

South Sea Bubble

by Michael Davies

THE drone of the relentless ocean bores me now. Individual waves breaking on the coral, half a mile out in the lagoon, merge into a monotone by the time they reach the house and the sound is stultifying. When we first arrived on the island, it had been one of the great attractions. Think of it, he'd said: waking up and falling asleep to the sound of the mighty Pacific outside the window. What could be more soothing? And he'd been right: it was soothing. But even the gentle ministrations of the deep can become wearing after a time, and all I hear now is a death rattle.

He's inside right now, rustling up a light supper that we'll take on the terrace, no doubt, watching the sun set over our glamorous saltwater pool and the sand beyond. I can't remember the last time either of us swam in the pool – or the ocean, come to that. It's his pride and joy, of course, and he shows it off to all his casual acquaintances. 'Ah yes, you've noticed the mosaic,' he'll say nonchalantly. 'It took us months to find just the right tiles, and

black is so daring, don't you think?' God knows what they make of it, the tourists and travellers that he collects at the resort hotels and invites over for drinks. A couple of decrepit American queers marooned in the South Pacific, picking up strangers to liven up their autumn years. I play along, acting the outrageous eccentric to shock the guests, but it's tediously thin entertainment.

I FIRST met Howard Kratz at a publisher's party in New York. Back in the 70s, it was still fashionable to gather socially without all the subtext that ruins things these days. Believe it or not, there was a time before the back-scratching stereotypes came along and destroyed our innocence and naivete. Or maybe I'm just being innocent and naive. Anyhow, I first met Howard Kratz at one of these events, so I'm prepared to convince myself that they were better times then.

He was tall, much taller than me, and looked pretty good in a crumpled, struggling author sort of way. At least, he'd made an effort, with a corduroy tan jacket and a woollen tie. He drank whisky macs all night, which was my drink too at the time, so we had an instant reference point right there. He wasn't too talkative, didn't come across as over-confident – not like some of the youngsters out to make an impression – and we chatted for most of that night and well into the following morning. Publishers' parties could be like that then: they just hired the hotel suite and you stayed as long as you wanted.

It was a hot summer and we fell in love quickly, though not so quickly that the passion burned itself out. I hadn't been looking for anyone and neither had he, and that kind of accidental love is so much more rewarding than the kind you have to create in your own mind just because you need it. We shared some interests and had a few all our own and it made for a comfortable partnership. Maybe I'm making this sound more drab than it was in reality. The truth is, I'd never known anyone like Howard and the depth of our emotion was greater than anything I'd ever experienced. Howard blew my mind in so many ways and at some level I guess he still does.

We travelled a lot, eagerly swallowing up the history and culture of Europe, the dark mysteries and strange worlds of Africa, even the proto-American youthfulness of urban Australia. Funded by my infrequent academic publications and his more pragmatic crime thrillers, we trawled the globe for new experiences and secret destinations we could call our own. That's how we found this place. That was a long time ago.

SO I'm sitting here, smoking a fat, imported cigarette, and I can hear voices through the thick bushes we planted to get some privacy. I don't have to move my garden chair much to be able to see through a gap in the greenery, down on to the beach, just to one side of where our garden runs down to the sands. It's two girls of fourteen or fifteen, giggling and chattering away to each other and obviously looking for a secluded place. They think they've found it here, because from where they are on the beach the house is completely hidden in the vegetation, and there isn't another property for a quarter of a mile in either direction.

I put out my cigarette, even though it's less than half-smoked, in case the smell drifts down, and I watch them. I watch them lay out a large towel on the sand. I watch them unpack a basket of food. I watch them stare at the late sun that they've only just caught and are trying to make the most of. But most of all, I watch them being young. They've long ago stripped off their clothes and are freely displaying their smooth brown skin with only a pair of briefs to hide their girlish embarrassment from each other.

After a while, one of the girls gets up and heads up the beach in my direction and moves behind a clump, out of sight of her companion. They're still laughing and talking aimlessly, but the girl who's moved now drops down into a squatting position and tugs her briefs down to her doubled-up knees. Before I even realise what she's doing, she's peeing in the sand, all the time continuing her teenage conversation. And I can't look away, like I should, because I can't bear to abandon such a scene of innocence. It's not like I can see anything intimate – she's got her back to me – and I'm hardly your strongest candidate as a dirty old man. That's why I feel no sense of guilt watching her do this thing. All I feel is a sadness.

After she's finished and returned to her friend, I get up and turn around to face the house. The sun is still hot on my shoulders but my shadow now falls long and dark against the paving around the pool. I look up at the tops of the heavy stone pillars supporting the roof and notice them crumbling at the corners. As my eye travels down over the vast plate windows, offering an open vista on to the ocean, I look beyond the glass into the pristine interior, immaculately dressed, flawlessly hung with modern art, soulless.

I don't know how long I'm standing here, but when I turn back, the girls have gone.

ONCE you've found Paradise, it's very hard to leave. And when Howard and I found this place, that's exactly what it was: Paradise. I always thought Gauguin made the South Pacific look kind of prosaic, and as for Rodgers and Hammerstein – well, let's just say that *Some Enchanted Evening* hardly does justice to the place. In fact, I'm not even sure Rodgers and Hammerstein ever came here. I know they shot parts of the movie in Hawaii, which is not the same thing at all.

But even Paradise has its darker side, as Adam and Eve discovered, and it wasn't too long before our South Sea Bubble burst.

I guess we'd been coming here six or seven years, spending as much as a month at a time here, sometimes renting a house on the more sheltered eastern coast, sometimes just crashing out in the luxury of a hotel room – although the real luxury of the big places dotted along the western beaches was still some years away then. The vacationers hadn't reached this far south yet (still haven't, for the most part) and right from the start we saw it as a secret bolthole, a place to escape to whenever Howard needed the solitude to get on with real work. Some of his best stuff was written here; me, I could work just about anywhere, with my natural capacity for switching off entirely from the world around me.

By the second or third visit we'd pretty much exhausted all the places of interest on the island. That suited us just fine, leaving us few distractions from ourselves, each other and whatever Howard might be working on at the time. We must have walked practically every inch of the coastline, just taking it in and enjoying one another. We both loved the ocean,

having been brought up in cities hundreds of miles from the coast, and we could sit for hours just listening to the texture of the sound it made. I remember once looking across at Howard lying on a beach with his eyes closed and wondering if that's what he would look like dead: serene, satisfied, full with the sound of the sea.

It was soon after that he told me he'd been sleeping with Charles Durant.

We'd discovered Charles a couple of visits earlier, wasting his time away on expensive boats and cheap wines. He was an old island hand by that point, having first come here a decade before with his shamelessly wealthy parents. He'd decided this was the spot for him, and had settled here, single but never alone, chasing the local boys and living off the generous interest from his parents' inheritance. The islanders loved him, of course, this flamboyant young American with plenty of money to splash about, and he quickly became part of the local folklore. Visitors would be taken past the big house he had built and told some of the more exotic fairytales that soon sprang up about this quaintly exotic creature. But he grew tired of the natives' attentions and longed for sympathetic company. Once he latched on to us, of course, there was no escape, and we were always his houseguests on subsequent trips. While I can't say I felt any great hostility towards the man, I didn't find him the most attractive of hosts: his tastes were always rather gaudy, shall we say, and his fawning effeminacy could get very wearing. But Howard liked him well enough – a little too well, as it turned out.

Neither of them seemed to understand why I got quite so upset. Howard told me he thought his extra-curricular activity might spice things up for us a little, while Charles clearly thought the whole thing was a riot, a cause for celebration even. Having nowhere else to go, and not wanting to leave the two of them in the house together, I chose to stay on, on the strict understanding that Howard spent his nights in our bedroom and that anything physical between them ended there and then. Charles seemed disappointed but he was in no position to argue – at least, not if he wanted Howard to stick around.

And that's how we carried on. Howard and I continued our regular, frequent, trips to the island, Charles still played the outgoing host, and I bit my tongue and shelved my reservations in a futile attempt to preserve our piece of Paradise.

I CAN'T be sure if Howard contracted the virus from Charles or if he had other partners I never knew about. I can picture him now telling me the news, sitting on the arm of the big leather chair in our apartment back home, and I can remember feeling nothing at all.

When his condition worsened dramatically, a couple of years later, Charles insisted that we drop everything – what was there to drop, after all? – and head south. We would be his guests again for as long as we had... as long as he had. I wasn't sure, but Howard seemed to find some comfort in the idea, so we came here last June, eleven months ago, and he died in the Fall.

Sometimes I wonder why I'm still here, but I know that I can't bring myself to leave him here. And what is there to go back to anyway?

In the kitchen, up across the pool terrace, I can hear Charles clattering plates and dishes. He'll be calling me for supper soon, I guess.

Maybe I'll just have one more cigarette and listen while the sun sets into the ocean.