

Desire - Or Something like It

At the sound of the gate, she stopped folding washing to peer through the blind, then glanced at her watch. There was no time to brush her hair before the lesson, but she smoothed it with her palms and went to the door, amused at her own nervousness. Tutors were intimidating, not students, she told herself... The student lacked knowledge and knew it. The tutor knew all there was to know - except what this next student needed and that would be resolved in one session, she reminded herself.

He was staring away down the path when she opened the door, books under his arm and thumbs hooked in denim shorts. There was a longer pause than seemed necessary before he turned to face her. When he did, his green eyes were steady and appraising. Against a deep tan, his blonde hair was longer than she would have expected for someone still at school. Clearly not the average, average.

"Hullo, I'm Christine...Chris," she said brightly, holding out a hand "Come in...Kevin, isn't it?"

He took her hand in a cool, perfunctory squeeze and nodded "H'lo - yeah...Kevin." And walked into her life.

She had converted the little sun-room into a study and teaching corner. Her desk, lap-top and files took up one corner, affording her a view of the garden through the louvers above a low cream suite. A solid coffee table squatted atop thick legs on a colourful dhurry complementing the few pictures and wall hangings. Simple, but tasteful. Business-like, but feminine, she thought with satisfaction.

"Some coffee? While we talk and decide what we're going to do?" she paused at the door to the kitchen. He nodded silently, watching her. She busied herself filling the percolator, emptied by John's usual three cup breakfast. She spooned grounds, caught a movement and turned, surprised to see him leaning there in the doorway, studying her.

"I'm not so bad, you know. I *could* pass if I wanted to. I mean..." For a moment, he looked like any other kid she had tutored over the last couple of years. Flummoxed by maths and the way it had been explained to him, embarrassed and defensive at his lack of understanding. Resentful that it should hold so much sway in how his life went. And right now, she was part of this.

'Kevin, maths isn't everybody's thing. We don't all see the same pictures when we hear the same words. D'you like it strong? Sugar?' He waved a dismissive hand which she took to mean it didn't matter.

He was studying a calendar on the wall.

"I'd like to go there one day." he said. The sea was mirror flat below jagged cliffs topped by wind-twisted conifers. Other tiny islands were scattered off-shore in an endless expanse of water.

“Maine” she said looking across at the annual pharmacy giveaway.

“Main what?”

“Maine...in the States. I didn’t know until I read the caption. It looks lovely. All those little islands.”

“You think anyone’s been to all of them?” he asked, cocking his head to peer closely. Hair fell across his eyes and he brushed it aside with a brown finger.

“Here’s your coffee” She held out a mug. There seemed to be less reserve in him -her acknowledgement of his interest perhaps. He stood there, looking around her kitchen.

“Nice” he said.

“Thank you. I like cooking, so there’s a lot of stuff. I was cleaning up when you came.” Her tutor’s instincts sensed delaying tactics. “Let’s talk about what we should look at first. Any ideas?”

He shrugged, the impassive front again. “I dunno. Maybe quickly through the beginning and slow down when it gets hard.”

This was going to be tough, she thought. Six months into the year and starting at the beginning. “Let’s take a seat and have a look at your books. See where I can help.” She thought his gaze looked less distant at the last word. “OK”. He walked ahead of her, balancing his untouched mug.

His shoulders were broad under a snow-white T shirt worn out of the denim shorts. Muscle bunched in the brown calves and thighs...guiltily, she caught herself, bustling for a moment to clear magazines from the coffee table, a momentary awkwardness in her.

They sat opposite each other, she upright on the edge of her chair, knees together and skirt pulled down to cover them. Kevin looked considerably more at ease, bare legs outstretched and coffee-mug on his lap. She said brightly “Books?”

“Oh? Yeah. Well there’s this one.” He leaned to hand her a slim volume. It was badly covered in transparent plastic under which someone had added a surfing picture. She tapped it without opening the book and asked

“Do you surf?”

“All the time” he replied, his eyes lighting up as though she had thrown a switch.

“That’s Uluwatu – absolutely radical wave – I’m definitely going there first chance I get.”

“Indonesia? I believe it’s not that expensive” she offered, wondering where she’d heard that. “I’m sure you’ll find a way to get there, if surfing’s that important to you.”

The surfer, crouched on his board and speeding headlong and forever towards her under an arching avalanche of water, was rapt and open mouthed, - just as the shutter had captured him. "It looks very exciting" she murmured as she opened the book.

"You wouldn't know. Not if you've never surfed...." he stopped, as if aware that it might sound rude and dismissive of her age and housewife status.

"No I haven't - well, not really. Unless you count body-boarding when I first got married - on honeymoon".

"Yeah?" he said, and something in his voice seemed to suggest a shred of respect, whether that she had known that Uluwata was in Indonesia or tried something adventurous or that she had attracted a man, she couldn't tell. She flushed, then brought them back to the book open in her hand.

For the next half hour, she talked, wheedling and coaxing him towards a better understanding of the subject that had defeated him thus far. At times, she felt she was losing him, times when his eyes strayed to the calendar, to the world outside the window and to the picture on the book cover.

At the end of the hour, she stopped, frustrated. "So, Kevin what have I taught you - I mean, what have you learned?"

"Uh, that it's all very logical, that you have to learn some basic rules and that it's not so difficult. She nodded, telling herself that the lesson may not have been a total failure.

"That pretty well sums it up. OK, let's call it a day - or at least call it an hour." She blushed at her own weak sally.

"Unnh" he acknowledged, unwound himself from his sprawl in the chair and stood up, reaching for the books she was stacking. Their hands touched briefly in the exchange and she was surprised at the frisson it produced in her. He made no sign and tucked the books under one arm.

"What are you going to do with the rest of your day?" she asked brightly.

"Surf - Long Beach. What else?" he answered: "High tide's at three" as if his life was inexorably dictated by phases of the moon.

"Oh, well enjoy. I shall probably just get on with my housework, maybe read a book." She said, before she realised how it would sound. She opened the door to let him out and he left with just a nod, striding down the path to the gate. With a strange sense of regret, she watched until he disappeared from sight before she closed the door.

Turning back to her work, she paused after a minute or two and moved to the hall mirror. Surveying herself, she looked for the features that had appealed to John. The face was

striking more than pretty, mobile with a full, expressive mouth. The hair – well, the experiment with a bob was growing out.

She watched as her reflection reached for its shirt buttons, undoing them one by one until it could shrug off the shirt and unclasp the bra. Breasts neither voluptuous nor meagre, had retained their firmness and as she turned sideways, they seemed still to have an upward tilt.

The hands that hooked thumbs into the waist-band of the skirt were graceful, long-fingered and the belly exposed seemed flat enough. With the skirt pooled around her feet, she looked critically at her thighs. Were they fuller than she remembered? And did the knees seem less pronounced? The calves were satisfying, retaining their athletic heart shape above slim ankles and elegant feet.

The reflection turned sideways and then further, to give her a neck-craning view of its bottom. She couldn't decide whether that had lost any of its firmness, even when the panties were peeled down to expose one smooth flank – at least there were no signs of crepe, she told herself. Not entirely satisfied, she dressed again.

As she packed away the last of the folded washing, John's car purred up the drive and disappeared into the garage, followed by the whine of the automatic door closing and shortly after that by the sound of his keys on the hall table. She went to him for their dutiful, fleeting welcome kiss.

"How was it?" she asked out of habit, setting the table for a light lunch. "Any armed robberies worth mentioning?"

"Huh? No, none that you'd be interested in. Just the normal banker's Saturday morning. I see new car sales are up again. Quite a bit, too."

Without looking, she knew he'd be perusing the business section of the morning paper. She continued to cut bread.

"Had a new student this morning." No response from John. "The one referred by Denise. He's a surfer."

"If the mine unions would just calm down a bit, foreign trade might pick up. Bloody unions..."

"Here's lunch - just the usual. Pheasant, braised in red wine with truffles, nothing special."

"Hmm? Thanks, not very hungry, actually. Had a takeaway thing this morning. Listen, Gert got tickets for the big game at 5 – d'you mind?" At least he had turned the newspaper aside to see her face as he said this.

"Why should I mind? I know you love your soccer." And she busied herself pouring tea.

“Thanks Chris, you’re a brick. I’ll go at about 3 - travel time, have a few drinks before.” He was back behind his newspaper again, the subject closed.

“A brick. That’s nice. A hard, cold, rectangular object. My life’s ambition.” she murmured, stirring her tea.

John emerged once more to check the dining room clock, glanced at his watch to compare and folded the paper. He tugged at his tie and stood up “Oh well... better clean up a bit. Have a good afternoon.” And he was gone, leaving her to her tea and her thoughts. She had watched him go, comparing his neatly pressed rear with the very different one that had left her door just an hour ago.

John was putting on weight, she decided, his waistline and shoulders blurred and softened by time behind a desk. It came as a shock to realise that she was measuring her husband of five years with someone she’d only just met. Empty cup still cradled at her lip, she listened to him singing quietly in the shower. The sound of a shower had always meant something different in their past, especially Saturday midday, when she had joined her newly freed lover in a ritual of cleansing that preceded a long afternoon of love-making. There was the usual clunk in the pipes that signalled the closing of the mixer-tap.

She gathered tea things and the various spreads and cheeses and returned them to their places, his unused plate out of habit with hers in the sink.

“What time will you be back?” she asked quietly, running hot water.

“What? Oh, sometime after 6” he said from the doorway, surprising her on silent, bare feet. “Should I pick up anything?”

“No, I’ve done the shopping – just go and enjoy yourself.”

“Yeah... well.... I’ll do that - if you think of anything, call me on my cell.”

“Nnmh” she said under her breath. “And as usual, you’ll forget between the call and the time you get home.” Stacking crockery to drain and drying her hands on a tea towel, as he came up behind her, his arms encircling her waist and his lips fastened on the great pulse in her neck.

For just one moment she melted, her hands finding his and her head aside, eyes closed, to expose more of her neck to him. Then his arms relaxed and were withdrawn as he said cheerfully “Bye, Chris. Be good.” And he left. She remained where she was, staring out of the window as the car keys, garage door and purring motor sequence were played in reverse.

There was sun on the upper leaves of the Chinese elm and she peered up at the patch of sky visible from the kitchen window. Blue and cloudless, it decided her and she went back to the mirror and studied her face in more detail than before, turning this way and that, contorting

her mouth and eyes, considering, before she went into the bathroom where there was better light and where she kept her makeup.

Half an hour later, she was in her own car and on the road, a bulging beach basket on the passenger seat.

Long Beach curved, first towards her, and then away and out of sight, before reappearing and disappearing into infinity where only Chapman's Peak could be clearly defined, bulking against the distant sky.

The car-park was half full and she eased into an unmarked bay and gathered her beach-bag, car-keys and purse. The stone change-rooms had been extended since her last trip to the beach. Already she regretted coming here. This was not the Long Beach she and Kevin had haunted – the need for sun and open air their only objective. That, and their need for each other. But she made her way onto the sand and surveyed the family encampments and the sprawled singles and couples, before finding a patch of sand to spread her towel.

There were surfers in the water, brightly coloured flotsam sitting their submerged boards in knots of two and three. The swell was medium-sized and the afternoon on-shore threatened to reduce it even more as time went on. Here and there, a surfer gave up waiting and started to paddle shore-wards. She watched them as she applied sun-block.

At this distance, it was impossible to identify Kevin, but there was sudden galvanisation amongst the remainder as a single swell humped its wind-flecked shoulders and approached the shallower water. Two of the tiny figures jostled for position, stroking smoothly and swiftly into its rearing face as it felt the drag below.

The one in the lime green wetsuit edged ahead of the other and was suddenly launched into the wall by the curling lip, rising to its feet in a smooth and uncomplicated movement and crouching there on the racing board. She'd watched it a hundred times, but the fluid grace and sure-footed confidence never failed to enthrall her. It was as though her soul was swept along in the moment. In the shallows, the wall collapsed and ceased to be and the surfer stepped off his board and flipped it up under one arm to walk to shore in the knee deep ebb and flow.

There was something familiar about the set of the shoulders and when he shook his mane of hair free of its burden of salt water, she recognised Kevin striding up the beach, unzipping his wetsuit to the waist. He held his board under the stuttering shower, turning it this way and that, before propping it against the change-room wall and shrugged out of his neoprene second skin, standing under the torrent, face uplifted and eyes closed.

His Speedo was brief and moulded against him by the water and it was with some surprise that she found herself standing at the shower, her spare towel in hand – waiting for him to finish. He flipped off the shower and stood a moment, eyes closed, the water running off the bronze outline of him, then swung his hair this way and that in a cascade of droplets. When he opened his eyes, blinking, he made her out. And said evenly and unsurprised,

“Hullo Chris.” without taking those green eyes off her rapt face. Just holding out his hand for the towel as if it was the most natural thing to find her standing there.

She stepped backwards to let him out of the stone cubicle, and watched, soundless, as he towelled off and then ran his fingers, comb-like, through his hair, muscles writhing in bronzed shoulders and arms. She reached out and picked a glutinous shred from his chest “Kelp” she said, flicking it away.

He turned to collect his surfboard and wet-suit. “What are you doing here? This is the open air. Housework finished?” and she felt herself rising to the bait.

“Well, it’s a free world. Even for modern-day slaves. I thought I’d take in some sun too.”

“Uhuh? I guess so.” He stood for a moment, waiting, then said “Where’s your stuff?”

“Over there, the red basket and green towel.”

He walked purposefully towards her possessions as though it was where he wanted to be, with her a half-step behind.

“I’ve got some biscuits and cheese if you’re hungry.”

“Mmm, nice. Then I’m glad you came. I thought you were bringing me homework.” He defused the moment with a radiant grin that crinkled his eyes and showed off perfect teeth against his tan.

She busied herself, opening containers and setting biscuits on a board, glad to have something to occupy her hands. Kevin took a biscuit and dipped it into the cottage cheese she was holding, before transferring it to his mouth, watching her. She held the gaze, though flustered at his frank scrutiny.

“Good” he grunted, reaching for another and then startled her by holding the snack to her lips. She hesitated and then opened her mouth to admit the offering, leaning back a little when his finger brushed her lips to remove a smudge of cottage cheese. He transferred the morsel to his own mouth without taking his eyes off her and again she felt that ripple of feeling pass through her body and center in her belly.

“I’m going to have a dip”, she said suddenly, rising to her feet and turning to go. He lay there at his ease, propped on one elbow, studying her. He reached for another biscuit.

“Nice cozzie” he said “Looks good on you. Most things would.” And then applied himself to dipping the biscuit - as she set off for the water’s edge. “Very nice” he called after her retreating figure. In answer, she clasped her hands behind her bottom and plodded on, head bowed in confusion and without looking back.

Kevin applied himself to the biscuits and explored other cheeses and left her to her bathing. It was some time before he looked up again, interrupting his gorging to see where she was.

The little figure in the revealing two-piece was knee deep in the shallows, facing shore. She seemed to be rubbing distractedly at her thighs, shifting agitatedly from foot to foot. He sat up, squinting against the sunlight on the water, and then rose and trotted down to her. There were great, livid welts across her thighs, the long hair-like filaments of the blue bottle sting glinting every now and then in the sunlight as she moved in her dance of agony.

“Stand still, Chris! “He was calm but authoritative, “Let me take it off you...don’t rub it, you’re squeezing more poison out of it.”

By a supreme effort she stood, trembling as he bent and set about untangling her from the skeins of fine, dead tentacle. Unconsciously, she rested a palm on his exposed back to balance herself, even in her distress conscious of the warmth of the smooth skin under her hand.

“You could have found a bigger one”. He joked, intent on his work “Physalia utriculus, I always call it. Bluebottle sounds less impressive. It’s the cozzie of course - must have thought you were edible”

“Get on with it”. She gritted “I know what it is. I don’t need a biology lesson right now” but her mouth formed something like a grin as she said it.

“Pity. I thought a fair swop was a good idea - maths for biology – and first aid.” He had most of the sting clear of her body, minute barbed hooks festooned along its great length like tiny decorations and barely visible. He took her hand and led her ashore, kicked a hole in the sand, covered the sting and stamped it down.

“Come on. Time for your botany lesson.” He led her to the low dunes that fringed the beach. Tendrils of a familiar triangular-leafed succulent cascaded down the sandy slope like questing fingers. Vygies – meet Chris – Chris - meet vygies – Mesembryanthemums . . . the surfer’s friend.” He released her hand to pluck a handful of the leaves and then crushed them, the slime within oozing through his fingers.

Then he knelt before her and began gently applying it, kneading and caressing her inflamed thighs and knees. The relief was not instant, but the agony dulled to be slowly replaced by a sensation that disconcerted her at first and then shocked her when she recognised he growing trembling and contractions in her inner thighs. With a sudden will, she put her hands on his shoulders and arched her lower body away and out of reach of his hands. She had to clear her throat twice to stammer “I’m – I’m fine now...it’s working, Kevin. Thank you.....”

He knelt there before her, like some half-naked pagan at worship, hands resting on brown thighs, the wind stirring his hair. And Chris thought she had never seen anything quite as beautiful.

Her voice was husky when she asked “Where do you live?” mean...can I give you a lift home?”

“Up there.” he replied with a jerk of his chin, not taking his eyes off hers. She glanced at the smear of housing clinging to the distant slopes below the mountain firebreak. “How do you get here to the beach? D’you carry your surfboard all that way?”

His chuckle was genuine, the green eyes crinkling at the corners again as he started some smart response and thought better of it, shrugging instead. “OK – thanks”.

The house was square and a long verandah ran the length of it. At one end, there was an upper room, an addition to the main house, reached by wooden steps from the outside. “My place.” He said, indicating it with an incline of his head. “You want to see the view? I can see the surf from there.”

There was no car in the driveway “Where are your parents?” she asked, sitting there with the engine idling.

“Out” he said “Back some time after the golf club closes. Come on.” He was standing with the door open, with his board under an arm and stooping into the open door to look at her, he made it impossible to drive off. And then she realised that she didn’t want to. What was the harm? She watched herself switch off and gather the keys.

Kevin stepped aside to allow her to climb the stairs ahead of him and she was glad she’d wrapped a towel around her waist. On the little covered balcony, he zipped the board into its bag and slung his wet-suit over the balcony railing before unlocking the door, waving her in. There was very little to see. A single bed, neatly made, built-in cupboards no doubt holding his clothes. A small desk with a chair, some surfing posters thumbtacked to the wooden walls, one easy chair before a TV screen fixed to one wall. A shower cubicle occupied one corner.

Her survey complete, she murmured “Well...you’re very neat,”

“It’s not much. The view’s the thing.”

Chris turned to lean on the waist-high railing, marvelling at the panoramic expanse now revealed by just these few meters of elevation. Up here, above the ubiquitous milk-woods and other obstructions, the horizon seemed to stretch forever.

The on-shore had done its work and the rearing surf had subsided into sulky mounds moving in to the beach, crested by an occasional wind-driven fleck of spume. A canvas screen affixed to the railing as protection from the elements was thumping gently and rhythmically against its restraints.

At this distance, it was impossible to distinguish any human shapes, but she imagined that the beach was now largely deserted, hardy shell gatherers and dog walkers aside.

It was a shock to feel his hands at her waist, feeling for the corner of the towel where she had tucked it in to secure her temporary kilt.

“Kevin? I don’t...” and her voice died away as the towel fell to the floor and for want of any sort of reaction, she found herself simply staring at the sea – as though this was not happening. With her as an un-protesting participant. Back there, disturbing things were happening, her two piece swimsuit peeled upwards so that her buttocks were exposed and she became aware that Kevin was kneeling behind her.

Soft contacts with her chilling skin seemed to be kisses and firm hands were gripping the upper fronts of her thighs – as though she might pull away – something every sense screamed at her to do. Instead, she leaned forward and rested her chin on her forearms, staring out at a darkening sky, the want in her smouldering. As Kevin discovered the waistband of her swimsuit and in one smooth movement drew it downwards, it seemed that her thighs parted of their own volition.

As though her attention elsewhere might absolve her from responsibility for this, Chris concentrated on the horizon, acutely aware that Kevin was on his feet behind her and as naked from the waist down as she was, his fingertips hooked almost painfully into her waist at the hipbones, holding her immobile.

For a long, frozen moment, they stood, neither moving, and then two things happened. Slowly and yet without hesitation, Kevin entered her readiness, and stopped. And a white BMW slowed on the approach road and turned into the driveway.

It whispered to a halt at the front door and its occupants emerged. The man waved a vague hand and busied himself with finding the house key, but Kevin’s mother stopped to gaze unsteadily upwards at the two heads exposed above the shrouded railing, unwinding her scarf and blowing a clumsy kiss.

“Hullo Kevvy. You didn’t leave me your key – I couldn’t bring up your washing. I’ll get it now...” and turned to follow her husband inside.

“S’okay Mom, I’ll come and get it! Mom! This is Chris...my tutor. Just showing her the view.”

Chris raised an arm and waved weakly, forcing a bright smile and the woman paused to respond. “Hullo, dear...nice to meet you in person. Thanks for bringing Kevin home.” Then she disappeared.

The icy hand inside her belly relaxed and Chris thrust backwards to meet Kevin’s renewed vigour, their combined, silent laughter suppressed but genuine. Conspirators joined in their relief and their desire for each other.

Perhaps it was this heady mixture that carried Chris forward more swiftly than she could ever have imagined. Or perhaps, that below the verandah rail, Kevin had accessed her nipples and was rolling them between thumb and forefinger, so that in a series of convulsive jerks, she dropped her forehead on her forearms and climaxed in a wave of successive shudders. Her post-coital weakness would have collapsed her if not for the support of the railing, that, and the strength and increasingly urgent thrusting of Kevin’s hips.

At his first strangled gasp, she reached back with one hand to grasp at him, locked her quivering knees and bore down on the emptying of his lust. As it faded, they stood there, immobile except for the occasional twitch or spasm. Chris was dimly aware of his lips planted here and there on her bare back but the weight of his chest against her back was too much in her weakened state.

“This is not comfortable.” she said over her shoulder.

“Sorry. I don’t think I can move for a bit.” he whispered, but he raised himself upright, only his palms on her back, holding her in place for a little longer. Then with some effort, and with a gentle pat to each exposed cheek, he left her, before bending to retrieve her towel.

“Shower’s in there, if you want to get the salt off you. I’ll wait for you.”

Chris padded inside, her mind focussed on this familiar, uncomplicated daily function. The shower was hot and the water pressure good. It was calming, comforting and it helped to steady her heartbeat and reduce the quivering. She stood there a long time.

When she emerged, Kevin was sitting on his bed, a towel around his lean waist. He watched her dry herself and pull on the swim-suit without expression. “Are you OK?” he asked as she finger-combed her damp hair before the wall mirror.

“I’m fine. Just a little confused.” She answered. “This wasn’t in the syllabus.”

“Maybe not. Programs are made to be changed. Makes them more interesting.”

“Yeah?” she said, and turned to leave.

Kevin rose and stopped her at the door, anxious green eyes searching her face “See you next Saturday?”

“Why not?” she said.” We’ve made a good start. Come 30 minutes early.”

As she negotiated the steps, the sky had cleared and the distant sea was ablaze. It was going to be a magnificent sunset.