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Pando

A novel

(Original German title: Pando: Roman)

206 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 28 October 2024

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I will go down with this ship

And I won't put my hands up and surrender

There will be no white flag above my door

I'm in love and always will be

FLASH

1

Just before we met, I bought a new phone.

And now—I'm remembering. Again, that is. I'm remembering it again because my phone's showing me a recap of 2015.

The fifth time we hung out, we drove to the Erz Mountains. Back then I didn't know I wouldn't need Maps because you always find your way home, like those pigeons Fred's father kept.

We turned onto the road to Johannegeorgenstadt, and you told me how, one time, while Friedhelm was out of town, you had shot a football-sized hole in the pigeon cot, without even realizing. That borrowed, unbelievably expensive breeding pigeon never tried to flee. It sat there, day after day, as if frozen in place, although it could have easily gotten out. When Fritti got home, he chased Fred around the house with a cork sandal, up the stairs and down them again, I've always pictured it like a cartoon, Fred ducking under his dad's arms on the top step, Fritti's bright red head, his pulsing vein. Fred has since become a father himself, and Friedhelm has grown old, and I shed hot tears when I read that communiqué announcing his retirement from pigeon racing. It spoke of misbreedings and setbacks and of his dear partner, whose name shall remain unmentioned here precisely because he has not been forgotten.

In any case, you and your pigeon brain—which I didn't yet know about—steered that red Cinquecento along the abysses around the villages. I'd just watched a documentary about Wismut. Saxon uranium ore in the first Soviet atomic bomb. I'd learned there was a color called *Anna yellow*, and another one called *Eleonore green*.

It would take years before I ever saw you get lost. We were in Gjirokastër. A single bar at the edge of the screen—no reception. Sleet over the steep city. What we mistook for the black of night was in fact the mountain delineating the path on the one side, while a darkness yawned on the other, out of which the occasional rooftop reared. You were certain you could find the hotel you'd spent one night in all those years ago. We couldn't feel our feet. With my last ounce of energy, I fended off an old man who was only trying to help us. You didn't want just any hotel. You wanted to return to THIS ONE SPECIFIC HOTEL, as if trying to prove to yourself

that you'd been there before. You slithered over the wet cobblestone, slipped, caught yourself, and then you didn't, staring down into the chasm below as if expecting to see illuminated lettering, like in the movies: MOTEL. VACANCY. And when we finally found ourselves surrounded by the neo-baroque décor of a room in a sterile, modern building, you stripped off your soaking clothes and signed yourself, completely naked, into the WIFI. We'd been so close! We'd just made one wrong turn. The hotel did exist! And then you started to cry, and I comforted you.

I had no inkling of this possible future back then, in the Erz Mountains. We inspected the squat, prefab buildings. They looked like vacation homes, or cardboard toys. In a parking lot, there was a single mining car decorated with flowers in honor of the miners. Like out the front of Movie Park in Bottrop. You told me about the drop tower there, and I told you about it too. That weird feeling of sharing memories.

Like the gunslingers on TV, for example. Saturday afternoon. Tumbleweed creeping across the convex screen, and you or me as kids—briefly unsupervised—getting so close that we could see the individual pink and blue and yellow dots that produce the picture. Burning books, and people too. Holiday Inn, Sniper Alley. The rear end of a red bus splayed open like the model of a stage design. Where do you have to pull to close those curtains? Empty seats where girls once sat. Eraser marks fossilized in chalk on the blackboard. And Saturday again. 2019. On the livestream, the gunman sings: Karadžić lead your Serbs! He says: Subscribe to PewDiePie. Two hundred users watching. He parks. Let's get this party started. Praying figures fall like cardboard cutouts and no one props them back up. The only ruling power here is the one doing the filming. POV. Remnants of stray HD powder on the reporter's jawline as if someone tried to lift fingerprints from her face. Students dancing a haka for the dead. The leader bellows a word and the others join in. Slap their thighs, their chests and arms, and teeter back and forth, legs spread wide. And I—I vaguely remember having seen this all before. They open their eyes wide. They stick their tongues out. And you. You're quiet. As if you weren't here on this sofa but hidden somewhere else behind a bush or a column. As if you were trying desperately not to interrupt. They throw themselves on the ground, rubbing their cheeks against the earth, and then it comes back to me. As if through mist, I see them, those old men dancing the gjâma, not in New Zealand, but Albania. They repeat the motions they'd seen as kids. Things almost forgotten, but still there. They rub their cheeks against the earth and close its eyes. They thank it for receiving all these dead.

The interconnectedness that we try to catch before it slips away, that we carefully cup in our hands, peering at it through slightly spread fingers as if at a dragonfly—in moments like these, this interconnectedness becomes visible. Today, it determines my life, which is our life. But back then, on our way to the Czech Republic, I only had an inkling.

In the faint light the Cinquecento casts on the country road, I stared at that one hair jutting out of your left eyebrow. It's wiry and lighter than the rest. Like an antenna. What kind of signals do you receive? Across the border there were trailers lined between the spruce trees. A forest that's a landmark, frazzled and beautiful. Peasant uprisings must have taken place here and, later on, displacements. The residents of Johanngeorgenstadt come here to visit prostitutes. I told you I wanted to learn a trade. Something that would be of value somewhere else as well. Something tangible. A global occupation: doctor or hairdresser, for example.

After arriving in Karlovy Vary, we exchanged money at a casino. One of the coins bore the inscription: *Let us not perish, nor those who shall come after us*. In quiet voices, we spoke of the things we'd seen and meant the things we'd not yet seen. Shimmering brocade wallpaper. A mirror hung above the bed, and when I leaned against it, I could see the back of my head through the open bathroom door. You peeled a grapefruit for me, a green one. Stains on the starched sheets. I sucked the flesh from the pith and read to you.

The heaviest, I said, the heaviest and biggest and oldest living organism in the world is a forest. A forest in Utah. Thousands of trees connected to one another underground. They're all identical, yet different. And when one falls, it fertilizes the rest. And they've been doing it since the last Ice Age. I showed you the picture. Thin, white tree trunks and their shadows. Like a single, leafy barcode.

Pando, you said. I sprawled out on the bed.

The next time we saw each other, I confessed my great fear of the end. Be it decline or damnation. Today, sometimes, I think I've learned to live with it.

We chose a bench at a place where the land dissolves into islands but is still set, gem-like, in city. We chose a bench, and that's where we'd meet when everything goes to pot, you said, or maybe I did. We agreed that this would be the spot. And I don't doubt that you would find it blindfolded. As for me, I'm not so sure.

When Hans and Reja decide to get married, at a dingy bar called Destille, the gamblers at the slot machines cheer them on. And then suddenly: three cherries in a row. Old Eye-Bags Manni is beside himself. The coins patter wildly, and he dives onto the ground, coiling his body around them in a semicircle like he's trying to protect them. And he does. This is the moment he's been waiting for, even though he's never really believed it would come. The bystanders retreat discreetly into the darkness. An Aztec temple lights up the display. Only the pile of skulls is missing. Where will the ghosts of the vanquished head to when they pay their annual visit to our world? What sacrifices brought Manni here?

That same evening, Reja books two flights to America.

1520. Dürer realizes it has been a while since his last trip as he boards the ship in Würzburg. He enjoyed his time in Venice: the Doge's Palace, the Gothic tracery, and especially the gondolas. This is what Albrecht Dürer the Tourist recalls as he clamors onboard, swaying to and fro upon the Main, anxiously waiting for his ship to finally pull up anchor. Moving down the river until it meets the Rhine. He presents his customs documents. Dozes below deck. And suddenly, he's there: Cologne. From whence he plans to continue on to Montezuma's treasure through the woods by carriage. But just outside of Jülich, he is served some blood sausage. Dürer doesn't notice that it's spoiled because the innkeeper has smothered it in apple sauce. He doesn't mind that there's nothing else to really fill him up. Albrecht Dürer the Gourmet has eaten enough ryebread. Bread in the morning, bread at noon, bread for his supper. He'll never eat a French fry, hashbrown, potato fritter, gratin, or croquette.

At this very moment, it's nighttime in Mexico. At this moment, the conquistadores are crossing the Gulf toward the Yucatán. Beneath them teem eels and sardines and isopods fifty times the size of the little woodlice in the crypt below the cathedral of Sevilla. This giant isopod can survive years without food. But if a dead whale sinks down to it, it won't stop gorging. It'll gnaw its way through the blubber for weeks although its organs are already pressing against the insides of its exoskeleton. It grows heavier with each bite until eventually its spreading innards crush its own young. And there it lies, this giant isopod, hundreds of meters beneath the conquistadores, a brimming coffin for its own spawn. And in the deeper depths? Asphalt volcanos fed by seeping petroleum. Shellfish colonies settling on the hardened flows after eruptions, as though resting their bodies in the cab of a semitruck. Chemosynthesis at the rest stop, on the seafloor of the Bay of Campeche. Their ship may have been sealed with bitumen,

but the conquistadores have no concept of oil. Nor do they know that they're traversing a crater on their way to Veracruz, where gold awaits. This crater will be discovered much later by PEMEX, after the expropriation of Shell.

In their former palace in the capital, Petroleos Mexicanos now officiate. And thus ended a unique battle in social history: a country on one side; on the other, Royal Dutch Shell, Standard Oil, and California Sinclair—the almighty trinity of the world's petroleum monopoly.

So before these circumstances started churning, before the so-called West declared a boycott against *Bolshevik Mexico*, long before the first oil spill spread out over the Gulf, there was a churning and flowing within it, and beneath the conquistadores—

The carpet, too, is moving under you

2019. The moon sets palely over Hans's temple. Reja opens the door and tiptoes through the living room. Jean and Alice lie tangled on the sofa, their faces turned away from one another like a single, beautiful deity.

It's December and pleasantly mild in Oakland, California. Angela and Malcolm smile down on Reja from the facades of the buildings—or perhaps, more likely, down on the handful of other pedestrians outside. Though their gaze is not meant for her, she still feels like it is, just like she always does.

At the diner, she's directed to the last remaining seat at the counter. Next to her is a gaunt figure dressed in mountaineering gear. A ring on one finger measures his blood pressure and the quality of his sleep. Silicon Valley is fifty miles away, as far as the source of the Emscher River—on whose banks Reja grew up—lies from its mouth. But in reality, the Valley eats its way deep into the region. Its impact ripples all the way into the hinterlands. While Reja studies her laminated menu, a Facebook employee sounds the alarm: Rents in the area are so high that the offices are drowning in their own trash. No one is willing to commute for hours to scrape gum off the workstations of those authors who are working to write the modern world, to form or deform it, no one really knows which.

When his breakfast arrives, the techie starts in with a Lord's prayer. Reja is scared to death: She can already see him loading, flicking off the safety, taking aim. She can already hear him intoning a nasheed about Chick-fil-A.

The waitress dumps the rest of her coffee into a to-go cup. You like a lid with that? The techie chews. The other guests pay him no mind. A girl is recording a voice message of epic proportions, turning to suck on her straw between sentences without pausing her recording, and returning to her message after swallowing each sip.

Reja's friends are standing bleary-eyed around the backyard smoking, while Jean's uncle's pit bull, the legacy of generations of profitable inbreeding, chews on a rubber chicken. Hazy light. Alice puts her sunglasses on. Jean is freshly shaven. A tiny ketchup stain on his shirt.

2014. Jean and Hans are interns for a newspaper delivered to abandoned villages in the Carpathians where there's no one left to read them. The editorial staff sits in a far-flung wing of the House of the Press in Bucharest. The two wander the corridors together, and Jean can tell how nervous Hans is. Hans loves how softly Jean speaks at work and how different he is in the evenings, when they are lying on the floor. They go to the same barber on the ground floor of the building and wear the same haircut from then on. Like many of their colleagues with permanent positions, they secretly write poems. Their boss is afraid of an imminent Russian invasion. Jean and Hans don't understand a thing.

And when they return to Bucharest together—fast friends and Jean's hair now shoulder-length—they no longer have any responsibilities in the city. Jean talks about his hometown on the Middle Rhine and the tourist groups he used to watch from his balcony. Hans only knows tourists from being one himself. In the park, they buy a bouquet of lily of the valley. They walk past busts of famous Europeans and the Hard Rock Café. They cross the boulevard and lose themselves again inside the giant building. Eventually, they find the editorial office. It's abandoned. Where filing cabinets once stood, pale rectangles contrast with the yellowed walls. The same sticker still clings to the front desk: *We don't smoke*. Hans peels it off. Jean lays their bouquet on the windowsill. For a moment, it's almost like they'd never met.

And for winning the Northern California championship, Jean's uncle concludes, we got this ring. That's a good fifty years ago now. Oyster Happy Hour hasn't started yet, but he knows his way around. He greets their waitress by the name stitched on her uniform like they've known each other for years. Today's my lucky day, he says, my nephew's come all the way from Germany! And Cindy indulges him without a moment's hesitation, both of them laughing uproariously. Jean's uncle looks exactly how Reja's always imagined a high school basketball coach. She asks about his work, and off he goes. Who made it and who didn't. Who almost

made it, but still wound up drowning in that same shit spiral that's been waiting to suck in boys from Oakland, California, for as long as Jean's uncle can remember.

Take Glenn, for example. As kids they used to play basketball together, but Glenn made it as a baseball player instead. Made it all the way to the Major League. There was just one problem: Glenn was gay. And he wasn't particularly interested in hiding it. His coach offered to pay for his honeymoon. Glenn laughed himself half to death. He was good. He started. Some of his teammates didn't care. Others gave him grief. Avoided the showers when he was in there. That kind of thing. And then, in 1982, a newspaper outed him. And that was the end of Glenn's career.

Ya know? Jean's uncle says, dumping spicy vinegar onto Reja's eleventh oyster. It all happened so fast. He broke a leg. He started doing blow. Next thing you know, he wound up on the street. The whole fucking kit and caboodle. And he'd always managed to keep his nose clean before. By the time he moved in with his sister, we all thought things were looking up. But then Glenn got sick, and they let him die. Glenn and thousands of others with him.

Outside, a driverless truck maneuvers while wind gusts buffet the umbrellas on the empty patio. Sugar skulls are hanging in the window.

Jean puts his phone on the table. The friends huddle around the screen. Glenn, bat in hand, his gaze resolute. Sparta. The strengthening of the flesh. The annual hunting of the bravest slaves. Hunger Games in Rechnitz. Pink disappearing into the spray. Boys becoming men. *Indeed fear of the numbers and obstinacy of the masses even moved the Spartans to action, their policy at all times governed by the necessity of taking precautions against the unfree.*

Didn't Glenn also invent the high-five? Alice takes a sip of tequila.

Yeah, Jean's uncle says, out of embarrassment. Hans imagines how he must have looked at eight years old. Yellow overalls. Gap-toothed. Shooting hoops on the basketball court. Some street in the suburbs. The song of the scrap dealer. Blinking brake lights. Touching hands when they said goodbye. Watching each other becoming someone else, and be happy about it. Knowing each other. Jean's uncle raises his hand. The ring still tying him to Glenn even in death glitters on his finger. Reja understands that she should give him five, and so she does.

Just a second, Alice says, as he starts looking for his credit card to pay. Before I forget: the video from the game. She pulls a flash drive out of her purse.

2016. Alice and Reja sitting in a windowless seafood joint talking about the label George Gina & Lucy. As girls, both of them dreamed in vain of owning one of those purses—something their two mothers in two different towns had both decided was out of the question, too expensive. And now, with the S-Bahn shaking the entire room, Alice describes how she bookmarked a link to a recent eBay search: The George Gina & Lucy purse is coming back! And I'm going to get mine off someone who could afford it back then. That's my exorcism. Reja's not so sure. Those straps. Those carabiner clips. Desperately searching for something to hold onto in the joint connecting the two halves of the 82 bus. Next stop: Walpurgisstrasse. Bettina Barty vanilla deodorant. Caro from the tenth grade and her sperm-shaped eyebrows. Reja blinks dizzily. No. These purses don't deserve a second chance. Their useless straps are evil.

The physicist points today to colors in the solar spectrum which already have a name but the knowledge of which is reserved for the men of the future.

Alice, filming the game. Jean's uncle introduces her to the students as a European director. And here she had been trying so hard with her American outfit. Alice climbing to the top rung of the bleachers. Disappointment in the boys' eyes as she unpacks her old camcorder. And then they're off. Pivots. Layups. The smell of gym shoe soles. Rubber. Alice zooms out and can already see how the boys will sit there, with their deformed teenage bodies, eating Doritos while Jean's uncle darts his laser pointer across the projector screen—their very lives hanging in the balance. And Alice will have already crossed over the Bay Bridge in her gold Honda Accord, onward down the 101 with Kanye singing: *My life is His, I'm no longer my own*, and her friends' voices rising in chorus. Exit towards Junipero Serra Boulevard in the Stanford Hills. Serra, a Franciscan monk from Mallorca founded missions across California subordinate to one thing and one thing alone: subordination. Subordination and the annihilation of all things that could not be subordinated.

And so it began, Hans thinks: the sixth mass extinction. The fifth came from space. That asteroid. Hadn't it hit the sea with such an impact that the water had evaporated and the dinosaurs were wiped from the land as well? Hadn't it made such a deep crater that the Earth's crust melted? Isn't the ground in that part of Mexico still particularly calciferous even today? What was the normal word for that? Lime! It sounded delicious. Refreshing and effervescent.

The Yucatán was covered with a thick layer of limestone: nature's way of storing carbon dioxide gas as a solid, by combining it with calcium. Shocked limestone suddenly releases its stored CO₂, and in an impact as large as this, enormous quantities of this gas were almost instantaneously released like popping the cork on a colossal bottle of champagne.

That same asteroid whose crater the conquistadores traversed off the coast of Veracruz before making landfall. Plus ultra, in the name of Emperor Charles.

At the same moment, there's still daylight on the Lower Rhine. At the same moment, Dürer rips the latest Venetian fashions from his ass, having barely brought his coach to a halt in time for his hour of need. The oak leaves rustle above him, the cobwebs twinkle, a peaceful forest all around while Albrecht Dürer spews his guts.

How they glitter, the campuses. Google. Apple. Grindr. Close contact services. *Why are you hitting yourself?* Neuralink malfunction, short circuit of the brain. One click and you're either healed or neutralized. 2050. No conspiracy necessary, the fine print of contract law takes care of that, well, actually—actually, you took care of that yourself, you hostage, you customer, you—you're part of a gigantic bioprocessor. So many users, ONE mainframe. You, an extracted resource; you, the renewable energy. you—you hope your application to switch off your amygdala will be approved because: you are afraid. At some point, it's just a race between systems. A super quantum computer versus ten-thousand interned orphan kids. They can't compute basic equations, but they've got computational power! Who will do it first? Who will crack the uncrackable, break it off like an ice sheet from a glacier?

In Brussels, the glaring light hits Dürer like a full-frontal assault. He forms snow goggles with his fingers and squints his right eye shut. How can that be? Albrecht Dürer the Smith asks himself upon seeing a silver fish with golden scales. The last of its kind. The others have already been made into ingots.

At the same moment, it's nighttime in Mexico. At the same moment, things melt there that will never be seen again.

The friends visit the birthplace of the internet. Their footsteps squeak on the freshly polished floor. In the elevator, they press -1. Framed group photos. A man in a crop top. A question mark above him, no one seems to know who he was. The Library of Alexandria, it's always

burning somewhere. Reja taps her sneakers on the tiles. The very first chat message was received here. Or at least a part of it. Not LOGIN, but LO, as in: *lo and behold*.

And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

2001. Microsoft Encarta. Reja runs her finger over the reflective plastic. Her fingerprint against the deceptive smoothness of the disk. Peaks and valleys. Empty moving boxes piled in the living room. This is the last time she'll insert this CD-ROM. The next day, her father comes home from work early, beside himself with joy. Wikipedia. A pious double-click. Don't be so impatient, he says, fearing nothing more than the arrival of the hourglass. Open source. Does she know what that means: An idea that's not for sale? Reja's father has been waiting all his life for this. For this thing that makes tangible the connection he feels to the world. Well, no. It's always been tangible. But now it's legible! He's been waiting for this on those endless nightshifts as a security guard in the foyers of corporations and the branches of savings banks—his name on his tag always—What? Legible? No. He'd been waiting for it in front of the delivery room, Reja's mother on the other side of the door and no one there to tell him he was allowed inside, too. All the things he had missed in waiting. In line at the gas station, where he sometimes put a rock as a placeholder. As if he had something better, something more important to do. But instead, he only went around the block, gazing at the empty storefronts and into those crowded bars where girls drank peach nectar from tiny glass bottles and women drank coffee. He had the feeling time had grown thicker. Sugary, almost unpalatable—like it could stick to his fingers, his life. Back in the gas station line, he kicked the rock aside. By the time it was his turn, he'd grown a thousand years older. He has waited so long, and now the moment has come. He's showing his daughter the search function, and she's asking what she should type, thinking hard.

Those teeming masses at the intersection. From high enough up, even Gelsenkirchen looks like Liberty City. The roofs of cars, umbrellas. The dotted line separating lanes. Objects without shadows. Human civilization marches on. The invasion of Afghanistan. Software updates. *Grand Theft Auto 3*. The shadows return to the world, and you don't even notice anymore because you're already in it. Its borders always seem a bit further away, the closer you get.

A new apartment. 2005. Three drunks by the sandbox in front of the government office. The heavy perfume of linden flowers. Reja closes a window. She clicks through the self-sufficiency forum. Someone's posted a picture of their balcony. Their raised beds. Tomatoes.

Permaculture. Another calculates how much flax you'd have to grow to clothe a five-person family. They're talking about mandatory school attendance and mandatory vaccines and the state that she—she's twelve years old at this point—also finds threatening, but not threatening enough for her to want to up and move to some remote bit of forest in the Carpathians.

Outside, on the campus, the paving stones rest in the earth, immovable, while future millionaires drag themselves in exhaustion from the libraries.

Who was Cato, anyway?

A Roman senator, says Jean, the only one of them with an education in the humanities. He wanted to protect the Republic from Caesar because he was against decadence and corruption. But the Fall of Rome was already in the cards. The forests had been cleared and the flatlands were flooded. Cato fought for ideals no one even believed in anymore. Probably not even him.

And the Cato Institute? Reja points to the building in front of them.

The Institute, it turns out, is a thinktank. It has nothing to do with Cato. Its subject is freedom. Not of individuals, but of markets, those strange underwater beasts. Whoever understands their behavior knows the future. Around this behavior, a cult has formed, whose priests are consumed by impatience. They stare into the depths awaiting signs. Cast stones or tiny breadcrumbs. It quivers. The markets slap their tailfins, and entire communities fall victim to the flood. They shit an ink-black pat into the sea and thousands of decomposers gather around it. In the end, the Leviathan is not a state.

Wow, says Alice. I need a cold brew