

'Because she is plain. It's the waaay sheee speaaks. Nora's unbelievably dull . . . a sheep. She's a nobody.'

'Who's a nobody?' The old man grabbed an orange out of the chilly bin.

'Nora,' I whispered hoarsely.

'Nobody told me! I was having a wee chat with her just a minute ago about nothing in particular. Had I realised she was a nobody I wouldn't have bothered. I feel quite a fool.' The old man took a swig from a silver whisky flask he had tucked in the pocket of his shorts. The silver caught the sun and shone.

'Women hold bitchiness like water closets,' he muttered ambling back to the sphinx.

'I don't know how your poor mother can stand it,' said Nora softly as she gulped tea into the confines of her mouth. I imagined the warm liquid moving unclotted through the veins of her soft and stocky frame. Nora lived down the road in a house we have been invited to, but never entered. A brick and tile house. An ordinary house. For this sin I once stuffed sand into her letter-box. Mum stood by the water's edge, hands fanning out at her hips . . . slowly pecking her way into the sea by lifting each slender foot and placing it down into the unknown. Finally the ocean encircled her waist.

'We can go and have those fags now. No one will notice. I know the perfect place,' I said to Sandra.

We vaulted up the sand dunes to the hole in the macrocarpa hedge. Inside we crawled. It was my grandmother's hedge and it smelt of dark green forest, held within it whole armies of bloodied men and the odd gnarled creature. After we had lit up, I lay on my stomach and looked out. Down below the ribbon of sand was a golden runway that I had to keep watching in case it offered up a plane to catch. The old man had hung the orange on a stick plunged into the sand. He was cutting a hole in the middle. Mum's head bobbed about in the ocean; made visible by the red rubber plumage of her cap. Nora stood in the shallows waving slowly, heavily as if signalling to something irretrievably lost. The sea broke around her feet, sending a thousand tiny eggshells to their graves in the sand.

It was the voice I recognised. Down through the path she came, the massive pine trees bowing over her body and toning down the

massive colour she always carries. Just a trace of pink lipstick stained her mouth and I knew she must smell of salt and damp perfume. Dianne is the oldest child and she has to make everything a complete picture and backs it all with waves of her soft, salt water voice. Returning home late one night from her job as a waitress she had sat heavily down on the end of my bed while I pretended to sleep.

'You know it's interesting the way men call women birds and chicks. Silly though it may sound I sometimes feel like one. An exotically decked-out jungle bird serving meat to great flightless birds; a too moist pool in the desert. Or a small fantailed thing, trapped in amongst beer-potted clowns . . . that will eventually be swallowed without leaving an impression.'

This was difficult to imagine of Dianne, who stood all teased blonde and bronzed in a psychedelic bathing suit; climbing to the top of a sand dune. Once there she stopped.

'There's your pretty sister.' Sandra was squinting, pointing; looking terribly impressed.

'No kidding? Actually . . .' (I took a long drag of my Rothmans) 'Dianne says it's a burden being pretty.'

'That's stupid,' said Sandra.

Dianne bent over and circled her left leg with a towel. Tightening the ends around her thigh, she rolled the towel downwards. By the time she reached her knee, the towel became a turban which she placed on her head. Dianne straightened her body, eyes fixed toward the sea. I stabbed my cigarette out in the sand.

'Why has she got a towel on her head? What do you suppose she's gonna do?' Sandra was still squinting, her cigarette had been left to smoulder down to the butt.

'How am I supposed to know? Run I suppose.'

The sky darkened with a deafening noise. A squadron of planes from the army base on the hill drowned out our voices. We looked up. Caught between the sun and the white clouds, the planes became big shapes; like whales floating over a vast desert of cold sky. Dianne drew her arms up wide. The flaps of the turban rolled in the breeze. The bridge of her nose flared and trembled. Then she dived. Down the sand dunes and onto the beach while the sun hung on a flat porcelain sky.