

Extracts

The American whirled around violently, his face white with shock. His mind seemed to throb as a thousand memories shot across his consciousness. His eyes glazed and became misty and he felt himself weaken and slump to the floor. Vague, grey-blue pictures of people, places and rooms came and went like a light bulb in a storm. The only sound was a muffled voice, then the scratch of a chair on the floor. After that just his own heartbeat, insistent and inescapable. Still came the faces and the pictures. Open mouths one on the other like some horrid fantasy then faces encircling others' faces forming a grotesque kaleidoscope image of a shouting crowd. A fierce sun burst through the faces, parting the heads as it came surging towards him. He wanted to move his head but he couldn't. He tried again, summoning up the energy for some supreme effort. He tried shaking from side to side and finally found some movement. The sun veered away slightly, and then it began to swing from side to side, maintaining its distance now.

Maria sat spellbound. A hush descended on the room. The singer had a wonderful voice, the notes gentle and sad. Guitar strings squeaked as he ran his fingers along them but the mellow tone of the instrument matched perfectly the song he sang. He swayed slightly in time, his eyes closed. There was meaning in the words but whether of protest or of fond memory, Chris couldn't tell. The chords had a power of their own, though, and after a few verses, he found himself humming a familiar strain with the others around him. No one seemed to pay attention to the steady flow of people coming in - old and young, but all males. Before long the bar was full to capacity and there were three sets of shoulders between him and Maria. Glasses were silently filled by the barman and the humming grew louder as the latest arrivals joined in. When the final chords turned to a quiet ending of individual notes a rapturous applause started. Chris and Maria joined in. Rusan rose to his feet and put an arm around the younger man's shoulders, affectionately patting him as he did so and exchanging smiles. Then the young man bowed and walked out the door, leaving a general murmur behind him which slowly faded as his song had done.

Chris sped up the beach, sand flying from his soles and a white shirt fluttering in the moonlight as he headed for the track towards the car. Tina stood up, still naked, her hand pulling back her hair from her forehead as she tried to peer through the night in his direction.

The little Japanese car started after a brief spin of the engine and the front wheels scabbled for grip on the loose surface. Indecently noisily, it headed screaming in first gear, then second, towards the village, weaving through the parked bicycles and scooters outside the apartments and shops in the tiny street.

Outside a still-lit hotel he stopped, wheels locking and grinding the dusty layer of sand into the tarmac outside. Chris ran into the polished reception area and shouted for a line as he grabbed the ivory phone in the clear, brown perspex acoustic hood on the wall. Impatiently repeating the international dialling code for the UK again and again, slamming the two black points in the set until eventually he was able to continue the dialling, each number coming instantly to mind without pause. He strummed his fingers on the edge of the hood and glanced over at the man on the desk. Realising that he looked a little strange in just half-done-up trousers and his other clothes in a heap on the floor, he returned the enquiring look with a hand held up in acknowledgement.