

Spring 1990

Chapter 1 – Annie

‘Who is she, I wonder? Who will she turn out to be?’ said Annie, as they drove through the nether regions of Bradford into Churchill Close and drew up outside a dumpy pre-war semi.

‘How should I know?’ David refused to get caught up in Annie’s speculation. ‘She’ll be who she is, I expect.’ Annie stored a catalogue of pictures in her mind, baby pictures, toddler pictures, little girls, little boys; the burgeoning tribe she never had. As far as she was concerned, even down-to-earth David should be dying to know the child that was going to be theirs. She was so tense she could hardly breathe. What was it that was so fundamental about wanting a child that you’d do almost anything to get one?

‘Come on then,’ he said, opening the car door, ‘let’s get it over with.’

‘Get it over with? What do you mean, get it over with?’

‘You know what I mean.’

He’s like a cat on hot flags, she thought. Nervous, like me. Not that he’d ever admit it, not David.

An aging Escort sagged at the roadside under a spindly flowering cherry.

‘Looks like our social worker’s here,’ she said, climbing out into the early spring air. They looked at each other across the roof of the Polo and exchanged a smile. That weary expression he’d taken to wearing cleared for a minute and the smile reached right up to his trouser-

button eyes. Annie felt a surge of love, an unfamiliar certainty.

The foster mother was older than Annie expected, very hearty though worn ragged round the edges. She waddled through to the back room followed by Annie and David.

‘Just you look at her. Isn’t she bonnie?’ A scrawny child lay sleeping in a battered wooden cot with her social worker hovering like a second-hand guardian angel.

‘I’m Ms Blackshaw,’ she said, emphasising the ‘Ms’. Her tight wool skirt rode up round her chunky thighs as she bent over the child.

‘You should’ve seen her when she first come,’ said the foster mother, ‘poor little beggar. You couldn’t see what colour she were under all the muck. Didn’t know if she were black or white. First thing I did was give her a good wash down.’ She smiled fondly, stroking her baby cheek with podgy potato peel fingers.

Annie and David’s social worker, Mrs Whitehead, had said nothing to prepare them for the pungent furniture, the half-empty mugs on a ring-stained tabletop, greasy carpets melded into the floorboards and a child that looked as though she was reared by wolves. Annie gulped down her rising gorge and took a deep breath. *Muck and squalor*. She could practically hear her mam’s self-righteous sniff. Not that she was all that particular herself.

‘Shall we have a cup of tea?’ Mrs Whitehead switched her smile to full beam. ‘Then we can all have a chat.’

‘Sit yourself down, love,’ the foster mother waved towards an exhausted sofa. ‘Make yourself comfy.’ Annie perched on the edge of the seat, folding her long legs sideways out of the way. She wished she hadn’t worn her new linen trouser suit. That’s what comes of dressing up, trying to look like somebody who’s fit to be a

mother. Annie smiled her big toothy smile just in case anybody noticed her reluctance. You can't go upsetting people in their own homes, can you? Anyway, she could always get it dry-cleaned. David sat beside her and held her hand.

The foster mother heaved herself into the kitchen and filled the kettle. Ms Blackshaw sat down next to Mrs Whitehead in stark relief, bottle blond and killer heels next to a neglected perm and Clarke's sandals.

'Mrs Smith's very good, salt of the earth,' said Mrs Whitehead. 'They thrive with her, you know. She loves them, you see. That's what matters. It's the love that matters.' She looked suitably sincere.

'Smith?' said Annie, 'That was my name before I married a Neill.'

'Well, there's a coincidence!' Was it? This was all so far from what Annie had imagined, in spite of Mrs Whitehead's hints about the problems of neglected children. There was still, at the back of her mind, a little girl, dressed in a pink gingham frock, who would totter towards Annie with her arms outstretched. Annie would fall in love with her and take her home forever. Well, something on those lines. Not this skinny little creature that looked like something the cat dragged in. The social workers had smiles on their faces, though. It could still work out, couldn't it?

'Smith's a very common name,' said David but was ignored all round.

'Would you like to hold her for a bit,' ventured Mrs Whitehead, 'until Mrs Smith brings the tea?' A moment of silence followed, broken only by the clattering from the kitchen.

'Yes,' Annie said, 'Yes, I would.'

When Mrs Whitehead placed Bethany in her arms she felt unsubstantial, like a bundle of blankets with just a suggestion of a child inside. Annie held her close as though trying to breathe life into her.

When the tea came, she held on to the child one-handed. She was going on eighteen months but felt hollow-boned as a bird and smelled of baby sick. Annie tentatively sipped the tea from a brown stained mug. *Crate sweepings*, her mam would say. She would be lucky to get away without a stomach upset.

‘She’s a little sweetie-pie,’ said Mrs Smith, lowering her broad backside onto a scuffed leather pouffe, ‘a good little sleeper. I can sit and nurse her for hours. I sometimes wonder if she’s ever going to wake up!’ She laughed.

‘What does she like?’ asked Annie, not quite sure what she meant herself.

‘Let’s see,’ said Mrs Smith, taking it in her stride, ‘she likes something going on. She doesn’t want to be left on her own in the dark. She likes to be with people.’

‘What about food?’

‘That’s a bit of a problem. There’s not much she likes in the food line. But you can always give her jam. She will take jam.’ She smiled a hearty smile. ‘Have you any favourite names?’

‘Hasn’t she got a name?’ Annie couldn’t believe it. What if she died? She looked frail enough to expire just from sitting in a draught. *Whammy*, like her mam said. She could be condemned to eternal purgatory. You can’t not have a name.

‘Her name’s Bethany,’ said Mrs Smith, ‘though how she come to have a posh name like that beats me. Expect you’ll want to change it. Most people do.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Whitehead. ‘You can choose any

name you like. On adoption.’ The words hung sharp in the air. David looked at his watch.

After a lifetime of waiting, years of disappointments and months of interrogation, Annie’s head was spinning. Their intimate secrets had been flaunted on public display. They’d been up before the Panel, like plaintiffs in a court, stripped naked to the bone. What if, after all, this was a big mistake? Or, what if this was their only chance?

‘It’s early days, though,’ Ms Blackshaw chimed in, her Virgin RED lips pursed like a monkey’s bum. ‘You’ve got to be sure you’re doing the right thing.’ Annie noticed her nail polish was chipped. ‘It’s what’s best for Bethany, that’s the main thing.’

Annie felt the child move against her; she practically kicked her in the ribs. She glanced at the grey-blue eyes and found herself locked in their gaze. It was like watching the North Sea, those hypnotising ebbs and flows. If you watched them long enough you could drown.

‘Hello, Bethany,’ she whispered. The child closed her eyes and softened in her arms. Annie held her close while Mrs Smith enlightened them about her little idiosyncrasies.

‘She’ll be alright though. Give her time.’ It sounded as though the poor little thing had a lot to learn.

‘Next time, we’ll take her out in the pram,’ said Mrs Smith, ‘see how you get on with her. It can take a bit to get to know each other, specially if you’re not used to having bairns around.’

‘I’m an Infant teacher. I’m used to little ones,’ said Annie.

‘But it’s not the same, is it? Not like having your own,’ said Mrs Smith. ‘Don’t you worry love, it’ll be alright.’

‘Take your time,’ said Ms Blackshaw. ‘You don’t want to rush things, do you?’

‘No,’ said Annie, her heart lurching like a ship at sea.

I just ‘ope you know what you’re letting yourself in for, young lady.

‘I don’t know.’ David shook his head as he unlocked the front door. The weariness had come back but that wasn’t what unnerved Annie. It was what he said. David didn’t say he didn’t know, not as a rule. David’s whole universe was divided into things that were worth knowing and things that weren’t. He was usually very clear what was what. Most of the time, it didn’t much matter. What mattered now was his dithering.

Annie put the kettle on to make fresh tea, Yorkshire teabags in clean mugs. Then she went into the living room and lit the gas stove. They sat down, one each side, like a set of hearth dogs.

Annie scraped wayward strands of tawny hair behind her ears and cupped her chin in her palm. David looked old all of a sudden with worry lines sketched across his fine features and little fluffs of grey in his black boot-polish hair. She had a vision of them sitting there next to the popping gas stove for the next thirty years, slowly decaying under shrouds of spiders’ webs, knee deep in dust; would-be parents who never quite made it. A tear oozed from the corner of one eye and slid down her face, like a weeping Madonna.

‘It’s just that it’s such a big decision,’ David said eventually. ‘It’s not like going to a pet shop and choosing a guinea pig. Are you sure this is the one you want?’ She nodded. ‘Well, it’s up you, you know. Mrs Whitehead made it quite clear there’s no obligation on anybody’s part. Something better might come up.’

She thought for a while, wondering how to put it. Then it just came out.

‘But she chose me.’

‘What?’

‘She wanted me.’

‘What are you talking about?’ David gave her one of his looks. David’s looks could be unnerving. There was the look that implied you were terminally stupid, a look of grudging respect and a look that verged on sympathy. This was the one that implied terminally stupid. Annie thought about the kick in the ribs and the feeling of quiet acceptance but thought it better not to say.

‘If you’re sure it’s what you want...’ said David, shaking his head as though it was against his better judgement.

Funny, isn’t it? You want something all your life then, when it looks as if you might get it, you panic.

Annie knew what life was supposed to be like, right from the Mixed Infants. According to the omnipresent Ladybird readers, life first recorded in decades long gone was alive and flourishing in the suburbs. A family of four lived in a square brick house, father wore a Trilby to the office, Peter and Jane fed the cat and the dog, then mother took them to the park. Annie devoured them all from 1a to 12c before she moved into the Juniors. Peter and Jane, and Pat the dog, became her best friends. She could always go and stay with them when the going got rough.

It was a far cry from life on the Oldham Road. Her dad laboured in greasy overalls and spent his wages in the pub. Her mam couldn’t abide pets of any description, never mind children, and hadn’t set foot in a park since

the Methodist Whitsuntide Walk in 1957. Annie only knew that because there was a snapshot to prove it. Looking back, they had a lot to answer for did Peter and Jane.

Annie spent her teenage years nursing an imaginary life, how things would be if she had anything to do with it. She had strict ideas about certain things and wasn't going to put up with any more than she had to.

For a start, her name was Ann. An indefinite article, for God's sake. It's enough to give anybody an identity crisis. Granted, everybody called her 'Annie'. It's easier to say with 'ie' on the end but it was still indefinite.

Then there was her dad. She wouldn't marry a man like her dad even if he looked like Harrison Ford. As a matter of fact she wouldn't marry a man like any of the men she knew, particularly if they lived in spitting distance of the Oldham Road. The Oldham Road was the pits, a world-class cultural centre of grossness and pig-ignorance. No Thank You. What she wanted was a man who would be a proper dad and help his kids with their homework.

And there was the house, piled up with rubbish, nothing ever getting done and nothing in its proper place. What she wanted was a brand new house where nobody could possibly have left their dirty habits behind. Annie found a lot of comfort in her Ladybird world while she waited for the future.

Well, she hadn't done that bad so far, considering. She renamed herself Annabel and made up her mind that any child of hers would have a name of at least three syllables. Mind you, Annabel didn't last long. Not when it could be so easily shortened to Annie.

Then she met David at College. It was early September and there was already a taste of leaves in the air. God

knows what he made of her that first day at Leeds, a lanky girl in a too-small coat laden down with Co-op carrier bags and hair billowing in the wind like a yard of brown barathea. He was ahead of her, escorting a gang of Freshers to registration. But he looked back, caught her eye and waited.

‘Have you had a good summer?’ he said, as though he knew her already.

‘Yes,’ she lied. Her heart thumped.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Annabel.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Annie.’ How did he *know*? She screwed up her courage to look at him. Brown eyes, strong teeth and hair that stood up in clumps, he oozed reassurance and she relaxed enough to manage a smile.

‘Come on, then,’ he said. And she went. She never regretted it. Thank God she hadn’t panicked over David. As a matter of fact, she’d never been so sure of anything as she was of David.

The house was a different carry on. You see so many houses you dream about them and wake up in a lather. You can never find the right combination of a house you like and a house you can afford. It’s alright people saying you’re particular, *you should be thankful to have a roof over your ‘ead*, but it’s not that straightforward when you not only have to live there but pay for it as well. Who, for example, would pay to live in her mam’s house? Nobody in their right mind. It was only fit for rodents. And David was used to living in huge uneconomic vicarages, surrounded by fields of turnip and other such arable crops. He wouldn’t want to cramp himself into a cottage that was hardly more than a dog kennel. But Holmebridge had little to offer outside the cottage range,

not unless you were in the mansion bracket and, being teachers, they weren't. As it turned out, their cottage wasn't bad, nicely situated on the hillside with views over the valley enough to give you vertigo. It was just the thoughts of the generations of unwashed previous occupants that put her off, all those second-hand skin scales lurking in crevices and the stale breath of old ghosts. Anyway, David promised her a new house as soon as they could afford it.

Now there was chance of a child called Bethany, a name with three syllables. But, to be honest, something was amiss. It was like hovering on the edge of a crevasse. If you mustered your strength and jumped over to the other side you would be alright. If you didn't, you would be left standing on slippery ground and wish you had. It was David. What was the matter with him? It was what he wanted, wasn't it? They'd talked about it often enough. He deserved more out of life than work, work, work. She would make a go of it for his sake as well as her own. Either that or die trying.

Annie hugged herself in anticipation, or at least as best she could lurching about on top of a double decker bus. It was enough to make you sick, like pregnancy. She savoured the word. It was so full of hope. Admittedly, her pregnancy was what you might call virtual but, all the same, she was expecting. She couldn't remember a feeling like it. It took her some time to recognise it as happiness.

She was going to tell her mam and dad. There comes a point, doesn't there, when you have to face up to telling them, whatever it is? Otherwise you're just storing up trouble for yourself.

Going back. It was always the same. She usually got the bus from Huddersfield town centre down the Oldham Road. It was a great lumbering thing that managed to shake itself like a shaggy dog on every start, stop or bend. The shaking was worse if you sat upstairs but if you sat downstairs you got more than your fair share of diesel fumes.

She'd take the car only she would have to park it right on the main road. They all did. Those houses weren't built for people with cars. They were built for people with next to nothing. They had plenty now, though, judging by the vehicles jammed on both sides. It was a miracle the bus could still get through.

Whether it was the traffic fumes or what, Annie arrived with a queasy feeling in her stomach. She didn't know how her mam and dad could stand it, living in a permanent pall of pollution. They might just as well park their fireside chairs in the middle of the Aspley roundabout.

Annie's mam was the most miserable woman on God's earth. Madge Smith nurtured her misery and wrapped it round herself like a greasy old blanket. Somehow, she managed to create an atmosphere of unrelenting gloom that expanded to fill any space she happened to be in. She could fill the whole universe given half a chance. Lucky for the rest of humankind, and whatever inhabited the outer planets, she spent most of her life in the house, huddled over the gas fire.

And her dad, Johnnie, was permanently laid off. Green Street Mill gasped its last in 1979, worn out with a hundred years' production of fine worsted cloth, the best in the world. Only the world didn't want it any more. Ages ago, she remembered, he took to working nights. That kept him well out of the way of anything resembling family life.

Being laid off didn't make much difference to his comings and goings. He still kept odd hours and spent most of his time wearing out the bar in the Weavers Arms.

Their house, No. 39, was a mean little house whose door opened straight onto the street. She steeled herself and walked straight in. No use knocking on this door. You could knock for a month of Sundays and nobody would open it. You could knock your knuckles to the bone and be found in years to come, a rattling skeleton hanging on the doorknob like a novelty wind chime.

'Hello,' she called out, stepping from the promising sunshine into the familiar gloom. She didn't expect a reply.

When she was little, she noticed that other people's mothers came to greet you at the door. Most of them were permanent kitchen fixtures, ranked somewhere between the sink and the stove. They kept stocks of hankies, safety pins, Elastoplasts and boiled sweets in their pinny pockets. They had red-scrubbed hands, always in water, dried vigorously on a rough kitchen towel whenever they came to the door. They were the heart of the house. They kept it alive and kicking, made sure that fires were lit, clean knickers and vests warmed on the rack and hot dinners appeared on the table every day. They smelled of kitchen, carbolic and comfort.

Annie's mam played a different game. No welcome mat here. Funny, there was always a smell of wet washing although you never caught her at it. Through the clammy kitchen into the back room, there she was, eking out her existence over the cracked and blackened radiants of the aging gas miser, dragging on a cigarette and gazing at the telly flickering in the corner.

'Hello Mam.' Annie breezed. Madge cast baleful eyes briefly in her direction.

‘Put t’kettle on, will you.’ That was as much as you’d get.

‘How are you, Mam?’ Annie called over her shoulder, heading back into the kitchen.

‘Badly.’

‘Oh?’ Annie took her cue, inviting a recitation of symptoms, including wracked chest, stranglehold bellyache and chronic veins, that hadn’t changed since Annie, at the age of five, had been frightened to go to school in case her mam died behind her back. How could she possibly wield a half-inch paintbrush with any conviction (‘a field of daisies’ poster paint on sugar paper, circa 1962) with her mam slumped in a dead heap in the back room? How could she open her little-girl mouth and join in ‘Praise Him, Praise Him, all you little children...’ when her mam was simultaneously sounding her death rattle? She felt a leaden weight lodge in her chest and knew it was all her fault. It was a miracle she ever learned anything. Her teachers always said she was a quiet child. No wonder. It took all her energy just to get through the day, never mind anything else. But Madge wasn’t dead yet, though Annie was sorely tempted to advise her to hurry up and get on with it.

‘Oh, I’m sorry you aren’t feeling up to much,’ she paused for effect, ‘just when you’re going be a Grandma!’ She listened intently at the kitchen door. No response. She filled the kettle and started rattling cups and saucers, blue striped ones from Woollies that had lurked in the sideboard for donkey’s years. No response. Kettle boiled, she brewed the tea, poured it out, plenty of milk and sugar, and then, with a little glow of satisfaction, carried the tea tray into the back room. The little glow died an instant death as she realised that Madge, glued to a repeat of Dynasty, hadn’t heard a word.

‘Joan Collins,’ she said, stabbing her fag end in the direction of the television screen, ‘knows how to dress up, she does.’ Not that Madge would know. She hadn’t dressed up since the Queen’s Silver Jubilee, then that was only for a street party.

‘Mam,’ Annie said, ‘we’re going to have a little girl!’ That grabbed her attention alright.

‘What? At your age? You must be wrong in your ‘ead. Anyway, it might be a boy and then what?’

‘No, Mam, we’re adopting! Didn’t the social worker come to talk to you about it?’

‘Oh, aye.’ Light dawned. ‘So that’s what it were about. I thought she wanted to put me in an ‘ome.’ She sounded disappointed. Annie sighed in exasperation.

‘I’m doing it, mam. I’ve made my mind up. I’m thirty-two and if I leave it much longer I’ll be past it.’ Annie went on while the going was good. ‘We’ve been to see her a few times and now she’s coming for the weekend.’ Madge’s mouth dropped.

‘You don’t want to do that. You never know what you’re getting. You can’t send ‘em back you know, not once you’ve got ‘em.’

It was a good job David couldn’t make it after all. Annie was none too pleased on Saturday morning when he remembered he was supposed to be supervising an inter-school chess match. It wasn’t like him. He usually made lists weeks in advance, wrote Daglo Post-Its to himself and ticked things off in his academic diary.

Anyway, it turned out for the best; he couldn’t see her spending. She hardly knew where to start, never mind where to stop. Browsing round Babycare was a revelation.

Did babies really need all this stuff? It was like a whole new industry had invented itself behind her back, what with plastic widgets and polythene gadgets, interchangeable this and convertible that, never mind Heath Robinson on wheels. Mind you, it all looked very hygienic.

She asked an assistant for advice and came away with a SafeleyGo car seat, a Cumfibaby buggy, a Kosikid cot, half a dozen sets of non-allergenic bedding, terry sleeping suits, knickers and vests, pretty frocks, frilly socks and a dozen night-time nappies. All for one weekend? *Come up on the pools 'ave you, madam?* No, on the credit card. Well, she wasn't going to have her kid looking like a ragamuffin.

'Wait a minute!' the assistant called after her as she went to bring the car round for loading, 'What about feeding?'

'What?'

'You'll need dishes, forks, spoons, and things, won't you?'

'I've got dishes and forks and spoons and things at home.' I mean, for goodness sake, who wouldn't?

'Yes,' said the assistant in a tone of voice reserved for crass amateurs, 'But are they *baby* dishes, forks, spoons?'

Annie swallowed hard. It was all getting out of hand.

'And what about a pot?'

'What?'

'You know, a pot.' The assistant explained, as though it were self-evident.

'You mean a cup?' said Annie, embarrassed by her shortcomings in the babyware department.

'I'm talking about the *other end*,' said the assistant, her voice taking on an edge of exasperation. 'A potty. For weeing on and that.'

‘Oh,’ said Annie, as light dawned, ‘I haven’t thought beyond nappies. How do you go about it? Changing over from one to the other?’

‘What you want is one of these.’ The assistant hustled over to a display stand and picked up what looked like a squat pink plastic jug, featuring a jolly cat motif. ‘A musical potty. It plays a tune when they wee. Encourages them you see. They can’t wait to do it again.’ A new line in novelty musical instruments, whatever next?

‘Alright,’ Annie was bordering on desperate, ‘whatever you think.’ The assistant took this as license to add a set of plastic bibs, one for each day of the week, and half a dozen pairs of trainer pants.

Torn between rushing over to Bradford to get Bethany and going home to prepare everything first, Annie decided to take the practical option. Sometimes, the only way to deal with David was to act fast and face him when the deed was done. It could save him hours of agonising. She set off for Bradford, to Churchill Close.

By the time David came home, Bethany was sitting on a fresh towel, spreading a jam sandwich over her Saturday bib and pink gingham frock. Her baby shampoo hair sprang into bright copper curls round her dainty features and little ruffs of lace circled her tiny feet.

‘Look at her, David, isn’t she sweet?’ Annie felt radiant. David couldn’t help but agree.

They sat on the carpet and watched her hungrily; enchanted by the way she picked at the bread and spread jam over her face, as though revelling in its stickiness.

‘Look at her,’ said Annie, her heart melting like lard in a chip pan. ‘I think she’s going to be bright, don’t you?’

‘You’ll have her reading in no time.’

‘See how straight she’s sitting,’ Annie marvelled.

‘Yes,’ David laughed, ‘she looks as though she owns the place already.’

‘And she looks so serious.’

‘And so superior.’

‘She’s beautiful.’

Annie felt a fierce force of possession that nearly took her breath away. If that’s what they call mother love, then that’s what she had. She would die for this child if need be. Although, she thought twice about telling David just yet, he might think she was a bit previous.

‘I just love her, David, don’t you? Even when she’s covered in jam!’

‘Why did you give her jam? She should be eating something more substantial, to build her up.’

‘She won’t eat anything else. She isn’t used to proper food yet.’

‘Right, then. We’ll have to do something about that,’ said David, standing up and striding purposefully towards the fridge. Annie smiled.

She gazed at the sleeping child, drew the non-allergenic cover over her little shoulders and tenderly stroked her head. So small, so perfectly formed, Annie could fancy there was something fey about her. She felt a shower of warmth inside her like she never had before.

She took the warmth with her back to bed and snuggled up to David’s back to share it. He was tired, worn out with his first taste of fatherhood. She put her arm round him and held him close, wrapping him in her burgeoning love. She pressed her face against him feeling

his body heat seeping through his pyjama top, and closed her eyes.

David shifted closer, looking for comfort. She nuzzled into his neck with little sleepy kisses, wanting to tell him how much she loved him but was too drowsy to get the words out. She breathed in his familiar David smell. You couldn't say what it was exactly but it made her feel good. He said she had her own special smell as well but she couldn't imagine what it would be like. Anyway, she always wore Right Guard, even in bed, just to be on the safe side.

David reached out backwards and found her bum. He squeezed the plump curves in satisfying caresses, like kneading dough.

They didn't make love much nowadays. They'd got out of the habit. It was not having babies that did it. There didn't seem much point in setting yourself up to fail time and time again.

When you first fall in love you need each other all the time. You just can't help it. It seems the nearest you can get to possessing somebody, apart from eating them alive. And it's not long before you need them all over again.

Then you settle down and start trying for a family. It's the trying that gets you. You end up going through the motions like some outlandish ritual you're obliged to perform. If sex hadn't already been invented, who would have thought of it? It would take an unprecedented leap of imagination to think up the things you have to do to have a baby. It's all very undignified, not to mention unhygienic, when you look at it in the cold light of day. It's as though loving each other is beside the point.

David turned towards her, seeking her mouth with his. His touch was light and questioning, enough of a kiss to mean it but not enough to lose face if she turned away.

Annie's heart went out to him. She folded him in her arms and opened her lips inviting his tongue into her mouth. He let out a low moan and pressed himself hard against her, his needy hands grasping, squeezing, hurting... She relaxed and let him take his fill. Before, she would have felt obliged to do something in return, kiss for kiss, stroke for stroke, or something over and above like sucking him off just to please him. Now, all she wanted was to give and give, in a frenzy of giving.

Afterwards, she lay with him heavy in her arms, savouring the stickiness between her legs. Before she would have got up to the bathroom but the moment was too precious to just wash away. Now they were free to love each other for the sake of it.

'Our social worker told us not to expect too much to begin with but, quite honestly Mother, I think there might be something wrong.' David was phoning an update of the weekend's antics whilst Annie collapsed in a heap on the tired settee. She heard Elizabeth's cultivated tones floating over the airwaves, saying something very sensible, no doubt. Bethany was lying in the Kosikid cot doing nothing in particular.

David, after failing to get a coddled egg down her throat, rather than down her clothing and all over the carpet, decided they needed help.

'Why don't you ring your mother?' he said.

'You must be joking. Keep her out of it.' Annie surprised herself, never mind David, with the strength of her feelings. It was one thing putting up with the poisonous old besom yourself but to inflict her on an innocent child? Not on your life.

‘Well, who, then?’

‘The social worker?’

‘That would be admitting defeat.’

‘Mrs Smith?’

‘Jam. She’ll say give her jam.’

‘Well than, what do you think?’ Mr Know-all David thought the answer to everything was in a book but, in this case, he must have got hold of the wrong book. Nurse Harvey’s ‘Guide to Bringing up Baby’ he’d found in Second Hand Seller on Main Street told you what the infant should do, such as smile at three months, but not what to do if it didn’t.

‘Then I’ll have to ring *my* mother.’ Good. Annie was, truth be known, a bit scared of Elizabeth. She was all Country Casuals and confidence, and lived in a defrocked parsonage in Norfolk, but somebody like her would be bound to know what to do. David grabbed the phone for the first of a string of phone calls that got them through the weekend.

By Sunday afternoon Annie was exhausted. How the heck do they do it, other mothers? Some have three or four all at once. Annie’s colleagues used to say it was easier to manage thirty at school than one of your own at home. They always felt sorry for mothers who complained their kids were out of hand. Well, Bethany wasn’t exactly out of hand but the mess was.

‘She’s not remotely toilet trained, you know,’ David regaled his mother. ‘We got through the nappies in no time. When we sit her on the potty, she manages to spread it everywhere. Hands and face, everywhere, she’s completely incontinent.’ He listened patiently to the soothing sounds that followed before launching into the next complaint.

‘She won’t feed properly. She doesn’t seem to chew. She spits everything out. Then she daubs it all over the place. I mean, how can she live if she won’t eat?’ Elizabeth seemed to have an answer for that as well.

‘She’s not even toddling. She just sits there like a doll. And she doesn’t talk. She just sort of whinges to herself. Honestly, Mother, I’m not convinced she’ll ever be normal.’

Annie listened with a sinking heart. It had looked promising at the beginning. Now she realized it was going to be much harder than she thought. But she wanted to keep her all the same. From the minute Bethany was washed and powdered and dressed in her new clothes Annie knew she would never let her go. It was more than a conviction. It was a baptism. A baptism of fire, as it turned out.

‘You can’t move for clutter. There’s so much stuff in here. It looks as though we’ve been invaded.’ David droned.

‘Can I have a word?’ Annie held out her hand for the phone.

‘Annie wants to talk to you, Mother, I’ll ring back later, OK?’ He passed it over and shuffled through to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

‘Hello dear, you are having a difficult time of it, aren’t you?’ Annie suddenly realised she wasn’t overawed by Elizabeth’s immaculate articulation any more. Her voice was warm and comforting.

‘It’s hard going at the moment. What do you think, Elizabeth?’

‘I think that son of mine is expecting too much all at once. You know, every baby is different, they all develop in their own time.’ She paused to let the message sink in. ‘I know she’s been neglected but she’ll catch up. After all,

she's been assessed for adoption and, if there were any major problem, you would have been told about it.'

'Are you sure?' said Annie, sensing a straw to grasp at.

'Of course I'm sure,' said Elizabeth with reassuring heartiness. 'All you have to do is give her a home and love her.'

'Yes, you're right,' said Annie, her exhaustion evaporating as she spoke. 'She just needs to be loved and cared for like any other child. It's the love that matters.'

Annie glanced at the clock ticking on the living room mantelpiece. Five forty. The social workers were due at six.

'David, I don't want to let her go back. Not to that filthy foster place. Couldn't she just stay on with us?' Bethany was swaddled in her baby pink coat with matching bunny bonnet, all packed up and ready to go.

'You mean you definitely want to keep her?'

'Yes.' Annie balanced the child on one hip like mothers do. 'I've never felt like this before.'

'After the helluva weekend we've just had? Are you sure?'

'I can't let her go.' Annie's voice quivered. 'I just can't. She's got to me. She's part of me now.'

'I know.' David sighed. 'She's got to me as well.' He circled his arms round them in a big protective hug. Annie smiled, surprised. It wasn't like David to go all soft on her. They snuggled together, enjoying the cosy bundle of child between them for a few perfect minutes.

The social workers arrived in tandem to find out what was what, and installed themselves on the settee to hear the edited highlights of the weekend.

‘That’s a positive step forward,’ said Mrs Whitehead.

‘But we don’t want to rush things, do we?’ said Ms Blackshaw, drawing on a well-worn phrase from her repertoire.

‘You can have her again next weekend,’ soothed Mrs Whitehead. ‘Then, we’ll see.’ They left with looks of satisfaction on their faces.

‘Well then,’ said Annie, subsiding onto the settee. ‘We’d better start making plans.’

‘Right,’ said David. ‘Erm... what plans?’

‘We’ll have to rearrange the furniture, to fit everything in, then sort out a routine...’

‘Ah, yes,’ David was cottoning on. ‘Register her at the Doctors,’ he offered.

‘And the baby clinic,’ she said, thinking of Bethany’s babysoft neck that smelled of Johnson’s powder.

‘Sort out some kind of childcare.’

‘What?’

‘You know, baby sitting, nursery, that sort of thing.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Annie’s voice came out louder than she meant. That was enough to rub David up the wrong way.

‘What I’m talking about,’ he said in the voice he usually employed for pupils with special educational needs, ‘is someone to look after Bethany when you’re at school. She can’t look after herself, as well you know.’ Annie’s heart lurched.

‘But I won’t *be* at school. We told the social workers *I’d* look after her.’ David looked astonished as if for all the world this was the first he’d heard about it. Annie stood up. ‘What’s the point of having a child if you’re going farm it out to all and sundry? You can’t... and that’s that.’ She noticed herself shaking as though she were suddenly

somebody else looking on. *Now look what you've got yourself into, lady!*

'People do it all the time. They have to. It's the way society's going.'

'Well, they can if they want to but I'm not,' she said breathing hard, steadying herself against the chair back. 'You can't take a poor little kid who's hardly had a chance and pass her round like a parcel...' She fought back tears, willing herself to be in control. 'Every time she stops somebody'll rip a layer off.' David sighed. 'You know what your mother said. Bethany needs love and care. She's right. You know she is.' It wasn't often Annie saw red but she was seeing red now.

'Mother doesn't have to pay the mortgage, does she? And you're the one that's always going on about a new house. Do you want to stay in this so-called hovel forever?' David turned his back to show her the conversation was over. Not on your life.

'I know I called it a hovel,' said Annie evenly, 'and I am always going on about a new house. But it doesn't matter now, not when it comes down to choosing between a house and a baby, does it?' She knew by the slump of his shoulders that she'd won. But she also knew why he'd given in. It was something that wouldn't be mentioned. But she knew, and he knew she knew, and there was no joy in that. She would just have to make it work the way it was. Show him that it could.