

ONCE UPON A BEACH

TOTI O'BRIEN

They ask me if I want a ride to the poetry festival: a giant thing, not to miss, they say. I don't know about that. I'm way past enthusiasm. I've been living abroad—only back for a visit, I feel alien, extraneous. I will leave again soon, I can miss anything I want.

One more reason not to say no, they insist. What do I have to lose? Get on your feet, climb into the car, squeeze in.

Ah, the beach... how magic it is. We have arrived at "the gates": an ex-army zone no one should trespass. But it is the unofficial destiny of all improvised parties, all midnight spaghettis. Meeting point is that rip in the fence, open door to a few miles of clean empty dunes: a small piece of quasi paradise, not far from our chaotic and smothering capital town.

Well: it is quite crowded tonight...

I am struck by the candor of tents. Tall searchlights stick out against a black sky (the stars shying away, almost invisible). Fancy structures of numerous stages draw complicate patterns. All looks like a De Chirico painting. In the background, the sound of the ocean is haunting—like a mighty breath, hidden behind this phantasmagoria.

1

Here he comes! The American guru is about to begin.

You must be kidding, I say.

You don't read the papers, they reply.

But what does he do here, who paid for the plane fare?

They are all here, dummy, don't you know? This is the last night, the night of the US celebrities.

It must be that small man. Neat and clean, he wears white. That looks odd. All around I see black, the blue of jeans, spare accents of bright. White, though... what could better profile itself in this darkness?

His smile is warm and polite. He would like to start reading but he can't. A commotion occurs as soon as he opens his mouth: a girl just jumped on stage. She must be drunk... a crumpled sheet in her hand, she wants to read her own poetry. Right now: a spontaneous, cheap, confessional and inappropriate performance. Also a local one, in our national language. The organizers of course try to silence her, gently pushing her back.

Is it gentle? She resists and she's not alone. A faction takes her side. Why not her? Why should the feature go first? He should yield to the locals, or let things happen as usual: confided to the wings of improvisation. If she stole the words from his mouth... good for her, let her express herself.

The American takes it well: he still smiles—not receding an inch, though, from center stage. He interjects whenever he can... someone frantically whispers translations in his ear. Clearly he doesn't understand what this is about. He only speaks English, and though he does it well that's not helping him.

Meanwhile trouble swells, taking uncanny proportions. The organizers can't keep the situation in check (here they never can). The crowd's already set in two armies, agitated, ready to fight. Here are those who came to hear the celebrity first. Here are those who don't care for order, who want the drunk to complete her exploit since she started it.

Now the feature is tired. He has grabbed the mike and he sports a different voice: big, metallic. He's proposing a system: something like a list. He's talking of numbers.

In a corner—below, very close—I look at him mesmerized. I stare at his lips while I attempt to make sense of his words. He articulates. He speaks slowly. Still he speaks the only language he knows, the one he actually masters—that's why he is famous. But it isn't working.

I look at his eyes. They are good, honest. Almost sincere, are they? I'm horribly sorry for him.

This is not getting better: the confusion is beyond control, the star increasingly nervous. His tone becomes shrilling while he tries to assign numbers for folks to line up. He's moving around, pointing, touching.

Not a good idea. Irritation weaves its way through the rows. I can feel it brushing at me. Who's this guy after all? Who does he think he is? Why is he trying to lead us? Does he think he's in charge? Did he come from the States to teach us how to rule our affairs? Can't he let us take care of our mess in our messy way? Why does he think he knows better?

These notions crawl like ants on the edge of my soul. Then they burst at my side, like an unattended grenade from D-day.

A woman, longhaired, not quite a smart face, sat still on the sand during the entire rumpus. Now—determined, slow, terrifying in her methodical way—she holds her fist high while shouting: "Yankees go home". Her row joins in the chorus. Voices swell like a wave, hammering at the night sky. Someone rushes the poet towards a tent.

I'm ashamed. I'm torn. I hate them all. I hate them because they misunderstood his attempts of polite, democratic and rational conciliation. I hate him because he understood nothing. We were all here to celebrate common feelings, kin ideas, to enjoy and enrich each other. But how easily, gosh, it didn't happen at all.

Isn't it how things usually go? I must have learned it that night among other lessons. People walk on a tightrope: they run forwards with enthusiasm, expecting to meet in the middle. Then a tug somewhere, an oscillation: they fall. Always on opposite sides.

Well, I thought I knew better. Or I thought I would not take the risk. I'd walk my tightrope alone.

2

The invited US poets were three... I wonder who found the money to fly them. The government? Strange, for a bunch of dissident writers. Famous all right, but on the rebel side. Though I had just gathered a demonstration of their relative composure. Dissident Americans were more reasonable and disciplined than confused, primitive us.

Would the second star take the podium just left by the man in white? Maybe an adjacent one: various stages displayed different programs (all had been brilliantly orchestrated, except for impromptu disasters). In

doubt, I wandered a bit.

A young man busied himself around a spotlight: planting it in the sand, weighting it down. I perfectly remember his gestures—how weird, for such trivia. But the girls who had dragged me along whispered non-stop in my ear, about him of course. A new acquaintance they had hopes upon... maybe planning to get him in turns... not certain. I am sure they were depicting his virtues, their soft words mixed with the background din, the wind in the distance.

I remember their voices: enticing and off, for I wasn't looking at them but at what they described. That prince, clearly in disguise, since he was sweating on a subordinate task. He was part of the organization, they said. A bright mind, a true intellectual. Also kind, very nice. So he looked.

I don't know why—my eyes switching carefully from handsome limbs to handsome face—I had a sudden epiphany. Not for me, I heard myself say. I will never, never be with someone like this. "This" was too good for me just as the American guru—a minute ago—was too good for our provincial crowd.

Well, of course the comparison didn't work. If the foreign poet and the local intellectual could be assimilated, why myself and the drunk, emotional, short fused audience? I have no explanation. The episodes lined up randomly: gravity pulled them together. They got stuck into a constellation: that's how history occurs. The personal, and the other one.

Wait, the pattern is not complete.

I had not perspired yet the anxious shame I felt when those fists were shaken at a performing poet. I decided to bluntly ignore the second feature: I needed a walk.

I moved fast, deepening into parts of the beach clear of people, immersed in soothing obscurity. I came to the wet sand, next to the water. There I sensed them. I perceived their rhythm. I mean the couple making love in lotus position.

I was young, I had never seen it done that way. If I knew it was a possibility, I didn't have it in my eyes. They were in the darkness, of course, but

it sort of dispersed around them. The energy must have created clarity... for I neatly remember their silhouette: one, made of two bodies in joint motion.

I recall something centered, something vertical... definitely an idea of pleasure ascending (where else should it go?) Waves and foam as a backdrop. And smile: did I see it? I doubt it. I didn't come close: I smoothly but rapidly veered away.

Still I recall the smile. It must have been his: she was smaller and facing him. It radiated a happiness I didn't know existed. It didn't resemble anything I had experienced. Not a bit. It breathed calm instead of excitement. I liked it even more.

And I sensed the opposite of what I had felt minutes earlier, while admiring the smart handsome guy. I felt: this is what I want and will get. All the rest can wait.

3

The third poet was getting on stage when I got back. The crowd gathered to the podium... I dared mixing in for another attempt at listening. People were even noisier: alcohol had been circulating.

The third star didn't seem to notice. He was casual. He had something familiar in his gait: an old uncle, so good hearted you couldn't possibly hurt him. He was wearing dark, maybe plaid... working immigrant style.

He started reading his stuff. I remember nothing but one famous poem. That it was famous, I learned later. To me it was new and it struck hard. It talked about that wide hole in the tent elephants can waltz through.

The image was stunningly appropriate. Weren't we surrounded by tents? Wasn't this a kind of circus? For sure. But I got the metaphor: it wasn't a complex one.

Yes, I got the metaphor. Sometimes (always, perhaps) we struggle hard to access things we want—love, happiness, inspiration... whatever. We cannot find the key, or the keyhole. But the door is wide open: shall we let ourselves in? No effort is needed. Simply waltz with the elephants, with that innocent, unselfconscious grace.

That made perfect sense... I felt enlightened and grateful. Thank you, dear old uncle. With you even distant US seem familiar. Even they come closer.

I never forgot the hole in the tent. But I never found it, if there was one.

I wonder if the third poet was tipsy when he read. If he wanted our sympathy, or to console us.