

5 The fat girl in the sky-blue coat again took herself to the mirror. She could not keep away from it. Why did the others not comment on her scarlet cheeks, just like when she got measles, and the way her hair was stuck down with sweat? But they didn't notice her; she thought they did not see her. This was because of Debbie who protected her, so they got nothing out of noticing her.

10 She knew it was cold outside, for she had opened a window to check. Inside this flat it was, she believed, warm, but the heating in the block was erratic, particularly in bad weather, and then the electric fires were brought out and Debbie swore and complained and said she was going to move. But Julie knew Debbie would not move. She could not: she had fought for this flat to be hers, and people (men) from everywhere – 'from all over the world', as Julie would proudly say to herself, knew
15 Debbie was here. And besides, Julie was going to need to think of Debbie here, when she herself got home: remember the bright rackety place where people came and went, some of them frightening, but none threatening her, Julie, because Debbie looked after her.

20 She was so wet she was afraid she would start squelching. What if the wet came through the coat? Back she went to the bathroom and took off the coat. The dress – Debbie's, like the once smart coat – was now orange instead of yellow, because it was soaked. Julie knew there would be a lot of water at some point, because the paperback Debbie had bought her said so, but she didn't know if she was simply sweating. In the book everything was so tidy and regular, and she had checked the stages she must
25 expect a dozen times. But now she stood surrounded by jars of bath salts and lotions on the shelf that went all around the bathroom, her feet wide apart on a fluffy rug like a terrier's coat, and felt cold water springing from her forehead, hot water running down her legs. She seemed to have pains everywhere, but could not match what she felt with the book.

30 On went the blue coat again. It was luckily still loose on her, for Debbie was a big girl, and she was small. Back she went to the long mirror in Debbie's room, and what she saw on her face, a look of distracted pain, made her decide it was time to leave. She longed for Debbie, who might after all just turn up. She could not bear to go without seeing her ... she had promised! But she had to, now, at once, and she wrote on a piece
35 of paper she had kept ready just in case. 'I am going now. Thanks for everything. Thank you, thank you, thank you. All my love, Julie.' Then her home address. She

stuck this letter in a sober white envelope into the frame of Debbie's mirror and went into the living room, where a lot of people were lolling about watching the TV. No, not really a lot, four people crammed the little room. No one even looked at her. Then the man she was afraid of, and who had tried to 'get' her, took in the fact that she stood there, enormous and smiling foolishly in her blue coat, and gave her the look she always got from him, which said he didn't know why Debbie bothered with her but didn't care. He was a sharp clever man, handsome she supposed, in a flashy Arab way. He was from Lebanon, and she must make allowances because there was a war there. Sitting beside him on the sofa was the girl who took the drugs around for him. She was smart and clever, like him, but blonde and shiny, and she looked like a model for cheap clothes. A model was what she said she was, but Julie knew she wasn't. And there were two girls Julie had never seen before, and she supposed they were innocents, as she had been. They looked all giggly and anxious to please, and they were waiting. For Debbie?

Julie went quietly through the room to the landing outside and stood watching for the lift. She checked her carrier bag, ready for a month now, stuffed under her bed. In it was a torch, pieces of string wrapped in a piece of plastic, two pairs of knickers, a cardigan, a thick towel with an old blouse of Debbie's cut open to lie flat inside it and be soft and satiny, and some sanitary pads. The pads were Debbie's. She bled a lot each month. The lift came but Julie had gone back into the flat, full of trouble and worry. She felt ill-prepared, she did not have enough of something, but what could it be? The way she felt told her nothing, except that what was going to happen would be uncontrollable, and until today she had felt in control, and even confident. From shelves in the bathroom she took, almost at random, some guest towels and stuffed them into the carrier. She told herself she was stealing from Debbie, but knew Debbie wouldn't mind. She never did, would say only, 'Just take it, love, if you want it.' Then she might laugh and say, 'Take what you want and don't pay for it!' Which was her motto in life, she claimed on every possible occasion. Julie knew better. Debbie could say this as much as she liked, but what she, Julie, had learned from Debbie was, simply, this: what things cost, the value of everything, and of people, of what you did for them, and what they did for you. When she had first come into this flat, brought by Debbie, who had seen her standing like a dummy on the platform at Waterloo at midnight on that first evening she arrived by herself in London, she had been as green as ... those girls next door, waiting, but not knowing what for. She had been innocent and silly, and what that all boiled down to was that she hadn't known the price of anything. She hadn't known what had to be paid. This was what she had learned from Debbie, even though Debbie had never allowed her to pay for anything, ever.

From the moment she had been seen on the platform five months ago on a muggy, drizzly August evening, she had been learning how ignorant she was. For one thing, it was not only Debbie who had seen her; a lot of other people on the lookout in various

parts of the station would have moved in on her like sharks if Debbie hadn't got to her first. Some of these people were baddies and some were goodies, but the kind ones would have sent her straight home.

5 For the second time she went through the living room and no one looked at her. The Lebanese was smiling and talking in an elder-brotherly way to the new girls. Well, they had better watch out for themselves.

For the second time she waited for the lift. She seemed quite wrenched with pain. Was it worse? Yes, it was.

10 In the bitter black street that shone with lights from the lamps and the speeding cars she hauled herself on to a bus. Three stops, and by the time she reached where she wanted, she knew she had cut it too fine. She got off in a sleet shower under a street lamp and saw her blue coat turning dark with wet. Now she was far from being too hot, she was ready to shiver and shake, but could not decide if this was panic. Everything she had planned had seemed so easy, one thing after another, but she had
15 not foreseen that she would stand at a bus stop, afraid to leave the light there, not knowing what the sensations were that wrenched her body. Was she hot? Cold? Nauseous? Hungry? A good thing the weather was so bad, no one was about. She walked boldly through the sleet and turned into a dark and narrow alley where she hurried, because it smelled bad and scared her, then out into a yard full of builders' rubbish and rusty skips. There was a derelict shed at one end. This shed was where
20 she was going, where she had been only three days before to make sure it was still there, had not been pulled down, and that she could get in the door. But now something she had not foreseen. A large dog stood in the door, a great black threatening beast, and it was growling. She could see the gleam of its teeth and eyes. But she knew she had to get into the shed, and quickly. Again water poured hotly
25 down her legs. Her head was swimming. Hot knives carved her back. She found a half brick and flung it at the wall near the dog, who disappeared into the shed growling. This was awful... Julie went into the shed, shut the door behind her, with difficulty because it dragged on broken hinges, and switched on the torch. The dog stood
30 against a wall looking at her, but now she could see it would not hurt her. Its tail was sweeping about in the dirt, and it was so thin she could see its ribs under the dirty black shabby fur. Its eyes were bright and frantic. It wanted her to be good to it. She said, 'It's all right, it's only me,' and went to the corner of the shed away from the dog, where she had spread a folded blanket. The blanket was there, but the dog had
35 been lying on it. She turned the blanket so the clean part inside was on the top. Now, having reached her refuge, she didn't know what to do. She took off her soaking knickers. She put the carrier bag close to the blanket. Afraid someone might see the gleam of light, she switched off the torch, first making sure she knew where it was. She could hear the dog breathing, and the flap-flap of its tail. It was lying down, not

far from her. She could smell the wet doggy smell, and she was grateful for that, pleased the dog was there. Now she was in no doubt she had got here just in time, because her whole body was hot and fierce with pain, and she wanted to cry out, but knew she must not. She was groaning, though, and she heard herself: 'Debbie, Debbie, Debbie ...' All those months Debbie had said, 'Don't worry about anything, when the time comes I'll see everything's all right.' But Debbie had gone off with the new man to Paris, saying she would be back in a week, but had rung from New York to say, 'How are you, honey? I'll be back at the weekend.' That was three weeks ago. The 'honey' had told Julie this man was different from the others, not only because he was an American: Debbie had never called her anything but Julie, wouldn't have dreamed of changing her behaviour for any man, but this 'honey' had not been for Julie, but for the man who was listening. 'I don't blame her,' Julie was muttering now. 'She always said she wanted just one man, not Tom and Dick and Harry.' But while Julie was making herself think, I don't blame her, she was groaning, 'Oh, Debbie, Debbie, why did you leave me?'

Debbie had left her to cope on her own, after providing everything from shelter and food and visits to a doctor, to the clothes and the bright blue coat that had hidden her so well no one had known. Debbie and she joked how little people noticed about other people. 'You'd better watch your diet,' the Lebanese had said. 'Don't you let her' – meaning Debbie – 'stuff you with food all the time.'

Julie was on all fours on the blanket, her head between her arms, her fists clenched tight, and she was crying. The pain was awful, but that wasn't the worst of it. She felt so alone, so lonely. It occurred to her that having her bottom up in the air was probably not the right thing. She squatted, her back against a cold brick wall, and went on sweating and moaning. She could hear the dog whining, in sympathy, she thought. Water, or was it blood, poured out. She was afraid to switch on the torch to see. She felt the dog sniff at her face and neck, but it went off again. She could see absolutely nothing, it was so dark. Then she felt a rush, as if her insides were pouring out, and she thought. Why didn't the book say there would be all this water all the time? Then she thought. But that's the baby, and put her hand down and under her on the blanket was a wet slippery lump. She felt for the torch and switched it on. The baby was greyish and bloody and its mouth was opening and shutting. Now she was in a panic. Before, she had decided she must wait before cutting the cord, because the paperback said there was no hurry, but she was desperate to get the cord cut, in case the baby died. She found where the cord came out of the baby, a thick twisted rope of flesh, full of life, hot and pulsing in her hand. She found the scissors. She found the string. She cut the birth cord with the scissors, and trembled with fear. Blood everywhere, and the dog had come close and was sitting so near she could touch it. Its eyes were saying, Please, please ... It was gulping and licking its lips, because of all the blood, when it was so hungry.

‘You wait a bit,’ she said to the poor dog. Now she tied the cord up with the string that had boiled a long time in the saucepan. She was worrying because she was getting something wrong, but couldn’t remember what it was. As for boiling the string, what sense did that make, when you saw the filth in this shed. Tramps had
5 used it. The dog ... other dogs too, probably. For all she knew, other girls had given birth in it. Most sheds were garden sheds, and full of plants in pots, and locked up. She knew, because she had checked so many. Not many places where a girl could give birth to a baby in peace and quiet – or a stray dog find a dry place out of the rain ... She was getting giggly and silly, she could feel herself losing control. Meanwhile the
10 baby was lying in a pool of bloody water and was mouthing and pulling its face about, and she ought to be doing something. Surely it ought to be crying? It was so slippery. The paperback didn’t say anything about the baby being greasy and wet and so slippery she would be afraid to lift it. She pulled out the bundle of towel from the carrier and laid it flat, with the soft pink satin of Debbie’s blouse smooth on top. She
15 used both hands to pick the baby up round its middle and felt it squirm, probably because her hands were so cold. Its wriggling strength, its warmth, the life she could feel beating there, astonished and pleased her. Unexpectedly she was full of pleasure and pride. The baby’s perfectly all right, she thought, looking in the torchlight at hands, feet ... what else should she look for? Oh, yes, it was a girl. Was it deformed?
20 The baby had an enormous cunt, a long wrinkled slit. Was that normal? Why didn’t the book say?

She folded the baby firmly into the towel, with the bottom of the towel well tucked in over its feet, and only its face showing. Then she picked it up. It began to roar in short angry spasms. And now the panic began again. She had not thought the baby
25 would cry so loudly ... someone would come ... what should she do ... but she couldn’t leave the shed because there was a thing called the afterbirth. As she thought this, there was another wet rush, all down her legs, and out plopped a mass of something that looked like liver with the end of the thick red cord coming out of it.

And now she knew what to do. She raised herself from the squatting position, clutching the baby with one arm and using the other hand to push herself up from the
30 floor. She stood shakily by the bloody mess and moved away a few paces with the baby held high up and close against her. At once the dog crawled forward, giving her a desperate look that said, Don’t get in my way. It ate up the afterbirth in quick gulps. It hopefully licked the bloody blanket, and briefly lifted its muzzle to look at her,
35 wagging its long dirty tail. Then it went back to its place and sat with its back to the wall, watching. Meanwhile the baby let out short angry cries and kicked hard in its cocoon of towel. Julie thought, Should I just leave the baby here and run for it? No, the dog ... But as she thought this, the baby stopped and lay quietly looking at her. Well, she wasn’t going to look back, she wasn’t going to love it.

She had to leave here, and she was a swamp of blood, water, God only knew what.

5 She took a cautious look. Blood trickled down her legs. And she had actually believed a tampon or two would be enough! She laid the baby down on a clean place on the blanket, keeping an eye on the dog. Its eyes gleamed in the torchlight. She put on a pair of clean knickers and packed in sanitary towels. She tried to tie the guest towels around her waist to make an extra pad, but they were too stiff. Now she picked up the baby, which was just like a papoose and looking around with its blurry little eyes. She took up the carrier bag and then the torch. She said to the dog, 'Poor dog, I'm sorry,' and went out, making sure the door was open for the dog. She switched off the torch, though the ground was rough and had bricks and bits of wood lying about. She could just see: there were lights in windows high up across the street. The sleet still blew down. She was already shivering. And the baby only had the towel around it ... She put the bundle of baby under the flap of the now loose coat and went quickly across the uneven ground to the alley, and then through the bad-smelling place and then along the pavement to a telephone box she had made sure would be conveniently close when she was looking for the shed or somewhere safe. There was no one near the telephone box, no one anywhere around. She put the baby down on the floor and walked towards the brilliant lights of the pub at the corner. She did not look back. The pub was crammed and hot and noisy. Now what she was afraid of was that she might smell so strongly of blood someone would notice. She could hardly make her way to the toilet. There she removed her knickers with the pads of sanitary towels, which were already soaked. She used one of the guest towels to wash herself down. She went on soaking the towel in hot water and wringing it out, then wiping herself, watching how the blood at once began trickling on to the clean white skin of her inner thighs. But she could not stay there for ever, washing. She rubbed the same towel, wrung out in hot water, over her sticky head. She combed her hair flat. Well, it wouldn't stay flat for long: being naturally curly it would spring back into its own shape soon. Debbie said it was sweet, like a little girl. She filled her knickers with new pads, put the bloody pads into the container, and went out into the pub. Now there was music from the jukebox, pounding away, and the beat went straight through her, vibrating and making her feel sick. She wanted badly to get away from the music, but she bought a shandy, reaching over the shoulders of men arguing about football to get it. Unremarked, she went to stand near a small window that overlooked the telephone box. She could see the bundle, a small pathetic thing, like folded newspapers or a dropped jersey, on the floor of the box. She had first found the shed, then looked for the telephone box, and then hoped there would be a window somewhere close by, and there was.

40 She stood by the window for only five minutes or so. Then she saw a young man and a girl go into the telephone box. Through window glass streaked again with sleet, she saw the girl pick up the bundle from the floor, while the young man telephoned. She

ought to leave ... she ought not to stand here ... but she stayed, watching, while the noise of the pub beat around her. The ambulance came in no time. Two ambulance men. The girl came out of the telephone box with the bundle, and the young man was behind her. The ambulance men took the bundle, first one, then the other, then
5 handed it back to the girl, who got into the ambulance. The young man stood on the pavement, and the girl inside waved to him, and he got in to go with them. So the baby was safe. It was done. She had done it. As she went out into the sleety rain she saw the ambulance lights vanish, and her heart plunged into loss and became empty and bitter, in the way she had been determined would not happen. 'Debbie,' she
10 whispered, the tears running. 'Where are you, Debbie?' Not necessarily New York. Or even the States. Canada ... Mexico ... the Costa Brava ... South America ... The people coming and going in Debbie's flat were always off somewhere, or just back. Rio ... San Francisco, you name it. And Debbie had said to her, 'One day it will be your turn.' But now it was Debbie's turn. Why should she ever come back? She wanted to
15 have 'just one regular customer'. Once she had said, by mistake, 'just one man'. Julie had heard this, but did not comment. Debbie could be as hard and as jokey as she liked, but she couldn't fool Julie, who knew she was the only person who really understood Debbie.

Now Julie was walking to the Underground, as fast as she could. Her legs were shaky,
20 but she felt all right. All she wanted was to get home. It had been impossible to go home, or even think too much about home where her father (she was sure) would simply throw her out. But now, it was only a question of a few stops on the Underground, and then the train. At the most, an hour and a half.

The Underground train was full of people. They had had a meal after work, or been in
25 a pub. Like Julie! She kept looking at all those faces and thinking, What would you say if you knew? At Waterloo she sat on a bench near an old man with a drinker's face, a tramp. She gave him a pound, but she was thinking of the dog. She did not have to wait long for a train. It was not full. Surely she ought to be tired, or sick or something? Most of all she was hungry. A great plate of steak and eggs, that was what
30 she needed. And Debbie there too, eating opposite her.

A plump fresh-faced girl in a damp sky-blue coat sat upright among the other home-goers, holding a carrier bag that had on it, written red on black, SUSIE'S STYLES! Her eyes shone. Her young fresh fair hair curled all over her head. She vibrated with confidence, with secrets.

35 At the station she had to decide between a bus and walking home. Not the bus: on it there'd almost certainly be someone she knew, and perhaps even from her school. She didn't want to be looked at yet. The sleet was now a chilly blowy rain, with the sting of ice in it, but it wasn't bad, more of an occasional sharp pattering coming into

her face and invigorating her. But she was going to arrive home all wet and pathetic, not at all as she had planned.

5 When she turned into her street, lights showed behind the curtains in all the windows. No one was out. What was she going to do about that coat, wet through, and, worse, hanging on her? Her mother would notice all that space under the coat and wonder. Three doors from home she glanced around to make sure no one was watching, and stripped off the coat in one fast movement and dropped it into a dustbin. Even in this half dark, lit with dull gleams from a window, she could see blood-stains on the lining. And her dress? The yellow dress was limp and grubby, but
10 the cardigan came down low and hid most of it. This was going to be the dangerous part, all right, and only luck would get her through it. She ran up the steps and rang the bell, smiling, while she clutched the carrier bag so it could hide her front, which was still squashy and fat where the baby had been.

15 Heavy steps. Her father. The door opened slowly while he fumbled at locks, and she kept the smile going, and her heart beat, and then he stood in front of her large and black with the light behind him, so that her heart went small and weak ... but then he turned so she could see his face and she thought. That can't be him, that can't be my father-for he had shrunk and become grey and ordinary, and ... what on earth had she been afraid of? She could just hear what Debbie would say about him! Why, he was
20 nothing at all. He called out in a sharp barking voice, 'Anne, Anne, she's here.' He was a man waiting for his wife to take command, crying as he went stumbling down the hall. Julie's mother came fast towards her. She was already crying, and that meant she could not see anything much. She put her arms around Julie and sobbed and said, 'Oh, Julie, Julie, why didn't you ...? But come in, why, you're soaked.' And
25 she pushed and pulled Julie towards, and then into, the living room, where the old man (which is how Julie was seeing him with her new eyes) sat bowed in his chair, tears running down his face.

'She's all right, Len,' said Anne, Julie's mother. She let go of her daughter and sat upright in her chair, knees together, feet together, dabbing her cheeks under her
30 eyes, and stared at Len with a look that said, There, I told you so.

'Get her a cup of tea, Anne,' said Len. And then, to Julie, but without looking at her, looking at his wife in a heavy awful way that told Julie how full of calamity had been their discussions about her, 'Sit down, we aren't going to eat you.'

35 Julie sat on the edge of a chair, but gingerly, because it hurt. It was as if she had been anaesthetized by urgency, but now she was safe, pains and soreness could make themselves felt. She watched her parents weep, their bitter faces full of loss. She saw

how they sat, each in a chair well apart from the other, not comforting each other, or holding her, or wanting to hold each other, or to hold her.

‘Oh, Julie,’ said her mother, ‘oh, Julie.’

‘Mum, can I have a sandwich?’

5 ‘Of course you can. We’ve had our supper. I’ll just...’

Julie smiled, she could not help it, and it was a sour little smile. She knew that what had been on those plates was exactly calculated, not a pea or a bit of potato left over. The next proper meal (lunch, tomorrow) would already be on a plate ready to cook, with a plastic film over it, in the fridge. Her mother went off to the kitchen, to work
10 out how to feed Julie, and now Julie was alone with her father, and that wasn’t good.

‘You mustn’t think we are going to ask you awkward questions,’ said her father, still not looking at her, and Julie knew that her mother had said, ‘We mustn’t ask her any awkward questions. We must wait for her to tell us.’

15 You bloody well ought to ask some questions, Julie was thinking, noting that already the raucous angry irritation her parents always made her feel was back, and strong. And, at the moment, dangerous.

But they had expected her to come back, then? For she had been making things easier for herself by saying, They won’t care I’m not there! They probably won’t even notice! Now she could see how much they had been grieving for her. How was she
20 going to get herself out of here up to the bathroom? If she could just have a bath! At this point her mother came back with a cup of tea. Julie took it, drank it down at once, though it was too hot, and handed the cup back. She saw her mother had realized she meant it: she needed to eat, was hungry, could drink six cups of tea one after another. ‘Would you mind if I had a bath, Mum? I won’t take a minute. I fell
25 and the street was all slippery. It was sleeting.’

She had already got herself to the door, clutching the carrier in front of her.

‘You didn’t hurt yourself?’ enquired her father.

‘No, I only slipped, I got all muddy.’

30 ‘You run along and have a bath, girl,’ said her mother. ‘It’ll give me time to boil an egg for sandwiches.’

Julie ran upstairs. Quick, quick, she mustn't make a big thing of this bath, mustn't stay in it. Her bedroom was just so, all pretty and pink, and her big panda sat on her pillow. She flung off her clothes and waves of a nasty sour smell came up at her. She stuffed them all into the carrier and grabbed from the cupboard her pink-flowered dressing gown. What would Debbie have to say about that? she wondered, and wanted to laugh, thinking of Debbie here, sprawling on her bed with the panda. She found childish pyjamas stuffed into the back of a drawer. What was she going to do for padding? Her knickers showed patches of blood and that meant the pads hadn't been enough. She found some old panties and went into the bathroom with them. The bath filled quickly and there were waves of steam. Careful, she didn't want to faint, and her head was light. She got in and submerged her head. Quick, quick ... She soaped and rubbed, getting rid of the birth, the dirty shed, the damp dog smell, the blood, all that blood. It was still welling gently out of her, not much but enough to make her careful when she dried herself on the fluffy pink towels her mother changed three times a week. She put on her knickers and packed them with old panties. On went the pyjamas, the pink dressing gown. She combed her hair.

There. It was all gone. Her breasts, she knew from the book, would have milk, but she would put on a tight bra and fill it with cotton wool. She would manage. In this house, her home, they did not see each other naked. Her mother hadn't come in for years when she was having a bath, and she always knocked on the bedroom door. In Debbie's flat people ran about naked or half-dressed and Debbie might answer the door in her satin camiknickers, those great breasts of hers lolling about. Debbie often came in when Julie was in the bath to sit on the loo and chat... Tears filled Julie's eyes. Oh, no, she certainly must not cry.

She stuffed the bag with the bloody pads and her dirty clothes in it under her bed, well to the back. She would get rid of it all very early in the morning before her parents woke, which they would, at seven o'clock.

She went down the stairs, a good little girl washed and brushed, ready for the night.

In the living room her parents were silent and apart in their two well separated chairs. They had been crying again. Her father was relieved at what he saw when he cautiously took a look at her (as if it had been too painful to see her before), and he said, 'It's good to have you home, Julie.' His voice broke.

Her mother said, 'I've made you some nice sandwiches.'

Four thin slices of white bread had been made into two sandwiches and cut diagonally across, the yellow of the egg prettily showing, with sprigs of parsley disposed here and there. Hunger sprang in Julie like a tiger, and she ate ravenously, watching her

mother's pitying, embarrassed face. Why, she thinks I've been short of food! Well, that's a good thing, it'll put her off the scent.

Her mother went off to make more food. Would she boil another egg, perhaps?

'Anything'll do. Mum. Jam ... I'd love some jam on some toast.'

- 5 She had finished the sandwiches and drunk down the tea long before her mother had returned with a tray, half a loaf of bread, butter, strawberry jam, more tea.

'I don't like to think of you going without food,' she said.

- 10 'But I didn't, not really,' said Julie, remembering all the feasts she had had with Debbie, the pizzas that arrived all hours of the day and the night from almost next door, the Kentucky chicken, the special steak feeds when Debbie got hungry, which was often. In the little kitchen was a bowl from Morocco kept piled with fruit. 'You must get enough vitamins,' Debbie kept saying, and brought in more grapes, more apples and pears, let alone fruit Julie had never heard of, like pomegranates and pawpaws, which Debbie had learned to like on one of her trips somewhere.

- 15 'We aren't going to pester you with questions,' said her mother.

'I've been with a girl. Her name is Debbie. She was good to me. I've been all right,' said Julie, looking at her mother, and then at her father. There, don't ask any more questions.

- 20 'A girl?' said her father heavily. He still kept his eyes away from Julie, because when he looked at her the tears started up again.

'Well, I haven't been with a boyfriend,' said Julie and could not stop herself laughing at this ridiculous idea.

- 25 They were all laughing with relief, with disbelief ... they think I've been off with a boy! What were they imagining? Julie contemplated the incident in the school cloakroom with Billy Jayson that so improbably had led to the scene in the shed with the dog. She had joked with Debbie that it would be a virgin birth. 'He hardly got it in,' she had said. 'I didn't think anything had really happened.'

- 30 Probably Billy had forgotten all about it. Unless he connected her leaving school and running away from home with that scene in the cloakroom? But why should he? It was four months after they had tussled and shoved and giggled, she saying, No no, and he saying, Oh come on, then.

‘Are you going back to school?’ asked her mother carefully. ‘The officer came round last week and said you still could. There are two terms left. And you’ve always been a good girl before this.’

5 ‘Yes, I’ll go back,’ said Julie. Seven months – she could manage that. She’d be bored, but never mind. And then ... This was the moment she should say something more, explain, make up some lies, for they both sat staring at her, their faces full of what they had been feeling for the long five months she had been gone. She knew she was treating them badly, refusing to say anything. Well, she would, but not now, she was suddenly absolutely exhausted. Full of hot tea and food, she felt herself letting go,
10 letting herself slide ... She began to yawn and could not stop. But they did not suggest she should go to bed, and this was because they simply could not believe they wouldn’t get anything more from her.

But there was nothing she could say. She looked at her father, that cautious, greyish, elderly man, sitting heavily in his chair. At her mother, who seemed almost girlish as
15 she sat upright there in her pretty pale blue dress with its nice little collar and the little pearl buttons down the front. Her grey curls were sprightly, and her blue eyes full of wounded and uncomprehending innocence. Julie thought, I wish I could just snuggle up to Mum and she could hold me and I could go to sleep. Surely this must have happened when she was small, but she could not remember it. In this family,
20 they simply did not touch each other.

Full of the clarity of her exhaustion, and because of what she had learned in the last months, she saw her parents and knew that they cancelled each other out. Debbie would say there was something wrong with their chemistry. They did not disagree. They never raised their voices, or argued. Each day was a pattern of cups of tea,
25 meals, cups of coffee and biscuits, always at exactly the same times, with bedtime as the goal. They seldom went out. They saw very few people, only each other. It was as if they had switched themselves off.

They had been old when she was born, was that the trouble?

30 At Debbie’s people shouted, kissed, hugged, argued, fought, threatened, wept, and screamed.

There were two bedrooms in that flat. Debbie had given her the little one to herself. She was supposed to make herself scarce when Debbie came in with a man, a new one, but not when Derek was there, Debbie’s real boyfriend. Derek joked a lot and ordered Julie about. How about making me a cup of tea, getting me a drink, making
35 me some bacon and eggs, what have you been doing with yourself, why don’t you get yourself a new hairdo, a new dress? He liked Julie, though she did not like him much. She knew he was not good enough for Debbie.

Soon Debbie would get rid of him. As she had the man who once owned the flat and took a percentage of what she earned. But Debbie had found out something bad about him, had put the screws on, got the flat for herself, worked for herself. Julie had seen this man just once, and he had given her the creeps. 'My first love,' Debbie joked, and
5 laughed loudly when Julie grimaced. Derek did not give her the creeps, he was just nothing! Ordinary. Boring. But the man Debbie had gone to New York with was a TV producer. He was making a series no one had heard about in England, not good enough to sell here, he said. This man was more like it, but Julie thought Debbie would get rid of him too, when something better came up.

10 All these thoughts, these judgments, so unlike anything ever said or thought in her own home, went on in Julie's mind quite comfortably, though they wouldn't do for herself. Debbie had to be like this, because of her hard life. This included something bad that Debbie had never talked about, but it was why she had been so good to Julie. Probably, just like Julie, Debbie had stood very late in a railway station, pregnant, her
15 head full of rubbish about how she would get a job, have the baby, bring it up, find a man who would love her and the baby. Or perhaps it had been something else to do with being pregnant and alone. It was not she, Julie, who had earned five months of Debbie's love and protection, it was pregnant Julie, helpless and alone.

Oh, yes, Debbie was fond of her.

20 Sometimes she spent the night in Debbie's big bed because Debbie could not bear to sleep alone. She got scared, she said. She could not believe that Julie wasn't frightened of the dark. Debbie always crashed straight off to sleep, even when she hadn't been drinking. Then Julie cautiously got up on her elbow and bent over sleeping Debbie, to examine her, try and find out... Debbie was a big handsome girl.
25 Her skin was very white, and she had black shiny straight hair, and she made up her lips to be thin and scarlet and curving, just right for the lashing, slashing tongue behind them. When she was asleep her face was smooth and closed, and her lips were ordinary, quite pathetic Julie thought, and there was wear under her eyes. That face showed nothing of why Debbie said to people coming into the flat who might notice
30 Julie the wrong way, 'Lay off, do you hear? Lay off, or I'll...' And her scarlet lips and her black eyes were nasty, frightening.

But if Debbie woke in the night, she might turn to Julie and draw her into an embrace that told Julie how little she knew about love, about tenderness. Then Julie lay awake, astounded at the revelations this big hot smooth body made, and went on making,
35 even though Debbie was off to sleep again. She never actually 'did anything'. Julie even waited for 'something' to happen. Nothing ever did. Just once Debbie put her hand down to touch the mound of Julie's stomach, but took it quickly away. Julie lay entangled with Debbie, and they were like two cats that have finished washing each

other and gone to sleep, and Julie knew how terribly she had been deprived at home, and how empty and sad her parents were. Suppose she said to her mother now. Mum, let me come into your bed tonight, I'm scared, I've missed you ... She could just see her mother's embarrassed, timid face. 'But Julie, you're a big girl now.'

- 5 Anne and Len slept in twin beds stretched out parallel to each other, the night table between them.

There were tears in Julie's eyes, and she did not know it, but then she did and looked quickly at her mother, then her father, for they must not know she would give anything to cry and cry, and be comforted and held ... But they weren't looking at
10 her, only at the television. They had switched it on, without her noticing. Now all three of them sat staring at it.

On the screen a woman announcer smiled the special smile that goes with royalty, animals, and children and said, 'At eight o'clock this evening a newly born baby girl was found in a telephone box in Islington. She was warmly wrapped and healthy. She
15 weighed seven pounds and three ounces. The nurses have called her Rosie.' Hot waves of jealousy went through Julie when she saw how the nurse smiled down at the little face seen briefly by Julie in torchlight, and then again through the sleet outside the shed. 'The mother is urged to come forward as she might be in need of urgent medical attention.'

- 20 It was the late news.

Surely they were going to guess? But why should they? It was hard enough for her to believe that she could sit here in her pretty little dressing gown smelling of bath powder, when she had given birth by herself in a dirty shed with only a dog for company. Four hours ago, that was all!

- 25 'Why don't we have a dog. Mum?' asked Julie, knowing what she was going to hear.

'But they are such a nuisance, Julie. And who's going to take it for walks?'

I will. Mum.'

'But you'll have finished school in July, and I don't want the bother of a dog, and I'm sure Len doesn't.'

- 30 Her father didn't say anything. He leaned forward and turned off the set. The screen went blank.

'I often wonder what Jessie thinks,' he remarked, 'when she sees something like this on the telly, I mean.'

'Oh, leave it, Len,' said Anne warningly.

5 Julie did not really hear this, but then she did: her ears sprang to life, and she knew something extraordinary was about to happen.

'That's why we were so worried about you,' said Julie's father, heavy, grief-ridden, reproachful. 'It's easy enough to happen, how were we to know you weren't...'

'Len, we agreed we wouldn't ever...'

10 'What about Auntie Jessie?' asked Julie, trying to take it in. A silence. 'Well, what about her. Dad? You can't just leave it like that.'

'Len,' said Anne wildly.

15 'Your Auntie Jessie got herself into the family way,' said her father, determined to say it, ignoring his wife's face, her distress. His face was saying. Why should she be spared when she's given us such a bad time? 'She wasn't much older than you are now.' At last he was looking straight at Julie, full of reproach, and his eyes dripped tears all down his face and on to his tie. 'It can happen easy enough, can't it?'

'You mean ... but what happened to the baby? Was it born?'

'Your cousin Freda,' said Len, still bitter and obstinate, his accusing eyes on his daughter.

20 'You mean, Freda is ... you mean. Auntie Jessie's mum and dad didn't mind?'

25 "They minded, all right," said Anne. "I remember all that well enough. They wanted the baby adopted, but Jessie stuck it out and had it, and in the end they came around. I still think they were right and Jessie was wrong. She was only seventeen. She never would say who the father was. She was stuck at home with the baby when she should have been out enjoying herself and learning things. She got married when she was a baby herself."

By now Julie was more or less herself again, though she felt as if she'd been on a roller coaster. Above all, what she was thinking was, I've got to get it all out of them now, because I know them, they'll clam up and never talk of it again.

30 'Didn't Uncle Bob mind?' she asked.

‘Not so that he wouldn’t marry her, he married her, didn’t he, and she had a love child he had to take on,’ said her father, full of anger and accusations.

‘A love child,’ said Julie derisively, unable to stop herself. But her parents didn’t notice.

- 5 ‘That’s what they call it, I believe,’ said her father, all heavy and sarcastic. ‘Well, that’s what can happen, Julie, and you’ve always been such a sensible girl and that made it worse.’ And now, unbelievably, this father of hers, whom she had so feared she ran away from home, sat sobbing, covering his face with his hands.

Her mother was weeping, her eyes bright, her cheeks red.

- 10 In a moment Julie would be bawling too.

‘I’m going to bed,’ she said, getting up. ‘Oh, I’m sorry Mum, I’m sorry. Dad, I’m sorry...’

‘It’s all right, Julie,’ said her mother.

- 15 Julie went out of the room and up the stairs and into her room, walking carefully now, because she was so sore. And she felt numbed and confused, because of Aunt Jessica and her cousin Freda. Why, she, Julie, could have ... she could be sitting here now, with her baby Rosie, they wouldn’t have thrown her out.

- 20 She didn’t know what to think, or to feel ... She felt ... she wanted ... ‘Oh, Debbie,’ she cried, but silently, tucked into her little bed, her arms around the panda. ‘Oh, Debbie, what am I to do?’

- 25 She thought, In July, when I’ve finished school, I am going back, I’m going to run away, I’ll go to London and get a job, and I can have my baby. For a few minutes she persuaded herself it was not the silly little girl who had run away who said this, but the Debbie-taught girl who knew what things cost. Then she said to herself, Stop it, stop it, you know better.

- 30 She thought of Aunt Jessie’s house. She had always enjoyed that house. It occurred to her now that Debbie’s place and Aunt Jessie’s had a lot in common – noisy, disturbing, exciting. Which was why her parents did not much like going there. But here, a baby here, Rosie with her long wrinkled cunt here ... Julie was laughing her raucous, derisive laugh, but it was unhappy because she had understood that Rosie her daughter could not come here, because she, Julie, could not stand it.

I’ll take Rosie to Debbie’s in London, said Julie, in a final futile attempt.

But Debbie had taken in pregnant Julie. *That was what had been paid.*

If Julie brought baby Rosie here, then she would have to stay here. Until she got married. Like Auntie Jessie. Julie thought of Uncle Bob. Now she realized she had always seen him as Auntie Jessie's shadow, not up to much. She had wondered why
5 Auntie Jessie married him. Now she knew.

I've got to get out of here, she thought, I've got to. In July I'll leave. I'll have my O levels. I can get them easily. I'll work hard and get my five O levels. I'll go to London. I know how things are, now. Look, I've lived in Debbie's flat, and I didn't let myself get hurt by them. I was clever, no one knew I was pregnant, only Debbie. I had Rosie
10 by myself in that shed with only a dog to help me, and then I put Rosie in a safe place and now she's all right, and I've come home, and I've managed it all so well they never even guessed. I'm all right.

With her arms around the panda Julie thought, I can do anything I want to do, I've proved that.

15 And she drifted off to sleep.