

The Raft

It was the year when I lived with whores and ballerinas and watched Isadora Duncan's sister-in-law cook eggs at the Communist café on the street of cheap houses. The year when I ate slices of pear preserve and runny Brie for the first time as doves clattered in horse-chestnut trees. It was the year when I was 150 miles from the coast but drowned in the sea all the same.

Yuki and I had come to Paris on a whim, hoping to stake a claim to the Nouveau Roman, and had promptly lost half our funds when my bag was snatched outside the Gare du Nord. Luckily we had a friend who had gone out during the previous month and was known for finding his feet in those ramshackle days. Richard was unperturbed and breezily confident that he could find us a bed to sleep in and paid work. This eventually proved to be space on the floor of his new woman's flat and some backstage cleaning at a semi-derelict theatre.

Inge always told us that she was a Swedish air hostess with family money but her flat was Spartan, furnished only with a large double bed and a mono record player that she kept in a wicker basket with her Jacques Brel collection. She was often absent overnight or entertaining Cambodian businessmen and her shoes were too high for flight deck duties. During the day she would shuffle restlessly between the high windows in a dressing gown or an unfamiliar man's shirt. Sometimes she would appear dressed only in a bath towel, which revealed her shoulders, shockingly frail and bird-boned, and the small circular scar that puckered disapproval from the top of her spine.

In England I wouldn't have considered Inge as a potential friend. She was unhygienic, unpredictable and sly. She couldn't be trusted with boyfriends or open purses or razors - had no time for books or art. But then again, perhaps you make different friends in a foreign language.

I never knew where she had run into Richard. Probably somewhere near the Opéra where the ballet students drank coffee syrup and smoked to keep their weight down. They slept in the same bed but were not intimate. Not intimate in my mother's sense of the word. But we heard whispered laughter through the walls and occasional snatches of cabaret song.

One early morning the wine flowed more freely than usual and the four of us started one of those dawn conversations, the kind you have two or three times in your life - playful as knife-thrower with Tourettes. We became daringly competitive while Inge sat like a sphinx in candlelight, magnificently impassive and tolerant of our small indiscretions. We must have seemed childishly innocent to her. Then someone mentioned the sea and we were at once in *From Here to Eternity* territory. By the water? In the water? Under the water? The spilt wine from Inge's glass ran across the floorboards and left a stain that we failed to shift the following day.

The derelict theatre was used by out of work actors and entertainers to rehearse audition pieces. It was run jointly by Madame Duncan and her improbable lover and filled with ballet students and elderly rouged comics. Madame maintained the flowing robes of her very distant youth. Possibly she imagined she still looked like one of the

ethereal dryads from her sepia photographs, but I remember a yellow and bad-tempered monkey in a dirty shroud. She seemed to know Inge from somewhere and would run her cane down the back of her legs when they met. Inge showed her genuine affection and brought packets of boiled sweets and bottles in brown paper.

I cannot remember now who first suggested a Tarot reading, very possibly one of the ballet students who were notoriously superstitious. You must go. She's wonderful. She'll show you your own soul. She'll show you all the lives you have ever lived. Inge was at first sarcastic and reluctant but agreed to come with me. The area wasn't safe for someone with my schoolgirl French. Then she laughed as she reworked this. The reading wouldn't be safe for someone with my schoolgirl French.

The old Algerian with her pack of greasy cards had thin calves and a gap in her top teeth, a starched dress over a limp slip and shoes like gondolas – turned up at the toe and beaded. She began the session by laughing at me and smelt disconcertingly of a wound that would not heal. My story unravelled like a snake, heavy with the bulge of her previous readings, and so failed to touch me. I was to spend my life waiting for a man of the cloth. Inge and I vied to outdo each other with the absurdity of our interpretations. A tailor? A monk? Someone on the Fuzzy-Felt assembly line? It was not specified and my future remains cowled to this day.

For Inge it was different. The woman sighed and drew the Ace of Cups. Water. The small eyes glittered. You were born near water? No. Reborn in water, perhaps? I saw a hook finding its hold in Inge's soft bottom lip. From that point on I could see how the woman played her, how each lack of gesture on Inge's part, each stiffening, was

expertly and remorselessly reeled in. I hadn't anticipated the sustained malice our giggling would provoke, or its effects, and so was unprepared when Inge stumbled on the kerb crossing back into our square. I caught her arm and steered her to a nearby bench.

"Can you swim?" Inge was lighting a Gauloise from a previous stub. I admitted that I had never learnt and that I had grown up in a landlocked county where we looked to the sky, not the sea, for the sublime. "It's better if you can't" she said.

Richard was quietly furious with me for some time after we got back. What was I thinking? How could we have been so silly – to go unescorted into an area like that? The singing stopped that night and the whispering through the wall became his alone. Over the following weeks Inge turned pinpoint bright and the rich Cambodians more numerous. There was little pretence now. No mention was made of flight stopovers or cheques from Sweden.

Meanwhile Yuki was intrigued, as I knew he would be. He went over our visit to the Algerian, crafting and finessing the dialogue, setting up counterpoints, paring the story down to the bone. I could tell he missed his battered typewriter. Each day a new thread was teased out of the everyday. Did I notice that she washed but never bathed? Could I find out where she had met Madame Duncan? Why were the Cambodians always so very, very short? Did I think that she enjoyed her work?

It was partly to distract Yuki from this growing obsession that I suggested we support Richard in his new venture as a burlesque comic. This was the result of a long and concerted campaign of attrition. After pleading and eventually bribing Madame Duncan with absinthe, he had finally been given a matinee slot on the least popular day of the week. At the last minute Inge announced that she was free and would come with us and we sat as far back and as far down in our seats as possible, watching Richard perform an excruciating French version of George Melly's *Frankie and Johnny*, bursting balloons to improvise gunshots. This was followed by a modern ballet loosely based on *The Raft of the Medusa*, which was truly awful and garnered its own cruel laughter and slow applause from those not involved.

The dance itself was disjointed and confused but the lighting was an unexpected delight and extended from the stage to the interior. The old Rococo balcony mouldings became submerged coral reefs and the peeling brown paper hung slickly like the beginnings of a kelp forest. I turned to point this out to Inge and found her frozen beside me and unable to move.

It took Richard and two male dancers to manoeuvre her backstage. Richard was sent to get a blanket. The embarrassed dancers melted away and Yuki stood inscrutable against a stage flat until Madame gestured with her cane for him to go. The three of us were alone for barely three minutes. Two minutes were all that were needed for Madame to explain about the child, its predictable parentage, the slipped moorings of the raft at the family's Baltic retreat, the wrapping and submerging of a cold doll.

The story was so well constructed as it stood that the ragged aftermath of the events she covered in the third minute seemed superfluous. I would have cut it from a screenplay, have Inge step into the water with her pathetic bundle and not resurface. I spent the third minute barely listening to Madame and searching for flaws in the weave and points of weakness – the purchase I needed to lever us out of the flat and Yuki away from the lip of this narrative whirlpool. It didn't matter that Inge's drowning eyes held mine. I was thinking in English now.

We returned to the flat subdued. Richard tried to hold the blanket around Inge's shoulders but she barely noticed and sipped a corner with her cigarette. Yuki was indignant when I toed Madame's party line and supported a diagnosis of women's problems. How could I possibly think that that was convincing? Everyone knew Inge went for quarterly injections to suppress her periods and maximize her earnings.

But by the next day we had bigger fish to fry, more exciting things to think about and to fill our journals. We listened to the radio announcements as the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh and toasted the triumph of the unsung agrarian poor. We adopted a haughty approach to Inge's dwindling clientele and sneered in private at the size of their watches. In the end it was surprisingly easy to extricate Yuki from the flat.

Dropping hints that Bohemian life might well become turgid and repetitive was bound to sow seeds of restlessness in a mind honing itself for literary triumphs. Inge helped seal her own fate with her sullen withdrawal and lack of personal care. A positive screening from her clinic and a series of small thefts from Richard's wallet proved to be the final straws. We moved out separately. Yuki and I went to stay with a ballet

dancer who tried unsuccessfully and successfully to seduce us both. Richard went to become Madame's live-in caretaker at the theatre.

And so I cut Inge adrift and found that the sea closed over my head rather than hers. I should have remembered that I had never learnt to swim. Yuki and I fell into a peevish artistic cannibalism when we returned to England, mining our personal exchanges until we had worn all meaning from the words. Richard waved gaudy flags at an empty horizon and put on weight when no one waved back.

The last time I saw Inge was by chance on a gallery visit just before we left Paris. She was with a tall Scandinavian client this time, standing in front of Gericault's painting at the Louvre; standing perfectly still and as near as possible to its surface, so that the spray became solid flicks and globs of lead white on a canvas that was now her world.

The man bent towards her and whispered something, running a possessive hand down to the small of her back. Inge remained motionless, looking aloof and slightly bored. It had always been her chief charm, this suggestion that she was waiting to be rescued from the tedium of current company. She could have been counting the minutes ticking by on the meter. She could have been running through her lines for a later performance. It is just possible that she was weeping without sound or movement - hearing her father's shouts above the thrashing water and feeling her mother's thumbs on the back of the neck, pushing her down.