



Sunday, Juli 23, 2017

TOO MUCH OF THE TOURIST

Saturday, July 22, 2017 – Bangalore (India) Rhenius Street

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Blame it on the white chocolate. No bar there. But that is of no comfort to me as I now sit, holding an 80-year-old lady in my arms, on the petrol fume-ridden rim of the road-divider the Bangalore city council has built in the middle of two-lane Rhenius Street to discipline traffic a bit – or, shall we say, to reduce the number of frontal collisions. It is ten o'clock in the evening. On the left, tuk-tuks rattle past us at top speed. To the right, cars and buses shoot out of the dark of the dimly lit street to disappear again into the night. Their headlamps strike our faces like light sabers, but Kumudini doesn't seem to notice. She keeps her eyes closed and breathes in irregular gasps.

Kumudini is the mother of my old travelling companion and translator, Gunvanthi. She

lives in a house in Richmond Town, less than 200 yards from the spot at which we are sitting. I worshipped Kumudini from the moment we met. That was almost a dozen years back, and time has not diminished my admiration. Kumudini is a dignified lady, who has been able to preserve the over-blown charm of a young princess. She can be unruly, imperious, sometimes a tad impatient, and occasionally dismissive. This is especially noticeable to her daughter and her female staff. Kumudini loves men and I am one of her knights, her princes, for whom she is happy to discard her thorny mantel to show off her smart, most charming and generous side.

As night fell, I strolled with Kumudini and Gunvanthi to the Hockey Club, about 300 yards

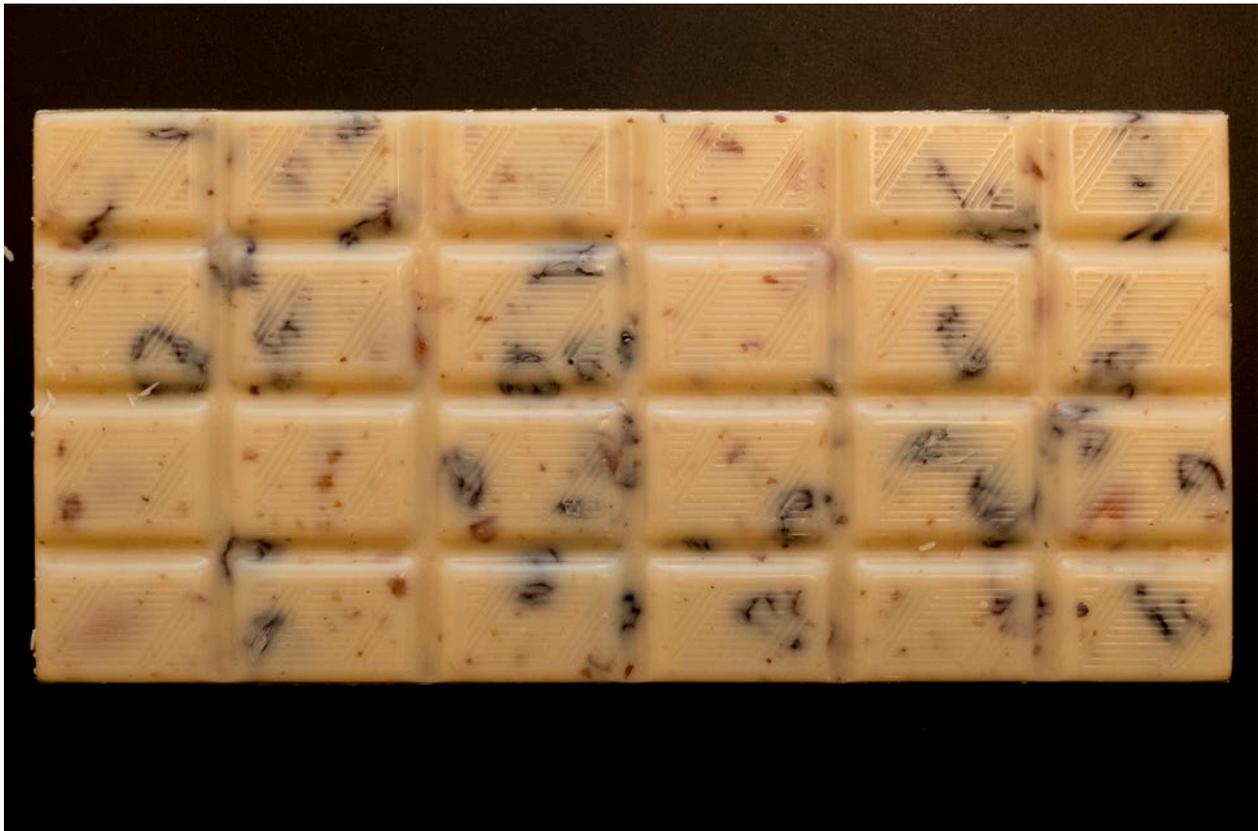


from the mother's house – a distance for which the old lady did not want to summon her driver although she's not sturdy on foot nowadays. Gunvanthi is a member of the club, not because she plays hockey (she has never tried it to my knowledge), but because you can sit on a well-kept lawn by the tree-lined walls of the club and drink beer or whisky cola – unmolested by hawkers and traders and begging children. Kumudini, whose normal diet is rice with vegetables, rasam, sambar and yogurt, ate a plateful of fried baby corn at first and then of paneer tikka, and washed them down with a large Kingfisher beer. Her eyes lit up and she developed the smug and vaguely mischievous expression of a person who knows that true pleasure is hard to come by with modest means. It was dark in the garden of the club; with the aid of a flash, I took a few pictures of Kumudini in the spooky light. We enjoyed ourselves royally.

Then it was time to go home – and to return the old lady to the care of her housemaid and the cool peace of her rooms. While Gunvanthi was paying the bill, which can be a bit complicated and take a bit of time in such clubs, Kumudini and I started walking slowly out of the

club. We stepped out of the gates into Rhenius Street, and squeezed our way through the narrow gap between closely parked cars to cross the road. A motorcycle thundered so close to us that I felt the driver's knee on my pants. I put my right arm around Kumudini's shoulder and pulled her over to the road divider in the middle of the road. Then, with a bang and loud honk, a second motorbike shot past us. Kumudini winced and I sensed that something had happened in her body that suddenly seemed to have no tension whatsoever. She could not take another step. I hurriedly half-carried the swooning lady to the road divider and helped her sit down. As soon as we were seated Kumudini collapsed and her head drooped forward. I pulled her up a little, leaned her upper body against my chest and called her by name. She did not respond.

Years earlier, I had held her like that in my arms. That had been on Schönbüel, in the middle of the Swiss Alps. I had persuaded her to take the chairlift with me. It had been a premiere in her life. At first she was terrified, but then she took rapturous delight in the flight over the landscape. And now, was this going to be our last adventure together? Crossing a road in Bangalore? I tried to



turn around so that I could grab her wrist without letting her slip onto the street. To my surprise, I felt a pulse and, at that very moment, life came back into her body. She sat up groaning a little and I heard her gastric contents shoot up. I pushed her upper body a bit to the side, so that it did not ruin her sari. She proceeded to puke in three or four big bilges – it was a surprisingly bright vomit – and my attempt to preserve the sari was only partially successful.

I remembered at that second that, in the late afternoon, Kumudini had gobbled up a whole slab of white chocolate – standing, in haste, in greed. I had brought her twenty chocolate bars from Switzerland: all but one were of the dark variety. The lady had opted to go first for the sole white chocolate, the *Tourist* made by Frey, with raisins, almonds and hazelnuts. It had been one of my grandmother's favourite chocolates, and Grandma would always have one in her handbag on every trip: Frey, as if the brand name were the order of the day. The peculiar aroma of the *Tourist*, which has little to do with real chocolate, is closely bonded in my memory to my earliest trips to central Switzerland, to Lungern below Schönbüel, where my grandparents had a holiday chalet. And, yes,

that's the reason I had wanted to bring Kumudini a slab of it.

For one used to the light diet of south India, a *Tourist* can be quite a challenge – as you can see. And then come fried baby corn strips, paneer cubes and beer and, for dessert, an acoustic punch in the pit of the stomach...! Well, here we are, the old lady and me. She is too weak to get up, her eyes are firmly closed. I'm afraid I cannot let her go, that she's going to fall headlong into the street, into the pool of vomit at her feet. I do not want to force her to do anything, force anything in fact, so we just sit there, tormented by the headlights flashing past...

Finally, two young men notice we are in trouble. They ask if they can help. I describe Kumudini's condition, explain. They stop a tuk-tuk, describe, explain, gesticulate. We lift Kumudini into the back seat, seconds later we are in front of her house. The security guard of the building helps me bring Kumudini to her apartment door. The domestic help opens the door, Gunvanthi is already there, full of concern, in the dark she had walked past us in the street without noticing us. We bring Kumudini



to her bed. She speaks again. It's all quite uncomfortable for her. I leave her to her girls. While leaving the apartment, I see that there is a slab of Galak on her dresser, of which a chunk is missing. I cannot remember if I bought her

another pack of white chocolate. For a moment, I consider taking it away. But then I remember the glint in Kumudini's eyes – and let it be.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.