

it just slightly and breathed in with an air of indulgence. Mum shook her head, put her hand to her forehead, mumbled under her breath . . .

'It's going to be another discourse. I don't think I can stand it.'

The old man addressed the vast stretch of beach, the ocean and Nora.

'We learnt a great deal from the Bedouins about easing thirst. And then there was that wonderful invention; the suspended orange.' He gestured towards the lonely orange . . .

'An act of genius. Like Rommel. I loved all the flying. The desert nights. Addis Ababa. Of course the Nile, Valley of the Kings, etc.'

'It's not the war again, is it Dad?' Dianne stood behind the old man, sleek, moulded. Still belonging to the sea. He turned, half bent and poked her leg with his stick.

'What would you and your hippie mates know about suffering and more bloody suffering until you go mad? All you know is your boneless drivel. Free love, for God's sake. That's all you want. Free love. Free love is for the animals. For the nobodies.' Dianne rubbed her leg and laughed.

'Suffer the little children, Dad. Suffer the little children.'

Sandra nestled close to me, mouth dropping open.

'Catching flies are we, Sandra?' I said, giving her a push.

'I can't bear it any more. I want to die,' Mum said from her horizontal position under the umbrella. Nora sat with her hands clasped tightly about her knees, eyes cast downward. The old man regained control of himself and, in the same instance, his youth. A sneering, boyish youth getting ready to swoop down and menace any remaining calm like a seagull searching for crusts. He moved with elegant ease towards Nora.

'For that matter I suppose we are all nobodies. I mean when one gets down to it, in the last bloody instance . . . we're just bloody nothing. I suppose death is just the manifestation of our nothingness. All one is . . . at the end of the line . . . is a rotting corpse. Don't you agree?'

Nora covered her face with her hands.

'I don't believe it. The nobody's crying!' The old man's hair had fallen forward in a kind of wild and shocked abandon. His eyes just narrow watery slits.

'I am not nobody.' A thick foreign accent poured forth. Nora opened the palms of her tear-stained hands and lifted them up toward the old man. On each wrist was a series of numbers. 'Please . . . please. I am Nastasya Sokolov. I am a Russian Jew. My family . . . they are all dead. Exterminated. I came here as a refugee after the war.' But the old man did not hear her. Dianne had plunged his head into the top of the sphinx as the sun melted red into the sea.

The old man stood in the doorway, propping himself up on his stick, and spoke in a voice that could talk across oceans.

'You just can't imagine what a bloody beautiful thing the world is until you have suffered some extreme deprivation.' A cigarette blazed and gathered ash at his side as if it were the lone attack against some inconsistency.

'Oh yes, yes I can see. I can imagine,' offered Nastasya. She quickly and exactly sliced the beetroot in preparation for the borsch soup and no longer flattened her vowels but let them flow deep and lilting. Now she was Nastasya, Nora was welcome in our house.

The soup was Dianne's idea. 'It will heal us . . . cleanse us,' she said.

'We are a very clean family, we don't need to be cleansed,' said Mum anxiously to Sandra who, in turn, looked anxiously at the borsch.

'Have you seen *Dr Zhivago*?' Sandra said to Nastasya. 'That's about Russians.'

'Yes, I have. It was very romantic.'

I wanted to ask her if she liked it. Did it make her homesick? But all I could do was watch her face. I had never noticed the eyebrows, arched and dark. Dark hair swept thick into a bun at the base of her neck. Tiny opaque earrings dropped from fleshy earlobes. A luminous quantity. I watched her in awe. I loved her. This woman had kept a secret, had been reared on potatoes; had seen her reflection on the shiny surface of a samovar.

'The joy, for instance, the pure bloody joy upon finding one Christmas when I was a child, an orange in my sack and discovering for the first time that an orange is round.' He kneaded the shape of his words and laughed. 'I had only seen the damned things in