ONE

When I was a little girl I actually used to dream of it. I would be in a boat, gliding through sparkling water, and there in the distance I'd see an island. But it wasn't green like real islands are. It was all dark brown, as if someone had lit a fire and burnt up the whole place. But of course, I knew differently. And as my boat came nearer I grew more and more excited, until at last, with only a few yards to go, I couldn't wait any longer. So I'd leap out, feel the water cool on my skin, wade forward, then throw myself on the ground and scoop up the brown pebbles on the beach, cramming them into my mouth.

Only they weren't pebbles, of course.

Chocolate.

The whole island was made of chocolate.

That was what I dreamt of, when I was a little girl. It was much better than a gingerbread house, because

there was no wicked witch on my island; there was nobody but me. And in the silence, the absolute silence, I could eat and eat, and never feel sick. Later I'd change the dream so that there was a banana tree in the middle of the island as well. Chocolate and bananas … and not have to share with a soul. I knew what paradise meant, even if only in my dreams.

I once asked the little boy on the floor below what he wanted for Christmas. He pursed his lips and frowned, and thought for a long time. Then a big smile crossed his face, and his eyes shone and he said, "A BANANA!" Despite my own fantasies I thought it a strange thing for a seven-year-old boy to want for his "big" present: not a car or a train but a banana!

"Why don't we have things like bananas, Mama?" I asked.

She shook her head sadly.

"How can I begin to start to tell you, Flora?" she said. "We just aren't so lucky – as some countries."

"You should answer the child's questions properly," muttered my father.

She shook her head, giving him one of those warning looks I had just started to notice.

"You should know better, Constantin," said Mama.

"Tell me, Tata," I said.

"We don't have chocolate, or bananas – or cheese or butter or meat, or even fresh bread for that matter – because we're lucky enough to live in the glorious Socialist Republic of Romania, watched over by our magnificent leader Comrade Ceauşescu. He knows it would be bad for our souls to be corrupted by the disgusting luxuries they enjoy in America, Britain, France and Germany. So that's it, little Flora."

All that came out in a quiet burst, as if he wanted to throw back his head and yell, and yet was being pressed down by something unseen, so that the words escaped like steam from under a lid. And Mama shook her head furiously, and said "*Shhhh*!"

That was a couple of years ago, and then I began to notice the "*SHHHHHHH*s" more and more. All questions silenced. Yet I wanted to talk. I *needed* to talk. Maybe that was one of the things that led me astray… Oh, but that's to jump ahead. And I must tell my story just as it happened.

It all began the day my best friend and I had an argument – one of those silly quarrels over nothing which end up by changing things for ever.

Alys and I live in neighbouring blocks on an estate in Bucharest. Four massive blocks, each twenty stories high – that's all. I've seen pictures of other places, of rolling green fields, grand houses, pretty cottages, and wide white sands under vivid

blue skies, and huts on stilts. So I know that where we live is ugly and mean. Tata says it stops your spirit from growing, living in a place like this.

Every morning I run down the stairs from the tenth floor (they were going to build lifts – the shafts are there, all boarded up because the money ran out), and go outside to the stretch of rough ground between the blocks and wait for Alys. Sometimes she is there already, with her bag hitched on her shoulder, and her big grin. Usually we don't speak much. We just walk to school together, just as we always have.

When we were smaller we'd sometimes race, especially if it was raining. Alys might challenge me to jump one of the huge puddles which collect in the unfinished ground, and stay long after the sun had come out. But we don't race or jump any more, because it's childish. To be quite honest, I stopped it anyway because Alys always beat me. I am small and thin and not good at any games, whereas Alys is taller and very strong, and brilliant at running, all sports, and gym. People say she will be a great athlete one day. Sometimes that really annoys me.

(Before I go on, I have to be really honest. I was only just starting to realize that it was possible to love someone and resent her at the same time, so that sometimes the two feelings fight such a battle

inside you, it leaves you breathless. Sometimes you even want the person you love to go far away, just so you'll be spared the turmoil. I was starting to feel like that about Alys. To me she was a perfect person: tall, slim, pretty, with blonde hair that curled round her face. She was clever in class, as well as good at sport, and to make it even worse, the kind of smiling person everyone likes; whilst I had started peering into the awful foggy mirror in our tiny bathroom, and saw this plain, spotty, *cross*, person, with dark hair that always looks lank no matter how much I stick it under the kitchen tap. So I could hate Alys Grosu, even though I looked forward to seeing her every day.)

"There's going to be a new boy in class today," Alys said as we drew near the school gates, streaming in with hundreds of others, all dressed alike in dark clothes.

"Who told you?" I asked.

"I heard the old Monster talking to one of the other teachers."

"Listening at doors, Alys! You'll get reported," I teased.

She laughed. "Who by – you?"

"Don't say that. It's not something to joke about."

"Rubbish! As far as I'm concerned you can make jokes about anything and everything," said

Alys gaily; then dropped her voice to a silly stage whisper and added, "even old Ceauşescu."

"Shhhh!" I went, and looked over my shoulder quickly.

The boy was just a few yards behind us, but didn't look as if he had heard. I just knew right away he must be the new boy. He was walking confidently and looked somehow different to all the pupils crowding round him.

I turned back quickly, but not before he had caught my gaze and nodded coolly in my direction. I felt my face grow hot. I nudged Alys sharply.

"Look behind … oh, not so obviously, you fool!"

"Mmm, if that's the new boy, he's quite an addition," she grinned. "He looks like a … a film star."

"You've never seen a film star," I muttered.

"How do you know what goes on in my dreams?" she retorted.

I looked around again, trying to be subtle – but he had gone.

In class we went through all the usual stuff: chanting out our loyalty to Romania, and to our beloved President, Nicolae Ceauşescu. By now I had stopped thinking about the words. Once, when I was younger, I started to sing a song at home,

which we had learnt in the Young Pioneers – all about how Comrade Ceauşescu was our father and his wife Elena was our mother, and how their love for us shone like the sun. But Tata spoke sharply to me and told me to shut up. Now I just thought it was all rubbish and it didn't bother me.

Anyway, when all that was done the Monster told us to make Daniel Ghiban welcome, and then stopped the whispering and staring by bringing his hand sharply down on the table, and telling us to open our maths books. That was it for the rest of the morning, and I couldn't even twist round and see – because Ghiban had been put immediately behind me. Once or twice I glanced across to Alys and she raised her eyebrows, twitched her nose, and grinned knowingly. It made her look rather silly, I thought.

So I put everything out of my mind, and buried my nose in equations – thinking that there, at least, amongst the small letters and numbers, it was all right for meaning to be hidden, and for things to stand for something else.

I suppose you could say that my life, up to this point, had revolved around food, parents, food, Alys, school … and food. Mama said it was the way I was built: thin and wiry like a little cat, and so always hungry. When you are little you

don't notice things: your mother getting up at 5 a.m. winter and summer alike, and going out into the chilly dawn to queue for bread and milk, and anything else she can find. And Tata would always carry an old shopping bag, sometimes getting home very late from the factory because, he said, he'd seen a queue and joined it, since it was bound to be something we needed. Some nights he'd come in with his face split in two with joy, holding the bag in the air like a trophy. And there would be a treat, like four or five apples, or some bacon, or a lump of cheese. Would we have a feast!

Then, later, you start to be aware – and you could kick yourself for the number of times you had whined about wanting milk or fruit, and your mother would slump wearily into the chair, as if it was all her fault. Which, of course, it was not.

So it isn't very surprising that my first impression of Daniel Ghiban was to do with food, even though other girls noticed his hair (dark and slicked back in a style we thought modern and daring) and his clothes (of which more later). But me – I noticed his food.

Everybody took a sandwich wrapped in brown paper for the middle of the day. Today mine was some fried onion between two thick slices of heavy white bread. All the kids had similar things – or

maybe a slice of cold corn mush, making the paper wet and soggy. Unsurprisingly there was a small group of boys standing around Daniel Ghiban. They probably thought they were being friendly, but people aren't so friendly in our country; they're more curious, wanting to find out all they can. It was obvious, from the sudden burst of excited comment, that something unusual was happening. So Alys and I, with four or five other girls, moved in closer to see.

Meat!

He had real meat in his sandwich. And the bread was soft and fresh. *And* he had a piece of cake which looked delicious. My mouth began to water, and I looked down at what I had with distaste. I suppose that's the first time you let your parents down, when you feel ashamed of the best they can give.

We moved away again, the other girls chattering with excitement.

"Did you see that?"

"It looked like beef – lucky thing!"

"Never mind that – what about the *jeans*!"

"Real. Definitely real."

"Oh my God!"

"He's handsome – don't you think?"

"Think! Know, more likely."

"I wish he'd talk to me…"

"Definitely one hundred per cent."

"I bet he thinks he's wonderful," said Alys.

"Fancy having real meat in your sandwich," I said.

"I can't imagine," said Alys.

"Hey, Alys," said a girl called Adriana, who was jealous of Alys, "I bet, if you play it right, he'd give *you* a bite!"

With that the rest of them collapsed in silly giggles, and so we moved away disdainfully just as the buzzer went.

When the Monster gave us the result of the early morning maths test the new boy had got the highest mark, beating Alys. (I forgot to say she was usually top of the class in maths and science, although I could usually beat her in history and in composition.) I don't remember much about the rest of the day, until it was time to go home. We were surging out towards the cloakroom, when the handle on my bag broke suddenly (poor Mama had mended it about five times), and all my books cascaded to the floor. Alys had gone on ahead and didn't notice; those who were left laughed at me and walked on. I knelt down to start picking up the scattered work – when suddenly there was another pair of hands helping.

Daniel Ghiban.

"Don't worry about it," I muttered, feeling embarrassment flame in my cheeks.

"It's OK. I'll help," he said.

"Really, I'm fine," I said quickly as I stood up, clutching an assortment of books and papers to my chest.

"What about the one that got away?" he smiled, pointing at my pencil, which had rolled across the corridor.

He stepped across, bent down slowly, and picked it up. He was just in the process of handing it to me, with a flourish, when he glanced at it and frowned.

"Wait – it's broken."

"It's OK. Give it to me."

"Do you have a sharpener?"

"A what? Of course not. What's wrong with the kitchen knife?" I said.

"Just wait a moment," he said – and rummaged in his bag, before bringing out a smart plastic pencil case. "Look!"

Very carefully he sharpened my pencil with a beautiful metal pencil sharpener – the like of which I had never seen in my life. Then he handed it back to me with the warmest, friendliest smile so that I forgot to be cross or shy, and felt like the luckiest person in the world.

"Here you are… What's your name?"

"Popescu – Flora," I said.

"Borrow it whenever you like, Flora," he said casually, before hitching his bag on his shoulders and walking on.

I packed all my things back, clutched my own ruined bag to my chest, and walked to where Alys was waiting on the corner. She glanced at me curiously, and I could feel my smile lighting up the whole corridor. But I couldn't stop it. You know when a grin takes you over, as if your mouth is the open entrance to your whole soul?

We walked halfway home in silence. Then I said gloomily that I didn't know if my mother would be able to fix the wretched bag yet again, and what was I going to do? But Alys wasn't listening.

"So what do you think of him, then?" she asked.

"Who?" I asked, knowing perfectly well.

"The new boy."

"I think the same as everyone thinks," I said. "He's good-looking, got decent clothes, and is lucky enough to be given meat sandwiches. His Dad probably works for a butcher."

"I wonder where he's come from?" she said. "I mean, people don't move, do they?"

"Not usually," I said.

"Mmm," she said and suddenly I felt irritated.

"What do you mean, *Mmm*?" I asked.

"There's something about him I don't like," said Alys.

I thought of Daniel, and the way he was the only one who had stopped to help me, and how he'd done it in such a nice way, and bothered to sharpen my pencil for me, and how he was new anyway and so Alys didn't even *know* him.

"Probably the fact that he beat you in maths," I retorted.

"That's just silly," said Alys crossly.

"Well aren't *you* being silly?" I replied.

"No, I'm not," she said, in a distant, grown-up sort of way that made me feel crosser than ever.

"Yes you are," I said knowing how childish it sounded.

Alys shrugged. "Well, in that case we might as well stop talking!"

And a few minutes later she veered sharply away, not even saying goodbye, just doing her athletic loping run across the wasteland towards her block. Usually we stood and talked for a while, or even went to one or other of our flats for a short time – but not tonight. It left me feeling cold and lonely, as if Alys was a warm fire I was used to sitting by, that had suddenly been put out. But I couldn't understand who had done it. The sudden

squabble had been so silly.

When I let myself into our flat I slumped in my usual chair by the dining table, feeling miserable. Nobody was in. Mama would arrive home from her museum job very soon, and Tata would get home from the factory about an hour after that. So there was nobody to tell.

In any case, what would I tell them?

Parents (I'd discovered) didn't understand about friendships, and how important it was to be liked by people your own age. Mama worried about food and life, and Tata muttered about life and politics, and both of them nagged me to work hard at school – even though (honestly) I couldn't see the point except if you could be really rich and get things like chocolate on the black market. People like my parents had gone to University, and worked hard, but they couldn't get decent jobs. So Tata was a factory worker, and Mama stood around in the National Museum all day, and we had no money. No wonder I escaped into my daydreams, and those lovely fairytales of Inspirescu. But Mama and Tata couldn't escape. They worried about *everything*. So what could I tell them? A quarrel with Alys? They'd think it unimportant. They wouldn't understand.

Sometimes that knowledge makes you lonelier

than ever, and you long to be a little child again, when your parents are the very centre of your whole universe, and you believe that they know the answers to everything and can make everything all right, always. When you get to be eleven or twelve you suddenly see it isn't true, and notice how your parents have as many faults as you do. Then all the safe, cosy walls around you crumble slowly down, and you have to step out over the debris into the cold wind, and find your way in this new country on your own.

After that, the worst thing is the responsibility.

You can't let them know that you know.

So I sat there at the table, looking around our tiny flat (only two rooms and a tiny kitchen and bathroom), and knowing that I'd have to pretend everything was all right. So I started by chucking all the things from my bag on to the sofa (which turned into their double bed at night) just to see if I could get some string and mend the handle on my own.

Then I stopped, and picked up the pencil with a point that was neater, more regular, more perfectly, *precisely* sharp than I had ever known – and looked at it carefully.

I pressed it against my palm.

Ow!

The sharp jab was real; the pencil was beautiful. It made me want to do my homework for once – and gave me some small consolation, because the new boy had said that I could borrow his sharpener whenever I wanted. He was friendly, and I wanted to forget all that stupid giggling about his hair, and his jeans, and the navy blue jumper with a badge on one side. Oh, and trainers, too – I forgot the trainers…

When I thought of his packed lunch I felt a pang of longing in my stomach as sharp as the pencil. And envy – real envy.

Anyway, none of that was important.

He had *talked* to *me*, that was what mattered. And that made me push aside my unhappiness at quarrelling with Alys. Alys had been mean and unfair about someone who was trying to be friendly. I had been right to snap back at her. It was, I decided, all her fault.