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'Has all the  
makings of a  
cult classic'

— Nick Hornby

# The Beach

ALEX GARLAND

# *The Beach*

ALEX GARLAND



PENGUIN BOOKS

For Suzy, Theo, Leo, Laura,  
and my parents

**PENGUIN BOOKS**

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Australia Ltd

487 Maroondah Highway, PO Box 257

Ringwood, Victoria 3134, Australia

Penguin Putnam Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Canada Limited

10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd

Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd

4 Pallinghurst Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:

Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published by Viking 1996

Published in Penguin Books 1997

44 46 48 50 52 54 55 53 51 49 47 45 43

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Printed in Australia by Australian Print Group,

Maryborough, Victoria

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ISBN 0 14 025841 8

4065319

'BRUTAL AND COMPELLING STUFF ... [A]  
MESMERIZING, KNUCKLE-CLENCHING  
READ. PICK THIS UP AND YOU WON'T EASILY  
PUT IT DOWN' – MAXIM

'*Lord of the Flies* and *The Magus* lurk at the roots  
of this novel, but Garland reshapes them  
with panache into something terrifyingly new'  
– Julie Myerson in the *Mail on Sunday*

'Garland's prose is stunningly lucid. It is as if the  
influence of film is so strong that he has written a  
film in the form of a novel ... But it is a very  
well-written film ... Addictive and compelling'  
– Rory Dunlop in the *Spectator*

'Precise and speedy prose, with a good  
old-fashioned romantic adventure spiced up by  
deadpan authorial irony ... Remarkable' – Sean  
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'A gripping adventure and also a fascinating  
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a terrific debut' – Elizabeth Buchan in *The Times*

'The Beach's characters are startlingly well-  
drawn, but it's Richard, increasingly unhinged  
and amoral, who truly fascinates ... A powerful  
and frighteningly believable novel' – *Company*



8152001

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Garland was born in London in 1970. *The Beach* is his first novel.

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## *Boom-Boom*

*Vietnam, me love you long time. All day, all night, me love you long time.*

*'Delta One-Niner, this is Alpha patrol. We are on the north-east face of hill Seven-Zero-Five and taking fire, I repeat, taking fire. Immediate air assistance required on the fucking double. Can you confirm?'*

*Radio static.*

*'I say again, this is Alpha patrol and we are taking fire. Immediate air assistance required. Can you confirm? We are taking fire. Please confirm. We are . . . Incoming, incoming!'*

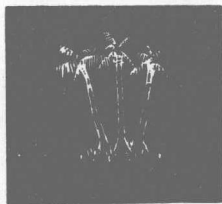
*Boom.*

*' . . . Medic!'*

*Dropping acid on the Mekong Delta, smoking grass through a rifle barrel, flying on a helicopter with opera blasting out of loudspeakers, tracer-fire and paddy-field scenery, the smell of napalm in the morning.*

*Long time.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil, for my name is Richard. I was born in 1974.*







# BANGKOK





## *Bitch*

The first I heard of the beach was in Bangkok, on the Khao San Road. Khao San Road was backpacker land. Almost all the buildings had been converted into guest-houses, there were long-distance-telephone booths with air-con, the cafés showed brand-new Hollywood films on video, and you couldn't walk ten feet without passing a bootleg-tape stall. The main function of the street was as a decompression chamber for those about to leave or enter Thailand, a halfway house between East and West.

I'd landed at Bangkok in the late afternoon, and by the time I got to Khao San it was dark. My taxi driver winked and told me that at one end of the street was a police station, so I asked him to drop me off at the other end. I wasn't planning on crime but I wanted to oblige his conspiratorial charm. Not that it made much difference which end one stayed because the police obviously weren't active. I caught the smell of grass as soon as I got out of the cab, and half the travellers weaving past me were stoned.

He left me outside a guest-house with an eating area open to the street. As I studied it, checking the clientele to gauge what kind of place it was, a thin man at the table nearest me leant over and touched my arm. I glanced down. He was, I guessed, one of the heroin hippies that float around India and Thailand. He'd probably come to Asia ten years ago and turned an occasional dabble into an addiction. His skin was old, though I'd have believed he was in his thirties. The way he was looking at me, I had the feeling I was being sized up as someone to rip off.

'What?' I said warily.

He pulled an expression of surprise and held up the palms of his hands. Then he curled his finger and thumb into the O-shaped perfection sign, and pointed into the guest-house.

'It's a good place?'

He nodded.

I looked again at the people around the tables. They were mostly young and friendly looking, some watching the TV, and some chattering over their dinner.

'OK.' I smiled at him in case he wasn't a heroin addict, just a friendly mute. 'I'm sold.'

He returned the smile and turned back to the video screen.

Quarter of an hour later I was settling into a room that was a little larger than a double bed. I can be accurate about it because there was a double bed in the room, and on each of its four sides was a foot of space. My backpack could just slide in the gap.

One wall was concrete – the side of the building. The others were Formica and bare. They moved when I touched them. I had the feeling that if I leant against one it would fall over and maybe hit another, and all the walls of the neighbouring rooms would collapse like dominoes. Just short of the ceiling, the walls stopped, and covering the space was a strip of metal mosquito netting. The netting almost upheld the illusion of a confined, personal area – until I lay down on the bed. As soon as I relaxed, stopped moving, I began to hear cockroaches scuttling around in the other rooms.

At my head end I had a French couple in their late teens – a beautiful, slim girl with a suitably handsome boy attached. They'd been leaving their room as I got to mine and we exchanged nods as we passed in the corridor. The other end was empty. Through the netting I could see the light was off, and anyway, if it had been occupied I would have heard the person breathing. It was the last room on the corridor, so I presumed it faced the street and had a window.

On my ceiling was a fan, strong enough to stir the air on full setting. For a while I did nothing but lie on the bed and look up at it. It was calming, following the revolutions, and with the mixture of heat and soft breeze I felt I could drift asleep. That suited me.

West to East is the worst for jet lag, and it would be good to fall into the right sleeping pattern on the first night.

I switched off the light. There was a glow from the corridor, and I could still see the fan. Soon I was asleep.

Once or twice I was aware of people in the corridor, and I thought I heard the French couple coming back, then leaving again. But the noises never woke me fully and I was always able to slip back into the dream I'd been having before. Until I heard the man's footsteps. They were different, too creepy to doze through. They had no rhythm or weight and dragged on the floor.

A muttered stream of British swear-words floated into my room as he jiggled the padlock on his door. Then there was a loud sigh, the lock opened with a click, and his light came on. The mosquito netting cast a patterned shadow on my ceiling.

Frowning, I looked at my watch. It was two in the morning – early evening, UK time. I wondered if I might get back to sleep.

The man slumped on to his bed, making the wall between us shake alarmingly. He coughed for a while, then I heard the rustle of a joint being rolled. Soon there was blue smoke caught in the light, rolling through the netting.

Aside from the occasional deep exhalation, he was silent. I drifted back to sleep, almost.

'Bitch,' said a voice. I opened my eyes.

'Fucking bitch. We're both as good as . . .'

The voice paused for a coughing fit.

'Dead.'

I was wide awake now so I sat up in bed.

'Cancer in the corals, blue water, my bitch. Fucking Christ, did me in,' the man continued.

He had an accent, but at first my sleep-fogged head couldn't place it.

'Bitch,' he said again, spitting out the word.

A Scottish accent. Beach.

There was a scrabbling sound on the wall. For a moment I thought he might be trying to push it over and I had a vision of

myself being sandwiched between the Formica board and the bed. Then his head appeared through the mosquito netting, silhouetted, facing me.

'Hey,' he said.

I didn't move. I was sure he couldn't see into my room.

'Hey. I know you're listening. In there. I know you're awake.'

He lifted up a finger and gave the netting an exploratory poke. It popped away from where it was stapled to the Formica. His hand stuck through.

'Here.'

A glowing red object sailed through the darkness, landing on the bed in a little shower of sparks. The joint he'd been smoking. I grabbed it to stop it burning the sheets.

'Yeah,' said the man and laughed quietly. 'Got you now. I saw you take the butt.'

For a few seconds I couldn't get a handle on the situation. I kept thinking — what if I actually had been asleep? The sheets might have caught fire. I might have burned to death. The panic flipped into anger, but I suppressed it. The man was way too much of a random element for me to lose my temper. I could still only see his head and that was back-lit, in shadow.

Holding up the joint I asked, 'Do you want this back?'

'You were listening,' he replied, ignoring me. 'Heard me talking about the beach.'

'... You've got a loud voice.'

'Tell me what you heard.'

'I didn't hear anything.'

'... Heard nothing?'

He paused for a moment, then pressed his face into the netting. 'You're lying.'

'No. I was asleep. You just woke me up ... when you threw this joint at me.'

'You were *listening*,' he hissed.

'I don't care if you don't believe me.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Well ... I don't care ... Look.' I stood on the bed so our heads

were at the same level, and held up the joint to the hole he'd made. 'If you want this, take it. All I want is to go to sleep.'

As I lifted my hand he pulled back, moving out of the shadow. His face was flat like a boxer's, the nose busted too many times to have any form, and his lower jaw was too large for the top half of his skull. It would have been threatening if not for the body it was attached to. The jaw tapered into a neck so thin it seemed incredible that it supported his head, and his T-shirt hung slackly on coat-hanger shoulders.

Past him I saw into his room. There was a window, as I'd assumed, but he'd taped it up with pages from a newspaper. Apart from that it was bare.

His hand reached through the gap and plucked the butt from my fingers.

'OK,' I said, thinking I'd gained some kind of control. 'Now leave me alone.'

'No,' he replied flatly.

'... No?'

'No.'

'Why not? What do you . . . do you want something?'

'Yep.' He grinned. 'And that's why . . .' Again he pushed his face into the netting. '... I won't leave you alone.'

But as soon as he said it he seemed to change his mind. He ducked out of sight, obscured by the angle of the wall. I stayed standing for a couple of seconds, confused but wanting to reinforce my authority – like it wasn't me stepping down, just him. Then I heard him relight his joint. I let that mark the end of it and lay back down on the bed.

Even after he'd switched his light off, twenty or so minutes later, I still couldn't get back to sleep. I was too keyed up, too much stuff was running through my head. Beaches and bitches; I was exhausted, jumpy with adrenalin. Perhaps, given an hour of silence, I might have relaxed, but soon after the man's light went out the French couple came back to their room and started having sex.

It was impossible, hearing their panting and feeling the vibrations

## THE BEACH

of their shifting bed, not to visualize them. The brief glimpse of the girl's face I'd caught in the corridor was stuck in my head. An exquisite face. Dark skin and dark hair, brown eyes. Full lips.

After they'd finished I had a powerful urge for a cigarette — empathy maybe — but I stopped myself. I knew that if I did they'd hear me rustling the packet or lighting the match. The illusion of their privacy would be broken.

Instead I concentrated on lying as still as I could, for as long as I could. It turned out I could do it for quite a long while.



## *Geography*

The Khao San Road woke early. At five, muffled car horns began sounding off in the street outside, Bangkok's version of the dawn chorus. Then the water-pipes under the floor started to rattle as the guest-house staff took their showers. I could hear their conversations, the plaintive sound of Thai just rising above the splashing water.

Lying on my bed, listening to the morning noises, the tension of the previous night became unreal and distant. Although I couldn't understand what the staff were saying to each other, their chattering and occasional laughter conveyed a sense of normality: they were doing what they did every morning, their thoughts connected only to routine. I imagined they might be discussing who would go for kitchen supplies in the market that day or who would be sweeping the halls.

Around five thirty a few bedroom-door bolts clicked open as the early-bird travellers emerged and the die-hard party-goers from Patpong returned. Two German girls clattered up the wooden stairs at the far end of my corridor, apparently wearing clogs. I realized that the dreamless snatches of sleep I'd managed were finished, so I decided to have a cigarette, the one I'd denied myself a few hours before.

The early morning smoke was a tonic. I gazed upwards, an empty matchbox for an ashtray balanced on my stomach, and every puff I blew into the ceiling fan lifted my spirits a little higher. Before long my mind turned to thoughts of food. I left my room to see if there was any breakfast to be had in the eating area downstairs.