks, really?

No. And you don't even know that the hotel had to send someone to the airport for me.

Yeah?

Yeah. Maybe there will be a shortage in education. Maybe there will be a miracle in education in India.

You know full well, she tells you, that there won't be.

Why not?

And she explains to you, that everyone can get an education in India.

And it's on the tip of your tongue why the campuses of the universities in Bangalore, all you've seen so far, are all found behind high stone walls and why soldiers guard them, and why the castellated walls are topped with broken glass, but you manage to swallow it down in time.

And she explains to you that a €50,000 education in India costs 60,000 rupees (about €1,000).

You can get a scholarship, she tells you, but the majority do not.

Your family can support you, she says, but most cannot.

And the most absurd thing, she says, is that you can't work while you study.

You're surprised, why's that?

Because at Indian universities you have mandatory attendance, you have one single time to take an exam, and that's it. Otherwise, she adds, the level of education in India is very high.

Traditionally, you add.

Traditionally, she replies.

And it's on the tip of your tongue – if that's not the reason – why the campuses of Indian universities are surrounded by walls and patrolled by armed guards, but you manage to swallow it down in time.

And that's the reason, she tells you, why the campuses of Indian universities are surrounded by walls and patrolled by armed guards, and why you're shit out of luck if you don't have money.

And in the end she tells you again, since you're not from India, you cannot appreciate what I've just told you.

You don't know how, but you wind up in the university library. It's beautiful. The library has glass walls from the floor to the ceiling, and the building is circular, and you see the sun setting, you're in the Indian tropics and soon the moon will come out and present itself to you from an angle you've never seen it at before, which you tell her, and she tells you, well try not to piss yourself, kiddo, and you ask her, aren't you from India, don't you look out past that stone fence way too often...? And she tells you, yeah, I do.

It's late and you're alone in the library.

Yeah, well.

And now, if there were the chance, you wonder if you could kiss her, if you could do it.

And now, if there were the chance, you ask yourself if you could caress her breasts, if you could do it.

And you feel... nothing.

And now, if there were the chance, to touch her face, stroke her hair, could you do it?

There's a reason they told you over and over, before you went to India, that brown girls smell.

There's a reason they told you over and over, before you went to India, that brown girls are dirty.

They told you this, the children of those who grew up under the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia.

Those Czech and Moravian neo-Nazis.

And you, in all the five days you've been in Bangalore, you haven't seen the people not smiling at each other, haven't seen them yelling at each other, pushing each other in the street, punching each other, and then last night when you came back to the hotel, traffic was backed up at an intersection, and all the drivers, including the drivers of public buses and tuk-tuks, were working on the car that had broken down and wasn't even blocking traffic but had been dragged off to the side of the intersection, but the intersection was blocked by the drivers kibbitzing and playing mechanic and their abandoned buses and cars, and their passengers just waited and chatted, and the scene was softened by the haze from the exhaust. And when you started talking to the tuk-tuk driver, you told him that in the five whole days you've been in Bangalore, you haven't seen people getting pissed off with each other, cursing, shouting, fighting, and shoving each other.

The driver answered you over his shoulder, you would see that, sir, just 7 kilometers outside Bangalore.

Wait, what?

Fights, stabbings, murder.

And the driver weaved his way between the traffic of Bangalore like he was enjoying a game of Russian roulette, the whole time flashing a broad and brilliant smile at you over his shoulder.

No wonder the campuses of Indian universities surrounded by gates topped with barbed wire and broken glass and patrolled by armed guards, just like she told you.

And now in the library, you tell yourself, no, she isn't turning you on at all, you couldn't even bring yourself to kiss her if the chance arose, to even touch her, etc., and under her sari you can't even make her out, i.e. her ass, her breasts, why the hell do the women even wear those? And at the gate of the Alliance Française de Bangalore, which reminded you most of the entrance to a dump, a junkyard, or some ruins, you took her picture just because she was wearing completely normal, boring jeans and a sweater, the 1 photo you've taken in your life, and it's just coincidence that she was in it, you tell yourself, and now you quickly say goodbye, it was nice meeting you, you tell her, but I should finally get back to the conference I came all this way for and finally meet up with my friends.