

# Prosopisia

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*On The Beach*

I thought another day in Melbourne would kill me so I bought a one-way ticket to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was between massacres then, but trouble was brewing and lingered in the air like stale smoke. It was a desperate place – full of stories of tourists being robbed, kidnapped and worse. There were two basic rules of survival: never go anywhere with the locals, and don't get into a car – even a taxi – with anyone you don't know. A month of travelling in these conditions and I was in need of some R and R.

Then a New Zealand girl suggested I go to India. 'You'd like Kovalam Beach.'

I took to the idea right away, so my next one-way ticket was to Trivandrum, the nearest airport to Kovalam.

I emerged from Trivandrum airport at the same time as a German guy. His English was pretty terrible, and my German was non-existent. Through a series of nods and gestures, we figured out we were both heading for Kovalam Beach.

The bus stand was crowded. There was jostling and shouting and pushing and the next thing I knew the German guy and I were in a taxi with seven Indian men and the city of Trivandrum was receding through the rear window. We were driving through jungle. One of the guys in the front seat turned around. He was talking to us and staring at my tits in a way that made me shudder. I was convinced we were going to be killed.

The German boy was pressing up against me in a way that couldn't be explained as either a sexual advance or the result of overcrowding.

Just when I was close to vomiting, when all I could hear was an inner voice screaming, 'Don't get in a car with anyone you don't know', the taxi took another ninety-degree turn and a huge sign loomed before us. It said: Welcome to Kovalam Beach.

I looked at the German guy. He'd turned white. I swallowed.

The taxi stopped by the sign and we – all ten of us – tumbled out. The driver opened the boot. We grabbed our bags. The seven Indian men were smiling and shaking our hands and, before long, had disappeared towards the beach. The German boy and I stood frozen to the spot, our mouths silently opening and closing without instruction.

'If that was Sri Lanka we would be already dead,' he said. I nodded.

A young Indian man, a Keralan wearing a dhoti, popped out of nowhere and said, 'Hello, hashish?'

This was in the early 1980's, and Kovalam still had a reputation as a place where the sun had never set on the sixties. A spot of hashish seemed in keeping. Besides, after the taxi ride, I needed it.

The Keralan handed over a block of hash, and then told us he knew a very good, very cheap hotel.

The German guy and I ended up at the same place and, because we felt a sort of bond after the taxi ride, I invited him to my room for a smoke.

We lit up and went over the story again. Couldn't believe we were alive. The sense of menace I'd felt the whole time in Sri Lanka began to evaporate. The lodge was a dive, but it was right on the beach. The only furniture in the room was a rickety old bed. We sat on it.

I rolled a joint, lit it, and drew the smoke deep into my lungs. It worked almost instantly. We smiled. By the end of the joint my head felt so heavy I lay down. So did he. Sounds romantic, but the hash was very good and I'd almost forgotten he was there.

'Hello coconut.'

What a strange thought. I laughed out loud.

'Hello coconut, pineapple?' It was louder this time, and I realized it wasn't a thought but a voice, and it was coming from outside the window. The windows had bars instead of glass. An Indian woman was standing outside balancing a fruit bowl on her head. Taking it all in stride, I bought a pineapple and decided I loved India.

The German boy and I ate the pineapple.

'I love this country,' he said, and then he drifted off to his own room.

The sun moved across the sky.

Next morning I did a reconnaissance. I walked down the dingy hallway and out the door. The yellow sand, the blue sky and the glare of the sun hit me all at once, almost winding me, sending me reeling back inside. But my hotel was so scruffy and dirty I was determined to compare it with the other guesthouses. Once my eyes adjusted, my fears were confirmed: I was staying at the worst lodge on the whole beach.

Squinting, I surveyed the beachfront.

Already I could tell the humidity was a problem. The air was so heavy with moisture even my money was damp.

Ropes and nets were strewn along the beach drying. Fishermen were packing the dry ones up and storing them in the boats - ancient wooden dugouts that looked barely seaworthy.

As I got my bearings a woman with the biggest, deepest brown eyes and the longest batting eyelashes I'd ever seen approached me. She lifted a fruit bowl off her head and offered me a pineapple.

'Pineapple, good pineapple. I market going, eight rupees I pay. You pay nine rupees,' she said.

She was wearing a ragged sari. She swung her hips seductively. Her naked and exposed waist was thinner than the pineapple she was offering me. I was reminded that I was fat and happy in the midst of deprivation. I resented this realization.

'Six rupees,' I said.

'No memsahib.'

'Six rupees, take it or leave it.'

She took it.

I went wandering and found an open-air restaurant up in the cool shade of the jungle. I spent the day up there rolling joints and passing them on. I knew a few people - the one's who'd recently come over from Sri Lanka. The crowd at this place, aptly named Shangri La, were the kind of rugged individuals who, faced with the daunting prospect of lone travel through India, bought a copy of Tony Wheeler's *India a Travel Survival Kit*. Once in India, they never deviate from its well-beaten paths.

Two German guys were sitting at the next table to me smoking heroin. One leaned towards me and said, 'Do you realize how green the rice is? You can see it growing. It is greener than green.'

'Yeah,' I said, figuring they were goners. And they were; still watching the rice grow when I left three weeks later.

The next morning I lay in bed smoking and thinking about the nature of existence, and whether I should eat fruit for lunch or make the effort to get up and go to the jungle restaurant.

I decided to take photographs. These would show my India. I didn't feel inclined to leave my room, preferring to view India through the lens of my window. I planned to take photos out the window of every Indian hotel room I stayed in. I would call the series 'India Through the Window'.

The idea was conceptually sound. It failed, however, in the rendering, as the photos I took stank.

After much deliberation, I finally decided to move up to one of the lodges near Shangri La restaurant.

On my last day at the first lodge the German guy came to see me. Conversation between us had gotten harder, not easier with time. I told him I was moving out. He nodded. Then as an after thought, he asked me, in that formal German way, what my hobbies were. I took the question to mean interests rather than hobbies and told him they were watching films and plays, and reading books. 'I go to the pub,' he said.

'Ah...' we both said simultaneously, recognizing difference. This was our first moment of intimacy since our shared near-death taxi ride, and we felt a bit closer for it.

The crowd that ate at Shangri La was fun. There was an English couple who called themselves Lord and Lady Smyth. They were either in the restaurant or in their room, but wherever they were, they were fighting. His favorite saying was 'You stupid cow.' Then there was Lance, an eighteen-year-old from somewhere in the American mid-west. For some reason he hadn't had his immunizations and was turning gray. There was Bende, a dope-headed Dane, Cornelia, a

distracted German medical student, and Paul, an unemployed Englishman on vacation from the rigor of life on the dole.

It was the wet season. The rain hadn't come yet, but the humidity had. The clothes I washed didn't dry but they did begin to rot. My room smelled of mold. I began to wonder if I should have brought more clothes and fewer books.

The books came in handy though. The cockroaches in my room made the bugs in The Naked Lunch look small and authentic. But they did give me something to do in the evenings. I'd single out one roach and hit it with my shoe. It would freeze for a few minutes, then get up and go about its business as if nothing had happened. I'd hit it with my dictionary next, then with a couple of Orwells. Eventually, I'd lift the bed up and

squash the roach under one of its legs. Then I'd sit on the bed. After a bit I'd get up, replace the bed, and wait. The roach usually walked away, but I was always pleased if it was moving slower than before.

I learned to avoid the beach on Sundays. My first Sunday, I noticed that two Indian guys, obviously father and son, were standing hand in hand, glaring at me. They displayed no visible signs of embarrassment, and simply refused to go away, even when I threw a banana at them.

Everywhere I looked that Sunday, groups of Indian men were scattered across the beach. They held hands or cuddled, as is their custom, and giggled and squealed at the sight of topless European girls. The Indian men rarely swam, but they did dance, sing, and wriggle their hips ritualistically.

While all this was happening music blared from every restaurant. There was Indian classical music, some Hindi pop from the movies, David Bowie, Talking Heads and Midnight Oil. The music drifted across the beach, mingled with the men's laughter, and got lost in the sound of the waves.

The arrangements at Shangri La were pretty loose. Lord and Lady Smyth were fixtures. The rest of us came and went as we liked. This suited me. It facilitated my secret life with a Kashmiri carpet salesman. He was exotic, beautiful and forbidden. Rules on such

matters were unstated, but I felt that fraternizing with the local men was strictly forbidden.

Jamal would keep me in his shop for hours plying me with tea and stories of his financial need for a Western wife. I had a need, but not for a husband.

The first time I walked into his shop, I thought I had stumbled into the pages of the Thousand and One Nights. He wore the light gray cotton tunic and pantaloons that stay-at-homes only see in the movies. The light in his shop was always muted, and everything smelled of incense. Richly colored oriental rugs lined the walls and floors.

One day he invited me to dinner at the Hotel Palm Shore. I'd heard it was the second-best restaurant in Kovalam. This annoyed me, but he fascinated me, so I went.

After dinner we went and sat on the beach. He kissed me under the stars. Delicious kisses, but an inner voice warned me 'beware the Muslim carpet salesman in search of a Western wife'. It sounded like good advice. I figured any further, and I'd have to either marry him or leave town. I was having too much fun for either. I affected the moral outrage of a southern virgin, pushed him away and scurried off back to Shangri La for a before-bedtime smoke with the Smyths.

He spotted me sun-baking topless on the beach a few days later, so I decided I'd better avoid him altogether.

Someone at Shangri La suggested we take a trip to Cape Comorin, the southernmost point in India. The idea grew and preparations were made, but it nearly fell through. The organized nature of the beast gave our motley gang of misfits, loners and mavericks the jitters. We held together, somehow, and on the appointed day, assembled at Shangri La at 6.00 am. We proceeded toward the bus stand in single file, passing a morning joint up and down the line.

The landscape on the way to Cape Comorin looked ancient. Flat dry paddy fields ran smack into mountains so old and worn they looked like a movie set constructed of cardboard cutouts.

Cape Comorin is one of those 'been there done that' places. Its beach is undistinguished, except for a temple built at India's 'Lands End'.

There is a monument to Gandhi (who'd also been there and done that – or rather, his ashes had), but we couldn't be bothered finding it. I stood on the beach with Paul, the unemployed Englishman, and skipped stones.

Paul wandered off towards the temple. I began to wonder if I was living too much in my head. I pondered this question so long that I found myself abandoned. Finding the others proved easy though. We were the only white folks in a fifty-mile radius, and word of our movements had spread all over town. As I moved along, shopkeepers, housewives and small children crowded into the street to ridicule and ape me. Fortunately, they also pointed out the direction my companions had taken. Seeing that I was outnumbered, I began to wave and bow and perform other gestures of buffoonery. This so delighted the crowd that they took to following me. By the time I reached the others, I had an entourage of one hundred or so people. My friends were in a restaurant, but it was nothing like the ones at Kovalam. My entourage joined the already substantial crowd of onlookers and settled down to watch an impromptu performance of 'The Whites Eat Their Lunch'. Our reactions to this, which ranged from amusement to rage, brought gasps of delight and applause from the ever-growing crowd.

We all ordered the same thing, a vegetarian thali. The waiter placed a fresh banana leaf in front of each of us. Then another waiter came. He carried a shiny aluminum bucket of rice. With a coconut shell spoon he flicked a large dollop of rice onto each banana leaf. Then followed a seemingly endless parade of aluminum-bucket-carrying waiters, each slopping a new and even more delicious curry onto the rice. There were no utensils, so after 'hand washing' in the bucket provided, we attacked the food, shoveling it into our mouths with our right hands. The more we ate, the more delighted the waiters and the crowd got, until, one by one, exhausted from overeating, we shook our hands and heads at the on-coming buckets. The waiters proceeded to use the banana leaf stems to clear the table. As if sated by our overindulgence, the crowd dispersed, and we made our way back to the bus stand.

I'd been in Kovalam for a while and began to meet a different crowd. I met people who'd begin conversations with 'I came here in 1965 and loved the place'. These people were almost always junkies. They were known as freaks, and given the hippie clothes, dreadlocks and vacant eyes, I could see why. I could also sense Kovalam's seductiveness.

I thought another day in Kovalam and I'd be trapped, so I took a bus into Trivandrum and headed for the train station to buy a one-way ticket to the Iraj Mahal. But this was India not Melbourne and, since I was reading Hess not Kafka, I was totally unprepared for what happened next.

The simple process of buying a train ticket was expanded into a three-hour ordeal. There were lines and more lines, forms and more forms. I only just managed to navigate the bureaucratic maze at the ticket office and get my ticket, but the train didn't leave until the next day.

It was late afternoon by the time I got back to Kovalam. I sat in one of the beachside restaurants and watched the sun set over the Arabian Sea for the last time. As they had every evening at sunset, clouds drifted in and surrounded the sun, lighting the horizon bright orange. I had to pay attention. At exactly six o'clock the sun dropped below the horizon like a basketball disappearing behind a nasty neighbor's fence. Now you see it, now you don't.

I noticed the German boy sitting on the rocks watching the sunset. He was with another German girl I knew, and as the light faded, he slid his arm around her shoulder.

In the last light I saw my Kashmiri friend emerge from his shop and escort a young white woman along the beach towards Kovalam's second-best restaurant. He saw me sitting there and waved. I smiled and waved back.

Once it was fully dark I could see the dim lights from the distant fishing fleet.

I made my way along the dark jungle path to Shangri La. I shared a last smoke with my friends. We all expressed the hope our paths would cross again.

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