

## 'The Visa' - Outline

At opposite sides of a table in a deportation centre, sit two tearful people - a failed Albanian asylum seeker and his female paralegal. Their hands are entwined, and they stare into each others' eyes. Although the outcome, even at this 11th hour is uncertain, this seems to have been more than a client-lawyer thing.

### A Year Ago

Cathy Salcoats is an over-worked paralegal at a law firm - she's just been transferred to the hectic immigration department. The first time Cathy encounters Pavlo Bublik 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. The second time they meet is late at night, outside the gents toilet in Cathy's office block, where Cathy is surprised to see that the suave well-spoken foreigner is actually a night-cleaner with a toilet-plunger.

The third time they meet is when Pavlo walks into Cathy's office, announcing that he wants to claim asylum. Pavlo is Albanian, a librarian - but he was caught up in a *Kanun*, a blood feud between his and another family (... it's an ancient oft-reported societal anomaly that still exists there). In his case, Pavlo was an innocent bystander, but vengeance is sought and, in genuine fear for his life, he has had to flee, and cannot return. Pavlo's only other friend in the city is Szolt, a Kosovan economic migrant who's got Pavlo a job as a night-shift office toilet-cleaner - living in a crowded tower-block with illegal immigrants from Syria, Chad, Uganda, Russia, Afghanistan, Sudan and Yemen - all under the control of a gang-master. Pavlo now desperately needs a visa. But Cathy has bad news for him - the U.K.'s Home Office doesn't see Albania's *Kanun* as a 'recognised threat' - so Pavlo can't claim asylum - and he doesn't qualify under any of the conditions that would give him the right to stay in Britain - so he's a man without status - he's off the radar - effectively, he doesn't exist.

Cathy & Pavlo bump into each other in the coffee shop now and then - they've built a rapport - she's moved by his plight and and her law firm's inability to help.

Cathy however, is a woman with her own issues - her relationships have been train-wrecks - having abandoned the dream of being a lawyer, she's 'settled' as the law firm's irreplaceable paralegal - she's single, the 'wrong side' of 35, and with a biological clock ticking so loudly that her desperation for a baby is in tune with the recognised condition 'Whining Womb Syndrome'. She's convinced that life's fulfilment can now only come from single motherhood - she's been down the anonymous-father sperm-bank route - she can't even bring herself to inject the contents of the temperature-controlled box from Denmark that sits spilling dry ice onto her kitchen table.

Everything changes on the day Cathy 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'. Cathy'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! Conscious of the questionable ethics of her plan, not to mention the

borderline illegality, she steals herself and musters up the courage to pitch the proposal to Pavlo. Despite his deep reservations and suspicions, he accepts - he's going to go along with it - the journey towards pregnancy has begun.

Cathy & Pavlo agree that artificial insemination is the preferred and obvious method of conception - this is a 'business arrangement' after all! Cathy 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 Cathy's apartment - the 'action' takes place in their singular 'private' time in her bathroom - Pavlo produces his deposits - Cathy takes immediate delivery for injection. Their anticipation is defined by that biological wait - fertilisation or failure - both crave signs that Cathy's monthly pregnancy test will be positive... morning sickness, nausea, tender breasts... anything!

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. Cathy, 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.

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

It's back to the hopeless humdrum of their singular downtrodden lives. Cathy 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, cleaning toilets every night-shift and living in squalor, he becomes an irritant to the gang-master as he agitates for better pay and working conditions. He also reconnects with Szolt, who tries to convince him that life on the run is no way to live, and wouldn't they be better taking their chances in another country!?

It doesn't take Cathy 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 tracks him down and begs forgiveness. Pavlo's pride can't pretend that he doesn't miss her too.

The plan is back on. But the dam of pent-up sexual frustration has burst - syringes and sterile cups give way to sex, and they're at it whenever there's a window of opportunity, which is always! - even if their pillow talk revolves around industrial-strength disinfectants.

Pavlo tells Szolt that he's not playing fleeing fugitives with him after all - he has a plan to get a legitimate visa, and he's seeing it through. Szolt ridicules him, but understands.

Pavlo becomes a regular visitor at Cathy's apartment, much to the suspicion of her neighbours - dinner invites see Cathy turning up with her 'plumber'!

They both realise the clock is ticking - Cathy's egg-count is low, and Pavlo is constantly looking over his shoulder. Pavlo moves in with Cathy - they're now in an actual relationship. There's a knock on effect at work too - tired of being the office door mat, Cathy decides she is going to finally finish her law practice exams, move on up from the world of a paralegal, and demand the promotion she's long deserved.

Cathy's plan was pure mutual expediency but, ironically, their blossoming relationship is a snapshot of how good 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 - lessons in Albanian cuisine descend into kitchen frolics - likeminded familiarity abounds - weekend days by the seaside are a welcome opportunity to forget, for a while, that the clock ticks for both of them.

But then, the one thing that was never meant to happen, happens - Pavlo gets caught. He's sent to a detention centre, pending repatriation.

Cathy, demented with worry, finds herself in a police station - when she's told of Pavlo's fate, she throws up over the superintendent.

In the detention centre, Pavlo meets Szolt, who's also been caught. But Szolt has some news for Pavlo - he knows people who know the family of Pavlo's *Kanun* agitants, and he's owed favours - he can guarantee Pavlo's safety.

### This is where we came in

Cathy & Pavlo sit at opposite sides of a table in an immigrant detention centre, hands entwined, staring into each others' eyes, contemplating the hopelessness of their situation. There's now only one option, and Cathy pitches it - she suggests they get married - marriage will get Pavlo residency and a visa - but her proposal isn't just for mutual interests - they actually love each other.

Pavlo agonises over Cathy's proposal - but he has to decline - her 11th-hour marriage to an illegal immigrant-cum-imminent-deportee will wreck her legal career, and he can't live with that guilt. Pavlo reassures Cathy that he'll be safe back home and that she shouldn't worry about him, and that they have nothing to regret - their adventure was worth every minute.

Just as Cathy is at home being told that Pavlo is about to be sent to the airport for a Tirana-bound plane, she throws up into the phone, and realizes she has all the hallmarks of morning sickness.

Cathy rushes to the detention centre and catches Pavlo as he's being escorted into a van for the airport. Pavlo begs an official for a moment with her. They interlock fingers through the wire mesh fence - a last few precious seconds together. Cathy tells Pavlo she's got morning sickness, nausea and tender breasts - the delightful irony of their situation. Pavlo, too consumed with their mutual malaise, doesn't realise what she's saying - until being led back to the waiting van, when he turns for a last, tinged but joyous look at her, and a punch in the air with his fist.

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*Based on a series of unsettlingly true events, 'The Visa' is a character-driven story with a hard, realistic edge - a comedy with a conscience. In its essence, it's a story about the lengths two incongruous characters will go to if sufficiently desperate and driven; but there are a number of elements that distinguish this film. It's a film about collisions and contradictions. Cathy & Pavlo come from worlds apart, yet her immigration paralegal and his asylum-seeker couldn't be a more seamless fit. The undercurrent of shared goals and obstacles is obvious - Cathy's biological imperative will echo with many women, while Pavlo's need for safe haven taps into one of the most emotive and controversial societal issues of our day. This contemporary backdrop provides a canvas against which the consequent high-stakes story is played out.*

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