

ANYWAY, NO WHITE MAN HERE WOULD THINK LIKE THIS

by Gertrud Strauss

She is black, not white like my wife beside me in her beach-robe on the sand. She is a young girl, Zulu probably, not approaching bad-tempered middle age as my wife is, and I am watching her without any intention of getting to know her. Or of getting closer to the borderline of sand and water where she is.

What caught my eye at first was her manner of undressing. She'd come to the beach in red taffeta — she'd waded with her bare feet and gone a bit deeper till the spray had got her hem wet. She seemed intent then on getting more of the cool wetness on her skin and took the taffeta shift off. I really thought she'd be naked underneath but she had a bathing costume on, conservative blue, one-piece and neat, and revealed a taut good body. The taffeta dress she quickly took to the waiting children, four of them, one toddler, two little girls and an older boy, all sitting obediently in a row, watching her run in for a swim.

I can see her now, eager with anticipation, I know she wants to share in the excitement of the waves, but she comes to a stop gradually, a little frightened. They don't usually learn to swim and she can't, I'm sure, else nothing would keep her from flinging herself into the surging movement. She bends down and scoops up the water that has swirled round her ankles and sprays it with cupped hands onto the full length of her legs, her arms and body.

She hardly moves her legs at all, as though she were standing perched on a rock in the middle of a stream. Where I imagine she must have learnt those movements of bending down to all sides and scooping water. And that central pivot, the controlled inner point of the outgoing movement, it's astonishing how it grips me. And I could go on watching her doing just this for a very long time.

Only, now she turns to the children and sees the boy with a white plastic bucket marked "Economic P.V.A.". He has undressed without my taking notice and now sits stark naked, happily awaiting each wave. When it subsides one sees all of his body, big tummy, penis and all. She beckons to him to bring her the bucket. He's just tried to catch an inch of water with it but obeys her immediately. Without shifting her feet or bending her legs much, she reaches down to receive the onshoot of the wave in the bucket which she holds surrounded with both hands and flicks up to empty it all over the length of herself.

Now she scoops less water holding the bucket by its rim with one hand only, to pour down into the bathing costume

which she pulls at with her free hand, leaving a gap between the fitted bra and her breasts. She draws her tummy in too, I can see it quite well, to let the gap go down like a funnel for the water to be poured into. Her back seems eel-like elastic; she bends it, straightens it, and pours again and again to delight in the feel of the cold liquid running down her naked flesh inside the costume.

It's a bit silly perhaps, all this bucket-splashing, when the whole surf foams and rejoices just beyond where she dares to go, but I'm happy that here the beaches haven't yet been zoned and I can just sit and watch her, even with my wife reading sun-bespectacled next to me.

The internal cleansing has given her all she can get out of it and now she must share. For she runs with a filled bucket to each one of the dry children and empties it against them. They like it too and laugh, not minding their dripping clothes. The youngest one is tentative and looks frightened but he doesn't flinch and receives the flood bravely. She finishes his wash by wiping the snotty nose with a much practised movement of the back of her hand. He's had his bath now, she's quite satisfied with all of them and looks for her taffeta dress on the dry sand.

But one can't wear that over a wet bathing costume. Nor does she, as it's not in the least bit odd to her to bare her breasts to the sea wind by pulling down the top of her costume. Then, with arms lifted, she finds her way into the stiff material of her shift and has to smoothe it over the wet skin that clings to it at every point. When the skirt hangs down far enough, up to mid-thigh, she gropes under it, not caring how much she lifts it again, to pull down the costume from underneath. Of course I know as she does this that she won't have any dry panties to wear.

I turn to watch her as she walks flat-footed up the beach sands with the procession of little children struggling on behind her. Inside the red taffeta stiffness she carries her body straight, but a black V of skin shows up between the shoulder-blades where the zip stays undone.

Once or twice she half turns round and speaks to the children very loudly, ordering them to get a move on. It spoils it a bit, the impatient female bossiness, but it might as well, seeing that I'm not supposed to be watching a black woman like this anyway. □

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