

Story for performance #963  
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Source: Praful Bidwai, 'India shoots out of Iran's orbit', *Asia Times online*, 08/02/08.

Tags: [intimacy](#), [violence](#), [surveillance](#)

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X was explaining to me how if you touch someone you can get a bit killed. We were talking on the telephone, long distance. She was speaking very quietly. I don't know why. If there was anyone listening in, presumably all they had to do was turn up the volume. It's not like it was a secret anyway. Or so she gave me to understand.

'So when you spend any time here,' she was saying, 'you'll see that money never passes hands. You put it down in front of you. And then somebody else picks it up. Which is why also people go around with their arms by their sides, not with their elbows sticking out like they do where you come from.'

'When you say a bit killed...?' I wasn't sure if she meant what she was saying literally. Turns out she did.

'I'm not saying "the hour of your death" is therefore closer than it would have been, I mean the hour of your death is the hour of your death isn't it. It's when it happens. The rest is mystical crap. What I *mean* is when you touch someone, another person, you become a bit more killed than you were a moment before. But you go on with your life. It's like being killed is a thing of degrees. That's what I mean.'

I could tell from her tone, even at such low volume, that she liked that last phrase about a thing of degrees. Something she'd prepared earlier. But I wasn't in a mood to give her the credit.

'You go on with your life?'

'Of course you do. It's not like you can avoid people touching you. That would be impractical. It's a thing you have to put up with. But yes, more and more, people who can afford to are hiring other people to do all sorts of things for them. And staying indoors. Or taking taxis everywhere. Or else using their own transport, of course.'

'So everyone knows about this?' This was the second or third time I'd asked her the question, in one way or another, since the conversation had taken this particular turn.

'They sense it,' she replied, evenly. 'They are people too. People are contagious.'

It was very rarely that X and I ever spoke on the phone. In the beginning, which seems like centuries ago now, we'd tried it once or twice but it had been clumsy and uncomfortable, perhaps because too much was being demanded, on both sides, from the immediacy and strangeness of hearing the other's voice. Mainly we made do with email and sms. That way we could keep the alliance ticking over, nurture the common ground between us so to speak, without the risk of either of us pulling up all the daisies. This evening, then, was an exception, although truth be told I can't remember now which of us it was who had made the call.

'It's very sad,' I said.

'It's a fact of life,' she said. 'Some freak combination of forces, or some mutant "molecules" thing, some freak susceptibility of humans to members of their own species, which means they can continue going

round—I'm not saying going around more *dead* than they were, I'm not talking about *dying*—but going round finding themselves a little bit killed, at any moment, and that being something you have to keep on living with to the end. I mean the violence, living with the violence. That's what being killed is. It's violence. And that's the human contagion. Am I making any sense?'

'Sure,' I said, although it wasn't the contagion business I was referring to when I'd said 'sad' a moment ago. I was thinking, as I often do, about myself. Or rather, I was imagining a picture, with me in it. Me and X. It's a summer's day, although you might not know that from the weather. Outdoors. A bit of park in a town centre. There's a bite of cold in the air, and a wide-angled brightness to everything, which means that whoever appears there, in the picture, can't help appearing just a little over-exposed. And there is X, sitting on a park bench, shivering somewhat, although she's wearing an anorak so the shivering isn't as obvious as all that. I enter the picture too and I sit down beside her. She's travelled such a long way to be here. So have I. Right at this moment, though, we don't have much to say to each other, so we sit there on the bench, mumbling about this and that. Centuries ago, indeed. Although now that I have the picture in my mind and find myself able to step into it and take up a place there, it doesn't seem so sad after all. It feels loving. It was loving at the time, I'm sure. It always was. I want to say this to X.

'Why are you speaking so quietly?' I ask into the telephone.

'It's late where I am,' she says. 'I don't want to disturb anyone. There's people asleep next door.'

'I was thinking about that time we sat in a park together,' I start to say.

'I was thinking about satellites,' she interrupts.

'Satellites?'

'Satellites. The ones who can really afford it don't need to risk having anyone touch them. They have satellites in the sky that can see the smallest things as well as big things, day or night, whatever the weather, nothing is invisible. But that also means that every single instant of human contact can be seen, recorded, remembered. Nothing escapes. It's all stored up somewhere and can be accounted for.'

'It isn't all violence,' I say.

'What isn't?'

'Human contact,' I say. 'Touching.'

'Listen,' she says. 'Listen to it.' She stops talking. I listen, my ear against the telephone. I assume she's listening also.

It's darker, and later where she is. Colder too, maybe. The seconds tick over. A thing of degrees. I shiver and smile.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Joe Kelleher.*