

'The Visa'

aka

'The Albanian Librarian'

Synopsis

Communist Albania, 1979 - a time when the country's dictatorship, fearing the influence of western 'decadence', banned flared trousers, long hair and beards! Dissenters faced detention or jail.

September 19th - a bar in the capital, Tirana - a TV above the bar is broadcasting a pretty important football match... Partizan Tirana v Glasgow Celtic, European Cup, 1st round 1st leg - the capacity crowd of 30,000 in the Qemal Stafa Stadium wait nervously as the teams prepare to walk out onto the pitch. The commentator wonders if the Celtic captain, Danny McGrain, has respected the laws of the country and shaved off his beard.

The bar is full of Albanian men, eagerly anticipating the match as they stare at the TV - the men are all noticeably clean-shaven.

The players walk out and stand in formation for the obligatory team photos - there's a huge cheer from the Albanian men in the bar as they see the bearded McGrain, posing with his team-mates.

45 Years Later (present day)

Late night at a bus depot in Glasgow - two people sit next to each other, waiting for the airport bus. Albanian librarian Pavlo Bublik is voluntarily deporting himself back home - Scottish paralegal Ailsa Salcoats waits with him. They look distressed and downbeat and hold hands lovingly. This seems to have been more than a client-lawyer thing.

A Year Ago

The first time Ailsa encounters Pavlo is at the counter of a Starbuck's-style coffee shop - two lonely people, whiling away a Saturday afternoon, as they both reach for the last biscotti. Pavlo, a cool-looking rugged-yet-stylish well-spoken foreigner, is nearing the end of his holiday in Glasgow - but he has someone to meet before he departs - it's the reason he's visited. Ailsa, an over-worked paralegal at a law firm, is scouring her laptop in-between frothy sips - she's investigating sperm banks, but she's trying not to look like a brooding singleton up to her eyeballs in baby fever. The Barista tells us "*I see the brooding singleton up to her eyeballs in baby fever's in again*".

The second time they meet is late at night, outside the gents toilet in Ailsa's office block where Ailsa, who's been working late, is surprised to see that the suave Pavlo is actually a

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night-cleaner with a toilet-plunger. Intrigued but confused by the disconnect as to Pavlo's actual identity, Ailsa tells him that she's just been transferred to her law firm's immigration department. She asks him if he needs help with his 'situation' - he says no.

The third time they meet is when Pavlo walks into Ailsa's office - he's been disturbed by his declining of someone offering help - he now realises that Help is exactly what he needs. Pavlo tells Ailsa that just prior to his departure home a month ago, he got word - if he returns he'll be in perilous danger - he's been caught up in a blood feud (a *Kanun*) - although a mere bystander in a generations-old inter-family 'war', vengeance is sought - Pavlo is now an innocent target thanks to the archaic cultural anomaly in his country. Pavlo explains that his 'situation' in Glasgow will become daunting - he's still here legally, courtesy of his 180-day visitor visa - but his entitlement to stay will expire along with his visa.

Pavlo needs indefinite leave to remain, settled status. Ailsa explains the options, but it's not looking good. He has no family ties to the UK so there's no 10-year route; he hasn't 'integrated into the local community'; he doesn't have an 'exceptional talent'; he's not an 'orthodox minister of a recognised religion' and he can't claim asylum. Pavlo is effectively a guy in limbo... a dead man walking.

Everything changes on the day Ailsa witnesses an incident in the office - a foreign client is saved from deportation because he's fathered a child with a local woman, and a Discretionary Visa is in the works via his 'rights to a family life'. Ailsa's mischievously ingenious legal brain kicks in - if Pavlo were to father a child with her, then they'd both get what they desperately want - he'd get a residency visa - she'd get a baby - it's the perfect quid-pro-quo!

Ailsa however is conscious of the questionable ethics of her plan, not to mention the borderline illegality. Can she steal herself and muster up the *chutzpah* to pitch the proposal to Pavlo? She tries, on the rooftop of her office building, late at night, Glasgow sprawled out around them. Pavlo is clueless as to Ailsa's thoughts, but sensitive to her distress - "*You have my sympathy*"; to which she replies "*I don't want your sympathy... I want your semen.*"

Despite his reservations and suspicions, Pavlo accepts - he's going to go along with it - the journey towards pregnancy and conception has begun.

Ailsa & Pavlo agree that artificial insemination is the preferred and obvious method of conception - this is a 'business arrangement' after all! Ailsa stocks up on sterile cups, syringes, ovulation predictors and pregnancy testing kits - Pavlo stocks on some 'visual stimulation'. Over the months they settle into a regular routine at Ailsa's flat - the 'action' takes place in their singular 'private' time in her bathroom - Pavlo produces his deposits - Ailsa takes immediate delivery for injection. Their anticipation is defined by that biological wait - fertilisation or failure - both crave signs that Ailsa's monthly pregnancy test will be positive... morning sickness, nausea, tender breasts... anything!

Pavlo understands why the success of their plan is so important for Him, but he struggles to grasp the reasons and depth behind Ailsa's biological imperative... her desperation to conceive... to be a mother. She owes him an explanation. She's had it with Men-Boys... guys who couldn't commit to the want of starting a family - her relationships have been train-wrecks - she's single, the 'wrong side' of 35 - she has a biological clock ticking so loudly that she's got the condition Whining Womb Syndrome. And then, there was 'The

One', the long-termer, the would-be family man - but he left her for a younger woman, a younger woman who, Ailsa has found out on the grapevine, now has The One's baby. That was the final straw... the one that broke the camel's crib. It was her call to action. Ailsa convinced herself that life's fulfilment could now only come from single motherhood - she's been down the anonymous-father sperm-bank route - she's even had temperature-controlled sperm flown in from Denmark - but neither are not for her - she wants to know exactly who the father of her child would be. And now, fantastical as this serendipity is, cue Pavlo!

Pavlo becomes more and more enthused and optimistic about the prospective success of their plan - not only for his chances of a visa, but also by the prospect of fatherhood. Even the chore and indignity of his cleaning shift has lightened - he's got to know his fellow comrades... his co-workers, waiting for the outcome of their asylum claims, all alienated, scared - optimism and pessimism abound. Although bound up in his camaraderie, Pavlo has to keep a distance - he's part of a secret plan.

Ailsa, however, is starting to realise she may be out of her depth - she questions her ability to handle the responsibilities of single motherhood - she wonders if desperation and recklessness has got the better of common sense. She was always aware of the immorality of her illicit plan, particularly as a legal professional - but when her law firm hires an Ethics & Oversight Officer, her nerves really kick in. She agonises - domestic expediency versus professional ethics - tough call.

Ailsa can't go through with it - she calls a halt to proceedings. Pavlo takes it badly, disgusted at being shafted by Ailsa's flakiness.

It's back to the hopeless humdrum of their singular downtrodden lives. Ailsa feels herself stagnating - her career going nowhere and hopes of motherhood fading - life becomes a self-inquisition as she tries to convince herself that she was right to bag the plan - that her salary was more important than a baby.

Pavlo is drained of optimism for his future - his salvation has gone - he lives in a shabby bed-sit - he polishes floors and cleans toilets every night on his shift. He ticks off the calendar days... the countdown to the expiry of his visitor visa... limbo will soon give way to doom! He'll soon be 'illegal', constantly looking over his shoulder, status-less.

It doesn't take Ailsa long to realise that loneliness and limbo go hand in hand - she misses Pavlo, and realises that she's made a terrible mistake in giving up on him. She sheepishly confronts Pavlo for forgiveness late at night while he's in the middle of a cleaning shift - an unnerving moment for both, but Pavlo's pride can't pretend that he doesn't miss her too. They kiss... Pavlo's yellow rubber-gloved hands grasping Ailsa tightly.

The plan is back on.

The dam of pent-up sexual frustration has burst - syringes and sterile cups give way to sex, even if their pillow talk revolves around industrial-strength disinfectants.

At Ailsa's suggestion, Pavlo moves into her flat with her. On the surface, it's for convenience... they're cohabiting to procreate!... but we can see that these two people have tip-toed into a relationship.

But relationships come with trust, and Ailsa wants to know something... “*You didn’t really come here on a two week sightseeing trip, did you?*” It’s time for Pavlo to reveal the reason he came to Glasgow, and he has no shame in telling Ailsa. He travelled here for his father... his recently deceased father, a political activist and Partizan Tirana footballer during Albania’s communist years. His father’s lifelong wish was to swap shirts with Glasgow Celtic’s Danny McGrain, who he once played against - McGrain having defied the country’s strict no-beard policy, thus gaining hero status with much of the population, and with Pavlo’s father in particular. The day Pavlo was to depart back home, he gave Danny McGrain his father’s old Partizan Tirana shirt - his father has been honoured - duty has been done - except, Pavlo is still here!

Ailsa and Pavlo settle into a routine, of sorts - Pavlo works nights, Ailsa works days - Pavlo does the laundry and the ironing and he cooks Ailsa traditional Albanian dishes for her nightly arrival back from the office. They don’t see much of each other except for their brief crossover time - but there’s always the weekends - their purpose in life is at the forefront of their minds... quality time equals shagging time, but those pregnancy tests are always negative.

And now, before they know it, Pavlo’s visitor visa has expired - he’s an illegal ‘over-stayer’ - he has no grounds to be in the country - exceptional circumstances could apply but that hopeless argument is nixed when they realise their case rests solely on the mountain of negative pregnancy tests in Ailsa’s bathroom bin.

For Pavlo, deportation lurks round every corner, and if Ailsa can’t get pregnant before that happens then the whole thing’s been for nowt!

Ailsa’s plan was pure mutual expediency but, ironically, their blossoming relationship is a snapshot of how cosy their life could be if Pavlo got her pregnant. Their verbal jousting exemplifies two people in love - worried about his overheating scrotum is a perfect excuse for a shopping spree for looser boxer-shorts - a browse round The Mitchell Library with Ailsa in hand is sheer bliss for Pavlo - lessons in Albanian cuisine descend into kitchen frolics - likeminded familiarity abounds - weekend days by the seaside in Largs are a welcome opportunity to forget that, for a while, the clock ticks for both of them.

Their joint purpose has been a reawakening for Ailsa - time to address that other issue in her life’s un-fulfilment... the label of indispensable paralegal was not what she envisaged years ago when she wanted to be an actual lawyer - but now the time has come. Buoyed by bravado, Ailsa demands a summit meeting with the law firm’s chief partner - she lays it on the line... she’s going to finish her LPC exams.

But then, the one thing that was never meant to happen, happens - Pavlo is apprehended. Ailsa & Pavlo’s next rendezvous is not in the cosy confines of her bedroom, but instead it’s in a detention centre - she needs to be by his side for the inescapable ruling... as his legal counsel.

This is where we came in

Late night at a bus depot in Glasgow - Ailsa & Pavlo sit next to each other, waiting for the bus to the airport. Pavlo is voluntarily deporting himself back home - Ailsa waits with him. They look distressed and downbeat and hold hands lovingly. This was definitely more than a client-lawyer thing.

The bus to the airport will soon be departing - time to reminisce over their adventure - and time for Ailsa to chastise herself for not just marrying Pavlo and taking their chances in the sack. Even now, Ailsa is clinging onto forlorn last-ditch ideas, before realising... *“Okay, so marrying an ex-client illegal alien 11th hour imminent deportee who I’ve been intimate with would have convenience sham written all over it and of course it’d be the end of my career, but...”* And therein, the situation is hopeless.

Ailsa is of course fearful for Pavlo and his return - but all he can do is reassure her that he’ll make sure he’s difficult to find.

They smirk at the ballsiness of their plan, but with the tannoy telling us that the airport bus will depart in 2 minutes, Pavlo’s sentiment sums up his feelings... *“Right now I am thinking not so much about the plan... I am just thinking of the woman... I liked the plan, but I love the woman.”*

Ailsa doesn’t know if Pavlo will be allowed back into the UK - they hope they’ll see each other again, but they don’t know where, or when.

Pavlo and Ailsa walk out the depot to the imminently departing bus. A last long lingering kiss - Pavlo gets on the bus and sits down. Ailsa takes a few steps along the outside of the bus and stops where he’s sitting - a window between them. Pavlo slides the top of the window open and asks Ailsa if she’ll be okay. *“... well... I’m nauseous, my boobs are tender to the point of being sore, and I threw up this morning.”* Pavlo offers his sympathy. And then, as the bus moves off, Pavlo realises what Ailsa has said. He frantically stares out the back window of the bus - Ailsa’s gone. Pavlo sits back down and smiles to himself.