

On the  
windy terrace,  
a young  
woman was  
looking out at  
the sea.

She kept her hands to her head to try to keep her long hair from flying about. The sunlight was as if made violent by the wind. On the cement terrace were circles and squares painted in whitewash. When the girl turned towards George, her hair flowed over and followed the contours of her forehead, nose, cheeks. She drew the hair aside and it flew out behind her, exposing her neck. She stood for a moment, leaning against the wind.

George walked down a road towards the sea. Fifteen years before, he and his then girl friend, later his wife, had been to this island, and they'd walked down this road. The hotel he was staying at now, and other small, white hotels in stony fields, did not exist then. The road became a path through fields, lined with wind-bent reeds. The fields were covered with brown stubble and stones and empty mineral water

bottles. Where the fields ended was beach sand and low, twisted tamarisk trees growing in the sand. Beyond the trees, George saw red and blue pup tents pitched in the dunes. In the blowing wind the tents swayed. They appeared to make up a small desert encampment. Thrown over a reed frame was a worn oriental rug.

Hiding among a clump of tamarisk trees, George undressed, and as he did he realized it was silly that he was a little worried someone might see him undressed, he, a forty year old man; but he looked about to make sure no one was around before he slipped off his underpants and quickly slipped on his bathing suit. He walked through the encampment of tents and over the dunes.

As he hadn't been on a beach in over five years, his body seemed to him obscenely exposed in its whiteness. His flesh, which had been hidden away in Boston, would burn, and he had no sun lotion. He wanted to cover it, not to protect it, but to keep it hidden, even from his own oblique view of it. He had breasts, hairy breasts, and his stomach sagged over the top of his bathing suit. When he looked up from his body, he saw, coming towards him and walking in a rolling way because of the sand, a naked man, deep brown. His hair was thick, bleached by the sun, and it stuck out as if it had never been combed. Around his neck was a string of red beads. His purple penis flopped up and down as he walked. He might have been one of a tribe of nomads who had had no contact with the world outside his own. He was headed towards the tents.

On the white beach that sloped down to the blue-green water were more naked people. A group of naked boys and girls were throwing a ball to one another, while among them, sprawled on the sand, were more naked boys and girls, some looking at those playing, some lying as if asleep. Their tanned bodies were oiled.

George saw a large, naked man with a black beard lying propped on an elbow with a little girl riding his thigh. Her small, bare vagina bumped his hairy thigh. By him, a large woman, whose heavy breasts spread open, was lying flat on her back, her legs open. Perhaps they were a family.

Turned away from the beach, George stood where the

water rose over the flat sand. From the sea emerged the young woman he'd seen at the hotel. Her long wet hair was stuck to her shoulders. As she strode naked through the water, she shook her head and her hair swung out, spraying drops. As she passed him, she lowered her head, but she looked up at him from her lowered brow and smiled.

George walked further down the beach. He stopped at a spot between two women reading books where he threw his bundle of clothes onto the sand, and hooking his thumbs into the waist band of his bathing suit pulled it down, stepped out of it, and flung it onto the sand. No one looked at him. The woman on the left turned a page, and when he looked at the one on his right she turned a page. Naked, he sat on the sand, leaned back on his outstretched arms, and surveyed the beach, on his left and right, beyond the women.

In the evening, though there was no wind, Kiria Yanulla, who ran the hotel, placed stones at the corners of the paper table covers. As George, at his table, was arranging the stones in different patterns, some people came to the next table and he looked up to see, with another young woman and a young man, the young woman with the long hair. She sat at an angle to him.

Her body hidden, she did not, he remarked to himself, have a very beautiful face. Her nose was too thin and long. She and her friends spoke English with British accents.

George wondered which of the women was with the man. Maybe neither was, and they were just friends, most likely from a university. Happiness in George's life depended largely on a sense of possibility. Sometimes he thought he was too lazy to go out and get what he wanted, and sometimes he thought he was too shy. Really, he didn't want the young woman at the next table, but the possibility that she was free gave him great happiness.

The conversation among the three was lively and educated. With his third glass of wine, George felt he was falling in love with all three of them. He leaned towards their table and raised his glass to them, and they smiled, their teeth and the whites of their eyes gleaming in faces that were dark and disappeared into the surrounding warm night. The young

woman with the long hair was addressed by the others as Edith.

After they ate, the three young people went down to the harbour. After George ate, he thought he'd take a walk to the harbour, too. Then he thought that maybe he shouldn't, because if she, Edith, saw him there she might think he'd come after her. But he wanted to go down to the harbour because of course anyone would.

George walked slowly past the crowded bars, looking in. The doors and windows were open. When he saw Edith, sitting at a table with her friends under the arch of an arcade that ran along a line of shops and restaurants and bars, he climbed the cement steps up to the arcade and went into the bar. He couldn't go as far as to sit near her. In any case, there wasn't a free table. At the bar, he drank a brandy. Beyond the open doors he could see her, or part of her, and beyond the arch under which she sat he could see moonlight on water.

When she got up and left, he went back to the hotel. He read for a little while before putting out his light. His body emanated rays of warmth under the sheet.

This was George Sancret's first holiday since his divorce a year before. After having been married for over ten years, he accepted that the divorce was in large part due to him. Perhaps it wasn't due in large part to him, but he accepted that it was, and he did because he didn't want to have to explain to his ex-wife why the problems of their marriage could have been due to him only in small part. George hated explaining himself, and this was not because he believed he was above explaining his actions and words, but because he was sure that nothing could really be explained. He'd always wanted to say to his wife, "Please, let's just be quiet." He hadn't wanted a divorce.

At breakfast, he looked for Edith. The young woman who'd been with her the evening before came down. George waited, turning his empty cup round and round in its saucer, for Edith to come down. She didn't.

She and the young man must be lovers, he thought.

That would make it easier for him. Possibility was difficult to bear. Since his divorce, he found that it was a relief

to pass a beautiful woman in the street and not be tempted to turn. Once, he had looked for an excuse for not stopping to sit across from a beautiful woman seated on a bench in the Boston Common, and when he did come up with a good excuse, such as he had to go to the toilet badly, he felt that a great responsibility was lifted off him. Later, he reproached himself for inventing a bad excuse for not taking advantage of a good opportunity—what was happening to him?—but, still later, going to bed, he thought he'd done the right thing after all, and he was relieved that he was going to bed alone. Maybe he'd suffered more than he thought from his divorce; maybe he was in a weakened state. Possibility filled him with happiness, but it also filled him with anguish, and these could happen at the same time. Even to contemplate the possibility of getting Edith away from her lover required too great an effort. He hoped Edith and her lover were happy together.

On the beach, approaching a pup tent pitched by a dune, George saw the flap open and a young man's head emerge. The young man's taut, brown, naked body fell out and did a summersault on the sand, followed by the slim naked body of a young woman, who tumbled beside the young man. Together, they ran down to the sea and threw themselves into the glinting water. This was the way they woke up and started their day.

George followed two long-legged women, their buttocks swaying in the same way, walking ahead of him along the beach. He followed them at a distance. They walked towards the rocks, and then they turned round and walked towards him. He lowered his head a little as he passed between them and continued on to the rocks. Brown sunbathers were on the brown rocks. George climbed onto a low ledge, reconnoitred, and, sometimes holding out his arms to keep his balance, walked along the headland, on which, on smooth areas and in crags at water level, was a different population from that on the sand. He climbed up high, the stone hot on his soles, and looked down at this little society of naked rock people: they did not move about as the sand people did, but remained in their spots, only from time to time throwing themselves off

the rocks to plunge into the water, where their bodies turned pale blue and undulated under the waves.

Towards his right where the rocks opened was a small beach half covered with dried seaweed. Sometimes crouching to step from one stone ledge to another, he climbed down to this beach. A fishing boat, tipped on its side, was on the sand, and a rusty, four-pronged anchor on a coil of rope was at the prow. Edith was on the beach, standing on a rock that jutted out into the water. If he had called out her name, she would have turned to him. The young man from the hotel was descending the rocks carrying a large plastic bottle of mineral water. He was wearing espadrilles and shorts, which he unzipped and removed while she watched him. After she drank from the bottle, she handed it to him. Water dripped from their chins.

When they lay down together on a sheet, George undressed and went into the water to his waist, then let himself fall forward. Swimming, he thought how, when he was the age of the young couple, he could never have dreamed of being able to go to a public place with a girl where it would have been natural to lie naked on a sheet with her in full view of everyone around. The difference in his age and theirs was not so great, less than twenty years, surely. Back on shore, he sat with his feet in the water on a smooth stone at the opposite side of the beach from the young couple. His flesh was finely nubbled from the cold water.

He was sitting to the side of a little bay, with rounded rocks in the bay. The sea far out was deep blue with stretches of blue-green, and around the rocks it was green. Around the rock he was sitting on it was clear, showing the submerged rocks and the white sand and brown-black seaweed, all as if moving below the moving light. On the shore behind him, packed thick on flat, dark grey rock, the dried seaweed was bleached grey, and behind the shore was a stone wall along the top of the ledge. Through gaps in the wall appeared a field in which were brown thyme shrubs, and, above, was the colorless, blazing sky, which he couldn't look at, and which forced him to look down again, across the beach, to Edith, lying by the young man.



George climbed up onto the rocks until he was above the couple. He sat on dry seaweed. Below him, the legs of the couple and their bodies up to their waists were visible. He thought of the young man turning to the young woman and putting his hand between her legs.

The second young woman was coming across the beach, wearing a long, loose, sheer, red shift that slipped about her shoulders. As she approached the two lying on the sheet, the young man stood and walked towards her to meet her. She lifted her shift over her head and threw it down, and he took her in his arms and kissed her. George looked from them out to sea, to where a white ship was passing.

Edith was standing on the sheet. She turned, as if he'd called her, and looked up at him.

The worst moments George recalled of his marriage were not the most dramatically horrific, of which there had been more and more, but the merely embarrassing. He thought now how he had tried to impress his wife with his silence. He would go into their bedroom and lie on their bed and not move for hours. Sometimes, he lay on the floor in the middle of the living room and stared up at the ceiling while she went from room to room shouting and slamming doors. The recollections made him burn more than the sun did. His wife had ended up begging him to get up, to talk to her, but he remained where he was, silent and still.

Day after day, the heat got worse, and George, at the water's edge on the beach, felt isolated by it. The sky became black with heat. He felt isolated from the sea and the sand and the sky and also from the fact that his friends were arriving that evening, that he had friends, that he had an apartment in Boston and a medical practice there.

In side-long glances, he tried to revive, in the visions of beautiful naked women lounging on the sand, reading, combing their hair, oiling their breasts, the sense of possibility that had surrounded him the first time he'd come onto the beach.

He swam, then lay on his spot and fell asleep. When he woke, he sat up, his eyes wide. It took him a while to focus in

**DAVID  
PLANTE**

*The Beach*

the bright light. To his left, a man and a woman were looking past him, and he turned to his right to see, standing among the naked people on the beach, a man dressed in what looked like military fatigues and carrying a rifle. His hair was short and his chin blunt. He held the rifle as if at attention, and he looked past it out at the sea. The people sitting around him were looking at him, and further down the beach people were standing to look. A young woman put on her shorts and a halter, then a young man put on his shorts. George saw people, here and there, putting on clothes. The couple to his left, wrapped towels around themselves. George dragged his trousers towards him and pulled a cloth leg over his groin. The man with the rifle crouched and leaned his rifle against a wind break of cane which someone had built; he continued to look out at sea. Some of the people closest to him walked away. Then he unbuttoned and took off his brown and green camouflage shirt, removed his boots and socks, and, always looking out at the sea, unzipped his khaki trousers and took these off, then pulled down his underpants and threw them on the pile of his clothes. He lay, naked, his arms and legs outstretched, on the sand.

George told his friends about this. They were all sitting on the hotel terrace in the evening. His friends were a couple he'd met since his divorce. They laughed at George's story.

The woman, whose face was burned red from sitting on deck on the boat, exclaimed, "Totally naked?"

"Yes," George said.

From the terrace, they saw the moon rise.

George said, "I'll tell you what. Let's not eat here tonight. Let's go to a restaurant where there's music and dancing."

He was doing this for his friends. His friends' spirits were at that height where they thought they were original and spontaneous, but they weren't; they were the spirits of people who had just arrived. But he felt friendly towards them as they walked along the road in moonlight. They talked softly and laughed softly, as, all about them, sounds came from far distances. The whitewashed trunks of eucalyptus trees showed



in the moonlight, and the whitewashed walls of little stone buildings.

Music came from the restaurant, behind a screen of reeds. A big tractor was parked outside, among small cars. Under a shelter covered with palm fronds and entwined with illuminated strings of red, blue and yellow bulbs were tables with plastic covers and people at the tables eating. The music came from a cassette player hung on a wooden peg on the whitewashed wall. A boy wearing a singlet came out of the kitchen carrying a large tin tray on which were plates of grilled fish. There was a free table at a corner of the restaurant, and George led his friends there.

Edith was sitting at the next table. She was with people, another young woman and two young men, George didn't recognize.

Even though late, children ran about the large circle painted white on the cement floor, where people had danced. A man and a woman and two children left, climbed up into the cab of the tractor, and, in a cloud of heavy exhaust, went off.

Edith got up from her chair and went out of the restaurant. One of the young men called her, but she didn't turn back, and walked past the reed screen.

Without saying anything to his friends, George got up from his chair and went out of the restaurant. He walked to the screen of reeds and looked beyond it, then he walked down the dirt road. The music from the restaurant sounded remote, and sounded more and more remote as he continued down the narrowing road. His sandals sank into beach sand. A faint breeze was blowing through the tamarisk trees which he passed among, but on the beach the air went calm again.

Further up the beach was a fire, with figures moving around the fire.

Large pieces of broken stone lay scattered on the beach. George walked among them towards the sea, and as he did he saw a naked woman rise up in the water and come slowly towards the shore, water breaking about her thighs. George stopped. He saw her stop, too, when she saw him. He heard someone call, "George, George."