



In a Season of Calm Weather, Ray Bradbury

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GEORGE and Alice Smith detrained at Biarritz one summer noon and in an hour had run through their hotel on to the beach into the ocean and back out to bake upon the sand.

To see George Smith sprawled burning there, you'd think him only a tourist flown fresh as iced lettuce to Europe and soon to be transhipped home. But here was a man who loved art more than life itself.

'There ...' George Smith sighed. Another ounce of perspiration trickled down his chest. Boil out the Ohio tap-water, he thought, then drink down the best Bordeaux. Silt your blood with rich French sediment so you'll see with native eyes!

Why? Why eat, breathe, drink everything French? So that, given time, he might really begin to understand the genius of one man.

His mouth moved, forming a name.

'George?' His wife loomed over him. 'I know what you've been thinking. I can read your lips.'

He lay perfectly still, waiting.

'And?'

'Picasso,' she said.

He winced. Some day she would learn to pronounce that name.

'Please,' she said. 'Relax. I know you heard the rumour this morning, but you should see your eyes – your tic is back. All right, Picasso's here, down the coast a few miles away, visiting friends in some small fishing town. But you must forget it or our vacation's ruined.'

'I wish I'd never heard the rumour,' he said honestly.

'If only,' she said, 'you liked other painters.'

Others? Yes, there were others. He could breakfast most congenially on Caravaggio still-lives of autumn pears and midnight plums. For lunch: those fire-squirting, thick-wormed Van Gogh sunflowers, those blooms a blind man might read with one rush of scorched fingers down fiery canvas.

But the great feast? The paintings he saved his palate for? There, filling the horizon, like Neptune risen, crowned with limewood, alabaster, coral, paintbrushes clenched like tridents in horn-nailed fists, and with fishtail vast enough to fluke summer showers out over all Gibraltar – who else but the creator of *Girl Before a Mirror* and *Guernica*?

‘Alice,’ he said, patiently, ‘how can I explain? Coming down on the train I thought, Good Lord, it’s all Picasso country!’

But was it really, he wondered. The sky, the land, the people, the flushed-pink bricks here, scrolled electric-blue ironwork balconies there, a mandolin ripe as a fruit in some man’s thousand fingerprinting hands, billboard tatters blowing like confetti in night winds – how much was Picasso, how much George Smith staring round the world with wild Picasso eyes?

He despaired of answering. That old man had distilled turpentine and linseed oil so thoroughly through George Smith that they shaped his being, all Blue Period at twilight, all Rose Period at dawn.

‘I keep thinking,’ he said aloud, ‘if we saved our money ...’
‘We’ll never have five thousand dollars.’

‘I know,’ he said quietly. ‘But it’s nice thinking we might bring it off some day. Wouldn’t it be great to just step up to him, say “Pablo, here’s five thousand! Give us the sea, the sand, that sky, or any old thing you want, we’ll be happy....” ’

After a moment, his wife touched his arm.

‘I think you’d better go in the water now,’ she said.
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’d better do just that.’

White fire showered up when he cut the water.

During the afternoon George Smith came out and went into the ocean with the vast spilling motions of now warm, now cool people who at last, with the sun's decline, their bodies all lobster colours and colours of broiled squab and guinea hen, trudged for their wedding-cake hotels.

The beach lay deserted for endless mile on mile save for two people. One was George Smith, towel over shoulder, out for a last devotional.

Far along the shore another shorter, square-cut man walked alone in the tranquil weather. He was deeper tanned, his close-shaven head dyed almost mahogany by the sun, and his eyes were clear and bright as water in his face.

So the shoreline stage was set, and in a few minutes the two men would meet. And once again Fate fixed the scales for shocks and surprises, arrivals and departures. And all the while these two solitary strollers did not for a moment think on coincidence, that unswum stream which lingers at man's elbow with every crowd in every town.

Nor did they ponder the fact that if man dares dip into that stream he grabs a wonder in each hand. Like most they shrugged at such folly, and stayed well up the bank lest Fate should shove them in.

The stranger stood alone. Glancing about, he saw his alone-ness, saw the waters of the lovely bay, saw the sun sliding down the late colours of the day, and then half-turning spied a small wooden object on the sand.

It was no more than the slender stick from a lime ice-cream delicacy long since melted away. Smiling he picked the stick up. With another glance around to re-insure his solitude, the man stooped again and holding the stick gently with light sweeps of his hand began to do the one thing in all the world he knew best how to do.

He began to draw incredible figures along the sand. He sketched one figure and then moved over and still looking down, completely focused on his work now, drew a second and a third figure, and after that a fourth and a fifth and a sixth.

George Smith, printing the shoreline with his feet, gazed here, gazed there, and then saw the man ahead. George Smith, drawing nearer, saw that the man, deeply tanned, was bending down. Nearer yet, and it was obvious what the man was up to. George Smith chuckled.

Of course, of course ... along on the beach this man – how old? Sixty-five? Seventy? – was scribbling and doodling away. How the sand flew! How the wild portraits flung themselves out there on the shore! How ...

George Smith took one more step and stopped, very still.

The stranger was drawing and drawing and did not seem to sense that anyone stood immediately behind him and the world of his drawings in the sand. By now he was so deeply enchanted with his solitudinous creation that depth-bombs set off in the bay might not have stopped his flying hand nor turned him round.

George Smith looked down at the sand. And, after a long while, looking, he began to tremble.

For there on the flat shore were pictures of Grecian lions and Mediterranean goats and maidens with flesh of sand like powdered gold and satyrs piping on hand-carved horns and children dancing, strewing flowers along and along the beach with lambs gambolling after and musicians skipping to their harps and lyres, and unicorns racing youths towards distant meadows, woodlands, ruined temples and volcanoes.

Along the shore in a never-broken line, the hand, the wooden stylus of this man bent down in fever and raining perspiration, scribbled, ribboned, looped around over and up, across, in, out, stitched, whispered, stayed, then hurried on as if this travelling bacchanal must

flourish to its end before the sun was put out by the sea. Twenty, thirty yards or more the nymphs and dryads and summer founts sprang up in unravelled hieroglyphs.

And the sand, in the dying light, was the colour of molten copper on which was now slashed a message that any man in any time might read and savour down the years. Everything whirled and poised in its own wind and gravity.

Now wine was being crushed from under the grape-blooded feet of dancing vintners' daughters, now steaming seas gave birth to coin-sheathed monsters while flowered kites strewed scent on blowing clouds ... now ... now ... now....

The artist stopped.

George Smith drew back and stood away.

The artist glanced up, surprised to find someone so near. Then he simply stood there, looking from George Smith to his own creations flung like idle footprints down the way. He smiled at last and shrugged as if to say, Look what I've done; see what a child? You will forgive me, won't you? One day or another we are all fools ... you, too, perhaps? So allow an old fool this, eh? Good! Good!

But George Smith could only look at the little man with the sun-dark skin and the clear sharp eyes, and say the man's name once, in a whisper, to himself.

They stood thus for perhaps another five seconds, George Smith staring at the sand-frieze, and the artist watching George Smith with amused curiosity. George Smith opened his mouth, closed it, put out his hand, took it back. He stepped towards the picture, stepped away. Then he moved along the line of figures, like a man viewing a precious series of marbles cast up from some ancient ruin on the shore. His eyes did not blink, his hand wanted to touch but did not dare to touch. He wanted to run but did not run.

He looked suddenly at the hotel. Run, yes! Run! What? Grab a shovel, dig, excavate, save a chunk of this all too crumbling sand? Find a repair-man, race him back here with plaster-of-paris to cast a mould of some small fragile part of these? No, no. Silly, silly. Or ...? His eyes flicked to his hotel window. The camera! Run, get it, get back, and hurry along the shore, clicking, changing film, clicking until...

George Smith whirled to face the sun. It burned faintly on his face, his eyes were two small fires from it. The sun was half underwater and, as he watched, it sank the rest of the way in a matter of seconds.

The artist had drawn nearer and now was gazing into George Smith's face with great friendliness as if he were guessing every thought. Now he was nodding his head in a little bow. Now the ice-cream stick had fallen casually from his fingers. Now he was saying good night, good night. Now he was gone, walking back down the beach towards the south.

George Smith stood looking after him. After a full minute, he did the only thing he could possibly do. He started at the beginning of the fantastic frieze of satyrs and fauns and wine-dipped maidens and prancing unicorns and piping youths and he walked slowly along the shore.

He walked a long way, looking down at the free-running bacchanal. And when he came to the end of the animals and men he turned round and started back in the other direction, just staring down as if he had lost something and did not quite know where to find it. He kept on doing this until there was no more light in the sky, or on the sand, to see by.

He sat down at the supper table.

'You're late,' said his wife. 'I just had to come down alone. I'm ravenous.'

'That's all right,' he said.

'Anything interesting happen on your walk?' she asked.

'No,' he said.

'You look funny; George, you didn't swim out too far, did you, and almost drown? I can tell by your face. You did swim out too far, didn't you?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Well,' she said, watching him closely. 'Don't ever do that again. Now – what'll you have?'

He picked up the menu and started to read it and stopped suddenly.

'What's wrong?' asked his wife.

He turned his head and shut his eyes for a moment.

'Listen.'

She listened.

'I don't hear anything,' she said.

'Don't you?'

'No. What is it?'

'Just the tide,' he said, after a while, sitting there, his eyes still shut.

'Just the tide, coming in.'

The end