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Seascape with Figures

It was one of those Septembers when it seemed that the summer would never end.

The five-mile promenade of Royale-les-Eaux, backed by trim lawns emblazoned at intervals with tricolour beds of salvia, alyssum and lobelia, was bright with flags and, on the longest beach in the North of France, the gay bathing tents still marched prettily down to the tideline in big, money-making battalions. Music, one of those lilting accordion waltzes, blared from the loudspeakers around the Olympic-size piscine and, from time to time, echoing above the music, a man's voice announced over the public address system that Philippe Bertrand, aged seven, was looking for his mother, that Yolande Lefèvre was waiting for her friends below the clock at the entrance, or that a Madame Dufour was demanded on the telephone. From the beach, particularly from the neighbourhood of the three playground enclosures – 'Joie de Vivre', 'Hélio' and 'Azur' – came a twitter of children's cries that waxed and waned with the thrill of their games and, further out, on the firm sand left by the now distant sea, the shrill whistle of

the physical-fitness instructor marshalled his teenagers through the last course of the day.

It was one of those beautiful, naive seaside panoramas for which the Brittany and Picardy beaches have provided the setting – and inspired their recorders, Boudin, Tissot, Monet – ever since the birth of plages and bains de mer more than a hundred years ago.

To James Bond, sitting in one of the concrete shelters with his face to the setting sun, there was something poignant, ephemeral about it all. It reminded him almost too vividly of childhood – of the velvet feel of the hot powder sand, and the painful grit of wet sand between young toes when the time came for him to put his shoes and socks on, of the precious little pile of seashells and interesting wrack on the sill of his bedroom window ('No, we'll have to leave that behind, darling. It'll dirty up your trunk!'), of the small crabs scuttling away from the nervous fingers groping beneath the seaweed in the rock pools, of the swimming and swimming and swimming through the dancing waves – always in those days, it seemed, lit with sunshine – and then the infuriating, inevitable 'time to come out'. It was all there, his own childhood, spread out before him to have another look at. What a long time ago they were, those spade-and-bucket days! How far he had come since the freckles and the Cadbury milk-chocolate Flakes and the fizzy lemonade! Impatiently Bond lit a cigarette, pulled his shoulders out of their slouch and slammed the mawkish memories back into their long-closed file. Today he was a grown-up, a man with years of dirty, dangerous

memories – a spy. He was not sitting in this concrete hideout to sentimentalise about a pack of scrubby, smelly children on a beach scattered with bottle-tops and lolly-sticks and fringed by a sea thick with sun-oil and putrid with the main drains of Royale. He was here, he had chosen to be here, to spy. To spy on a woman.

The sun was getting lower. Already one could smell the September chill that all day had lain hidden beneath the heat. The cohorts of bathers were in quick retreat, striking their little camps and filtering up the steps and across the promenade into the shelter of the town where the lights were going up in the cafés. The announcer at the swimming pool harried his customers: ‘Allô! Allô! Fermeture en dix minutes! À dix-huit heures, fermeture de la piscine!’ Silhouetted in the path of the setting sun, the two Bombard rescue-boats with flags bearing a blue cross on a yellow background were speeding northwards for their distant shelter upriver in the Vieux Port. The last of the gay, giraffe-like sand-yachts fled down the distant waterline towards its corral among the sand dunes, and the three *agents cyclistes* in charge of the car parks pedalled away through the melting ranks of cars towards the police station in the centre of the town. In a matter of minutes the vast expanse of sand – the tide, still receding, was already a mile out – would be left to the seagulls that would soon be flocking in their hordes to forage for the scraps of food left by the picnickers. Then the orange ball of the sun would hiss down into the sea and the beach would, for a while, be entirely deserted, until, under cover of darkness, the

prowling lovers would come to writhe briefly, grittily in the dark corners between the bathing-huts and the sea-wall.

On the beaten stretch of sand below where James Bond was sitting, two golden girls in exciting bikinis packed up the game of Jokari which they had been so provocatively playing, and raced each other up the steps towards Bond's shelter. They flaunted their bodies at him, paused and chattered to see if he would respond, and, when he didn't, linked arms and sauntered on towards the town, leaving Bond wondering why it was that French girls had more prominent navels than any others. Was it that French surgeons sought to add, even in this minute respect, to the future sex-appeal of girl babies?

And now, up and down the beach, the lifeguards gave a final blast on their horns to announce that they were going off duty, the music from the piscine stopped in mid-tune and the great expanse of sand was suddenly deserted.

But not quite! A hundred yards out, lying face downwards on a black and white striped bathing-wrap, on the private patch of firm sand where she had installed herself an hour before, the girl was still there, motionless, spreadeagled in direct line between James Bond and the setting sun that was now turning the left-behind pools and shallow rivulets into blood-red, meandering scrawls across the middle distance. Bond went on watching her – now, in the silence and emptiness, with an ounce more tension. He was waiting for her to do something – for something, he didn't know what, to

happen. It would be more true to say that he was watching *over* her. He had an instinct that she was in some sort of danger. Or was it just that there was the smell of danger in the air? He didn't know. He only knew that he mustn't leave her alone, particularly now that everyone else had gone.

James Bond was mistaken. Not everyone else had gone. Behind him, at the Café de la Plage on the other side of the promenade, two men in raincoats and dark caps sat at a secluded table bordering the sidewalk. They had half-empty cups of coffee in front of them and they didn't talk. They sat and watched the blur on the frosted-glass partition of the shelter that was James Bond's head and shoulders. They also watched, but less intently, the distant white blur on the sand that was the girl. Their stillness, and their unseasonable clothes, would have made a disquieting impression on anyone who, in his turn, might have been watching them. But there was no such person, except their waiter who had simply put them in the category of 'bad news' and hoped they would soon be on their way.

When the lower rim of the orange sun touched the sea, it was almost as if a signal had sounded for the girl. She slowly got to her feet, ran both hands backwards through her hair and began to walk evenly, purposefully towards the sun and the faraway froth of the waterline over a mile away. It would be violet dusk by the time she reached the sea and one might have guessed that this was probably the last day of her holiday, her last bathe.

James Bond thought otherwise. He left his shelter, ran down the steps to the sand and began walking out after her at a fast pace. Behind him, across the promenade, the two men in raincoats also seemed to think otherwise. One of them briskly threw down some coins and they both got up and, walking strictly in step, crossed the promenade to the sand and, with a kind of urgent military precision, marched rapidly side by side in Bond's tracks.

Now the strange pattern of figures on the vast expanse of empty, blood-streaked sand was eerily conspicuous. Yet it was surely not one to be interfered with! The pattern had a nasty, a secret smell. The white girl, the bareheaded young man, the two squat, marching pursuers – it had something of a kind of deadly Grandmother's Steps about it. In the café, the waiter collected the coins and looked after the distant figures, still outlined by the last quarter of the orange sun. It smelt like police business – or the other thing. He would keep it to himself but remember it. He might get his name in the papers.

James Bond was rapidly catching up with the girl. Now he knew that he would get to her just as she reached the waterline. He began to wonder what he would say to her, how he would put it. He couldn't say, 'I had a hunch you were going to commit suicide so I came after you to stop you.' 'I was going for a walk on the beach and I thought I recognised you. Will you have a drink after your swim?' would be childish. He finally decided to say, 'Oh, Tracy!' and then, when

she turned round, 'I was worried about you.' Which would at least be inoffensive and, for the matter of that, true.

The sea was now gunmetal below a primrose horizon. A small, westerly offshore breeze, drawing the hot land-air out to sea, had risen and was piling up wavelets that scrolled in whitely as far as the eye could see. Flocks of herring gulls lazily rose and settled again at the girl's approach, and the air was full of their mewing and of the endless lap-lap of the small waves. The soft indigo dusk added a touch of melancholy to the empty solitude of sand and sea, now so far away from the comforting bright lights and holiday bustle of 'La Reine de la Côte Opale', as Royale-les-Eaux had splendidly christened herself. Bond looked forward to getting the girl back to those bright lights. He watched the lithe golden figure in the white one-piece bathing-suit and wondered how soon she would be able to hear his voice above the noise of the gulls and the sea. Her pace had slowed a fraction as she approached the waterline and her head, with its bell of heavy fair hair to the shoulders, was slightly bowed, in thought perhaps, or tiredness.

Bond quickened his step until he was only ten paces behind her. 'Hey! Tracy!'

The girl didn't start or turn quickly round. Her steps faltered and stopped, and then, as a small wave creamed in and died at her feet, she turned slowly and stood squarely facing him. Her eyes, puffed and wet with tears, looked past him. Then they met his. She said dully, 'What is it? What do you want?'

'I was worried about you. What are you doing out here? What's the matter?'

The girl looked past him again. Her clenched right hand went up to her mouth. She said something, something Bond couldn't understand, from behind it. Then a voice, from very close behind Bond, said softly, silkily, 'Don't move or you get it back of the knee.'

Bond swirled round into a crouch, his gun-hand inside his coat. The steady silver eyes of the two automatics sneered at him.

Bond slowly straightened himself. He dropped his hand to his side and the held breath came out between his teeth in a quiet hiss. The two deadpan, professional faces told him even more than the two silver eyes of the guns. They held no tension, no excitement. The thin half-smiles were relaxed, contented. The eyes were not even wary. They were almost bored. Bond had looked into such faces many times before. This was routine. These men were killers – pro killers.

Bond had no idea who these men were, who they worked for, what this was all about. On the theory that worry is a dividend paid to disaster before it is due, he consciously relaxed his muscles and emptied his mind of questions. He stood and waited.

'Position your hands behind your neck.' The silky, patient voice was from the South, from the Mediterranean. It fitted with the men's faces – tough-skinned, widely pored, yellow-brown. Marseillais perhaps, or Italian. The Mafia? The faces belonged to good secret police or tough crooks. Bond's mind ticked and whirled, selecting

cards like an IBM machine. What enemies had he got in those areas? Might it be Blofeld? Had the hare turned upon the hound?

When the odds are hopeless, when all seems to be lost, then is the time to be calm, to make a show of authority – at least of indifference. Bond smiled into the eyes of the man who had spoken. ‘I don’t think your mother would like to know what you are doing this evening. You are a Catholic? So I will do as you ask.’ The man’s eyes glittered. Touché! Bond clasped his hands behind his head.

The man stood aside so as to have a clear field of fire while his Number Two removed Bond’s Walther PPK from the soft leather holster inside his trouser belt and ran expert hands down his sides, down his arms to the wrists and down the inside of his thighs. Then Number Two stood back, pocketed the Walther and again took out his own gun.

Bond glanced over his shoulder. The girl had said nothing, expressed neither surprise nor alarm. Now she was standing with her back to the group, looking out to sea, apparently relaxed, unconcerned. What in God’s name was it all about? Had she been used as a bait? But for whom? And now what? Was he to be executed, his body left lying to be rolled back inshore by the tide? It seemed the only solution. If it was a question of some kind of a deal, the four of them could not just walk back across the mile of sand to the town and say polite goodbyes on the promenade steps. No. This was the terminal point. Or was it? From the north, through the

deep indigo dusk, came the fast, rattling hum of an outboard and, as Bond watched, the cream of a thick bow-wave showed and then the blunt outline of one of the Bombard rescue-craft, the flat-bottomed inflatable rubber boats with a single Thompson engine in the flattened stern. So they had been spotted! By the coast-guards perhaps? And here was rescue! By God, he'd roast these two thugs when they got to the harbour police at the Vieux Port! But what story would he tell about the girl?

Bond turned back to face the men. At once he knew the worst. They had rolled their trousers up to the knees and were waiting, composedly, their shoes in one hand and their guns in the other. This was no rescue. It was just part of the ride. Oh well! Paying no attention to the men, Bond bent down, rolled up his trousers as they had done and, in the process of fumbling with his socks and shoes, palmed one of his heel knives and, half turning towards the boat that had now grounded in the shallows, transferred it to his right-hand trouser pocket.

No words were exchanged. The girl climbed aboard first, then Bond, and lastly the two men who helped the engine with a final shove on the stern. The boatman, who looked like any other French deep-sea fisherman, whirled the blunt nose of the Bombard round, changed gears to forward, and they were off northwards through the buffeting waves while the golden hair of the girl streamed back and softly whipped James Bond's cheek.

'Tracy. You're going to catch cold. Here. Take my

coat.' Bond slipped his coat off. She held out a hand to help him put it on her. In the process her hand found his and pressed it. Now what the hell? Bond edged closer to her. He felt her body respond. Bond glanced at the two men. They sat hunched against the wind, their hands in their pockets, watchful, but somehow uninterested. Behind them the necklace of lights that was Royale receded swiftly until it was only a golden glow on the horizon. James Bond's right hand felt for the comforting knife in his pocket and ran his thumb across the razor-sharp blade.

While he wondered how and when he might have a chance to use it, the rest of his mind ran back over the previous twenty-four hours and panned them for the gold-dust of truth.