

On the Beach at Coronado

The sweeping arc of the bridge to Coronado Island is as breath-taking as it is banal. It rises through the San Diego docks like a stretching cat made sluggish by the California sun. The ascent is gradual so you don't notice the height until you begin to imagine what would happen if there was an accident and then every bit of its two hundred feet grabs at you like a frightened child, that is, if such things bother you. They never bother me. I don't mind being high up, whether it's on a bridge going sixty or a plane going six hundred, it makes no odds how far above ground you are, it's just a way of getting places. The rise doesn't last, you are beginning to descend before you realise it and that's when the island comes into view. It's not much to look at, but in a car with the top open on a July day it's better than being dead. The bridge is America's second favourite suicide bridge, though I can't understand why you'd want to kill yourself if you lived in San Diego, aside from the fact Top Gun was filmed there. Yeah when it comes to leaving this life it's second only to the Golden Gate Bridge and there I was thinking the Golden State was full of happy golden people, goes to show doesn't it?

This was the first time we crossed the bridge together. Susan, my wife, had been to San Diego years before and in her excited giddiness she had made the crossing to the island sound exhilarating and wonderful, but like everything fuelled by anticipation, nostalgia and imagination, it fell short. Mustering my best acting I told her it was amazing and that I was having a great time. I asked our ten-year-old son who was sitting in the back of the car if he was having a good time, but he was too busy chasing images on a screen. It occurred to me that his generation was likely to be underwhelmed by everything because reality would never catch up with the fizzing neurons of their gamer existence.

We sloped down the final stretch of the bridge and on to the island. An old tollbooth, its canopy still intact, sat squat and sun bleached like something left behind on the set of a sci-fi film. I made a quip about free entry to the island, but no one commented.

We parked somewhere off Avenue B or C. In the warmth of the day it didn't matter, we had no particular place to go and plenty of time to get there. I asked Susan about it but she said nothing and strolled ahead with the boy, now gadget free and enjoying the heat. My thoughts wandered in the lazy warmth and I found myself appreciating the manicured lawns, the tidy streets and the flags that hung from flagpoles like landed marlin. As I ambled along I saw an old man, perhaps eighty, maybe more, trudge one step at a time up a small path and then move stiffly up the wooden steps to his porch before finally flopping into a wicker chair like someone who'd been holding a secret and now suddenly unburdened could relax. His sense of relief for

having made it to safety made me think about that peculiarly American sense of pride in one's home and why Americans felt so strongly about their guns and their right to bear them. I looked back at the old man and imagined him levelling a rifle at me and winking and telling me to keep on walking and leave him be.

A loud and powerful pickup truck chugged past leaving the smell of petrol and gears and mechanical processes in its wake. It unmoored me from my daydreaming and I looked at Susan who was about fifty feet ahead and nearing the end of the street. She was pointing to the right, indicating the direction in which I was to follow her. She turned the corner and I jogged to catch up. By the time I got to the corner she was, once again, fifty feet ahead.

After another short street and a couple of more turns we arrived on Orange Street where Susan became animated as if privy to some delicious gossip. She smiled broadly and said she knew where she was and that it was all coming back to her. She skipped ahead with the boy and in the wind after her, I caught her words, faint and delicate like a dragonfly's wings, the hotel, the beach, *Some Like it Hot*.

The hotel was like any other. Opulent and grand for sure with an airport concourse like reception and gift shops and teeming tourists flashing along corridors. I knew the reason for its fame and while I liked the movie, I wasn't especially impressed. While my wife and son walked through the cool foyer and out towards the courtyard that lead to the beach I paused to ask a bellhop how much a room cost per night and once I'd had a moment to process the information I followed on. The courtyard led to a set of double doors through which red-carpeted stairs dropped into a small garden that led to the dry white heat of the beach.

They were waiting on the stairs and once I arrived, they moved on. Race you said the boy, his mother in gleeful chase. I watched them go towards the white sand and stop suddenly as if it had turned to shards of glass.

You are missing it Susan said urging me to hurry up. I thought to myself that I was missing nothing, that whatever was there would still be there when I arrived. I ambled along and when I got there, I asked what it was I was missing. Susan gave me a distant look and then told me matter-of-factly that the sand was too hot to walk on barefoot. It was.

We took a spot near enough to the water for the boy to play unsupervised. He gravitated to the rocks and rock pools and after enduring some small talk with my wife, I left her to the sun and followed the boy. He was among a group of blonde-haired kids that may or may not have been related. His dark hair made him recognisable to me as I'd forgotten the colour of his t-shirt. Approaching him, I noticed it was red white and blue, of course.

The assembly of kids were looking at crabs scuttling under the rocks and across the rocks or standing absolutely still waving their pincers in a touchingly feeble display of threat. Get them, get that one, said one of the kids reaching for a bucket and plunging it in the water of a deeper pool. Once full, a hand deposited a crab into it, then another crab until there were several crabs circling the bottom of the bucket. The boy and I peered in. I said something to him and half expected someone to say you're not from 'round here to me, but nothing was said and the boy who was now welcome in the group moved on to the larger rocks that spread into the frontier of the ocean.

I realised in that moment that I'd stood in the Pacific before acknowledging it was my first time seeing it. I looked at how it stretched into a pile of grey and white cloud and how much darker the water appeared than what movies would have you believe.

I said that very thing to a woman who appeared at my right. I don't know why I said it, maybe I just thought it needed to be said.

'Are you from England?' she asked.

'Ireland,' I said.

'My husband always wanted to go there,' she said.

I didn't reply but my natural cynicism about the American cliché of visiting Ireland began to rise. I expected her to compliment my brogue or tell me about her relatives in some godforsaken part of West Cork. I let words come to the surface but passed on the chance to commentate and instead took a surreptitious look at the woman by pretending to focus on an imaginary point down the beach.

She was older than me, mid-fifties perhaps, I couldn't tell exactly but I could tell she'd miles on the clock. That said, she retained something of a youthful attractiveness. Her hair was blonde and she was slim. I pictured her as a younger woman on the beaches of La Jolla or Newport in the company of some surfer, discussing a future that had since come to pass.

'He never got there,' she said.

'There's still time,' I said offhandedly.

'He died two weeks ago.'

'I'm sorry,' I said automatically and then thought how hollow it sounded.

'Thanks,' she said, 'how do you like it here?'

It was then that I noticed her accent, it was broader and slower than a generic American accent, as if every word had to earn its place, and for an instant I thought of *Fargo*. I asked her where she was from.

'I live in Phoenix,' she said, 'but I come from a small town in Maine.'

‘Aren’t all towns in Maine small?’ I asked.

She smiled and as a small wind rose, pulled her hair away from her face.

‘I guess so,’ she said, ‘same as Ireland.’

I nodded in appreciation of her riposte.

‘Was your husband from Maine?’ I asked.

‘New York,’ she said.

‘How long have you lived in Phoenix?’ I asked.

‘About a week,’ she said.

I didn’t know what to say after that. I looked at the rocks to where the boy, now fully integrated into the blonde clique, was climbing with the casual steadiness of a cat. I looked again at the woman and then behind me to where Susan lay on the sand, almost invisible because of the whiteness of her skin.

‘A new beginning,’ said the woman, ‘just in case you’re wondering about why I moved to Phoenix.’

I said nothing and smiled in a way that conveyed a willingness to listen. I felt she had more to say.

‘We lived in New York for almost thirty years. He was a stockbroker, he worked non-stop, chasing all the money in the world. In the end he smoked, drank and stressed himself to death.’ She paused before continuing. Her voice carried an echo of wistfulness but it was faint and dwindled like a dying ember with each word.

‘We had three kids and we never went anywhere or did anything. He was all about work and golf. I looked after the kids and when they moved on I had nothing to do anymore.’

I was about to parrot another sorry when a cry of delight rang out from the ocean startling me. I saw a girl rising from the water on the shoulders of a muscular young man. He took hold of her waist and threw her into the air. It was like something you’d see on the beaches of Magaluf or Ayia Napa, young people enjoying themselves in the rising sun time of their lives. I watched as she hung in the air and for a moment everything stopped before she crashed into the water with a loud splash.

‘Aside from the fresh start why Phoenix, why not Maine?’ I asked.

The woman didn’t seem to object to the question but took a moment to reply.

‘The weather.’

‘My wife’s the same,’ I said.

‘My husband didn’t care for the sun. He was a cold person, in all sense of the word.’

I wanted to ask her if she was glad he was gone, just for my own satisfaction, but I didn't need to, the tiny trace of a smile on her face was like a flower emerging in spring, unaccustomed to its new surroundings, only needing time to bloom.

'You be good to your wife,' she said to me, 'treat her right.'

'How do you know I don't?' I asked.

It was her turn to look beyond me and into the distance.

I wanted to press the point but I realised it would be better if I didn't say anything.

The boy came running towards me his face filled with energy and urgency. He told me in a breathless gasp that there was a huge crab in one of the pools and I had to come and look at it. *Ginormous!* he said, his eyes wide as saucers.

I told him I'd be over in a minute and he ran off with the same urgency as he'd arrived.

'He's a good-looking boy,' said the woman.

'Thanks,' I said.

'You'd better go see that crab before it scuttles away,' she said in a voice that conveyed a sense of purpose.

I nodded, she was right. I began to make my move.

'I threw his ashes in the water just beyond those rocks,' she said almost as an afterthought.

I looked at the rocks and how the waves threw white and frothy spray onto them.

'It's a beautiful place,' I said, 'seems as good a place as any to do something like that.'

'He hated the beach,' she said.

I turned to look at her but she had turned and was she moving with casual ease up the shoreline. The waves crashed and broke and stretched along the sand and almost tickled her feet, but not quite. My eyes trailed up the sand to where Susan was waving at me. She was pointing at the boy.

He called to me again and I began to run towards him hoping all the time the crab would still be there when I arrived.

