

'That swim was divine,' said Mum.

'How very bloody nice.' The old man was having a break from the sphinx. He leant against its bulk, drinking from his flask. Taking a long drag from his cigar, he fixed his eyes on Mum.

'Did you hear those planes?' She attempted to flick her hair as she spoke. The bathing cap had left it damp, clinging to her head.

'You look groovy Mum . . . groovy,' said Dianne, whose own hair streamed wistfully down to her waist.

'Yes. I heard them,' Nora said meekly. Joining Mum in the sea seemed to mean that she could now join us; as if the water had baptised her, washed away the plain, the dull imperfection.

'It could have been twenty years ago. The feeling was the same,' said Mum.

'What the hell are you talking about?' The old man stood up, almost losing his balance in near drunken haste.

'The war, Digby. The Japanese. The Japanese flew over. I was in this exact same spot. I was swimming. Floating on my back. It's worth considering,' she leaned toward Nora, 'that if those buggers had succeeded . . . we would all be working in some bloody factory in Petone like machines.'

'What a load of absolute drivel.' The old man meandered back to the sphinx.

'You weren't here. You were off fighting the mighty Hun in a blaze of glory.' Mum smoothed out her towel and languished down into it, looking terribly tired.

'Thank God,' said the old man.

'Where were you in the war, Nora?' asked Dianne. We all looked at Nora. We had never asked her a question before . . . never wanted to discover anything. Nora was a vessel into which we poured our lives and she held it all firmly inside; a teapot full of hot strong tea. She hesitated, folded in her big legs and hugged them to her chest.

'There is a war on now and the children have to run for their lives in case they get burnt with napalm,' said Sandra.

'Shut up Sandra and listen to what Nora has to say.' My voice strained with a tension, an unexpected anger.

'How dare you be so rude to your friend,' said Mum.

'Nora hasn't even said anything anyway,' said Sandra.

'I worked in a factory,' murmured Nora, looking away from us and out to sea. Her face was square and paled; the expression almost sour like that of a worn peasant woman squinting into the camera of a foreigner . . . mind filled only with exhaustion and dubiety. Behind her the manuka shyly scattered and ran from the hot wind, the blazing gorse hills offering no sympathy.

Dianne stood by the water's edge letting the waves touch her side as if they were a loved, favourite animal. Once she had a dream of white whales; swimming with them as their friend. She reached out to stroke one but, to the whale, Dianne's gesture was inconsequential, a mere tickle. In the paper the next day, Dianne had read that a whale had died because it swallowed fifty plastic bags, two bullets and a load of rubbish. That was it, she cried. The whale was communicating its disappointment. In my dream, it had no time for human beings. How appalling, said Mum. Bullshit said the old man. He had got to the sphinx's head. It rose up on its haunches, a lion with a human head ready to defy any incoming tide; immutable . . . like a picture I had once seen of skulls. Row upon row of fine white bone haphazardly arranged on the shelves of a dark dirt-lined room. They could have been tossed there by a wave, straight from the jaws of the sea. The skulls must once have been the heads of people . . . sister, father, mother, and all I could feel was a rising sense of being in the presence of something powerful. Death as a pure volume of faces delicately fashioned from the elements. Like the sphinx, the old man looked lightly baked, glazed, and the thinning grey curl of his hair sat on his head in a kind of wild and shocked abandon. When he had finished we all had to stand under the orange, squeeze it and drink, all except Dianne of course who always managed to avoid such rituals and was swanning about in the sea. Even Nora, who said this is just ridiculous; blindly believing she could get away with a cup of tea and a pink wafer under our umbrella. The old man then offered her a swig from his flask.

'No thank you, Digby. I'm as right as rain.'

'Never had rain in the desert of course.' The old man picked up the well-worn driftwood stick that was his calling card, leant on