

TESSA HADLEY

Funny Little Snake

The child was nine years old and couldn't fasten her own buttons. Valerie knelt in front of her on the carpet in the spare room as Robyn held out first one cuff and then the other without a word, then turned around to present the back of her dress, where a long row of spherical chocolate-brown buttons was unfastened over a grubby white petticoat edged with lace. Her tiny, bony shoulder blades flickered with repressed movement. And although every night since Robyn had arrived, a week ago, Valerie had encouraged her into a bath foamed up with bubbles, she still smelled of something furtive – musty spice from the back of a cupboard. The smell had to be in her dress, which Valerie didn't dare wash because it looked as though it had to be dry-cleaned, or in her lank, liquorice-coloured hair, which was pulled back from her forehead under an even grubbier stretch Alice band. Trust Robyn's mother to have a child who couldn't do up buttons, and then put her in a fancy plaid dress with hundreds of them, and frogging and leg-of-mutton sleeves, like a Victorian orphan, instead of ordinary slacks and a T-shirt so that she could play. The mother went around, apparently, in long dresses and bare feet, and had her picture painted by artists. Robyn at least had tights and plimsolls with elastic tops – though her green coat was too thin for the winter weather.

Valerie had tried to talk to her stepdaughter. It was the first time they'd met, and she'd braced herself for resentment, the child's mind poisoned against her. Robyn was miniature, a doll – with a plain, pale, wide face, her temples blue-naked where her hair was strained back, her wide-open grey eyes affronted and evasive and set too far apart. She wasn't naughty, and she wasn't actually silent – that would have been a form of stubbornness to combat, to coax and manoeuvre around. She was a nullity, an

absence, answering yes and no obediently if she was questioned, in that languid drawl that always caught Valerie on the raw – though she knew the accent wasn't the child's fault, only what she'd learned. Robyn even said please and thank you, and she told Valerie the name of her teacher, but when Valerie asked whether she liked the teacher her eyes slipped uneasily away from her stepmother's and she shrugged, as if such an idea as liking or not liking hadn't occurred to her. The only dislikes she was definite about had to do with eating. When Valerie put fish pie on Robyn's plate the first night, she shot her a direct look of such piercing desperation that Valerie, who was a good, wholesome cook and had been going to insist, asked her kindly what she ate at home. Eggs? Cottage pie? Baked beans?

Honestly, the girl hardly seemed to know the names of things. Toast was all she could think of. Definitely not eggs: a vehement head shake. Toast, and – after long consideration, then murmuring hesitantly, tonelessly – tomato soup, cornflakes, butterscotch Instant Whip. It was lucky that Gil wasn't witness to all this compromise, because he would have thought Valerie was spoiling his daughter. He and Valerie ate together later, after Robyn was in bed. Gil might have been a left-winger in his politics, but he was old-fashioned in his values at home. He despised, for instance, the little box of a house the university had given them, and wanted to move into one of the rambling old mansions on the road behind his office. He thought they had more style, with their peeling paint and big gardens overgrown with trees.

Valerie didn't tell him how much she enjoyed all the conveniences of their modern home – the clean, light rooms, the central heating, the electric tin opener fitted onto the kitchen wall. And she was intrigued, because Gil was old-fashioned, by his having chosen for his first wife a woman who went barefoot and lived like a hippie in her big Chelsea flat. Perhaps Marise had been so beautiful once that Gil couldn't resist her. Valerie was twenty-four; she didn't think Marise could still be beautiful at forty. Now, anyway, he referred to her as the Rattrap, and the Beak, and the Bitch from Hell, and said that she would fuck anyone. When Valerie first married him, she hadn't believed that a professor could know such words. She'd known them herself, of course, but that was different – she wasn't educated.

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On the phone with his ex-wife, Gil had made a lot of fuss about having his daughter to visit, as a stubborn point of pride, and then had driven all the way down to London to fetch her. But, since getting back, he'd spent every day at his office at the university, even though it wasn't term time, saying that he needed absolute concentration to work on the book he was writing. Robyn didn't seem to miss him. She looked bemused when Valerie called him her daddy, as if she hardly recognized him by that name; she'd been only three or four when he'd moved out. Valerie didn't ask Gil what he'd talked about with his daughter on the long car journey; perhaps they'd driven the whole way in silence. Or perhaps he'd questioned Robyn about her mother, or ranted on about her, or talked about his work. Sometimes in the evenings he talked to Valerie for hours about university politics or other historians he envied or resented – or even about the Civil War or the Long Parliament or the idea of the state – without noticing that she wasn't listening, that she was thinking about new curtains or counting the stitches in her knitting. He might have found fatherhood easier, Valerie thought, if his daughter had been pretty. Moodily, after Robyn had gone to bed, Gil wondered aloud whether she was even his. 'Who knows, with the Great Whore of Marylebone putting it about like there's no tomorrow? The child's half feral. She doesn't look anything like me. Is she normal? Do they even send her to school? I think she's backward. A little bit simple, stunted. No surprise, growing up in that sink of iniquity. God only knows what she's seen.'

Valerie was getting to know how he used exaggerated expressions like 'sink of iniquity', whose sense she didn't know but could guess at, as if he were partly making fun of his own disapproval, while at the same time he furiously meant it. He stayed one step ahead of any fixed position, so that no one could catch him out in it. But Robyn looked more like him than he realized, although she was smooth and bland with childhood and he was hoary and sagging from fifty years' experience. He had the same pale skin, and the same startled hare's eyes swimming in and out of focus behind his big black-framed glasses. Sometimes, when Gil laughed, you could see how he might have been a different man if he hadn't chosen to be this professor with his stooping bulk and crumpled, shapeless suits, his braying, brilliant talk. Without glasses, his face was naked and keen and boyish, with a boy's shame, as if the nakedness must be smothered like a secret.

Gil's widowed mother had owned a small newsagent's. He'd got himself to university and then onward into success and even fame – he'd been on television often – through his own sheer cleverness and effort. Not that he tried to hide his class origins: on the contrary, he'd honed them into a weapon to use against his colleagues and friends. But he always repeated the same few anecdotes from his childhood, well rounded and glossy from use: the brew-house in the back yard, where the women gossiped and did their washing; the bread-and-drippings suppers; a neighbour cutting his throat in the shared toilet; his mother polishing the front step with Cardinal Red. He didn't talk about his mother in private, and when Valerie once asked him how she'd died he wouldn't tell her anything except – gruffly barking it, to frighten her off and mock her fear at the same time – that it was cancer. She guessed that he'd probably been close to his mother, and then grown up to be embarrassed by her, and hated himself for neglecting her, but couldn't admit to any of this because he was always announcing publicly how much he loathed sentimentality and guilt. Valerie had been attracted to him in the first place because he made fun of everything; nothing was sacred.

She didn't really want the child around. But Robyn was part of the price she paid for having been singled out by the professor among the girls in the faculty office at King's College London, having married him and moved with him to begin a new life in the North. There had been some quarrel or other with King's; he had enemies there.

As the week wore on, she grew sick of the sound of her own voice jollyng Robyn along. The girl hadn't even brought any toys with her, to occupy her time. After a while, Valerie noticed that, when no one was looking, she played with two weird little figures, scraps of cloth tied into shapes with wool, one in each hand, doing the voices almost inaudibly. One voice was coaxing and hopeful, the other one reluctant. 'Put on your special gloves,' one of them said. 'But I don't like the blue colour,' said the other. 'These ones have special powers,' the first voice persisted. 'Try them out.'

Valerie asked Robyn if these were her dollies. Shocked out of her fantasy, she hid the scraps behind her back. 'Not really,' she said.

'What are their names?'

'They don't have names.'

'We could get out my sewing machine and make clothes for them.'

Robyn shook her head, alarmed. 'They don't need clothes.'

Selena had made them for her, she told Valerie, who worked out that Selena must have been their cleaner. 'She doesn't come any more,' Robyn added, though not as if she minded particularly. 'We sacked her. She stole things.'

When Valerie tied her into an apron and stood her on a chair to make scones, Robyn's fingers went burrowing into the flour as if they were independent of her, mashing the butter into lumps in her hot palms. 'Like this,' Valerie said, showing her how to lift the flour as she rubbed, for lightness. Playfully, she grabbed at Robyn's fingers under the surface of the flour, but Robyn snatched them back, dismayed, and wouldn't try the scones when they were baked. Valerie ended up eating them, although she was trying to watch her weight, sticking to Ryvita and cottage cheese for lunch. She didn't want to run to fat, like her mother. She thought Gil refused to visit her mother partly because he worried about how Valerie might look one day, when she wasn't soft and fresh and blonde any more.

Robyn had hardly brought enough clothes to last the week – besides the dress with the buttons, there was only a grey skirt that looked like a school uniform, a ribbed nylon jumper, one spare pair of knickers, odd socks, and a full-length nightdress made of red wool flannel, like something out of a storybook. The nightdress smelled of wee and Valerie thought it must be itchy; she took Robyn shopping for sensible pyjamas and then they had tea at the cafeteria in British Home Stores, which had been Valerie's treat when she was Robyn's age. Robyn didn't want a meringue but asked if she was allowed to hold her new pyjamas, then sat with the cellophane package in her lap and an expression of conscious importance. The pyjamas were white, decorated with yellow-and-blue yachts and anchors. 'Can I keep them?' she asked tentatively, after a long, dull silence. Valerie had grown tired of chatting away inanely to no one.

She had been going to suggest that Robyn leave the pyjamas behind, for the next time she visited, but she didn't really care. Every child ought to want something; it was only healthy. And, packed into Robyn's suitcase along with the rest of her clothes – all freshly washed, apart from the dress, and pressed, even the socks, with Valerie's steam iron – the pyjamas would be like a message, a coded reproach, for that mother in Chelsea.

She imagined Marise unpacking them in some room of flowery frivolity she couldn't clearly visualize and feeling a pang for the insufficiency of her own maternal care. Valerie knew, though, that her parade of competence and righteous indignation was a lie, really. Because the truth was that she couldn't wait for Robyn to go home. She longed to be free of that dogged, unresponsive little figure following her everywhere around the house.

Gil was supposed to be driving Robyn back down to London on Wednesday. On Tuesday evening, when he came home early, Valerie knew right away that something was up. He stood behind her while she was preparing meat loaf at the kitchen counter, nuzzling under her ear and stroking her breast with one hand, determinedly jiggling the ice cubes in his Scotch with the other. He always poured himself a generous Scotch as soon as he came in: she'd learned not to comment. 'You're so good to me,' he said pleadingly, his voice muffled in her neck. 'I don't deserve it.'

'Oh dear, what's Mr Naughty's little game now?' Valerie was long-suffering, faintly amused, swiping onions from her chopping board into a bowl with the side of her knife. 'What's he sniffing after? He wants something.'

'He knows he's so selfish. Causes her no end of trouble.'

These were two of the roles they acted out sometimes: Valerie brusquely competent and in charge, Gil wheedling and needy. There was a truth behind their performances, as well as pretence. Gil groaned apologetically. A problem had come up at work tomorrow, a special guest coming to dinner at High Table, someone he needed to meet because he had influence and the whole game was a bloody conspiracy. He'd never be able to get back from London in time. And Thursday was no good, either – faculty meeting; Friday he was giving a talk in Manchester. They could keep Robyn until Saturday, but the She-Bitch would never let him hear the end of it. He wanted Valerie to take her home tomorrow on the train. Valerie could stay over with her mother in Acton, couldn't she? Come back the following day?

Valerie had counted on being free in the morning, getting the house back to normal, having her thoughts to herself again, catching a bus into town perhaps, shopping. She was gasping for her solitude like a lungful

of clean air. Biting her lower lip to keep herself from blurting out a protest, she kneaded onions into the minced meat; the recipe came from a magazine – it was seasoned with allspice and tomato ketchup. Certainly she didn't fancy three extra days with the kid moping around. She thought, with a flush of outrage, that Gil was truly selfish, never taking her needs into consideration. On the other hand, important men had to be selfish in order to get ahead. She understood that – she wouldn't have wanted a softer man who wasn't respected. She could squeeze concessions out of him anyway, in return for this favour. Perhaps she'd ring up one of her old girlfriends, meet for coffee in Oxford Street, or even for a gin in a pub, for old times' sake. She could buy herself something new to wear; she had saved up some money that Gil didn't know about, out of the housekeeping.

Theatrically, she sighed. 'It's very inconvenient. I was going to go into Jones's, to make inquiries about these curtains for the sitting room.'

He didn't even correct her and tell her to call it the drawing room.

'He's sorry, he's really sorry. It isn't fair, he knows it. But it could be a little holiday for you. You could just put Robyn into a cab at the station, give the driver the address, let her mother pay. Why shouldn't she? She's got money.'

Valerie was startled that he could even think she'd do that. The child could hardly get herself dressed in the mornings; she certainly wasn't fit to be knocking halfway around London by herself, quarrelling with cab-drivers. And, anyway, if Valerie really was going all the way to London, she might as well have a glimpse of where her stepdaughter lived. She was afraid of Marise, but curious about her, too.

Outside the front door in Chelsea, Valerie stood holding Robyn's suitcase in one leather-gloved hand and her own overnight bag in the other. The house was grand and dilapidated, set back from the street in an overgrown garden, with a flight of stone steps rising to a scruffy pillared portico, a broad door painted black. Names in faded, rain-stained ink were drawing-pinned beside a row of bells; they'd already rung twice, and Valerie's feet were like ice. The afternoon light was thickening gloomily under the evergreens. Robyn stood uncomplaining in her thin coat, although from time to time on their journey Valerie had seen her quake with the cold as

if it had probed her, bypassing her conscious mind, like a jolt of electricity. The heating had been faulty on the train. While Valerie read her magazines and Robyn worked dutifully through one page after another in her colouring book, the washed-out, numb winter landscape had borne cruelly in on them from beyond the train window: miles of bleached, tufted dun grasses, purple-black tangled labyrinths of bramble, clumps of dark reeds frozen in a ditch. Valerie had been relieved when they got into the dirty old city at last. She hadn't taken to the North, though she was trying.

Staring up at the front door, Robyn had her usual stolidly neutral look, buffered against expectation; she hardly seemed excited by the prospect of seeing her mother again. And, when the door eventually swung open, a young man about Valerie's age – with long fair hair and a flaunting angel face, dark-stubbled jaw, dead cigarette stuck to the wet of his sagging lip – looked out at them without any recognition. 'Oh, hullo?' he said.

With his peering, dozy eyes, he seemed to have only just got out of bed, or to be about to slop back into it. He was bursting out of his tight clothes: a shrunken T-shirt exposed a long hollow of skinny brown belly and a slick line of dark hairs, leading down inside pink satin hipster trousers. His feet were bare and sprouted with more hair, and he smelled like a zoo animal, of something sour and choking. Realization dawned when he noticed Robyn. 'Hullo!' he said, as if it were funny. 'You're the little girl.'

'Is Mrs Hope at home?' Valerie asked stiffly.

He scratched his chest under the T-shirt and his smile slid back to dwell on her, making her conscious of her breasts, although he only quickly flicked his glance across them. 'Yeah, somewhere.'

A woman came clattering downstairs behind him and loomed across his shoulder; she was taller than he was, statuesque, her glittering eyes black with makeup, and diamonds glinting in the piled-up mass of her dark hair, in the middle of the afternoon. Though, of course, the diamonds were paste – it was all a joke, a pantomime sendup. Valerie wasn't such a fool, she got hold of that. Still, Marise was spectacular in a long, low-cut white dress and white patent-leather boots: she had an exaggerated, coarse beauty, like a film star blurred from being too much seen.

'Oh, Christ, is it today? Shit! Is that the kid?' Marise wailed, pushing

past the young man, her devouring eyes snatching off an impression of Valerie in one scouring instant and dismissing it. 'I forgot all about it. It can't be Wednesday already! Welcome home, honeypot. Give Mummy a million, million kisses. Give Jamie kisses. This is Jamie. Say hello. Isn't he sweet? Don't you remember him? He's in a band.'

Robyn said hello, gazing at Jamie without much interest and not moving to kiss anyone. Her mother pounced in a cloud of perfume and carried her inside, calling back over her shoulder to Valerie in her husky voice, mistaking her for some kind of paid nanny, or pretending to. 'Awfully kind of you. Are those her things? Do you want to drop her bags here in the hall? James can carry them up later. Do you have a cab? Or he can get you one. Oof, what a big, heavy girl you're getting to be, Robby-bobby. Can you climb up on your own?'

The hall was dim and high, lit by a feeble unshaded bulb; when determinedly Valerie followed after them, her heels echoed on black and white marble tiles. 'Hello, Mrs H.,' she sang out in her brightest telephone voice. 'I'm the new Mrs H. How nice to meet you.'

Marise looked down at her from the curve of the staircase, where she was stooping over Robyn, setting her down. 'Oh, I thought you might be. I thought he might have chosen someone like you.'

'I'm hoping you're going to offer us a cup of tea,' Valerie went on cheerfully. Of course Marise had known that she was bringing Robyn – Gil had telephoned last night to tell her. 'Only we're frozen stiff, the pair of us! The heating on the train wasn't working.'

'Do you take milk?' Marise wondered. 'Because I don't know if we have any milk.'

'So long as it's hot!'

She submitted graciously when Jamie offered to take both bags, then was aware of his following her up the stairs, appraising her from behind, and thought that Marise was aware of it, too. A door on the first floor, with a pillared surround and a pediment, stood open. You could see how it had once opened onto the best rooms at the heart of the house: now it had its own Yale lock and was painted purple and orange. The lower panels were dented and splintered as if someone had tried to kick through them. In the enormous room beyond, there was a marble fireplace and a candelabra and floor-length windows hung with tattered yellow brocade drapes;

the glass in a vast gilt mirror was so foxed that it didn't double the perspective but closed it in, like a black fog. Valerie understood that, like the diamonds in Marise's hair, this wasn't really decaying aristocratic grandeur but an arty imitation of it. Marise led the way past a glass dome as tall as a man, filled with stuffed, faded hummingbirds and a staring, dappled fairground horse, its flaring nostrils painted crimson; Robyn flinched from the horse as if from an old enemy.

In the next room, which was smaller, a log fire burned in a blackened grate beside a leather sofa, its cushions cracked and pale with wear. Jamie dropped the bags against a wall. Robyn and Valerie, shivering in their coats, hung over the white ash in the grate as if it might be lifesaving, while Marise hunted for milk in what must have been the kitchen next door, though it sounded cavernous. Jamie crouched to put on more logs, reaching his face towards the flame to reignite his rollie. The milk was off, Marise announced. There was a tin of tomato juice; wouldn't everyone prefer Bloody Marys? Valerie said that might be just the thing, but knew she must pace herself and not let the drink put her at any disadvantage.

The Bloody Marys when they came were strong, made with lots of Tabasco and ice and lemon and a stuffed olive on a stick: Marise said they were wonderfully nourishing, she lived on them. She even brought one – made without vodka, or only the tiniest teaspoonful – for Robyn, along with a packet of salted crisps, and she kissed her, pretending to gobble her up. Robyn submitted to the assault. 'You're lucky, I saved those for you specially. I know that little girls are hungry bears. Because Jamie's a hungry bear, too – he eats everything. I'll have to hide the food away, won't I, if we want to keep any of it for you? Are you still my hungry bear, Bobbin?'

Robyn went unexpectedly then into a bear performance, hunching her shoulders, crossing her eyes, snuffling and panting, scrabbling in the air with her hands curled up like paws, her face a blunt little snout, showing pointed teeth. They must have played this game before; Marise watched her daughter with distaste and pity, austere handsome as a carved ship's figurehead. For a moment, Robyn really was a scruffy, dull-furred, small brown bear, dancing joylessly to order. Valerie wouldn't have guessed that the child had it in her, to enter so completely into a life other than her own. 'Nice old bear,' she said encouragingly.

'That's quite enough of that, Bobby,' Marise said. 'Most unsettling. Now, why don't you go and play, darling? Take your crisps away before the Jamie-bear gets them.'

Robyn returned into her ordinary self, faintly pink in the face. 'Shall I show Auntie Valerie my bedroom?'

Marise's expression ripened scandalously. She stared wide-eyed between Robyn and Valerie. 'Auntie Valerie?! What's this? Valerie isn't your real auntie, you know. Didn't anyone explain to you?'

'We thought it was the best thing for her to call me, considering,' Valerie said.

'Well, I'm relieved you didn't go in for "Mummy". Or "Dearest Mamma", or "Mom".'

Flustered, Robyn shot a guilty look at Valerie. 'I do know she's my stepmother, really.'

'That's better. Your *wicked* stepmother, don't forget.' Marise winked broadly at Valerie. 'Now, off you go. She doesn't want to see your bedroom.'

They heard her trail through the kitchen, open another door on the far side, close it again behind her. The fire blazed up. Jamie began picking out something on his guitar, while Marise rescued his rollie from the ashtray and fell with it onto the opposite end of the sofa. Valerie guessed that they were smoking pot – that was what the zoo smell was. And she thought that she ought to leave. There was nothing for her here – she had made her point by coming inside. 'So, Valerie,' Marise said musingly. 'How did you get on with my dear daughter? Funny little snake, isn't she? I hope Gilbert enjoyed spending every moment with her, after all those protestations of how he's such a devoted father. Was she a good girl?'

'Awfully good. We didn't have a squeak of trouble.'

'I mean, isn't she just a piece of Gilbert? Except not clever, of course. Poor little mite, with his looks and my brains.'

Outside, the last of the afternoon light was being blotted out, and although wind buffeted the loose old windowpanes, no one stirred to draw the curtains or switch on the lamps. Valerie wanted to go, but the drink was stronger than she was used to, and the heat from the fire seemed to press her down in the sofa. Also, she feared returning through the next room, past the stuffed birds and that horse. She was imagining how her

husband might have been impressed and excited once by this careless, shameless, disordered household. If you owned so much, you could afford to trample it underfoot in a grand gesture, turning everything into a game.

'I do adore clever men,' Marise went on. 'I was so in love with Gilbert's intelligence, absolutely crazy about him at first. I could sit listening to him for hours on end, telling me all about history and ideas and art. Because, you know, I'm just an absolute idiot. I was kicked out of school when I was fourteen – the nuns hated me. Valerie, truly, I can hardly read and write. Whereas I expect you can do typing and shorthand, you clever girl. So I'd just kneel there at Gilbert's feet, gazing up at him while he talked. You know, just talking, talking, droning on and on. So pleased with himself. Don't men just love that?'

'Do they? I wouldn't know.'

'But they do, they love it when we're kneeling at their feet. Jamie thinks that's hilarious, don't you, Jamie? Because now I'm worshipping him instead, he thinks. Worshipping his guitar.'

'My talent,' Jamie chastely suggested. Marise shuffled down in the sofa to poke her white boot at him, prodding at his hands and blocking the strings so that he couldn't play until he ducked the neck of his guitar out of her way. His exasperated look slid past her teasing and onto Valerie, where it rested. Marise subsided with a sigh.

'So Gilbert's sitting there steering along in the little cockpit of his own cleverness, believing himself so shining, such a wonder! And then suddenly one day I couldn't stand it! I thought, But the whole *world*, the whole of real life, is spread out underneath him. And he's up there all alone in his own clever head. Don't you know what I mean?'

'I've never taken much interest in Gil's work,' Valerie said primly. 'Though I'm aware how highly it's regarded. I've got my own interests.'

'Oh, have you? Good for you! Because I've never really had any interests to speak of. I've counted on the men in my life to supply those. Gilbert was certainly interesting. Did you know that he beat me? Yes, really. To a pulp, my dear.'

What melodrama! Valerie laughed out loud. She didn't believe it. Or perhaps she did. When Marise, mocking, blew out a veil of smoke, she had a glimpse for a moment of Gil's malevolent Bitch from Hell, the strong-jawed dark sorceress who might incite a man to violence. Poor

Gilbert. And it was true that his rages had been a revelation when they were first married. In the university office, all the women had petted him and were in awe of his mystique: he had seemed thoughtful, forgetful, bumbling, dryly humorous, and high-minded. She stood up, trying to shake off the influence of the Bloody Mary. Her mother would be expecting her, she said. 'And I don't know what your plans are for Robyn's tea. But I made us cheese sandwiches for the train, so she's had a decent lunch, at least, and an apple and a Mars bar.'

Marise was amused. 'I don't have any plans for Robyn's tea. I've never really made those kinds of plans.'

She stretched out, luxuriating into the extra space on the sofa, putting her boots up. Valerie meant to go looking for Robyn then, to say goodbye, but the sight of chaos in the kitchen brought her up short: dishes piled in an old sink, gas cooker filthy with grease, torn slices of bread and stained tea towels and orange peels lying on the linoleum floor where they'd been dropped. The table was still laid with plates on which some dark meat stew or sauce was congealing. She went to pick up her bag instead. 'Give her my love,' she said.

No one offered to show Valerie out. Heroically, like a girl in a film, she made her way alone through the next-door room, where the pale horse gleamed sinisterly; she jumped when something moved, thinking it was a flutter of stuffed birds, but it was only her own reflection in the foxed mirror. On the stairs, she remembered that she shouldn't have called it 'tea'. Gil was always reminding her to say 'dinner' or 'supper'. And once she was outside, on the path in the wind, Valerie looked back, searching along the first-floor windows of the house for any sign of the child looking out. But it was impossible to see – the glass was reflecting a last smouldering streak of sunset, dark as a livid coal smashed open.

That night it snowed. Valerie woke up in the morning in her old bedroom at her mother's and knew it before she even looked outside: a purer, weightless light bloomed on the wallpaper, and the crowded muddle of gloomy furniture inherited from her grandmother seemed washed clean and self-explanatory. She opened the curtains and lay looking out at the snow falling, exhilarated as if she were back in her childhood. Her mother had the wireless on downstairs.

'Trains aren't running,' she said gloatingly when Valerie came down. She was sitting smoking at the table in her housecoat, in the heat of the gas fire. 'So I suppose you'll have to stay over another night.'

'Oh, I don't know, Mum. I've got things to do at home.'

The snow made her restless; she didn't want to be shut up with her mother all day with nothing to talk about. She found a pair of zip-up sheepskin boots at the back of a cupboard and ventured out to the phone box. Snow was blowing across the narrow street in wafting veils, and the quiet was like a sudden deafness; breaking into the crusted surface, her boots creaked. No one had come out to shovel yet, so nothing was spoiled. Every horizontal ledge and edge and rim was delicately capped; the phone box was smothered in snow, the light blue-grey inside it. She called Gil and pushed her money in, told him she was going to go to the station, find out what was happening. He said that there was snow in the North, too. He wouldn't go to the faculty meeting today; he'd work on his book at home. 'Please try to get here any way you can,' he said in a low, urgent voice. 'He misses you.'

'I have to go,' she said. 'There's quite a queue outside.'

But there wasn't; there was only silence and the shifting vacancy. The footprints she'd made on her way there were filling up already.

'I don't know why you're so eager to get back to him,' her mother grumbled. But Valerie wasn't really thinking about Gil: it was the strangeness of the snow she liked, and the disruption it caused. It took her almost an hour and a half to get to King's Cross – the Underground was working, but it was slow. When she surfaced, it had stopped snowing, at least for the moment, but there still weren't any trains. A porter said she should try again later that afternoon; it was his guess that if the weather held they might be able to reopen some of the major routes. Valerie didn't want to linger in King's Cross. She put her bag in left luggage, then thought of going shopping – they'd surely have cleared Oxford Street. But she took the Piccadilly line instead, as far as South Ken. By the time she arrived at the Chelsea house, it was gone two o'clock.

The house was almost unrecognizable at first, transformed in the snow. It seemed exposed and taller and more formidable, more mysteriously separated from its neighbours, standing apart in dense shrubbery, which

was half obliterated under its burden of white. Valerie didn't even know why she'd come back. Perhaps she'd had some idea that if she saw Marise today she'd be able to behave with more sophistication, say what she really thought. As she arrived at the corner, she glanced up at the side windows on the first floor. And there was Robyn looking out – in the wrong direction at first, so that she didn't see Valerie. She seemed to be crouched on the windowsill, slumped against the glass. It was unmistakably her, because although it was past lunchtime she was still dressed in the new white pyjamas.

Valerie stopped short in her tramping. Her boots were wet through. Had she seriously entertained the idea of ringing the doorbell and being invited inside again, without any reasonable pretext, into that place where she most definitely wasn't wanted? The next moment it was too late: Robyn had seen her. The child's whole body responded in a violent spasm of astonishment, almost as if she'd been looking out for Valerie, yet not actually expecting her to appear. In the whole week of her visit, she hadn't reacted so forcefully to anything. She leaped up on the windowsill, waving frantically, so that she was pressed full length against the glass. Remembering how those windows had rattled the night before, Valerie signalled to her to get down, motioning with her gloved hand and mouthing. Robyn couldn't hear her but gazed in an intensity of effort at comprehension. Valerie signalled again: Get down, be careful. Robyn shrugged, then gestured eagerly down to the front door, miming opening something. Valerie saw that she didn't have a choice. Nodding and pointing, she agreed that she was on her way around to the front. No one had trodden yet in the snow along the path, but she was lucky, the front entrance had been left open – deliberately, perhaps, because, as she stepped into the hall, a man called down, low-voiced and urgent, from the top landing, 'John, is that you?'

Apologizing into the dimness for not being John, Valerie hurried upstairs to where Robyn was fumbling with the latches on the other side of the purple-and-orange door. Then she heard Jamie. 'Hullo! Now what are you up to? Is someone out there?'

When the door swung back, Valerie saw that – alarmingly – Jamie was in his underpants. He was bemused rather than hostile. 'What are you doing here?'

She invented hastily, hot-faced, avoiding looking at his near-nakedness. 'Robyn forgot something. I came to give it to her.'

'I want to show her my toys,' Robyn said.

He hesitated. 'Her mother's lying down – she's got a headache. But you might as well come in. There's no one else for her to play with.'

Robyn pulled Valerie by the hand through a door that led straight into the kitchen; someone had cleared up the plates of stew, but without scraping them – they were stacked beside the sink. The only sign of breakfast was an open packet of cornflakes on the table, and a bowl and spoon. In Robyn's bedroom, across a short passageway, there really were nice toys, better than anything Valerie had ever possessed: a doll's house, a doll's cradle with white muslin drapes, a wooden Noah's Ark whose roof lifted off. The room was cold and cheerless, though, and there were no sheets on the bare mattress, only a dirty yellow nylon sleeping bag. No one had unpacked Robyn's suitcase – everything was still folded inside; she must have opened it herself to get out her pyjamas. There was a chest with its drawers hanging open, and most of Robyn's clothes seemed to be overflowing from supermarket carrier bags piled against the walls.

'I knew you'd come back,' Robyn said earnestly, not letting go of Valerie's hand.

Valerie opened her mouth to explain that it was only because she'd missed her train in all this weather, then she changed her mind. 'We weren't expecting snow, were we?' she said brightly.

'Have you come to get me? Are you taking me to your house again?'

She explained that she'd only come to say goodbye.

'No, please don't say goodbye! Auntie Valerie, don't go.'

'I'm sure you'll be coming to stay with us again soon.'

The child flung herself convulsively at Valerie, punishing her passionately, butting with her head. 'Not soon! Now! I want to come now!'

Valerie liked Robyn better with her face screwed into an ugly fury, kicking out with her feet, the placid brushstrokes of her brows distorted to exclamation marks. Holding her off by her shoulders, she felt the after-tremor of the child's violence.

'Do you really want to come home with me?'

'Really, really,' Robyn pleaded.

'But what about your mummy?'

'She won't mind! We can get out without her noticing.'

'Oh, I think we'll need to talk to her. But let's pack first. And you have to get dressed – if you're really sure, that is. We need to go back to the station to see if the trains are running.' Valerie looked around with a new purposefulness, assessing quickly. 'Where's your coat? Do you need the bathroom?'

Robyn sat abruptly on the floor to take off her pyjamas, and Valerie tipped out the contents of the suitcase, began repacking it with a few things that looked useful – underwear and wool jumpers and shoes. The toothbrush was still in its sponge bag. Then they heard voices, and a chair knocked over in the kitchen, and, before Valerie could prepare what she ought to say, Marise came stalking into the bedroom, with Jamie behind her. At least he'd put on trousers. 'How remarkable!' Marise exclaimed. 'What do you think you're doing, Valerie? Are you kidnapping my child?' Wrapped in a gold silk kimono embroidered with dragons, the sooty remnants of yesterday's makeup under her eyes, she looked as formidable as a tragic character in a play.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Valerie coolly said. 'I'm not kidnapping her. I was about to come and find you, to ask whether she could come back with us for another week or so. And I've got a perfect right, anyway. She says that she'd prefer to be at her father's.'

'I'm calling the police.'

'I wouldn't if I were you. You haven't got a leg to stand on. It's criminal neglect. Look at this room! There aren't even sheets on her bed.'

'She prefers a sleeping bag. Ask her!'

Frozen in the act of undressing, Robyn turned her face, blank with dismay, back and forth between the two women.

'And I'd like to know what she's eaten since she came home. There isn't any milk in the house, is there? It's two-thirty in the afternoon and all the child has had since lunchtime yesterday is dry cornflakes.'

'You know nothing about motherhood, nothing!' Marise shrieked. 'Robyn won't touch milk – she hates it. She's been fussy from the day she was born. And she's a spy, she's a little spy! Telling tales about me. How dare she? She's a vicious, ungrateful little snake and you've encouraged her in it. I knew this would happen. I should never have let Gilbert take her in the first place. I knew he'd only be stirring her up against me.'

Where's he been all these years, with his so-called feelings for his daughter, I'd like to know? Jamie, get this cheap kidnapping whore out of here, won't you? No, I like whores. She's much worse, she's a *typist*.'

Valerie said that she didn't need Jamie to take her anywhere, and that, if they were slinging names about, she knew what Marise was. Minutes later, she was standing outside in the garden, stopping to catch her breath beside the gate, where the dustbins were set back from the path behind a screen of pines. She was smitten with the cold and trembling, penitent and ashamed. She shouldn't have interfered; she was out of her depth. It was true that she didn't know anything about motherhood. Hadn't she encouraged Robyn, just as Marise said, trying to make the child like her? And without genuinely liking in return. Now she had abandoned her to her mother's revenge, which might be awful. Then the front door opened and Jamie was coming down the path, with a curious gloating look on his face: under his arms, against his bare chest, he was carrying the dirty yellow sleeping bag that had been on Robyn's bed. Hustling Valerie back among the pines, out of sight of the windows, he dumped the bag at her feet. 'Off you go,' he said significantly, as if he and Valerie were caught up in some game together. 'Her mother's lying down again. Take it and get out of here.'

It took her a moment or two to understand. In the meantime, he'd returned inside the house and closed the door. There was a mewling from the bag, she fumbled to unroll it, and Robyn struggled out from inside and wrapped her arms, with a fierce sigh of submission, around Valerie's knees. But she was in her white pyjamas, barefoot, in the snow! How could they make their way through the streets with Robyn dressed like that? A window opened above them and Jamie lobbed out something, which landed with a soft thud on the path: one of the carrier bags from Robyn's room, packed with a miscellany of clothes – and he'd thought to add the pair of plimsolls. Then he closed the window and disappeared. There was no coat in the bag, but never mind. In panicking haste, Valerie helped Robyn put on layers of clothes over her pyjamas: socks, cord trousers, plimsolls, jumper.

'I thought he was going to eat me,' Robyn said.

'Don't be silly,' Valerie said firmly. She kicked the sleeping bag away out of sight, among the hedge roots.

'Are we escaping?'

'We're having an adventure.'

And they set out, ducking into the street, hurrying along beside the hedge. By a lucky chance, as soon as they got to the main road there was a taxi nosing through the slush. 'How much to King's Cross?' Valerie asked. She had all the money she'd been saving up to spend on a new dress. She'd have to buy Robyn a train ticket, too. Then she asked the taxi to stop at a post office, where she went inside to send a telegram. She couldn't telephone Gil; she knew he'd forbid her to bring the child back again. But she couldn't arrive with Robyn without warning him. 'Returning with daughter,' she wrote out on the form. 'No fit home for her.' She counted out the shillings from her purse.

Back in the taxi, making conversation, she asked Robyn where her dollies were. Robyn was stricken – she'd left them behind, under her pillow. It was dusk in the streets already: as they drove on, the coloured lights from the shops wheeled slowly across their faces, revealing them as strangers to each other. Valerie was thinking that she might need to summon all this effort of ingenuity one day for some escape of her own, dimly imagined, and that taking on the child made her less free. Robyn sat forward on the seat, tensed with her loss. Awkwardly, Valerie put an arm around her, to reassure her. She said not to worry, they would make new dolls, and better ones. Just for the moment, though, the child was inconsolable.