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Opening Extract from...

The Island

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Otto

Monday

Otto put down his book. He could see her, the girl Maria, talking to a tall man with cropped blonde hair – a German perhaps. They were sitting on the pale sand, now cooling in the brief twilight, too far away for him to eavesdrop, heads close together.

Otto was sitting at a table outside a beach shack, the only customer, drinking vodka from a tiny, smeared glass. The sky, a fierce indigo all day, had faded and now, in the minutes before the sunset, a ribbon of grainy pink burned over the horizon. The vodka flamed on his tongue and at the back of his throat. The perfume of spiced fish and wood smoke drifted from the shack with its roof of dried palm leaves.

Without asking, the waiter refilled Otto's glass. The boy, perhaps three or four years younger than Otto, was dressed in shorts and a shirt, the ubiquitous flip-flops on his feet. A black and white puppy emerged and began snapping up the beetles that crawled, like clockwork, from the shack's crannies as the sun disappeared into the sea.

The book lay waiting on the table, opened and face down, a copy of War and Peace Otto had picked up from a cabin selling second-hand books off the path between his lodgings and the shack where he drank a banana lassi every morning and a fresh fish curry at night. He wasn't interested in the book. He couldn't take his eyes from Maria who was momentarily bathed in the golden rays of the dying day, silhouetted with her man against the backdrop of sea, a clichéd picture from a holiday brochure, a romance in paradise.

She gestured with her thin, elegant arms, tossed her head so strands of long hair swung over her shoulders. Otto sighed. It both annoyed and fascinated him that he found Maria so intriguing; he felt a

sliver of jealousy, like a needle, to see her engaged in such heated conversation with this other man, the burly may-be German, though Otto had only spoken to her twice.

He raised the glass to his lips, allowed another drop of vodka onto his tongue. Doubtless a party would kick off along the beach in the hours to come. He'd selected the quiet end for his sojourn in Goa, waiting to meet his friends. Four days into the trip, drinking alone, he realised he wasn't thinking about Jen or Charlotte very much at all.

Otto sipped his vodka. The puppy crunched another beetle. From inside the shack he heard conversation and somebody laughing. The sun sank beneath the horizon and for a moment the sky burned like a cymbal of gold, before the colour drained away and soft, indigo darkness lay over the sea. He could hear the waves, gently lapping the sand.

Maria reached for an embroidered bag, resting by her side on the sand. She untied the drawstring and took out a folder of some kind. This she passed to the German, who slipped it into his satchel. Both stood up, Maria hopping with an appealing mixture of awkwardness and grace as she slipped on her sandal and tipped sand from her fluttering skirt. She reached out to her companion to steady herself, fingers touching his arm momentarily. She pushed her hair behind her ears, kissed him lightly on the cheek and finally turned away.

The young waiter emerged from the shack and turned on a string of fairy lights. He raised the vodka bottle; Otto shook his head. He didn't think Maria had seen him but she was heading up the beach, away from the sea to the low enclosure and palm leaf thatch surrounding the Seaside Bar.

"Hey," she said. "On your own again?"

The answer was evident.

"Hey Maria," he said. "Would you like a drink?" The waiter was already waiting with a glass. Maria nodded and sat on the chair the other side of the narrow table. She scrutinised Otto, a teasing smile on her face.

"So what have you been up to today?"

"Oh, the usual. Nothing much."

She picked up the book. "Reading?" she said. "Oh.War and Peace." The book didn't hold her interest. She wrinkled her nose and dropped it back on the table. Her skin was the colour of coffee, tanned by the Goan sun. She had long chocolate brown hair in which shone strands of burnished gold. This hair never seemed to be still, always sliding silkily over her shoulders and arms, falling across her face.

They had met two days earlier in Anjuna at the flea market. Maria had spotted him wandering alone among the traders and invited him to join her for a drink. At twenty she was two years older than Otto and had lived in Goa for several months, exactly how many she declined to say. They had met again, by chance, the following day. Otto had taken a walk along the beach and had seen her on the sand, sunbathing in a tiny blue bikini, her body all curves and hollows. She wasn't alone – two much older French women, obscured by hats and sunglasses, were sitting beside her on beach mats. Otto and Maria had conversed briefly though the French women ignored him.

Now they were alone.

"So what have you been doing?" Otto was oddly shy.

"The same," she shrugged. "Nothing much." She tossed back the vodka in one gulp, grimaced, and gestured for the waiter to fill her glass again. Otto found it hard to take his eyes off her, almost greedily feeding on the spectacle she presented in her pink vest top and light cotton skirt with its complex hippy print of red birds and yellow flowers. She had a silver ring on one elegant finger. Her hands, like her hair, were restless, fiddling with the vodka glass or picking at the table. Otto reined in the

desire to ask her about the maybe-German. He found, to his irritation, she intimidated him - perhaps because of her age, or her knowledge of the place, or simply because she looked so entirely lovely. He wanted to impress but his usual sociable self confidence faltered in her presence.

"There's a party later," she said. "You might like it. Not the usual tourist thing, something special. I can take you. It's a bit out of the way - at the other end of the beach. I'll show you. Why don't you move your lodgings? I could find you somewhere closer to the action. I know some good places you could stay. "

Otto shook his head. "I like it where I am," he said. "It's not far to walk in any case." He didn't want to be in her debt, didn't want to be helped. Rather, he wanted to demonstrate his competence and independence. To this end he said:

"Actually I did go to the fort this morning, before it got too hot. On the hilltop." He gestured vaguely with his hand into the darkness. "Built by the Portuguese in the 18th century I think. Only ruins now – have you been up there?"

Maria shook her head. The prospect of the fort and his nuggets of guidebook information made no impression. Despite Maria's indifference, Otto had enjoyed the walk. He was staying in a village half a mile behind the beach. The buildings making up the settlement stood in a kind of jungle to left and right of a long narrow lane that led down to a small, natural harbour. Tiny one-storey huts and brick houses stood among huge, emerald plants and strange trees with roots that seemed to grow out of the branches and down into the soil. To reach the ruined fort he'd climbed out of the canopied village and steeply up, over dry, tussocky soil to the cliff-top. He had the place to himself, the ring of broken wall, the view over the ocean and a great dome of silence. A tiny island, steep-sided, jungle-crowned, rose from the sea, perhaps half a mile from the coast, mysterious and primeval. He'd sat on a turret of stone overlooking the sea and the long ribbon of white beach, soaking up the fact that finally, he was here, in

India, so far from home in this beautiful, extraordinary place. An hour passed and the heat intensified. Otto, blond and milk-skinned, felt the sting of the sun's rays on his bare shoulders and the back of his head.

Back in the village he was accosted by a young man who told him the trip had been dangerous because the fort was full of cobras which might, if enthusiastic, pursue him all the way back to the village, following his scent.

Otto was tempted to tell Maria this tale about the cobras, a more precious and colourful piece of information than the Portuguese provenance of the ruins since he had not uncovered it in a guidebook. But something stopped him, a nervousness that she might not respond as he would like. He would save this for Jen and Charlotte who would certainly appreciate it. By the time they arrived in another two days he would be an old hand, like Maria, easy in this place, knowledgeable and confident.

Perhaps that was part of the reason he'd booked to travel ahead of them. It hadn't exactly been part of the plan. Charlotte had been furious when she discovered he'd found a cheap seat on a flight five days earlier than the girls' departure. It had been an impetuous, rather selfish decision but this way he got to forge the path – to be the pioneer.

"So tell me about this party," he said. "You're going?"

"Of course," Maria said. "You'll like it."

Otto nodded. Maria had assumed he would go along. And why not? He had nothing better to do.

An hour later they were walking along the beach. Maria took off her sandals and trod in the edge of the sea so the tips of the waves played over her feet. She had an elaborate silver ornament around her ankle, chains and bells that jingled as she moved. The large, bright moon cast a long white path across the dark blue surface of the sea. As they walked further, beach shacks grew more numerous, makeshift bars and restaurants catering for the backpackers and travellers. Then came a giant holiday

resort, a kind of palace fortress, an illuminated swimming pool visible through the steel railings.

"So how long are you staying in Goa?" Otto had asked the question before and Maria had avoided it, as she seemed to avoid any question relating to the banalities of life outside the present moment. Otto was dogged.

"As long as I need to," she said.

"So how long are you travelling for? I mean, in total, before you go home?"

Maria's hair rippled over her shoulders. She stopped walking and faced the sea, arms raised as though to embrace the night sky and the endless sea.

"This is my home," she said.

"Goa? India?"

She turned to him, exasperated. "The world," she said. "What do you mean by home? Do I have a house? Do you want to know where I belong?"

Otto was chastened, tantalised and infuriated all at once.

They walked further, away from the main tourist area, around a headland with a crown of trees, and into a deeper darkness. It seemed an unlikely spot for a party, too much out the way. Otto was puzzled. He didn't like silence, and wanted to keep the conversation going.

"So who are these people we're going to meet at the party?" He didn't expect an answer though he had a premonition that Maria wouldn't stay with him for long. So it proved.

In the distance, at the back of the beach, Otto saw blazing lights and heard the low thump of amplified music. A huddle of shack bars made up the centre of the party. A low wooden platform, a dance floor of sorts, stood between them though no-one was dancing yet. A girl called out to

Maria, and waved – one of a number of silhouetted figures standing at a bar. Maria waved back and ran towards her friend. Otto followed after.

"Here, have a drink!" Maria's friend, an American girl with glossy blond hair, thrust a glass into his hand. The music was very loud, some kind of electronic dance music that was decidedly not Otto's thing though he could feel its pulse beating into his brain and his body. The American girl was swallowed by the crowd. Otto raised the glass to his lips, expecting the sting of alcohol. To his surprise, the glass contained only lukewarm water. He knocked it back, thirsty after the heat and the spicy curry.

All of a sudden he was part of a throng: young people gathering around, all talking to each other – Americans, Europeans, Indians – drinking, shouting to be heard over the music, laughing, waving to friends. For a moment, slightly disorientated by the vodka he had been drinking all evening, Otto felt slight panic. He was alone after all – knew no-one here, except Maria and she had gone. Then he felt a hand on his arm, someone pulling him.

"Maria? Maria?" He was tugged through the crowd, banging against people, weaving between them. Maria's fingers pressed into the sunburnt skin of his forearm – and then, almost magical, they were standing alone in a white place, an box of light, smooth wood only slightly salted by sand underfoot. It took him a moment to realise she had taken him to the dance floor. They were illuminated like actors on a stage. Was she expecting him to dance? Yes. Yes indeed.

Maria danced well. She closed her eyes to begin with, shutting out everything but the sound. She was graceful and un-self-conscious. How come girls so often danced better than boys? Going to clubs and gigs in the sixth form, most male dancing seemed to involve macho displays of jumping and barging, a licence for affectionate shoving and drunken sweaty hugs. Otto however hadn't like to be drunk or sweaty or barged into.

Maria opened her eyes again and she was smiling at Otto, her arms swaying above her head, inviting him to dance. What else could he do? He had no way of backing out, displayed as he was before the multitudes. And truly, why should he want to with this beautiful girl before him? Otto laughed. What did it matter what anyone else thought, the crowd of strangers? And the music caught him, beat through his limbs, his blood, into his brain. He didn't need to think what to do. He let the voice in his mind sink back.

They danced for a long time. One track followed another. They were not alone for long – soon the platform was crowded with people. Otto didn't feel tired. The more he danced, the greater the energy pulsing through his body. He had never felt so gloriously happy, as though an intense white light was shining in his chest and the pit of his belly, and similarly beaming from those dancing around him, so that together they were moving and dreaming in a brilliant lake of illumination. From time to time Maria moved away from him to dance with somebody else but each time she came back. The moon rose high in the sky. Far out to sea, a light blinked from a ship on the horizon. Along the edge of the beach palm trees stood like black cut-outs beyond which the world might have ceased to exist. A voice in his head said: remember what it feels like, to be in this place here and now.

Maria leaned towards him. "I need another drink," she said, holding his shoulder to speak into his ear. "Some more water. Are you coming?"

The hard light caught the beads of sweat on her forehead. He could smell her too, some spiced perfume, sandalwood perhaps, blended with the scent of her body and hair. He nodded, unhooking himself from the music, following Maria through the dancers and off the platform. The area around the cluster of bars was busy, so many people drinking and talking. A little further away a couple of fires burned on the beach. Maria took his hand and weaved through the party-goers to one of the less crowded bars where she bought two bottles of water. The man behind the bar knew her

name. He winked at Otto. The bottles were made of glass, rather than the usual plastic, and bore a plain white label upon which was written in an elaborate Indian-style script, a single word Otto struggled to make out in the semi darkness.

"Come on," she said. "I need a break. Did you enjoy that? You look like you needed to loosen up."

Otto laughed. "Yeah. It was great. You look fabulous when you dance." The excitement had loosened his tongue. Maria didn't answer. She led the way down the beach, away from the crowd and towards the sea. She plopped down onto the cool sand, opened the bottle and drank half the water in one go. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, a slow, sensual gesture that fascinated Otto. Then she stood the bottle in the sand and peeled off her vest top to reveal the bikini underneath. He saw, fleetingly, a small black tattoo on her back between her shoulder blades. She didn't look at Otto or ask him if he would join her. She simply dropped the skirt and ran towards the sea, the anklet jingling with every stride. Then she dived in, without hesitation, into the inky night water and its mesh of reflected moonlight.

Otto opened his bottle and swigged the water. He stared at the discarded clothes. It dawned on him that she didn't have her bag anymore, the drawstring bag from which she had taken the folder earlier in the evening. She hadn't had it while they were dancing either. Presumably she had left it with someone? He pushed the thought away. The sea called. He took off his tee-shirt and cut off jeans. Although the night was warm, a faint sea-breeze plucked at his perspiring body, making him shiver. His hair clung to his scalp and the back of his neck. He ran to the water's edge.

"Maria?"

She broke the surface, some way out now, spitting and pushing back the hair from her face. Otto waded into the sea. With every movement he created a glitter of phosphorescent light, as though he

created a halo around him. Even this late the water was welcoming and warm so he slipped down and began to swim, riding the slow waves. Looking back at the beach, the party with its ball of light was another world.

He swam to Maria and they trod water for a moment or two, a few metres apart.

"How are you?" Maria said.

"Very well thanks. How are you?" He couldn't stop grinning. Maria's face looked white in the moonlight. A phosphorescent glow outlined the movement of her body in the sea. Above their heads hung a dome of blazing stars.

"Can you touch the ground?" she said.

"Yes. Just. Can you?"

"No."

Otto moved closer. His toes bounced on the sea bed. Maria didn't take her eyes from him as he stretched out his hand and cupped the side of her face. She glided forwards, cradled by the water, and kissed him. Her lips parted and he felt all the heat of it, her mouth and her tongue, and the slickness and cool of her face. She pressed against him, the long, smooth, limber body he'd lusted after these last two days, and he had his arms around her. She tasted of the salt sea, and of vodka, and she relaxed in his arms, seemingly boneless, cleaving to him, arms around his neck.

Otto broke the kiss and drew his face away. It was too much, too overwhelming. His body was a drum in which blood was beating hard. He looked up, at the reeling stars, the beach lights smeared in the distance. Maria laughed. Otto took a deep breath. He was still holding her, his hands at her waist, supporting her in the water.

"Kiss me again," she said. The sea moved around them. Otto heard the soft sound of the breaking waves and distantly, the rhythmic thump of the music on the beach. He drew another slow breath, in and out, wanting

to calm himself. Then he kissed her lightly and waited a moment or two with his face very close to hers.

"I like you, Otto," she said. "I like you very much." She placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed herself away, sleek as a dolphin, flipping over in the water and submerging. In Maria's absence the water was cool against his belly and chest, as though contact had sensitised his nerves, an imprint of her shape now branded on his body. He wanted her back, to be in contact with her again.

Maria's head re-emerged some distance away, closer to the beach. She stood up, a silhouette, water dripping from her, hair hanging in long strands.

"Come-on," she called. "I want another drink." She waded out of the sea, sloshing through the low waves and onto the sand. Otto hurried after her, aching for another kiss, nervous of over-stepping the mark. She picked up her discarded clothes and trotted up the beach. Goose bumps covered Otto's white skin covered as the sea water evaporated. Just outside of the party's light bubble Maria slipped on her skirt. Otto caught her up and she leaned on him as she struggled to pull up the skirt without covering it in sand.

"What this? The tattoo on your back." He placed his hand on it, feeling the warmth of her body and the cool of the evaporating sea water.

"Oh do you like it? I got it done here," she said. A black-ink circle with flames – soon covered by the tee-shirt.

"Get us a drink, will you?" she said. "One of the vodka mixers, whatever they've got."

"Sure," Otto said. He slipped his hand in his jeans pocket where a few crumpled rupee notes remained. The party was busier now, crowds of carousers gathered around the dance floor. He pushed his way to the nearest bar, where two bar men struggled to keep up with the orders from the punters, three deep, calling out what they wanted, waving money. The

music was louder too – or seemed so, a physical presence thumping through warm night air, which smelled of overheated bodies, perfume, cigarette smoke and alcohol. Within minutes Otto was sweating again. It took an age to be served. He was squashed in the crowd at the bar, people all around him, so much bare skin and laughter and shouting as the revellers struggled to be heard over the music. When at last he was at the front the barman still ignored him for some time, preferring to serve the women. Strings of coloured light-bulbs hung beneath the thatching of dried palm leaves. Hosts of insects danced around the lights; huge spiders waited on mats of dense web. Otto looked around anxiously for Maria but his view was blocked by the people behind him. Finally, clutching two bottles, he pushed his way out from the bar and set off to find her.

The dance floor was heaving. Even the sandy area around the platform churned with people. Young people, mostly, though not all. Otto could see some older ones too, old hippie types who had perhaps lived in Goa for some time, or else holidayed here because they had never grown out of partying. He scanned the crowd for Maria but couldn't see her. Why hadn't she waited? The memory of their embrace in the sea was keen and the he wanted to kiss her again. She'd said she liked him – and he wondered feverishly if this meant sex – sex tonight- was on the agenda. He had to find her.

Far too many people. He stomped a path through the gathering, pushing through, using his elbows. Where was Maria? He made a path through the dancers on the platform, getting curses and complaints for his trouble. He circled the bar shacks, retraced his steps to the place where he'd bought his drinks in case she was waiting for him there. Nothing seemed quite normal anymore. The lights were too bright, the music almost substantial. The curious energy still crackled through his body. Perhaps he was a little drunk, or over-tired, or over-stimulated; perhaps all three at once. He began the circuit again, still clutching the two bottles.

Then he saw her – Maria – apart from the frenzied crowd, just outside the charmed circle, sitting on the sand, with two men and a girl, beside a little fire. Otto felt a spectacular sense of relief. He headed over, dropped a bottle into Maria's lap and dropped down on the sand beside her.

"There you are! I couldn't find you." he placed a proprietary hand on her shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"Thanks," Maria raised the bottle. She paid no particular heed to the kiss and continued her conversation with the two men sitting on the other side of the fire. Otto eyed them. He guessed they were in their twenties. One looked Indian, with a long black pony tail, the other was a European with close-cropped brown hair. They were dressed simply in tee shirts and jeans without the usual gewgaws and decorations favoured by many of the backpackers – the henna tattoos and pieces of jewellery bought from beach traders.

"Where did you go?" Otto said. "The party's heated up hasn't it? Is it always this busy?" His voice was too loud and insistent. He was a little provoked by the two older men sitting opposite the fire and was indulging a need to prove himself an alpha male. He wasn't going to defer, particularly with Maria, a tantalising prize, sitting so close beside him.

The other men considered him, seemingly unmoved by his swagger, his show of bravado.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Otto said, nudging Maria. "Cheers." He raised his bottle. They continued to regard him, the men and the other girl, who was black with long, fine braids, and an American, judging by her accent. Maria picked at something on her sandal. Otto guessed he had interrupted a conversation the others didn't wish to share. For a moment he felt a faltering inside; he sat up straighter, raised his voice.

"Well, I'm Otto, lately arrived from England - a fresh-faced beginner in all matters Goan," he said. "So I am a lucky man to have the lovely Maria as a guide." He knew he sounded gauche but still he held his hand out over the fire, close enough for its heat to sting. The hand waited for a moment - until the man with cropped hair reached out to shake it.

"Max," he said. "And this is Kumar." Max's accent was Irish. His friend, Kumar, nodded a greeting but didn't speak. The American girl offered:

"I'm Gina."

She didn't say anything else. Instead she fed fragments of driftwood into the fire; the flames leapt happily onto the fresh fuel. Further away, the sea endlessly unfurled onto the beach. The music, loud as it was, did not intrude, as though the noise and the crowd lay on the other side of a barrier, a show on the television perhaps, unable to touch them. It came over him again, as it had done from time to time over the last few days, how utterly alien India was - the unknown, unimaginable stinks and perfumes of the place, the skewed sky, the swarms of people among whom, for the first time in his life, he felt he didn't belong, aware of his whiteness, his difference. Standing on the platform at a crowded suburban railway station in Mumbai he'd realised he was the only white westerner in sight and it struck him in a way he had never anticipated what it felt like to be the conspicuous outsider.

He'd been on survival mode for the long, solo journey - keeping focussed, never letting his feelings get the better of him. Now the overwhelming shock of the place washed through his veins in a tide, a sense of his aloneness and vulnerability.

"So, when did you guys arrive in India?" He wanted to take charge of the conversation and he was curious about their intimacy, these three. Why had they clammed up? What had they been talking about when he'd arrived?

A gentle smile eased itself onto Max's face: "Oh, I've only been here a few days."

"Ah! Another fresh face!" Otto jumped in. "I flew into Mumbai four days ago!"

Max laughed. "Not a fresh face exactly. I spend a lot of time in India. Most of this last year." He looked into Otto's eyes, a cool, measured assessment.

"And what about you Kumar?" Some part of Otto's mind told him to cool it and take a back seat in this conversation but he couldn't let it go. He sensed he was behaving like an over-enthusiastic puppy and that no-one was impressed. But Maria was by his side. He wasn't going to roll over however cool this Max and Kumar might seem. The American girl, Gina, stared away from the fire to the sea, running her fingers around the neck of her beer bottle. Kumar, who had been contemplating the flames, slowly raised his eyes to Otto's. He took a slow sip from a silver flask. He had a strong, elegant face and was evidently tall and well proportioned, his arms and shoulders well muscled.

"What about me, Otto?" he said. The voice surprised him. It wasn't the English of India, but of Birmingham. Something about the way Kumar had used his name made Otto feel he was back in the classroom.

"You been in Goa long?" The inanity of the question troubled him, but Otto couldn't now give it up. Kumar said:

"So what do you make of the place, Otto? You having a good time? Enjoying the party?" Otto sensed some subtle put-down in the question. Clearly enjoying the party wasn't cool. So what were these two doing here, on the periphery? Otto had come across it before in his first few days - this hierarchy. Most despised were the package holidaymakers, the residents of the big hotels like the one along the beach, the gated other-worlds where low-paid Indians serviced middle-class westerners. Otto was well read on the environmental damage these places were reputed to do, the

draining of local fresh-water resources, the disparity between staff wages and the price a resident might pay for a fresh lobster dinner. To be a backpacker was, of course, infinitely more cool - to travel second class, to dine at the local eateries and tread lightly: to be not a tourist, but a traveller. Names and titles were important. Again, beyond the backpackers, gung-ho, naive or self important as they might be, were those who never intended to go home. The gap-year kids would be heading back for universities and careers after their grand tour but there were those who had cut all their ties, the perpetual travellers. Some enjoyed trust funds or inheritances. Others lived by their wits, hustling, buying and selling, trading drugs perhaps. They had as much contempt for the youthful backpackers as the travellers had for the tourists. So - was he enjoying the party? A simple question so heavily loaded Otto knew he couldn't answer it without showing himself for what he was - an innocent abroad, or else, a terrible poseur.

Beside him Maria kicked off her sandals are buried her beautiful feet in the sand. Cool, pale grains ran over her toes and clung to her calves, where the silver anklet tinkled. The spectacle of Maria's lovely feet, the contrast between the white sand and her dark honey skin, momentarily distracted Otto from his conundrum. Thoughts revolved and fitted together in his head, like Tetrus blocks.

"I'm a photo-journalist," he said.

The words dropped like pebbles into a still pond. A current seemed to flow among the other three. Without speaking or visibly moving, he sensed the leap in their attention. For the first time, they heeded him. An intense silence followed - then Gina said:

"A photo-journalist? That's cool. What's the assignment?" They had focussed on him now, all three.

"You never told me," Maria said. Her voice was lazy. She gazed at him, through lowered eye-lashes.

"No," Otto said. The moment of power was too delicious for him to put it aside yet, to come entirely clean. With this admission he had cut himself free of being either a tourist or a traveller. He was something else.

"So what are you working on?" Max spoke up. The Irish accent was more obvious now. He leaned forward. Firelight painted shadows on his narrow, bony face. It crossed Otto's mind he looked like a hungry prisoner of war, with his close-cropped hair. Something feverish about him too, the mad preacher perhaps, burning with zeal. Otto's confident lie began to seem like a bad idea.

"Oh," he said, raising a hand in a nonchalant gesture, thinking on his feet. "The party culture, the drug scene. Do you know how many westerners have died here in the last five years?"

Again the sense of shock. Had he touched a nerve?

"Who are you writing for?" This came from Kumar. Otto was struck again by Kumar's beauty, something he usually never noticed or was indifferent to in men. He shook his head and prevaricated. A quick google search would reveal that his employer wasn't one of the nationals but a small Bristol-based travel magazine called Tourism West. He'd undertaken six weeks' work experience for them over the summer just after taking his A levels. The first week he'd shadowed the staff photographer, taking photos of Wiltshire morris men and Somerset's stately homes. In the later weeks, having proved himself, the editor let him loose on solo assignments. Several of his pictures made it into the magazine, making up the beginnings of a professional port-folio. And there was some truth in his assertion. Travel West did publish features on overseas travel and had expressed an interest in anything exotic Otto might come up with on his Indian odyssey.

"A British magazine," he said.

"Which one?"

This time it was Otto who waved his hand in dismissal. "At this stage of the game, I'm not in a position to say," he said. The evasion risked any credibility he'd built up with Max, Kumar and Gina. He sensed a silent communication pass between them, quiet glances, a shared summing up. Was his mission statement enough to win an access pass to this clique of uber-travellers? He wondered, briefly, why it mattered so much to be accepted by this little coterie. After all, young people crowded the beach and he had never found it difficult to make friends. In fact he prided himself on it, his social confidence. Not like Jen, who found every new encounter in incomprehensible agony, or even Charlotte who was very choosy about the people she befriended. It was the challenge, wasn't it? He was used to winning people over and taking the lead. Now in this new environment, among men and women older and more experienced than him, he had to stretch. He didn't want to be overlooked. And of course, he wasn't going to back off in front of Maria.

Kumar unscrewed the top from his silver flask and held it out. Otto nodded, took the flask and raised it to his lips. Whiskey seared his lips and tongue, caught the back of his throat. He took another sip, wiped the mouth of the bottle and offered it to Maria. It was another indication of his confidence, to make free with Kumar's whiskey. Maria shook her head.

"I want some beer," she said. "Come with?"

Otto was torn between his lust for Maria and his curiosity about Gina, Max and Kumar. Maria stood up, stretching out her legs, brushing the sand from her skirt. There she stood, sleek and perfect. The memory of her body pressed against him in the voluptuous sea rose up in his mind with such blood-heating intensity it was suddenly no contest at all.

"Of course," he said, climbing to his feet. "Great to meet you guys. We'll catch up another time." He made it a statement rather than a request. He would find them again. Neither Max nor Kumar answered but they shared a look. Gina stood up.

“I’ll go with them,” she said.

They headed into the theatre of noise, leaving the two men sitting by the fire. Once Otto glanced back to see their fronts and faces picked out by the flickering red and gold light, their backs pressed against the darkness. It was a scene immemorial, men around a fire, encircled by the night. And they were talking.

More beer, then Maria pulling him into the crowd to dance. They lost Gina on their second trip to the bar where Maria flirted with whomsoever she met. Otto was intent, however. He wanted her and he wasn't going to give up. The drink removed any inhibitions and he laid on the charm, teased and flattered. The night stretched on, the music swam around them, ubiquitous and unavoidable, soaking into him. One track melted into the next. They danced together, Maria's movements, her grace, the form of her unfathomably lovely body branded on his brain. He had to have her.

Dawn came, at last, not as light but as a perfume from the sea, a freshening that seemed, perversely, to weary the party people. The dance floor began to clear and slowly groups of people departed. Otto stepped towards Maria and put his arms around her waist, pulling her towards him.

"I'd like to go home," he said. "Come with me."

She leaned against him, all of her slight weight, and rested her head on his shoulder. He breathed the scent of her sea-salty hair, the darker perfume of her tired, overheated body.

"I want to kiss you," she said, raising her face and flicking the hair from her eyes. It was a hard, assertive kiss, close-mouthed. He could feel her teeth through her lips.

"Let me get my bag," she said, pulling away. "Wait here." She stepped back into the thinning crowd of dancers, turned away and skipped off the platform onto the beach and disappeared into the darkness.