

An Eco- Terrorist Love Story

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I've learned to appreciate the bad puns at Balboa Research

Station. Whenever a steady light rain breathes over the jungle, ignoring our canopies as it prowls for the touchiest pieces of instrumentation, people say, "It's mist-ifying." Some anonymous soggy scientist must have coined the phrase years ago to ease the tension between teams of climatologists. After all, what better icebreaker than a comment on the weather? From "it's mistifying" grew a lingua franca of silly mottos: "How are you dewing this morning?" and several others that I'm too embarrassed to mention. But it's fascinating to watch newcomers adopt our misnomers and toss them back and forth to build camaraderie. The recent arrivals try to sound optimistic, even as the thankless slog of cataloguing tropical tree frogs changes them precipitously into us, a troop of glorified accountants under no illusion of preventing species extinction. The graduate students descend upon Balboa at four-month intervals with smuggled idealism. The mist invariably comes to greet them.

Another thing I've learned is how to tell the difference between a veteran field researcher and an amateur. It's simple: The vet will throw a tarp over the coffee maker first, and then the mass spectrometer. Minds take precedence over tools, and minds like Celia's need caffeine. I squeeze in next to her to stay dry. From underneath a plastic sheet, Celia produces two frothy mugs defter than a doctor delivering twins, and with the same trace of miracle. I accept mine gratefully. I remember when I first arrived at Balboa last year, Celia took a little while to warm up to me. It was due, I came to discover, to my resemblance to an old flame of hers, Felix de Silva, a native cauchero whose ancestral turf spanned the research station as well as the virgin acres beyond it prized by logging companies. Hot on the trail of a rare glass frog one day, Celia heard a woodwind's trill. She discovered Felix de Silva leaning against a rubber tree trunk, coaxing notes from a panpipe to accompany the rhythmic drip of

latex as it oozed from the lancet-like tap. He made love, Celia will freely admit, with similar sweet languor. This rustic troubadour was not without his defects, however, since Felix resembled another ex-boyfriend of Celia's, one of the *medicin sans frontiers* who was battling polio in tribal Pakistan. He dedicated himself to the eradication of microorganisms just as madly as Celia dedicated herself to the preservation of macro—. The shrinking pockets on the globe where polio was fighting its Alamo are what haunted the *medicin* day and night. He craved to know the feeling of wiping something completely off the face of the Earth. Celia did try to comprehend it, but she made a fatal misstep one night after an overdose on Humboldt's *Kosmos*, when all at once she couldn't discern why one form of life outweighed another—microbial “bad” but mammalian “good”—and, playing devil's advocate, Celia argued that polio was an essential contributor to biodiversity. She lost the *medicin*'s love forever. His style of tantrum throwing happened to be freakishly akin to the Baptist anarchist from whom Celia had fled barefooted and heartbroken in New Orleans.

It was evident right away that I was dealing with a woman tossed between extremes. Celia's paramours were flesh manifestos. Her soul was a cauldron of passions. It must have seemed, for a time, as though Felix de Silva was the stable pillar to moor herself upon, rooted as those rubber trees that he gently bled and ser-enaded. So when his naked corpse was found lynched at the jungle's edge, the news of it blew Celia's soul to pieces. She lost all interest in tree frogs and climate science but stayed on at Balboa as a kind of resident cynic. When I showed up here last Easter she was already a fixture.

My habit of softly whistling, my green thumb, the impression that as a lover I'd hate to rush it, which as virtues of Celia's previous suitor may have endeared me to her in a former life, did the opposite. I was trampling on a grave I couldn't see underfoot. My very presence was repeating the unwelcome cycle of Celia rushing pell-mell from impossible romance to impossible romance. But the matter was easy

to clear up, as it turned out. Following several weeks of giving me the cold shoulder, Celia simply noticed that I'm not an extremist. Swaddled in this Patagonia slicker is no warrior's heart, just the dutiful ticker of an eco-conscious technocrat. We became friends.

As a side note I'd just like to say, without bitterness, that I've enjoyed the close confidence of many extraordinary women for no other reason than sexual irrelevance. Being the nonthreatening sidekick to Amazons is a sort of minor profession of mine, and I'm truly convinced that intimacy of its kind outdoes the blind fission of bedmates. When we talk of unconditional love, what else can we mean?

"That's the last of the soy milk, so enjoy it," I hear Celia say as she takes a judicious sip of her coffee, but then flings the rest like slop into the mud. "Rancid grounds. Fucking Reinier's been raiding my stash again and leaving the container open. Cabrón."

I slurp mine but taste nothing awry.

The things she'll do to Reinier's genitals once the drizzle abates are varied and inventive. It somehow brings us around to our favorite topic of conversation. The gist: meaningful action. Celia goes on a well-rehearsed rant, and I agree with her up to a point. I understand how it's totally futile to spend our time tabulating the effects of global warming when common sense tells us that any future down our current path leads straight to hell. Twiddling hell's thermostat is absurd. The best that science can offer us now, having already peer reviewed the nature of our doom, is a nonbinding timeline. But that's incalculably worse (Celia argues) than wild, feverish visions of apocalypse.

"Give me macabre superstition instead of a palliative spreadsheet any day of the week. 'A three-degree rise in ocean temperatures by 2100.' Ha!" she scoffs in a generic Gen Xer's accent. "Eff that. We're playing right into enemy hands. Those denuders of the Earth who want nothing more than for us to prevaricate while they plunder and profit. Consider the human animal. Death is a guarantee and yet we always arrive unprepared. How can a surplus of statistics motivate

us to rescue our brethren—mammalian, amphibian, floral—when the mere notion of our own mortality causes us panic and paralysis? What we really need is a good old jolt of holy terror.”

So far, so good. But here is where we diverge. I ask Celia if instead of scientific inquiry she’s advocating a kind of pseudo-religious fervor, Adventist cults perhaps, and whether this wouldn’t lead us to the same impasse but from the reverse direction. Doesn’t imminent catastrophe render us helpless and fatalistic (to answer my own loaded question), just as its protraction makes us ambivalent and lazy?

She never gives me a straight answer. She just wants people to be scared shitless and to behave accordingly.

“Action. It’s a double whammy,” Celia says. “The problem with global warming is, firstly, its consequences are diffuse and, secondly, the actions we can take against it are unromantic. Where is the allure in using cloth diapers? Guerrilla warriors don’t march to the banner of solar panels. No bard composes revolutionary odes to the virtues of compostable utensils. But the ire of the people is there, we can feel it, Discontent and Impotency sit perched on the crown of Man,” it’s not unusual for Celia to talk like this, and by now I’ve grown accustomed to her florid effusions, “but where is our courageous Calvin with his nail, hammer, thesis? We can’t put abstraction into action. People need a target to aim at, and they need to hear the satisfying thwack of impact, otherwise there’s no visceral reward and this isn’t a war we’re waging, it’s some bogus exercise in attrition. Hello!”

A huddle of graduate students slobes past us, giving comradely nods. They enter the jungle perimeter, loath to lose a day’s data gathering to the stubborn damp, mistakenly thinking their dedication will impress us. Celia and I leave the shelter of the mess tent and walk with sucking steps up to the bunk cabins where she lays out fresh towels and energy bars, a de facto den mother. I hover nearby wanting to make myself useful but only have this to say:

“We don’t need chaos, though. Practically speaking, as frustrating and slow as it may be, a systemic problem requires a systemic fix. Luddites didn’t stop the Industrial Revolution. I want to take

action, sure, but more than anything I want results.” Stripping off her poncho, Celia flops down on an unmade cot and rests her eyes for a minute. My comment hangs in the air like something decorative but insubstantial. She knows me too well. I dissent under false pretenses. I don’t disagree with Celia, but I shrink from the desires her words awaken in me. The reason I, or any of us came to Balboa, really, the only reason, is to die with a clear conscience. We want to fulfill our nominal commitment and then return home with bragging rights, decorated veterans of The Good Fight. At least we can say that we did our damndest. Then we can point to historical inevitability for the global calamity—not our own cowardice—and luxuriate in the self-righteousness reserved for champions of a failed cause. How many saints await baptism in the rising seas?

Anything is preferable to making real sacrifice. I could have gone off the grid and built a log cabin, raised vegetable marrows, cured venison, shrunk my carbon footprint to chicken scratch, but why inconvenience myself if with a few laptop keystrokes I can summon the magic of Western civilization to jet hemispheres away and play Darwin? I see it clearly. I’m not innocent. Irony doesn’t keep well in this climate. Possibly without Celia’s companionship I would have quit long ago and ended the farce. Her sisterly cynicism has kept me in limbo. But how long did I think this could last until Celia’s smoldering grief over Felix de Silva’s murder sparked fire, and my yearning for a deeper purpose led me to follow her into the inferno?

“It has happened before. It can happen again. Someone needs to bend the arc of history...” her eyes crack open just a slit, peering directly into mine. “Someone like us.”

I won’t pretend to misunderstand what Celia means. The response of my blood, an instantaneous tumescence, causes me to crouch like a boxer, jack-knifed, combative. She has me now. Moving nothing except a fingertip, my every nerve lassoed to it, Celia draws me closer and whispers commands that I could have spoken myself. These very moments contain all that will come afterward.

The future that I've grown accustomed to seeing hazy and fractal snaps into focus like a cleansing eye blink. Parallel lines converge. And because there is no other way forward, it's much less shocking than it might seem when I find myself running toward the loggers' barracks with a silenced pistol in my fist and a pair of watchmen already executed back at the gate. Celia is inside by the time I reach the head honcho's hut. We're alone with Capitán So-And-So for barely a minute and he's confessed to Felix de Silva's assassination, given the names of accomplices higher up the food chain, spelling death for those men surely as his own breaths are numbered. The way Mozart looked at a piano and saw *Così fan tutte*, Celia looks at a pissant and sees a fantasia of agony. His howls, el capitán's, pierce the night for miles around, and I imagine them chasing the terrified woodsmen like demented spirits of felled trees, hexing all those who will come here with chainsaws and bulldozers forever. But I'm only able to hear—his hot blood streaking my face—the frogs' choral song filling the silence.

We put his head on a pike and we plant a leafy branch in his trunk. Contrapasso.

There's no question of sleep anymore. Cold sweats. Jagged images. The horror at what we've become runs thicker through my veins than Celia's, since I've been a sponge for liberal pacifism my whole life. Sometimes I mentally refute myself like a *New York Times* op-ed piece, citing how the impoverished citizens of developing countries have no other choice than to exploit their natural resources. The real culprits are greedy multinational corporations and insatiable Western consumers. To save the environment we must reform our own buying habits. The epitaph on my headstone: "He shopped conscientiously."

I grope around in the darkness. I seek out Celia, my hands moist and empty, only to find her standing at the far edge of the glade etched boldly in moonlight as she observes the dust clouds billowing from a distant caravan of poachers moving across the savannah.

Barely above a whisper: "Shall we?"

The orphaned elephant calf paces anxiously around the butchered carcass of its mother. The bound and gagged men kneel in puddles of their urine and jabber weepily. We force them to kiss a sawed-off tusk and then to pick heads or tails. Next, we insert the pointy end into their corresponding orifice until their screaming or kicking, respectively, stops. Our habit is to allow one survivor, the storyteller, whom if his mind doesn't crack from pain will spread the dreadful tale of his torture and embellish it to the status of myth. But to do so, Celia determines, he won't need his own ivories. She digs them out and pops in a hot coal to cauterize the gums. Meanwhile I hop on the GPS and relay our coordinates to the park warden of Ynratu Wildlife Reserve.

The Kenyan authorities officially deny any knowledge of our existence. Unofficially, they're our pit crew. Somehow Celia already knew a handful of the rangers from a previous escapade, and there was hardly any fuss about accommodating us—not that if she'd dropped from the moon it would have caused the slightest hiccup. Things had to happen this way. It isn't optimal or probable or preferable, but it's predestined. I'm constantly aware that my persona has folded into Celia's; we leave one set of footprints. I'm her natural partner, harmonious symmetry. To the supporting cast of men who've accumulated around us, all of whom must envision themselves heaving bull-like between Celia's tawny thighs, I'm like a squire or a caddie. They can't understand why she picked me to play demigods with. Little do they know that Celia's divine spark needs my dry husk to create combustion. Jealousy doesn't enter into it. The times which she and I have spent massacring bad guys under fabulous starry skies, no husband and wife, no legendary tragic lovers can approximate. Even if Celia does take a park ranger to bed every now and then, to satisfy an incorrigible animal itch, it only serves to elevate our perfect union.

We aren't informed of his visit in advance. It's strictly off the books. Sand pelts my face and I dream of suffocating in an hourglass before I awaken, gasping, to find Celia at the open flap of our

lean-to, her kimono whipped to a frenzy by the Apache helicopter's propeller cyclone. Word has spread to reach the ears of the wildlife reserve's principal benefactor, Samuel O. Pierce. He's paying us a visit. "We have unlimited funding," Celia mentions to me, and then she goes to meet the billionaire philanthropist who's decked out like a spindly Teddy Roosevelt.

I probably don't need to elaborate the steps that bring me to being drunk and slouched beneath the window of a biodiesel Humvee, eavesdropping on Celia and the tech tycoon's postcoital chat inside. Our lives run on a governed course. Surely as Samuel O. Pierce promises blanket immunity and a blank check, surely as his weaponized drones and untraceable private satellites make us the generals of a robot Mossad, surely as Celia's blithe ingratitude only swells the awe in which she's held by Samuel and myself and the annoying ranks of minions (because we all know that without cash and technology, Celia would continue to slay evildoers by hand, regardless), it comes to pass that I fall from favor and hit the bottle.

Above me I hear their pillow talk.

"You never knew your father? That's an old story," Celia is saying.

"Knew him in the deeper sense, is what I mean. He was a beaten man. He failed at everything twice over, the poor bastard."

"Whereas you conquered. I see. Good lad. Does the 'O' in your name stand for Oedipus?"

"You tell me, big mama..."

I puke in my mouth. Orbiting the Humvee is a cybernetic hummingbird. It stops abruptly to face me, its roto-wings a soundless blur, its beady little camera-eyes streaming everything in real time back to the geeks at Com-Set. I flip the bird the bird. We have no secrets here. Everybody knows everybody's whereabouts always. I'm on the other side of the armor-plated door, Samuel's aware, and so's Celia. She actually pressed her hand to the tinted glass at climax, bidding me to stay put and to listen. I roll onto my knees and moon the hummingbird. Then I splay out on the reddish baked dirt.

The heavens overhead brim with invisible technology. Whose

war are we fighting, anyway?

“I happen to notice you aren’t circumcised,” she’s saying.

“Agnostic upbringing,” Samuel answers.

“This absentee papa—I’m guessing that a pasha’s wealth fills the void he left?”

“Ha ha! Hardly.”

“Then?”

“For my children. The world they inherit. I made my billions to give them the gift of beauty.”

“Trust funds they’d appreciate more, I think.”

“They’ll be plenty comfortable, trust me, but not pampered brats.”

“Beauty?”

“A chance to experience it. For pristine nature, for unsullied wilderness to reflect their souls so that they might know themselves better than I or my father were ever able to. Do you think me pathetically sentimental?”

“Men have killed for stupider reasons. Play something, Sam.”

“What would you like to hear?”

“Surprise me.”

Naked as the dickens, he exits the Humvee carrying a French horn. Celia perches on the fender, also nude, and smokes angel dust. Hidden under the chassis, I peer out between her sleek muscled calves to the rock formation, like a petrified lion, where Samuel assumes an Orphic stance and blows the martial theme to *Carmen*. I slither forward and kiss Celia’s ankles. Her arches arch. Her fingers tousle my oily mane as I peck my way north to bury my nose in her profuse bush. The hummingbird records us in wide, medium, close-up. Samuel goes on a jazzy riff. We three all wind up back in the vehicle, spent and steaming, staring zombie-eyed at drop-down video screens that show aerial night vision shots of scattering human forms and blooming silent smoke plumes. Samuel puts the joystick aside and takes my hand.

“May I confide in you?” he asks.

Celia pretends to doze on my shoulder. The atmosphere reeks of our fluids. I want air.

“I want out,” I say.

“I know. Take a walk with me, please.”

She is actually asleep. We lug Celia to her bed and then we stroll outside the compound, muttering tonight’s password at the sentry. Twin scarab beetles hover just overhead and shine blue LED light on the sandy, pathless earth. I know that if I attack Samuel they’ll rip holes in my chest before I can blink. “We’re both smitten with the same woman. She’s chosen me, the rich interloper, and you have every reason to feel agitated. Speak with your blood, my friend. I’ll give you a freebie.” Samuel clucks a command that causes the scarabs to pause and somehow appear disinterested. He faces me bravely. I clock him with the rock that I’d been carrying in my pocket, which I don’t think he was expecting. Then I help him to his feet.

“Better?” Samuel says through chipped teeth like castanets.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it...” somewhat nasal. His sinuses are probably caved in. “But that’s beside the point. You were a—what were you professionally before you became an eco-terrorist?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Nonentity. Cog. Is that it?”

“I don’t like to talk about those years.”

We stroll along the rim of a shallow ravine. Heard in the distance: hyenas.

“Fair enough. They plan to kill me, you know.”

Indeed, I’d heard rumblings. I’d been hoping they were serious.

“Kidnapping then beheading—the usual menu,” Samuel continues. “Why reinvent the wheel?”

“You’ll blow them all to kingdom come, of course.”

“Obviously. I have no interest in playing the martyr. Things will devolve, though, a bit, in the aftermath. Celia and I plan to go underground. Retool. Our vision of the next phase doesn’t include you, I’m sorry to say.” He rips a silk handkerchief into strips and stuffs them

up his nostrils. “It’s a hard pill to swallow. I do want your life to have meaning, my friend.”

Samuel stops and takes my hand. I suddenly remember how his cock tasted. It isn’t an unpleasant thought, to be honest, mingled as it is with freedom, escapism, finality. And Celia’s warm cheek pressed to mine.

He says, “Care for my children in the interim, will you please?”
“Your children? Me?”

All at once, distant explosions ring the horizon. In a few seconds their reverberation breezes over us with its gentle, particulate mist. And then all is quiet again except for some sporadic gunfire in the direction of base.

“That’s how you can best serve the cause. The movement which you and Celia started.”

“As a manny? Are you joking?”

“Don’t put a label on it. And besides—” Samuel adds, and as he speaks I notice the scarabs shimmering in midair, “—you have no choice.”

“But... but I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Make it up as you go along. All parents do. The eldest, Jordan, is twelve. Marjorie just turned nine last Wednesday. She has a severe peanut allergy. My publicist will fill you in on the details and then unexpectedly meet with foul play, after which you’ll be the last person alive who knows the truth.” Samuel glances calmly at his wristwatch. A light goes out. One of the scarabs has flown off, but it returns bloodstained and once more becomes a lamp.

“Can I just see her one last time?” I say, as if asking him to stop the world from spinning.

Shadows coalesce. And there she is, Celia, standing apart from us, the residue of carnage painting her head-to-foot, a pistol smoking in her fist. For a moment I remember our first bloodbath at Balboa. It’s difficult to speak with my voice cracking, but I hear myself say, “I need you, Celia. Please tell him that we’re partners. We’re meant to be together—” but it’s no use.

With a subtle whirring noise that I only notice afterward, enormous mechanical dragonflies descend from the sky and clamp our shoulders daintily. Their reverse-thrusters make a ballet of dust devils upon the ground. Samuel hovers over to join Celia, and it seems fated, as if they're identical Icaris soaring overconfidently into the air, husbanded by their shared hubris. My machine is uncontrollable, on autopilot, flying away diagonally to I don't know where. Celia flashes me the sign for victory or peace and then I'm history.

