

NECESSARY DISTRACTION

A short story

I

For some mystical unknown reason which controls such choices, this one young couple seized Gerald Cuffman's attention and locked it in place, to the temporary exclusion of all the other bathers. And the couple were at a comfortable distance.

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She held onto the boy's hand as she went before him down the steep, irregular pathway through the trees. Pausing at a level spot, they put down the items they carried. They stood now at the top of two stair-step ledges of white limestone marked with wide brush strokes of brown and gray, ledges terraced by erosion as carefully as by a master mason.

The boy squatted and braced himself on the edge to support his companion. Still clinging to his hand, she eased her way down about four feet to the next ledge, finding footholds that had been worn by hundreds of bathers before her. Behind and above the couple, root-stunted live oaks and cedars framed their descent beneath a field-of-cotton July sky.

When the girl was secure on the ledge below, the boy lowered to her the white insulated cooler with the beer, followed by the dark-green bag filled with their beach paraphernalia. With quick agility, he followed her down. Then they repeated the maneuver in an almost identical descent to a wider surface of crushed limestone and soil that sloped fifteen feet or so to a jumble of wave-weathered boulders that formed the water's edge. This was their destination. This would be their beach.

A dozen or more bathers watched the pair descend, some from only a few yards away along the narrow beach and others from 30 to 50 yards across the V-shaped cove. They saw an attractive young woman, her light brown hair framing a pretty, angular face with full lips and cheeks that showed just a touch of color, and accented by narrow, wrap-around sunglasses. Her hair reached almost to the blue, palm-patterned bikini top that circled her upper body. Dark blue mid-thigh shorts revealed long and shapely legs beneath a trim waist.

Despite his best efforts, Gerald could not help thinking, "she does not look like Elaine." He knew he must keep such comparisons out of his mind, lest the day be lost.

The boy wore nondescript gray shorts and tee shirt. As he briefly stood by the girl's side, the thickness of his auburn-tinted hair made him appear to be as tall as she, about five-foot-nine, although he was in fact perhaps an inch shorter. Both were of college age.

Opening the green bag, the girl assembled two yellow, two-piece plastic paddles while the boy used a hand pump to inflate a deep-walled red and yellow raft. After assembling the paddles, the girl stepped out of her shorts, disclosing a matching bikini bottom that not even a grandmother would find too revealing. She checked the swimsuit's ties at each hip, tightening one of them. Pulling up the front of the suit an inch or so, she slipped one finger under an edge to adjust the fit between her legs and then smoothed the suit over her butt as her final concession to vanity.

Satisfied, the girl spread two beach towels on the narrow slope of ground they claimed for their own. Calling to the boy, she sat on one of the towels and worked her long hair into a bun as she watched him maneuver the raft into the water. She saw him slip off his tee shirt and drop his shorts before easing himself into the water and climbing naked into the raft. Waves from a persistent breeze, augmented by the power boats that cruised just beyond a rope-and-buoy barrier, required him to pay attention to keeping the raft in place.

Soon he called to her. She rose and handed him the paddles. Removing two cans of beer from the cooler and placing them in foam sleeves, she passed one can to him before returning to the towels

and reclining on her left side. While she sipped her beer and soaked up the sun, he rowed about for a few minutes at a close distance, as though checking out the raft.

When the boy called to her again, she came to the water's edge and handed him her can of beer. He held the raft steady while she stepped onto a boulder that lay just beneath the water's surface and then into the raft. They sat facing one another, her legs over his legs, and his feet touching her hips.

Gerald could tell that their purpose in the raft was not to reach a destination but to enjoy the water, the sun, and one another. The boy rowed nowhere, crossing paths with other couples and with single bathers who reclined on plastic floats of assorted shapes and color. Their raft made irregular patterns back and forth and across as they stayed within the confines of the narrow cove, never more than 20 or 30 yards from the shore, and now about that distance from the concrete bench where Gerald sat, feeling ever more alone and imagining the warm feeling shared not just by the couple in the raft but by so many of the other bathers .

The couple talked, and the girl smiled often. The boy paid close attention, and his face showed obvious pleasure at merely being with her. After 10 or 15 minutes, he looked intently at the girl's face and formed words that might have been, "Please, at least the top. Everyone else has, and no one will ever know." Prompted by some such plea, she reached behind her back and untied the bikini top. As she slipped the straps over her head, she exposed breasts whose firm, youthful beauty had not yet yielded to gravity. Their pristine paleness suggested this was their first exposure to the sun this season, and her delay until away from the shore indicated this might be her first time ever to publicly display herself. The aureoles around her nipples were so light-colored as to be barely distinguishable, but the nipples themselves stood out in enticing prominence. Did their prominence result from her sense of daring at this public exposure, or from the pleasure that showed in her companion's smile and concentration? Or did it possibly reveal her body's response to the total nudity of the handsome young man who sat facing her, with his legs beneath her legs, and his pelvic

area out of sight to all eyes except her own? Their responses to one another suggested they might not yet be accustomed to such intimate proximity.

She took the paddles from him and began rowing, following the pattern that he had set. With each forward-leaning movement, the sides of her breasts brushed against his bent knees. Both the boy and girl looked frequently about, taking full account of the other bathers who floated and paddled nearby.

Gerald watched them exchange comments that could be appraisals of one bare body or another that passed their raft. Then, after about 25 minutes, he saw them beach the raft, take additional cans of beer from the cooler, and sit together on the towels. She squeezed water from the swim suit top that she had removed in the raft and then lay back in the sun, Gerald noted with approval that the girl apparently had overcome the modesty that had prevented her from exposing her breasts prior to entering the raft. The boy lay on his side facing her, with a look of continuing admiration.

Soon the boy called the girl's attention to another couple who had taken position just a dozen yards away, closer to the concave point of the cove. The young woman was sitting and the man had bent over to kiss her. They, too, were of college age, slender and attractive. And they were totally nude, neither body showing any evidence of previous sunbathing, with or without swimsuits. The woman reached her arms around the man's neck to welcome and prolong the kiss. When the kiss ended, the man sat beside his companion, his arm around her waist..

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Across the cove, Gerald watched in near-reverent appreciation of the beauty displayed before him. Although his gaze frequently scanned both shorelines and the eight or ten swimmers and floaters in the water, he never lost track of the two couples on the opposite shore. He was sitting on a green beach towel folded over a concrete bench within the shade-line of three dwarfed live oaks, a gym bag at his feet. Occasionally he read from a Graham Greene paperback, "The End of the

Affair,” that he had placed on the bench beside him. But never for long, before the focus of his attention would return to the object of his distraction, the first couple across the cove, seekingseeking something that he could not or dared not define.

II

As time passed, the first young man rose, pulled on his shorts, stepped into his walking shoes, and climbed the small cliff back up to the trail that led to the restrooms, vending machines, and parking lot. The woman turned again onto her back, her body not yet showing any effect from the sun. Looking to her left, she saw the second couple exploring the shallow water at the “V” of the cove.

They did not swim, nor had they brought floats. Rather, they played about in the manner of young children, splashing one another, talking, laughing. The woman found a smooth flat slab of limestone that provided a place to sit just inches below the water’s surface, where the small waves caressed the most intimate parts of her body. The boy, tall and with thick brown hair that covered his neck, stood waist-deep, facing her.

Soon she rose, stepped into the deeper water beside him, and carefully slid backward, submerging her head. Rising quickly, she tossed her long black hair in the gentle breeze. She laughed again at something he said.

When their playfulness and their soft conversation seemed to reach an appropriate point, they climbed out of the water and stood holding one another close. They returned to their towels and reclined, facing one another. Now their lips met in a long, deep kiss, their hands first on one another’s shoulders, then descending lightly to the hips. When the kiss ended they lay back, their sides touching. She placed her left calf over his lower right leg, and her hand rested just above his knee. They closed their eyes.

III

On the opposite side of the cove, not far from where Gerald sits, four women pick their way down the rougher slope, following no determined path. All four seem to be in their early to late twenties, with perhaps a six- to eight-year spread between the two pudgy leaders and the younger, athletic-looking pair who follow them. Picking a spot among the rocks at the edge of the small cedar trees and only a few feet from the water, they put down their bags and their cooler and prepare to swim.

As they disrobe, their differences in physical condition and in attitudes become apparent. The first woman nonchalantly removes her black halter top and shorts to reveal a full-body tan, and dark, bushy pubic hair. The second woman, also somewhat overweight, removes only her halter. A roll of flesh bulges above the yellow tights that she does not remove. The uniformity of her tanned upper body shows that she is fully accustomed to the fashion of this particular beach and that perhaps she has reason other than modesty for leaving her lower body covered. The two women apply sunscreen to one another. Their breasts sag heavily with the weight of, perhaps, too many pizza calories consumed.

The prettiest of the foursome, a short-cropped pure blonde of about 19, displays a shy, sweet smile that foretells her behavior. She watches as the other slender young woman, perhaps two years older, quickly strips naked, disclosing a fully tanned body with a narrow, wedge-shaped strip of clipped brown pubic hair that stops just at the top of her genital lips. These two younger women exchange comments. Something that is said persuades the sweet-faced girl to take off the top of her suit, but not the bright-red elastic bottom that fully conceals the most-important parts. Her actions make it clear that she intends to go no further.

Soon all four of the women are on floats in the water, staying close to one another, talking and maintaining their own little social circle in the midst of an increasing number of bathers.

Nearby, this side of the cove extends to a sharp point that is well shaded and offers a number of roomy flat areas suitable both for sitting and for reclining. This is the most popular part of the lakefront. Many of the bathers who have gathered here are middle-aged and seem to be acquainted with one another. They are a varied assortment of shades, sizes, and ages. Several display tattoos, and a few wear body-piercing rings and studs. One woman, who is so deeply tanned that her skin has the look of worn brown corduroy, has adorned the cheeks of her butt with silver studs, two on one side and one on the other.

Most of the bathers, male and female, are completely nude. One woman wears a thong and no top. Two women have removed all hair below their waists. Three men have clipped, but not shaved, their pubic hair. A weather-beaten naked man about 50 years of age, with long black hair and a short beard, sits on a rock in the shade playing a guitar and singing.

Both along the trail and down closer to the edge of the lake, lone men occasionally walk slowly past, looking carefully about, seeking, perhaps, the best observation point. Most of these men wear swim suits or shorts, although a few are naked, with a towel over their shoulders and a beach bag in hand. One older man, who carries nothing, wears a makeshift facsimile of a codpiece: a one-inch band of brown cloth around his hips with a small pouch that hangs in front of, but does not enclose, his genitals.

After the four women who include the shy blonde have been in the water about 20 minutes, they return to the bank to drink beer and talk. The beers finished, they enter the water again. And now the group instinct, that influence of the circumstance of the moment that can turn the forbidden into the acceptable, takes effect. The sweet-and-shy 19-year-old girl is in the water, supporting herself by leaning on the float with her forearms and elbows. She slips her left hand down her side under the water, twists herself about, and then brings her hand back onto the float clutching the bottom part of her tight red swim suit. Her companions, all on their own floats, softly applaud. And

then they once again begin talking to her, perhaps coaxing her. Although now she is truly skinny dipping, she is, after all, still fully concealed by the water. And soon the coaxing, if that is indeed what they are doing, has its effect. The girl swings her right leg up and climbs onto the float, face down, still holding the red suit in her hand. Even fully prone, the silky white buttocks appear exceptionally well-shaped, by all the modern standards of sexiness. To the men who are watching, both from the water and from the shore, this girl is truly beautiful, with the kind of innocent appeal that arouses in men not so much the urge to have sex as the desire to proclaim to anyone who will listen, "I just fell in love!"

After floating prone for a while, all the time interacting with her friends, the girl slips back into the water. By floating only on her stomach, she still has not exposed the most private of her private parts, nor does it seem that she can be persuaded to. Still holding the suit, she once again swings up onto the raft face down. Then, inexplicably, she pushes herself back into a sitting position, legs straddling the raft, the pink nipples of her breasts displayed for anyone who is interested to see, her pelvic region pushed only a few inches under the water by the weight of her hips. And thus she paddles about, laughing, bantering, growing bolder. At last, with a quick resoluteness that seems to proclaim, "See, I'm not chicken," she leans backward until her head rests on the end of the raft. The action shifts her weight on the float so that her natural-blond pubic area rises above the water. With her legs spread-eagled around the raft, she is as fully exposed as any woman could be.

After two minutes of this display of daring, the top-and-bottom blonde rolls off the raft and paddles to the shore. Her brazen moment now past, she remains in waist-deep water to put on the bottom of her swim suit before climbing to the bank, drying herself, and putting her clothes on. Her companions soon follow.

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Despite his mental resistance, a tender scene replayed itself in Gerald's mind, the way it had done many times before, as clearly as on a movie screen, never fading, never failing. In the afterglow

of their first love-making, she was rolling her naked body over his and stepping from the bed. As he lay on his back and watched in sheer adoration, she walked the four or five steps through the open bathroom door, the lamp from the dresser illuminating her back and her beautifully curving buttocks. He had never seen anything so gorgeous in his life. Without closing the door, she ran warm water onto a wash cloth and took care of her own immediate needs. This completed, she rinsed the cloth in warm water, squeezed it, and walked back to his bed. And in this frontal approach, her hair shining like gold in the soft light, she was even more beautiful than before. She came to him and gently, lovingly applied the warm cloth to his area of need. He lay in silent wonder as she returned to the bathroom, dried her hands, and rejoined him in the bed. She then lay on her side, her body pressed against his, her right thigh over his stomach and her left arm under his neck. As she placed her head on his chest, she whispered, "There are no words to express how much I love you."

And at this point the scene broke apart, shattering into as many jagged pieces as a favorite china cup dropped onto a tiled kitchen floor. The way it always did. The way it must.

IV

Forcing his attention back to his surroundings, Gerald noted that the water was more densely occupied now, but still each swimmer and each float enjoyed a small perimeter of privacy. Into this field of gentle activity slowly appeared the couple on whom Gerald's attention had initially focused. The girl was facing her male companion on a shallow, dark green raft that Gerald had not been seen before. The girl lay back so that her long hair, no longer in a bun, reached the water. The dark glasses that concealed her eyes seemed to be of a different, somewhat larger style, and the aureoles around her nipples a bit darker, in greater contrast to the whiteness of her breasts. Puzzled, Gerald noted that from this closer distance the girl's face seemed even more lovely than before.

The boy was sitting upright, legs astraddle, the weight of his body forcing the middle of the raft a few inches under the water. His hands were submerged out of sight. Although no words were

spoken, he concentrated on the reclining girl as she stretched even farther back, the movement raising her pelvis into view at the surface of the water. And this made apparent to Gerald a significant development. Where previous modesty had mandated the protective covering of the palm-print bikini, now only a white belly and neatly trimmed brown hair greeted the sun and the water. Just as her first venture into the raft had emboldened her to remove the top of her suit, apparently the present venture on a shallow raft somehow led her to abandon the final restraint of the swimsuit bottom. Or could it have been her observation of the other nude couple in their intimate, loving embrace that motivated her? Was she following the example of the 19-year-old blonde from the all-female foursome? Or could it be the total experience, the ambiance of sun and water and of people doing as they pleased, that provided the approval she needed in order to yield to her own privately held temptation?

Without the constraint of fabric, or perhaps because of the position in which she lay, her previously flat belly now showed a pleasing handful of curve. Her companion looked at her face and her body with intense concentration, his head tilted slightly so that his long, bleached-blond hair fell forward over his shoulders.

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Long blond hair? Not the boy she came with!

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The boy's hands, underwater, showed no discernible movement. His legs provided whatever slight propulsion and steering the raft required. The girl's hands grasped the edges of the raft beside her hips. Her shoulders rolled slightly from side to side, a little more than the movement of the raft in the waves seemed to necessitate. At times she breathed deeply, her breasts arched upward, and her pelvic region undulated gently with the waves. Her companion's face grew more intent, his concentration directed at the small space that separated their two bodies.

Now the girl smiled and stifled a gasp. She raised her head, looked at her companion, and lifted her shoulders. This upward movement transferred her weight toward the middle of the raft, which now dipped a few inches deeper beneath the water as she slid slightly forward. Her hips sank out of view, and her upright body now pressed against the body of her companion. She again threw back her head, her face turning upward toward a flotilla of clouds that seemed to smile down at lovers everywhere. She and her companion circled their arms around one another, holding tight.

V

Gerald raised his eyes and breathed deeply as he slowly looked about at the 30 to 40 people-young, middle-aged, some of them older than he—who occupied the hillside around him. The opposite side of the cove, marked by its white limestone ledges brushed with brown and gray, held fewer. The towels where the first couple had rested remained unoccupied on their small patch of rocky beach.

With a last, sorrowful glance at the couple on the raft and again at the unoccupied towels, he stood and steadied one hand on the bench while he stepped into the bathing trunks he had pulled from the gym bag. He knew he must be gone before he would have to witness the auburn-haired young man's return to a bitter surprise, a suffocating discovery of betrayal that Gerald understood far too well and could not dispel, even in such surroundings as this. Especially, he now understood, especially in such a surrounding with its unfolding and unwelcome drama. Stuffing his towel into the gym bag along with the Graham Green novel, he turned and picked his way up the rough slope to the smooth and level path above. Head down, as though still needing to watch his footing, he walked slowly, disconsolately, toward the parking lot, remembering -- remembering far too much and too clearly. Disappointment and sorrow showed on his face, if anyone had cared to look.

No one did.