

“I believe in civilisation,” E.V. said. “I also believe in its discontents.”

The allusion hung invitingly in the air between them. It wasn't lost on Julian. His face lit up, as she thought it might. Then, in a flicker, it took on a look of wide-eyed inquiry.

“If we go on talking, are you going to sneak in references to the *entire* works of Freud?”

It was all in the delivery, of course. She saw that. A matter of tone and timing. She would have laughed even if she hadn't been in the mood to.

A young man in flapping black shorts ran by, calling to friends at the water's edge. It was lucky he skirted the two of them. Most of the other people on the crowded beach had settled themselves under one of the regiment of thatched beach umbrellas. E.V. and Julian had found a spot in the open.

The sky was cloudless. The descending sun was still hot. The merest breeze crept from the sea.

“Do you also take my point?” E.V. persisted, as she contentedly stretched first her arms, then her legs.

That characteristic tone. Julian remembered having lent it a moment of professional attention at the party. Although E.V. didn't look like anyone's idea of a don, she sometimes spoke in a 'don's voice'—with intonations he might be able to use himself some time, in some part or other.

Not that he could identify what made the voice what it was. E.V. herself, hearing it in someone else, might have found it easier. She might have recognised that it belonged to someone to whom it mattered to establish small personal victories while supposing that good sense was prevailing. She might have seen through the tone of calm reasonable inquiry to the passion driving it.

Julian gave himself another mouthful of sparkling wine, allowing the bubbles to fizz on his tongue, before taking up her challenge. “What *is* your point? That we have to pay a price for it?”

“Something like that.”

“I wonder if we're talking about the same thing. The civilisation I'm talking about is... architecture, fashions in clothes. Paintings and poems. Music. Poster design. Ways of thinking. Doesn't Freud just mean 'modern society'? Money and business and technology and behaving like a good Victorian?”

She took off her sunglasses. He liked the way she'd pulled her dark hair back, forcing anyone who glanced at her to take her finely moulded face on its own terms. "There is an earlier paper on 'civilised sexual morality' where that may be true," she said. "But in 'Civilisation and Its Discontents'—have you read it?"

Now his manner was all hurt—a Barnardo's boy cut off from culture. "You know how bare my cupboard is."

"I'm not testing you. I just wanted to be clear before I went on."

As if the other expression had never been, he was instantly the soul of brisk cheerfulness. "Dipped into it. A local library."

She found herself smiling again. "OK. As I understand it, he sees your 'civilisation' as an aspect of civilisation in general. He talks about 'ideal wealth' as well as material wealth. I think that's the 'civilisation' you're talking about—and it's a product of the civilisation we pay dearly for."

She waited for him to go on. He realised he wasn't sure now where he was. He liked playing with ideas, but he wasn't a thinker.

A line occurred to him. "Right. Your point. I wonder: doesn't 'discontents' suggest that there's some sort of quarrel between civilisation and nature? I mean that in becoming civilised, there's something natural that we've lost—"

"Or have to keep suppressing, day by day," E.V. broke in.

"OK. I'm with you. But I'm not sure there *is* a quarrel between civilisation and nature."

"Is that a Freudian position?"

"Give me a break," he flashed back. "Did I say I was a Freudian? One bloody..." he found the killer words, "'open letter', mentioned casually at a party, and I'm tarred for life."

"'Casually'. Or not so casually," she muttered lightly into the air. "Anyway, you were suggesting," she went on before he could respond, "that nature and civilisation weren't at odds with one another. Go on. I'm listening."

He smoothed a crease in his peacock blue trunks. "Well, take us now. Soaking up the sun. Breathing the sea air. It seems really natural." He paused. "But isn't it just because we live in our civilisation, with its history, that we go sunbathing at all? Isn't that why we think beaches are places to go on holiday?"

A point worth some lazy attention, E.V. thought. Of course, he'd changed the basis of the argument. All the better. It was just what their conversation

needed to stay in keeping with the warmth of the afternoon, the blue of the sky and the cheerful hubbub of the beach. She drank a little more wine, then put her plastic glass down in the sand, by her sunglasses case.

Each time she let the glass go, she expected it to fall over. She gave it a moment now. Children shrieked happily from the surf. The glass stayed upright.

She rolled over onto her back. “You’re right, of course. But even in the 1990s, civilised people don’t, for example, copulate on beaches.”

“A provocative remark if I ever heard one. Incidentally, didn’t you tell me that Jane Austen had a special word for big tits?”

Laughter bobbed into E.V.’s voice. “You couldn’t give me a better example of the displaced behaviour of civilised people. You look at my tits—and you think of Jane Austen.”

“That’s not fair. You know why I got so excited at the idea of coming on holiday with you.”

“It clearly wasn’t my boobs.”

“They played their part. But there were other inducements.”

“God, you sound more donnish than my most dreary colleagues.”

“I’m trying to join in.”

“Stop.”

It was just banter, but there was an edge to it. The word ‘copulate’ had revived a small tension. They were booked in to the one room, with a double bed, exactly as E.V. had said. Sex was clearly in the offing—and getting closer. Yet they hardly knew each other. They’d each put the moment off, once—Julian just a short while ago. The holiday was only a few hours old. Were things going to work out?

E.V.’s best guess was that they would get on well enough, at least for the duration. Julian had less disciplined hopes.

He glanced now at E.V., wondering if she was beginning to regret having asked him along. He knew so many horror stories.

Her eyes were closed; her face gave away no secrets.

He said, “OK. Wrong part to play. But I was enjoying the argument.”

E.V. replied without opening her eyes. “Me too. It was just the sudden appearance of a ghost from the SCR, mouthing prissy phrases. I thought I’d escaped.”

“You have. I’ll watch my language.” Suddenly Cockney. “Wash my marf out wiv soap, I will.”

E.V. conceded him another quiet laugh. The heat lapped at her body. Drifting on the air came the characteristic smells of the beach: salt, fresh sweat, sun oil, the occasional whiff of cooking food. She stretched once more, as comfortable as a cat by a fire. “So where are we?”

“Thinking about how far civilisation is at war with nature. And I’m sticking to my view that we only appreciate nature—simple societies, unspoiled views, our bodies, our impulses, everything we think of as natural—because we’re civilised.”

“Do people appreciate *all* their impulses? *Sometimes* the sexual ones, perhaps—”

“And generosity. The generosity of nature.”

She turned onto her side and looked at him, resting her head on her hand. “I’m not sure *human* generosity is natural. Children may need to be taught it. But leaving that aside,” she went on before he could interrupt, “there’s not much to appreciate in aggression, competitiveness, cruelty, greed...”

“Who says any of those things are natural impulses? I think *those* are the things we get taught.”

“Now you’re sounding like Rousseau. And he thought civilisation was to blame. You can’t have it both ways. I think your position is confused.”

“I think it’s too subtle for you. And I bet you don’t get *that* said to you too often.”

E.V. eased herself up, laughing. She drank some more wine.

Their glasses were now empty. Julian reached into the cooler and brought out the bottle.

“You assume that’s a male job?” E.V. asked, her eyes on him, as she held out her glass.

He met her gaze. “More a toy boy’s job.”

“Bitch,” she said coolly. “You’re not that much younger than me.”

“Five years,” he protested, without thinking. And then wished he hadn’t. What could he say, he wondered, to rescue himself? “Not that anyone would believe you were thirty seven?” It was too obvious to need saying. And he’d already shown her how surprised he was, in the pub in Oxford. He began filling her glass, giving her a chance to come back at him, if she wanted.

She didn’t. She just went on looking at him—cool, dark, sardonic. Even when her glass was full, and she lifted it to her lips, her eyes didn’t waver. He’d felt, since that moment in her flat, that he’d grasped part of the secret of her self-possession. She outfaced him all the same.

In their silence, he became aware of what had been in the background until then—traffic stopping and starting along the beach road, the hiss and slap of the surf, music from radios tuned to different stations, excited voices. Had a small child also been crying, somewhere nearby? If so, it had stopped.

A German family came up the beach towards them, the mother and father carrying their sun beds. This part of the Bay of Palma, the townlet of El Arenal—S’Arenal in Mallorquín—was thronged with Germans.

The mother had red hair. The father was a bit paunchy, but was otherwise well built.

E.V. found herself reflecting on the different kinds of swagger. There was the swagger of the street kid, out for a scrap with any passer by. And there was this less aggressive, especially German swagger.

What made the father so visibly German? It wasn’t anything military. The shoulders in fact were loose. Was the secret in the tilt of the jaw? Or in the deliberate eye movements? Perhaps that was it—the overall deliberation. An ordinary German, dressed only in the uniform of the beach, and yet each move he made suggested, in its minor way, a triumph of the will.

As the man came closer, he gave E.V. a distinctly appreciative look, then, drawing an obvious conclusion from the blonde athletic body of her partner, muttered something friendly in his direction.

Julian was visibly at a loss. E.V. came to the rescue. “*Es tut mir leid. Wir sind keine Deutschen.*”

“Ah,” the man exclaimed, “you are English.”

“My accent is that bad?”

“No, not at all. Your accent is that good. You are maybe from Oxford—or Cambridge?”

“I am from Oxford, as it happens.”

“*Das ist auch gut*. Please to enjoy your holiday.”

The children had already gone ahead. The man moved off, his wife giving E.V. and Julian a last uncertain smile. E.V. watched her on her way. She called to mind a famous passage on middle age in Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiography. The green of the woman’s bikini was designed to set off her fine red hair, and to that extent worked. But the last years of the woman’s thirties had tugged at and coarsened her body, in a way they hadn’t yet done to E.V.’s own.

Not yet.

The thought was easily brushed away in the late afternoon sun. She looked back at Julian, who had closed his eyes and let his head rest. Actually, only to a superficial glance could he pass for German. His face was carved incisively, but the features were too fine, too mobile. “Aristocratic good looks.” His agent had got him to change his name from Vandy to Auvergne. “I myself think that the name I was born with stood at least as good a chance in the 1990s,” Julian had explained with an ironic flourish, “but ‘Auvergne’ apparently suits my aristocratic good looks.”

This was at the party. E.V. remembered thinking that the phrase wasn’t out of place. Now, lying back herself, she wondered about how much of Julian it captured. It didn’t allow for how easy it was to picture him in crumpled clothes, selling *The Big Issue*. There was something hovering behind the fine features which she couldn’t yet place: a susceptibility, an expectancy.

He cut across her thoughts. “Do you know you always look embarrassed when you say you’re from Oxford?”

“Do I?”

“Always.”

She considered the point. Three small children raced past, squealing with excitement, one of them trying to splash the others from a bucket painted in swirling orange. Some of the sand sent flying by their feet should have landed on Julian and E.V.’s exposed bodies. None did. “Are you an elder son? I can’t remember if you’ve told me.”

“I’m an only son—an only child. What’s that got to do with it?”

“Perhaps you’ve noticed that elder children often look awkward when they get special treatment?” She didn’t pause for a reply. “It’s as though their secret sense of superiority was somehow out in the open. Coming from Oxford’s a bit like that. Even Cambridge is... a younger sibling. Not that it’s just age, of course. People talk about ‘Oxbridge’, but I suspect that’s a Cambridge expression.”

Julian's fingers found a sticky trace of sun lotion just above his warm knee. He smoothed it in. "Really?"

She kept her ground. "It's a bit like 'British'. Before the nineteenth century, it was essentially a Scots word. 'British', 'Rule Britannia', the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—they're all Scottish ideas. The Scots even used to call themselves 'North Britons' at one time. To suggest that England and Scotland were equals. The English didn't use the word 'British' much. They were the English."

"As people from Oxford are from Oxford."

She caught his eye. "The whole thing's stupid, of course. Being afraid of appearing arrogant is as stupid as *being* arrogant. But I think it explains my embarrassment. Is there any more wine?"

"There's always more wine. And I'm glad you've accepted my role."

To E.V.'s surprise, the bottle was still half full. Julian poured her another glass.

"After this, shall we go for a swim?" she asked.

"Of course. Anyway, you're the boss."

A casual enough remark, but she'd just as soon he didn't fall into a habit. "Julian?" She waited till she caught his eye. "Yes, I'm paying for the holiday. No, I don't expect to be deferred to."

"Sorry," he said. He stood up, finishing his wine.

"What do you think of it—the wine?" she asked.

"Absolutely brilliant." And in response to her raised eyebrows: "Well, it's not champagne, but I really like it. And I can't get over how cheap it was. For a litre too."

"Yes. It's good how cheap drink is in Spain—even here." She left just a mouthful in her glass, and put it back on the sand.

Of course, she thought, these glasses were designed for the beach. They were bound to have a low centre of gravity or something. She put her navy bikini top back on.

Julian saw her eyes stray back to the glass, as she got up. "Contingency," she said. "What happens to happen. Sometimes the wind blows sand into your eyes, sometimes it blows it somewhere else. Sometimes the glass you put down topples over, sometimes it stays upright."

“I like that word,” he said. “Contingency.”

“It’s about events happening in their own right. Of course, there are *causes*. But they lie in the events themselves. Each process goes its own way. The conjunctions are pure accident. There’s no necessity—no *reason*—for things to turn out the way they do.”

He turned the idea round in his mind, as he fell into step beside her. Neither of them gave a moment’s thought to their things. Towels, sandals, sunglasses, E.V.’s paperback Catullus, a rather frayed champagne cooler—they’d brought no money or watches to the beach, nothing worth taking.

The water was cool on their warm bodies. At the first wave that splashed up his legs, Julian threw himself into the water and began swimming out. E.V. waited until the water was a little deeper before she began swimming herself.

When they were strolling down to the water’s edge a man here, a woman there had glanced up—and gone on looking for a moment. Now the people nearest them in the water began to give them some attention. Only the children splashed and screamed unawares.

They were a striking couple. A tall dark woman, a tall blonde man, each with marked good looks. They swam through the glitter of late sunlight, strongly and easily, not saying much. Their bodies seemed to come into their own in the water, as though it were their element. Somewhere there was the thought that this was a good omen—though neither of them was conscious of thinking it.

Out of the water, they dried vigorously, E.V. finishing her wine before picking up her big purple towel. She was thinking of suggesting they went back to the hotel, but Julian, who was dry before her, had flopped back on his towel.

She dabbed at a trickle of water between her breasts. The sun was now low in the sky—a burnished orb with a ragged orange rim. There was no hurry, she reflected. The warmth and the wine had made her ready for what, in the nature of things, would make or break their holiday; but they had all week. And there was of course a pleasure in sustaining the state of anticipation.

She helped herself to a final glass of wine. There was half a glass left for Julian, if he wanted it. He seemed so relaxed it was difficult to tell if he was awake. She almost envied the way he gave himself up to the heat. She herself, equally relaxed, maintained a more equal relationship with it.

She spread her damp towel out again and sat looking at him, his lean body, the sparse blonde hair on his chest. At thirty-seven, and never married, she was familiar enough with short-lived sexual relationships. In fact, she admitted wryly, she hardly knew any other kind—not that there hadn’t been men who wanted more.



She reached over to Julian's torso and, with her fingertips, touched a strand of wispy blonde hair.

He opened one eye—a theatrical gesture. “Are you worried I’m going to burn?”

“I never worry.”

He opened both eyes, and lifted his head. The loose fringes of his hair were suddenly touched with sunlight. “Are you glad to be here?”

She didn't answer immediately. When facts or ideas were in play, E.V. could be direct enough, Julian thought. Direct questions about her feelings seemed to be another matter.

He got in first. “I am, anyway. I like to imagine”—and now the voice was that of a well-known dead entertainer, displaying his ‘talent to amuse’—“I like to imagine the two of us trotting along our separate paths, quite unaware that the paths were converging: on a second floor flat in South Kensington.” And then in his own voice, “Is that weird?”

“Weird is right,” she laughed. Still, it was an attractive idea. She stretched out again on her towel. Separately, they paid their dues to memory.

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