I

Julia gave the child the doll, and waited. There was a toy cradle in the room, and a toy pram, the old-fashioned sort, not a buggy. Beside the cradle and the pram was a neat pile of miniature blankets, and sheets, and pillows. No duvets. Julia made a mental note to include a duvet in the choice of bedlinen. Most children today would be used to duvets, not sheets and blankets. Sheets and blankets might confuse them.

The child, a girl of eight, small for her age, thin and quite frail-looking, though she had been examined and pronounced perfectly healthy, held the doll in both hands, gripping it round its shoulders. She looked at it without any apparent interest. It was a baby doll, with a bald head, and blue eyes which could close if the doll was tilted in a certain way. It was dressed in a

Babygro, a blue one, and underneath it wore a paper nappy. After a minute or so, the girl looked up at Julia, and frowned. She put the doll down, and folded her arms.

Quietly, without speaking, Julia picked the doll up and gave it a cuddle, patting it on its back as though it were a real baby. Then she went to the toy pram and put the doll into it. The girl began to show some interest, but this interest was more in Julia's action than in doll or pram. Carefully, Julia tucked the sheets and blankets round the doll until only its head, with its closed eyes, was visible. Then she pushed the pram backwards and forwards, edging it nearer and nearer to the girl, and then finally letting it come to rest right beside her. The girl immediately pushed the pram away, quite violently.

Julia was eight when the invitation to be a bridesmaid came from her cousin Iris. It was a great surprise to Julia's mother as well as to Julia herself. Iris's mother and Julia's mother were sisters, but they were not close. Julia's mother had always felt that Maureen, her older sister, treated her with disdain. She'd felt this all her life, and so had been happy, once she had married and moved away from Manchester, where they were both born, to keep her distance.

But a wedding changed things. Julia's mother understood that her sister would want the gathering together of her family, if just to match the gathering on the bridegroom's side. The bridegroom was a major in the army and his father was an MP. Maureen couldn't match that but she could at least have her sister and niece at her side.

But, though she understood this, Julia's mother did not immediately accept the invitation for Julia to be a bridesmaid; she waited three days, and then she rang her sister up, saying she doubted whether Julia could accept because of the expense involved. There would be the dress, the shoes, the flowers, and she had no money to spare for any of those things. She reminded her sister that she was a widow on a small, a very small, pension. Her sister was furious, but she tried to keep the anger at Julia's mother boasting of her poverty (which is how she regarded it) out of her voice. She reminded herself that her sister had had a hard time, and was indeed quite poor, whereas she herself was comparatively well off, and ought to be magnanimous. She said her sister was not to worry about the expense. She said that of course she would pay for Julia's outfit and everything that went with it. She had always intended to and should have made this clear.

If Julia's measurements were sent, a dress would be made and shoes bought.

Julia's mother still made a fuss about expense. She and Julia were to stay with Maureen, so the cost of a hotel was not involved, but a train ticket to Manchester would be pricey. Then there was the expense of getting to the station in the first place. The buses from their village were rare, and at awkward times, so a taxi would be needed. On and on Julia's mother went, moaning about money, doing sums on scraps of paper, looking in her bank book and emptying loose change out of various tin boxes marked 'gas' and 'rent'. Julia, always a good and obedient child, held her breath and waited. Meanwhile, a swatch of material arrived in the post, sent by Maureen to show Julia the colour and texture of the dress being made for her. It was not pink. That was the first disappointment. Julia had always assumed the dress would be pink. Instead, it was not exactly white but a kind of cream. And it was not soft or silky. This scrap of material felt like cotton, or even – 'Good heavens,' said Julia's mother – rayon. 'If it's rayon,' she warned Julia, 'it will crease instantly.'

A taxi to the station was not in the end needed. Julia's mother had told everyone about the coming wedding, dropping the name of the bridegroom's family ever so casually, and she and Julia were

offered a lift by the village shopkeeper's daughter who was going into Penrith that day. But nobody met them at the other end. Manchester station was, to Julia, terrifying. She held her mother's hand tightly. 'I don't know what to do,' her mother kept saying, which didn't help Julia's fear. 'Maureen said we'd be met.' Clearly, some arrangement had gone wrong. After a good fifteen minutes of standing stock-still on the platform where they had alighted, Julia's mother told her they would have to get a bus. She had a vague memory of a bus which went to the end of Maureen's road, but had no idea where the bus stop could be found. 'We will have to ask,' she said, in tones of horror. What, Julia wondered, was so terrible about asking where to find a bus stop? But her mother's agitation had communicated itself to her so completely that this wondering did not help. The noise in the station, the shrieking of the trains as they arrived and departed, and the surging crowds of hurrying people, made Julia terrified.

That was her recollection. Aged eight. Terrified, over something so unthreatening.

The girl's mother was waiting in the adjoining room. One look at the woman's face and it was

obvious that she had recently done a lot of weeping. Her eyes were red and the dark shadows underneath them appeared shiny, as though they were damp. Her hair, thin hair, bedraggled, had been pushed back behind her ears, but little tendrils had escaped and clung to her cheeks.

'Well?' she said to Julia, making no movement towards her child, who stood in front of her mother, waiting. There was no gesture of affection. She didn't, Julia noted, even look at the girl. It was as though she were not standing there, entirely submissive. 'Well?' she said again, her voice rising higher this time on the question.

Julia smiled, and sat down. 'I think Honor might be thirsty,' she said. 'It was rather warm in my room. I'll just get her a glass of water. I won't be a moment.'

It would have been useful to have a two-way mirror in that room, but there had never been any money for that helpful device, and Julia was not sure if she herself would have agreed with the spying element. Useful, though, in a situation like this. But re-entering the room, carrying water for Honor, Julia was pretty certain nothing significant had happened during the two minutes she'd been absent. Mrs Brooks hadn't folded her daughter in her arms, or in any way tried to

connect with her. Both mother and child were in exactly the same positions, their faces wearing exactly the same expressions, both of them tense and silent.

'Well?' Mrs Brooks said, this time neither challenging, nor impatient, but resigned.

'Sit down, Honor,' Julia said gently. 'Drink this. You look hot. You must be thirsty. Mrs Brooks, would you like some tea or coffee?'

Mrs Brooks shook her head. 'Let's get on with it,' she said. 'Let's have it straight, for God's sake.'

Julia looked at her. She looked into the mother's eyes steadily, unblinkingly, keeping her expression entirely blank, no frown, no slight smile, waiting. Honor drank the water greedily, in three big swallowings which were heard distinctly.

Mrs Brooks closed her eyes and sighed. 'What happens now?' she asked.

The bridesmaid's dress didn't fit. Julia's mother was almost delighted by this. There was no dismay in her voice as she said to her sister Maureen, 'The dress doesn't fit, it's been made too small!' Her tone was one of peculiar triumph.

'Or Julia has grown since you sent those

measurements,' said Maureen, adding, 'if they were accurate in the first place.'

Julia stood miserably in the too-tight dress while the sisters argued, each insulting the other in every word said. Julia tried not to listen. She wondered if she was allowed to take the dress off now it had been demonstrated that it didn't fit her. There was a mirror in the bedroom where this unsuccessful fitting took place, a full-length oval-shaped mirror on a wooden stand. Julia could see herself only partially because the mirror was slightly swivelled, making the lower half of her body invisible. It was a little like looking in a fairground mirror. She felt she was distorted, though she didn't know if this was the fault of the tight dress or the mirror. Whatever the reason, she felt miserable, standing there waiting to see what would happen when her mother and aunt stopped arguing. It never occurred to her to give her own opinion.

Then Iris came in. Oh, she was so pretty!

'Julia!' Iris said, laughing, holding her arms out. 'How you've grown! What a big girl you are!'

Julia blushed deeply. She'd forgotten what her cousin looked like, all that long blonde hair, so smooth and sleek, and the big blue eyes and the round face with the neat little nose, and the perfect

skin with cheeks so pink, glowing with health and happiness. Julia couldn't credit that her Aunt Maureen was this girl's mother. Where had Iris's prettiness come from? And then Iris saved her.

'Mummy,' she said, 'Julia's dress doesn't fit. Phone Mrs Batey right now and get her round here to see what she can do. I can't have my best bridesmaid in a dress that doesn't fit. Poor love, look at her, it's a shame.'

Mrs Batey came. She was in a huff, suspicious that the dress not fitting would be blamed on her dressmaking skills, but Iris handled her expertly. Mrs Batey, Iris cooed, was clever. Mrs Batey could see ways of managing things which no other dressmaker could. What Mrs Batey saw was that all the dress needed was the side seams let out. The waist dropped, and the hem let down. There was time, just, to do all this (at a price), and for Iris, Mrs Batey would do anything.

During the next few days, before the wedding, Julia saw how everyone was in thrall to her cousin Iris. She was both loved and admired. Her own mother, Maureen, adored her. Julia could not have said how she knew this, but know it she did. So did Julia's mother. 'Sun rises and sets with Iris,' she complained, though why this had to be a complaint Julia could not fathom. 'Spoiled, she's

been spoiled from the day she was born. There could be a shock coming.' A shock? Julia was alarmed and worried, and asked her mother what would this shock be, would the lovely Iris be hurt? The reply to this was far too enigmatic for an eight-year-old. Julia didn't get the full significance of 'She'll have to come down to earth with a bump once she's married'. A bump didn't sound too dangerous. Iris could surely survive it.

Julia had flowers in her hair, which pleased her enormously, cornflowers and daisies, cunningly wreathed together and attached to a velvet band. They made up for the dress being off-white and quite plain. And she had a posy, too, tied with blue ribbon. 'You're as pretty as a picture,' Iris said. It was Iris who was the picture. Even Julia's mother was silenced by the vision of Iris in her bridal gown. The dress was simple, nothing meringue-like or frothy, cut on the bias, the satin draping perfectly round Iris's slender figure. 'How do I look?' Iris asked. 'Lovely,' was the chorus, and again, 'Lovely, *lovely*.' Then Maureen began to cry, and barely stopped for the rest of the day. Tears of happiness, tears of joy, or so she said, but even Julia could tell these were tears of loss and pain. They were 'so close', this mother and daughter, or so Julia heard guests constantly saying to each other throughout the wedding

reception. Never been such a close mother and daughter. They were more like sisters, someone said, which Julia thought perfectly ridiculous. Did that person have eyes? Could she not see what Maureen looked like, what Iris looked like? Sisters?

Honor had required extra care after her difficult birth. That, of course, might explain a lot (the difficult birth). And the fact that Honor was a girl and not a boy. It had emerged early on that Honor 'should have been' a son, not a daughter. Julia hadn't asked why Mrs Brooks had wanted a son, why she cared about the sex of her first baby. It was not, after all, relevant. Mrs Brooks herself, it had also emerged, was one of three sisters, the middle one, also 'meant' to be a boy. 'I was never forgiven,' she had told Julia dramatically. Julia had smiled politely, and skilfully steered her back along the path she wanted her to go along. So, she had said, tell me about Honor as a baby. This was also a tale of woe. Honor was difficult, didn't feed properly, cried most of the time, took ages to regain her birth weight, couldn't hold her head up until she was three months old, maybe more, and really Honor's

development had gone on like that, difficult, right from the start.

Julia asked, at one point, who Honor showed affection to.

'Affection?' Mrs Brooks echoed, as though affection were a disease.

'Does she have a pet, perhaps?' Julia pressed. 'Or a soft toy she cuddles?'

'She's been given plenty of soft toys,' Mrs Brooks said, sounding angry, 'she hasn't been deprived of soft toys, I can tell you that. She's had teddy bears and every stuffed animal you can name, a whole zoo of them.'

Julia nodded, and politely asked again if Honor had shown affection for any of them and was there a particular toy she took to bed?

'She's eight,' her mother said, 'she's too old to take toys to bed, for goodness' sake.'

Julia nodded again, and made a note. 'What about relatives?' she suggested. 'Her aunts? Your sisters or cousins? Does she have cousins she's fond of?'

'No,' said Mrs Brooks.

'No to aunts, or No to cousins, or both?' Julia said.

'No to both,' she said, and did not elaborate.

Considering how defensive she always was, Julia was surprised no justification for this lack

of contact followed. The subject was considered closed, but Julia wouldn't agree to this. 'Friends?' she queried. 'Is Honor fond of any school friend, or has she been until recently?'

'She's never been keen on friends,' Mrs Brooks said, but this time sounding almost apologetic and not aggressive. 'I've tried,' she went on, 'I've invited children in her class to come and play after school, though Honor didn't want me to, but it wasn't a success.'

'How many times did you try?' Julia asked, injecting as much sympathy as possible into the question.

'Once,' she said, 'then I took the hint. What was the point if Honor wasn't interested? It just made me look silly when *I* had to play with the other child.'

'What did you play?' Julia asked quickly.

'What?' Mrs Brooks was annoyed again.

'What did you play with the other child?'

'Heavens, you expect me to remember that?'

'Why?' said Julia gently. 'Was it a long time ago, this one play date?'

There was a distinct pause, a real hesitation. Something was being weighed up, but Julia didn't know what. It was time, perhaps, to ask this woman more about herself. She liked talking about herself. Julia had already heard how she

had had the most unfortunate of upbringings, which involved a great deal of detail, in the telling, about her parents' divorce and how this had affected her. But time was short. She couldn't let Mrs Brooks get going on her own troubles.

'I think,' said Julia, 'I need to talk to Honor's teacher.'

The wedding was on a Monday, which scandalised Julia's mother. 'A Monday!' she kept exclaiming, as though this day of the week had some in-built taint attached to it. But Monday it had to be, for reasons Julia never understood except that they were to do with the bridegroom's next tour of duty with his regiment and his father arriving back only on the Sunday night – it was all complicated. However, a Monday it was, a wet Monday. More horror from Julia's mother when the curtains were opened that morning and the weather revealed. Julia herself felt miserable just looking out on the lashing rain and wild wind stripping the trees of leaves. In her mind, the very word 'wedding' was equated somehow with sunshine and blue skies. How could there be a wedding in this storm?

Iris, though, just laughed. The rain and wind

did not dismay her at all. 'Rain on your wedding day means good luck,' she said firmly. Julia's mother asked where she'd got that bit of wisdom from, but Iris laughed some more and didn't reply. 'You *are* an old misery, Auntie,' she said mockingly. Julia held her breath. It was true. Her mother was an old misery, but only Iris dared to say so. The peculiar thing was that instead of being insulted, or reacting with anger, Julia's mother merely nodded her head and tightened her lips. Anyway, the rain didn't last and the wind died down long before the time of the wedding. By 2 p.m. the sun was beginning to struggle through the clouds and though there were puddles all along the path to the church they looked pretty, like little lakes, glinting in the suddenly sharp light.

Julia skirted these puddles carefully, not wanting to damage her beautiful white satin shoes. She progressed on tiptoe, holding up the skirt of her dress, and arrived at the church door triumphant. The other two bridesmaids, the bridegroom's sisters Sylvie and Pat, were not so careful. They were much older than Julia and their dresses (she noticed at once, and with envy) were more elaborate, full-skirted and frilly on top, whereas Julia's dress was plain and simple, not a frill or flounce to it. But the sisters were

nice girls who made a fuss of Julia. She must walk in front of them, they insisted, and right behind the bride. 'You look so sweet,' they said, and Julia blushed and smiled. Her mother was nowhere near. She was already sitting in her place. I am so sweet, Julia repeated to herself in her head, so sweet, so sweet. She stood with the other bridesmaids waiting for Iris to arrive and felt happy and light-hearted. Then the car with Iris and her father arrived and there was such excitement in the air, such a lot of bustle, with ushers darting forward to open doors, and the music beginning, and at that moment Julia heard a whisper and felt something slipped into the hand not holding her posy. 'Give it to Iris,' the whisper said, 'it's a secret, afterwards.'

There was a pocket in her dress, in a side seam. 'I've made you a pocket,' Mrs Batey had said, 'to keep a hanky in case you need it.' And a handkerchief was indeed safely tucked away there, an embroidered handkerchief her mother had given her at Christmas, embroidered with her name in purple silk thread. Julia looked quickly at what was in her hand – a small, square box wrapped in tissue paper, tied with a ribbon – and slipped it into her pocket. Her heart raced a little fast. The whisper had been Reginald's, the bridegroom's. She'd only met him once, the

day before, and had been intimidated by him. He was tall and strong-looking and he'd been wearing dark clothes and looked, to Julia, sinister. She didn't say a word to him, and all he said to her was hello. But now he was in his soldier's uniform. Julia could see him, standing waiting in front of the altar as Iris slowly advanced on her father's arm. He didn't smile. He held himself rigidly, at attention it seemed, and Julia shivered a little at the sight of him, though she didn't know why.

Julia didn't tell her mother about Reginald's whisper, or about the little box he'd given her. He'd said it was a secret, and her understanding of 'secret' was that she must keep it to herself. But she would have liked to consult her mother about exactly what 'afterwards' meant. After the wedding was over? After the wedding breakfast? After Reginald had gone off with his regiment? She worried about when to give the box to Iris. There was no chance in the church afterwards. Too many people, all thronging round the bride, and then bride and bridegroom were whisked off in a car to the church hall. There, Julia was seated next to her mother at the top table, with Iris four places to her left, in the centre. There were speeches, and applause, and a lot of laughter, though Julia failed to understand why

people were laughing, especially at the best man's speech. 'Rude, no need for it,' her mother muttered.

Then there was the photograph, a time of maximum confusion, with the photographer making a great fuss about who was to stand where. Julia was first of all told to sit at Iris's feet but then told to stand next to one of the other bridesmaids, so that she was at the end of the row. This didn't suit the photographer either. He said the 'composition' was wrong, and the 'proportions'. Once more, Julia was put in front of the bridal couple but this time slightly in the centre, with the other two bridesmaids flanking the bride and bridegroom. Other group photographs were taken, with more and more people in them, and in the final one Julia was squeezed right at the end, almost out of the picture. She was tired by then and found it hard to smile, as instructed, or even to say 'cheese'.

Later, at school, she boasted about being a bridesmaid, describing her dress in a way that was not exactly a lie but was rather imaginative.

'Honor doesn't participate,' the teacher told Julia, 'not in any way. She doesn't volunteer any

opinions. If I ask her some direct question, she just shrugs. She can't be coaxed into expressing herself.'

It was a fee-paying school, the children wearing a neat uniform: blue-and-white-checked shirts, plain dark blue skirts or trousers, and a blue blazer with a white dove crest on the pocket. The school had been founded in the late sixties when a dove was the symbol of peaceful protest against the Vietnam War. Parents liked the idea of this, and they liked the uniform. Mrs Brooks said Honor couldn't have been at a nicer school, what with the uniform and the small classes and the strict discipline. The fees were high, but she believed anything worth having comes at a price. It was obvious. You get what you pay for. But Honor had not made the best of the opportunities being at such a model school gave her. She hadn't liked school from day one and had made a fuss about going every single morning from then on. What was there not to like? her mother had asked, of course she had, but Honor gave no reason, just repeated, so annoyingly, that she hated school and did not want to go. Told that the law said she had to, she said she hated the law too. Which, said Mrs Brooks, was such a stupid thing to say, so childish. 'But she is a child,' Julia had said pointedly.

There was something about the tidy, quiet school

which Julia found a little disturbing. She'd once been a teacher herself, and no school she'd ever taught in had been as unnaturally quiet as this one. The school building was an Edwardian double-fronted house, set in its own grounds. These grounds were not extensive, consisting as they did of a lawn either side of the driveway and a larger lawn at the back with some climbing apparatus at the end of it. There were no playing fields or anything like that, but then the children were aged five to eleven and not in need of football and rugby pitches and the like. There was a school bus, painted in the blue and white school colours, which took the children to the park and to a swimming pool in a local leisure centre. Their every need, the prospectus claimed, was catered for. But entering the school, Julia was struck by how the building appeared to dominate the children. The rooms were quite dark, and high-ceilinged, and though the furniture was modern and brightly coloured it was dwarfed by the space it occupied. The corridors, and the staircase, had lots of the children's artwork pinned on the walls but, again, the dark oak of the banisters, and the dark brown of the carpet on the broad stairs, seemed to fight, and win, a battle with the colourful paintings. The children looked out of place, especially the younger ones.

Honor's teacher was called Miss Cass. Julia was introduced to her by the headmaster, a Dr Richards (she assumed he was a doctor of philosophy, but in that she was wrong). 'This is Miss Cass,' he said. No Christian name was given, and Julia didn't ask for one, though she gave her own. Dr Richards said he would leave them to 'chat' about Honor Brooks, but he reminded Julia that Miss Cass only had fifteen minutes to spare. Julia said she was grateful to be spared them. They were left together, Julia and Miss Cass, in a small room next to the headmaster's study (he'd referred to it as a study, not an office). There were two leather armchairs facing each other with a coffee table between them, upon which rested a copy of the school prospectus. Miss Cass hadn't yet sat down nor had she invited Julia to do so. Thinking that to stand for the allotted fifteen minutes was absurd, Julia took the lead, though she felt she shouldn't have. 'Shall we make ourselves comfortable?' she said, smiling, and promptly sat down herself. Miss Cass hesitated, and then perched on the very edge of the seat of the other armchair.

Julia explained who she was and why she had come to ask Miss Cass about Honor, and then Miss Cass told her about Honor never responding to anything at all in class. Julia worded her

response to what Miss Cass said carefully. 'So you think Honor is shy?' she said.

Miss Cass looked surprised. 'No,' she said, 'I wouldn't call her shy.'

'What would you call her, then?' Julia asked.

There was a long pause while Miss Cass thought, and frowned. Disappointingly, she then said she was unable to describe accurately Honor's attitude, but she repeated again, quite emphatically, that the girl certainly did not give the impression of shyness. Julia switched tack. She asked the teacher if Honor was a satisfactory pupil in other ways, was her schoolwork good, was she obedient? Miss Cass said Honor's work was average, that she didn't lag behind but nor was she outstanding in any way. She wasn't *dis*obedient but there was always a certain reluctance about following instructions. She would do everything slowly and slightly resentfully. The minute Miss Cass had used the word 'resentfully', she took it back. 'What I mean,' she said, 'is that Honor never seems to enjoy cooperating.' Then she looked anxious, as though about to retract even that innocuous statement, so Julia quickly said she thought she understood what Miss Cass meant. 'Do you have any of Honor's written work available for me to see?' she asked. Miss Cass said she had an exercise book containing

work of Honor's which she was currently marking, but she would have to ask Dr Richards for permission to show it to Julia. Julia nodded, and said she would ask herself after their fifteen minutes were up.

They almost were. Miss Cass had taken so long replying to Julia's simple questions that the time passed quickly. Julia looked at her watch. 'One final thing,' she said, 'have you met Honor's mother?' There was an immediate change in the teacher's attitude. This was something she was happy to discuss. Mrs Brooks came in every day demanding to see Honor's form teacher and every day she had a list of complaints about how her daughter had allegedly been treated. Miss Cass was astonished at the list of what Mrs Brooks called 'assaults' which Honor was supposed to have suffered. She was said to have been pinched, scratched, pushed and to have had her hair pulled so viciously that she now had small bald spots all over her scalp where hairs had actually been yanked out. This was bullying, Mrs Brooks claimed, of the worst kind. Honor was defenceless against the ganging up that was going on. She didn't pay the fees she did to have her daughter treated like this.

Now the fifteen minutes were definitely up, but Miss Cass had warmed to her subject and

indignation made her forget the time. It was Julia who reminded her. She stood up, held out her hand, and thanked the teacher for being so helpful. Miss Cass, though, hadn't finished. She was eager to emphasise that Mrs Brooks was mistaken. Far from Honor being bullied, she was the bully, and Dr Richards had spoken to her after this tirade from the mother had been reported to him. Miss Cass had been so upset by the allegations, horrified that she might have missed observing Honor being tormented, and she had carried out a full investigation. The most trustworthy children in her form had assured her that no one bullied Honor Brooks. They were all much too frightened of her.

Dr Richards said yes, Julia could look at Honor's English exercise book, but in his presence, in his study. Julia didn't mind in the least where she looked at it, or in whose presence, but she was amused at Dr Richards' self-importance and suspicious nature. The exercise book was produced by Miss Cass and laid on Dr Richards' desk. 'Might I pick it up?' Julia solemnly asked.

'Of course,' Dr Richards said, suddenly apparently aware of Julia perhaps mocking him, and pushed it towards her.

Nothing written there was particularly revealing. Honor's writing was neat. Her

sentences were, for the most part, properly punctuated. The content of the various pieces of work was unremarkable, though there was one essay entitled 'My Saturdays' which offered a glimpse into Honor's life. 'On Saturdays,' it began, 'I see my cousin.'

But her mother had said Honor had no cousins.

Julia and her mother went straight home after the wedding, though they had been invited to stay. Going straight home meant catching an evening train, the last one that stopped at Penrith. Julia fell asleep as soon as she was seated and slept the whole way. Her mother had to shake her awake ten minutes before the train arrived at Penrith. It only halted there for a couple of minutes and so she and her mother had to be standing ready at the door. Julia swayed with fatigue and half fell out of the train. Her mother dragged her along the underpass and out into the dark windy night, and pushed her into the taxi she'd arranged to pick them up. Julia slept again, and had to be shaken awake when at last they reached home. She had no memory of climbing the stairs and getting undressed and into bed but when she woke up and saw where

she was she realised she must have done. If it had not been for the bridesmaid's dress draped over a chair the whole wedding would have seemed a dream.

It took Julia a long time to remember the present for Iris which Reginald had given her, and when she did she panicked in case she had lost it. But no, it was still in the pocket of her dress, the wrapping paper intact except that the tiny bit of white ribbon tied round it had come loose from its bow. Julia retied it carefully. Then she held the little package in her hand and wondered what she should do with it. She ought to have given it, as instructed, to Iris 'afterwards'. But there had been no opportunity straight after the church ceremony and then at the reception Iris was surrounded by people, and Julia resolved to wait. Reginald had said his present was a secret and so it could not be given in front of others, or that was how Julia reasoned. She would slip it to Iris when the two of them were alone. But they never were, and the truth was that Julia, during the meal and the speeches, eventually forgot what she'd been entrusted to do. It was hard to admit it to herself, but it was true, she simply forgot until the following morning, and then was overcome with guilt.

She didn't dare tell her mother. It was not just

that her mother would make a fuss but that Reginald had said his present was a secret, and a secret it must remain. Julia felt quite clear about that. Forgetting to give her cousin the gift was one thing, betraying Reginald's trust another. But how could she get the present to Iris? Iris had gone off with her new husband anyway and when she and Reginald came back from their short honeymoon (only forty-eight hours) they wouldn't be at her parents' house for long. After that, Julia had no idea what their address would be. Tears came into her eyes just thinking of the impossibility of getting the present to Iris. What would Reginald think? He would think Julia had either lost it or stolen it. Then Julia really did cry.

Her mother heard her. She came into Julia's bedroom and said this was what she'd expected. The travelling, the wedding, the rich food had all been too much, and this was the result she'd anticipated: 'hysterics'. She didn't once ask why her daughter was crying because in her opinion she knew the answer. She told Julia to wash her face and come down to the kitchen and get some wholesome food into her and then, together, they would take a brisk walk to the village shop and that would sort her out. 'And hang that dress up,' Julia's mother said, 'and put it on a padded hanger. You won't ever wear it again, but I might

be able to make something useful out of it.' As soon as her mother left the room, Julia again checked the pocket of the dress. Reginald's present was still there. She took it out and put it into the drawer holding her underwear, tucking it right at the bottom, covered by a vest she rarely wore.

Should she post it? But she only had her Aunt Maureen's address, and her aunt might open any package that arrived. The worry was making her feel sick. Downstairs, forced to nibble at the toast her mother provided, she risked asking the question to which she already felt she knew the answer.

'When will we see Iris again?'

Her mother laughed, that scornful laugh of hers containing no merriment whatsoever. 'See Iris again? Well, she doesn't visit us, does she? Oh no, we have to visit them. That's how it's always been, we get *summoned* when it's convenient. It took a funeral to bring them here, remember that?'

Julia only remembered it vaguely. She'd been barely five when her father was killed, how could she be expected to remember? A lot of people crying in their house, that was all she thought she remembered. She didn't remember her father himself all that distinctly. There were several

photographs of him round the house but these didn't summon up any real memories.

Julia managed to finish the toast and the boiled egg put in front of her, and then risked another question.

'When do you think we will be summoned again?' She kept her voice low and light so as not to enrage her mother more than was necessary.

But her mother was instantly provoked to attack. 'Why are you suddenly so keen on that lot? What's that family to you? What do you think you are to them? Iris might have asked you to be her bridesmaid, but has she ever shown any real interest in you? Even after your father was killed? Has she ever sent you anything for your birthday or a little something for your Christmas stocking? No, she has not. I'd be ashamed if I were them, ashamed.'

There was a long silence. Julia didn't dare to point out to her mother that this tirade was not a reply to her question. The best thing to do was keep quiet and hope that eventually her mother would realise she hadn't answered and would go into another reply which might be more informative.

'Summoned?' she queried after a good few minutes. 'Summoned, did you say?'

'You said it,' Julia said, her tone cautious, the

accusation of being cheeky hovering in the air. 'You said we only see Iris when Aunt Maureen summons us.'

Julia's mother nodded, inexplicably pleased with this explanation. 'Well then, there you are. We'll get summoned if there's another wedding or a funeral.'

Julia sat thinking about this. How could there be another wedding when Iris was an only child, just as she was, and she was already now married? And who would a funeral be for? Who was likely to die? But then her own father hadn't been likely to die. He'd had an accident involving a chainsaw which had slipped (Julia had been spared the details). She'd heard him described by people as having been the strongest, most fit man they'd ever known. So maybe Aunt Maureen or Uncle Tom would have an accident of some sort and there would be a funeral and she and her mother would be summoned and she would see Iris again and give her Reginald's present.

Julia agonised over what to do for another three days, then decided she would have to tell her mother. It was silly to wait for a funeral and a summons that might not come for years. Reginald would have found out by now that Iris had not been given the secret present and he would want to know what Julia had done with

it. Over breakfast Julia tried to catch her mother's attention.

'Mum,' she said, and at that moment the telephone rang.

'Get that, Julia,' her mother said, 'though I don't know who can be ringing at this time of the morning.'

Julia obediently answered the phone. It was her Uncle Tom, his voice hoarse, as though he had a terrible cold. He told her he needed to speak to her mother. Julia relayed this message, and saw a peculiar expression cross her mother's face as she dried her hands and turned from the sink to go over to the alcove where the phone rested. Julia had never seen this look on her mother's face before and couldn't quite interpret it. Excitement was there, and eagerness, but also something else. Dread? Julia didn't know.

After that, things happened quickly. Julia was told to pack her nightdress and a change of underclothes in a bag, and then put her coat on and stand at the window watching for the taxi.

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Manchester, to your aunt and uncle's, now hurry up.'

Julia fairly skipped up the stairs, delighted to be returning to Manchester. All the problems about Reginald's present would be solved. She

put the present in her bag and resolved to slip it into Iris's room as soon as she got to her aunt's house. She'd remembered her aunt say that Iris would be returning, after the brief honeymoon, before going to live in the married quarters of Reginald's regiment. She had a lot of stuff to sort out and take, and Uncle Tom was going to drive her there. Julia was smiling and humming with relief as she put her coat on and took up her position at the window.

'Take that silly grin off your face,' her mother snapped, 'we're going to a house of mourning.'

Julia put off writing her report on Honor Brooks for as long as possible. There seemed so much doubt about so many aspects of the case and she hadn't been able to resolve them to her own satisfaction never mind to other people's. Honor was an enigma. Her mother, on the other hand, was not. There was no need to wonder what part she had played in all this, or what she thought about Honor. She was absolutely sure that her daughter was guilty and had fully intended to do what she had done. She wanted Honor 'dealt with', as she put it. 'There must be places where they treat girls like Honor,' she said,

and added, 'she isn't safe, mixing with normal children, I mean the other children aren't safe, not after what she's done.'

But that was the point: what had Honor done? The baby was dead. That was indisputable. Honor had been the last person known to have touched her. That was admitted by her. She went into the baby's room because she heard her crying and she picked her up, trying to comfort her, and she cuddled her. Cuddled? The word and its meaning had been gone over and over. How hard had the three-week-old baby been cuddled? How had Honor held her? Over her shoulder? Tight to her chest? And for how long? Till she stopped crying, at any rate. Then Honor put the baby back in the cradle and went downstairs where her mother and her friend, the baby's mother, were talking. 'Is the baby asleep now?' the friend, the mother, had asked, and Honor had not replied. She walked straight out into the garden and kicked a tennis ball lying on the grass. This was made much of by Mrs Brooks. The ignoring of the enquiry about whether the baby was asleep and then the kicking of the ball were in her opinion proof of guilt.

In all Julia's experience, she had never come across any mother who did not attempt at least some sort of defence of her child. Most mothers

were aggressively defensive, no matter how damning the evidence. It troubled Julia a great deal that Mrs Brooks was so antagonistic towards her own daughter. Why? Where were the seeds of this buried?

She resolved to have one final interview with Honor.

Today, Honor was wearing a strange assortment of garments whereas previously she had been in her school uniform. Julia studied them. Nothing remarkable about the jeans, except that they seemed too big for the child, but the frilly apricot-coloured dress worn over a long-sleeved red T-shirt was startling. The colours clashed. The scarlet fighting with the almost-orange, and the material of the dress, gauze-like, looked odd stretched over the cotton T-shirt. Maybe, Julia thought, I am out of touch with what eight-year-old girls choose to wear. It crossed her mind that her mother must have allowed Honor to do just that, 'choose' her own clothes. Surely she herself would never have selected this outfit?

To mention the clothes or not . . . Julia hesitated. Best not to make too much of them, probably. She invited Honor to sit on the large beanbag, telling her how comfortable it was to settle into. Other children enjoyed hurling

themselves onto the bright blue canvas, but Honor treated it as though it were a straight-backed wooden chair, lowering herself carefully onto it, refusing to surrender her body to it. Her arms were braced either side, her hands clutching the canvas. She looked awkward, ill at ease, so much so that Julia felt she had to ask her if she would prefer to sit on an ordinary chair. Honor said she was OK. There was a defiance in her expression which Julia read as a refusal to give in to the idea of moving. She was going to sit where she'd been told to sit however uncomfortable she was. It meant some kind of victory, though over what Julia wasn't sure.

It was half-term, hence no school uniform. Even though Honor had not been at school since the baby died, she had always been wearing this uniform until now. Her mother said it made the home schooling seem more school-like if Honor wore her uniform, and Julia agreed she could see that this might be true. But this week was the official half-term, and so Honor's tutor had been told not to come though she had been willing to.

Julia wondered, aloud, what Honor had been doing this week.

Honor shrugged. 'Nothing,' she said.

Julia said that must be very boring for her.

Honor shrugged again, and said, 'Don't mind.'

'You don't mind being bored?' Julia asked, keeping disbelief out of her tone. 'That's interesting. When I'm bored, I mind it. I want something to do, or something to happen.'

Honor neither shrugged nor spoke. She just stared at Julia, and waited.

The day the baby died was a Saturday. Leila Brooks and Honor had arrived at around two in the afternoon. Leila's friend, the mother of the baby, had made coffee for Leila and given Honor some apple juice. She'd also provided cupcakes, apologising for not having baked them herself. They were iced, a selection of pink, yellow and chocolate. Leila declined a cupcake but Honor had two and would have accepted a third if her mother had not admonished her for greed. All this detail – the time of arrival at the friend's house, the cupcakes, etc. – had been gone over many times. None of it was important except that attention to detail helped to recreate the atmosphere of the afternoon and through doing that there was the hope that the truth of exactly what had happened might emerge. But it had not emerged. There was no clear medical evidence that the baby had been in any provable way harmed by Honor. She had been the last person to touch the baby, a fact freely admitted, so there had not been any real need for forensic tests to

confirm this, though they had been carried out anyway. It was the baby's mother who was convinced that Honor had harmed the baby. Mrs Brooks had come to believe this too. They thought Honor had smothered the baby, pressed her so tightly to her chest or shoulder that she had been asphyxiated. But there was no evidence of this. It was a cot death.

Julia had a hospital appointment. She resolved to spend the time sitting in the clinic profitably. She would sit with her eyes closed, thinking about Honor Brooks and what she should write in her report. Forcing herself to concentrate hard would make the waiting more tolerable.

Right, she told herself, once she was seated in the corridor between a large man who had a plaster covering his left cheek, which he kept touching, and a pregnant young woman who was turning the pages of a magazine, turning them noisily and quickly, appearing to pay no attention to the contents – right, *concentrate*.