Author of *Life After Life*

KATE ATKINSON

WHEN *will* THERE *be* GOOD NEWS?

'Genius'
Sunday Telegraph

'Genuinely surprising'
Guardian

'Exhilarating'
Daily Mail

A *Jackson Brodie* Novel

About the Book

In a quiet corner of rural Devon, six-year-old Joanna Mason witnesses an appalling crime.

Thirty years later the man convicted of the crime, Andrew Decker, is released from prison.

In Edinburgh, sixteen-year-old Reggie, wise beyond her years, works as a nanny for a GP. But Dr Hunter has gone missing and Reggie seems to be the only person who is worried.

Across town, Detective Chief Inspector Louise Monroe is also looking for a missing person, unaware that hurtling towards her is an old friend – Jackson Brodie – himself on a journey that is about to be fatally interrupted.

In an extraordinary virtuoso display, Kate Atkinson produces one of the most engrossing, brilliantly written and piercingly insightful novels of this or any year. *When Will There Be Good News?* sheds new light on the nature of fate, and on the human condition itself.

Contents

WHEN WILL THERE BE GOOD NEWS?

Kate Atkinson

For Dave and Maureen – thanks for many good times,
the best is yet to come

Thanks are due to the following for their assistance and information (I’m sorry if any of it came out wrong once I got my hands on it):

Martin Auld, Malcolm Dickson (Assistant Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland), Russell Equi, Detective Superintendent Malcolm Graham (Lothian and Borders Police Service), my cousin Major Michael Keech, Dr Doug Lyle, Detective Superintendent Craig Naylor (Lothian and Borders Police Service), Bradley Rose, Detective Superintendent Eddie Thompson (Metropolitan Police Service), Dr Anthony Toft, and last but not least my cousin Timothy Edwards for the title.

I have played a little fast and loose with the geography of Wensleydale and also that of South-West Edinburgh. Apologies – artistic licence and so on. I have never seen a horse in Midmar field but that doesn’t mean that there will never be one.

We never know we go, – when we are going
We jest and shut the door;
Fate following behind us bolts it,
And we accost no more.

Emily Dickinson

I
In the Past

Harvest

THE HEAT RISING up from the tarmac seemed to get trapped between the thick hedges that towered above their heads like battlements.

‘Oppressive,’ their mother said. They felt trapped too. ‘Like the maze at Hampton Court,’ their mother said. ‘Remember?’

‘Yes,’ Jessica said.

‘No,’ Joanna said.

‘You were just a baby,’ their mother said to Joanna. ‘Like Joseph is now.’ Jessica was eight, Joanna was six.

The little road (they always called it ‘the lane’) snaked one way and then another, so that you couldn’t see anything ahead of you. They had to keep the dog on the lead and stay close to the hedges in case a car ‘came out of nowhere’. Jessica was the eldest so she was the one who always got to hold the dog’s lead. She spent a lot of her time training the dog, ‘Heel!’ and ‘Sit!’ and ‘Come!’ Their mother said she wished Jessica was as obedient as the dog. Jessica was always the one who was in charge. Their mother said to Joanna, ‘It’s all right to have a mind of your own, you know. You should stick up for yourself, think for yourself,’ but Joanna didn’t want to think for herself.

The bus dropped them on the big road and then carried on to somewhere else. It was ‘a palaver’ getting them all off the bus. Their mother held Joseph under one arm like a parcel and with her other hand she struggled to open out his newfangled buggy. Jessica and Joanna shared the job of

lifting the shopping off the bus. The dog saw to himself. ‘No one ever helps,’ their mother said. ‘Have you noticed that?’ They had.

‘Your father’s country fucking idyll,’ their mother said as the bus drove away in a blue haze of fumes and heat. ‘Don’t you swear,’ she added automatically, ‘I’m the only person allowed to swear.’

They didn’t have a car any more. Their father (‘the bastard’) had driven away in it. Their father wrote books, ‘novels’. He had taken one down from a shelf and shown it to Joanna, pointed out his photograph on the back cover and said, ‘That’s me,’ but she wasn’t allowed to read it, even though she was already a good reader. (‘Not yet, one day. I write for grown-ups, I’m afraid,’ he laughed. ‘There’s stuff in there, well …’)

Their father was called Howard Mason and their mother’s name was Gabrielle. Sometimes people got excited and smiled at their father and said, ‘Are you *the* Howard Mason?’ (Or sometimes, not smiling, ‘*that* Howard Mason’ which was different although Joanna wasn’t sure how.)

Their mother said that their father had uprooted them and planted them ‘in the middle of nowhere’. ‘Or Devon, as it’s commonly known,’ their father said. He said he needed ‘space to write’ and it would be good for all of them to be ‘in touch with nature’. ‘No television!’ he said as if that was something they would enjoy.

Joanna still missed her school and her friends and *Wonder Woman* and a house on a street that you could walk along to a shop where you could buy the *Beano* and a liquorice stick and choose from three different kinds of apples instead of having to walk along a lane and a road and take two buses and then do the same thing all over again in reverse.

The first thing their father did when they moved to Devon was to buy six red hens and a hive full of bees. He

spent all autumn digging over the garden at the front of the house so it would be ‘ready for spring’. When it rained the garden turned to mud and the mud was trailed everywhere in the house, they even found it on their bed sheets. When winter came a fox ate the hens without them ever having laid an egg and the bees all froze to death which was unheard of, according to their father, who said he was going to put all those things in the book (‘the novel’) he was writing. ‘So that’s all right then,’ their mother said.

Their father wrote at the kitchen table because it was the only room in the house that was even the slightest bit warm, thanks to the huge temperamental Aga that their mother said was ‘going to be the death of her’. ‘I should be so lucky,’ their father muttered. (His book wasn’t going well.) They were all under his feet, even their mother.

‘You smell of soot,’ their father said to their mother. ‘And cabbage and milk.’

‘And you smell of failure,’ their mother said.

Their mother used to smell of all kinds of interesting things, paint and turpentine and tobacco and the Je Reviens perfume that their father had been buying for her since she was seventeen years old and ‘a Catholic schoolgirl’, and which meant ‘I will return’ and was a message to her. Their mother was ‘a beauty’ according to their father but their mother said she was ‘a painter’, although she hadn’t painted anything since they moved to Devon. ‘No room for two creative talents in a marriage,’ she said in that way she had, raising her eyebrows while inhaling smoke from the little brown cigarillos she smoked. She pronounced it *thigariyo* like a foreigner. When she was a child she had lived in faraway places that she would take them to one day. She was warm-blooded, she said, not like their father who was a reptile. Their mother was clever and funny and surprising and nothing like their friends’ mothers. ‘Exotic’, their father said.

The argument about who smelled of what wasn't over apparently because their mother picked up a blue-and-white-striped jug from the dresser and threw it at their father, who was sitting at the table staring at his typewriter as if the words would write themselves if he was patient enough. The jug hit him on the side of the head and he roared with shock and pain. With a speed that Joanna could only admire, Jessica plucked Joseph out of his high-chair and said, 'Come on,' to Joanna and they went upstairs where they tickled Joseph on the double bed that Joanna and Jessica shared. There was no heating in the bedroom and the bed was piled high with eiderdowns and old coats that belonged to their mother. Eventually all three of them fell asleep, nestled in the mingled scents of damp and mothballs and Je Reviens.

When Joanna woke up she found Jessica propped up on pillows, wearing gloves and a pair of earmuffs and one of the coats from the bed, drowning her like a tent. She was reading a book by torchlight.

'Electricity's off,' she said, without taking her eyes off the book. On the other side of the wall they could hear the horrible animal noises that meant their parents were friends again. Jessica silently offered Joanna the earmuffs so that she didn't have to listen.

When the spring finally came, instead of planting a vegetable garden, their father went back to London and lived with 'his other woman' – which was a big surprise to Joanna and Jessica, although not apparently to their mother. Their father's other woman was called Martina – *the poet* – their mother spat out the word as if it was a curse. Their mother called the other woman (*the poet*) names that were so bad that when they dared to whisper them (*bitch-cunt-whore-poet*) to each other beneath the bedclothes they were like poison in the air.

Although now there was only one person in the marriage, their mother still didn't paint.

* * *

They made their way along the lane in single file, ‘Indian file’, their mother said. The plastic shopping bags hung from the handles of the buggy and if their mother let go it tipped backwards on to the ground.

‘We must look like refugees,’ she said. ‘Yet we are not downhearted,’ she added cheerfully. They were going to move back into town at the end of the summer, ‘in time for school’.

‘Thank God,’ Jessica said, in just the same way their mother said it.

Joseph was asleep in the buggy, his mouth open, a faint rattle from his chest because he couldn’t shake off a summer cold. He was so hot that their mother stripped him to his nappy and Jessica blew on the thin ribs of his little body to cool him down until their mother said, ‘Don’t wake him.’

There was the tang of manure in the air and the smell of the musty grass and the cow parsley got inside Joanna’s nose and made her sneeze.

‘Bad luck,’ her mother said, ‘you’re the one that got my allergies.’ Their mother’s dark hair and pale skin went to her ‘beautiful boy’ Joseph, her green eyes and her ‘painter’s hands’ went to Jessica. Joanna got the allergies. Bad luck. Joseph and their mother shared a birthday too although Joseph hadn’t had any birthdays yet. In another week it would be his first. ‘That’s a special birthday,’ their mother said. Joanna thought all birthdays were special.

Their mother was wearing Joanna’s favourite dress, blue with a pattern of red strawberries. Their mother said it was old and next summer she would cut it up and make something for Joanna out of it if she liked. Joanna could see the muscles on her mother’s tanned legs moving as she pushed the buggy up the hill. She was strong. Their father said she was ‘fierce’. Joanna liked that word. Jessica was

fierce too. Joseph was nothing yet. He was just a baby, fat and happy. He liked oatmeal and mashed banana, and the mobile of little paper birds their mother had made for him that hung above his cot. He liked being tickled by his sisters. He liked his sisters.

Joanna could feel sweat running down her back. Her worn cotton dress was sticking to her skin. The dress was a hand-me-down from Jessica. ‘Poor but honest,’ their mother laughed. Her big mouth turned down when she laughed so that she never seemed happy even when she was. Everything Joanna had was handed down from Jessica. It was as if without Jessica there would be no Joanna. Joanna filled the spaces Jessica left behind as she moved on.

Invisible on the other side of the hedge, a cow made a bellowing noise that made her jump. ‘It’s just a cow,’ her mother said.

‘Red Devons,’ Jessica said, even though she couldn’t see them. How did she know? She knew the names of everything, seen and unseen. Joanna wondered if she would ever know all the things that Jessica knew.

After you had walked along the lane for a while you came to a wooden gate with a stile. They couldn’t get the buggy through the stile so they had to open the gate. Jessica let the dog off the lead and he scrambled up and over the gate in the way that Jessica had taught him. The sign on the gate said ‘Please Close The Gate Behind You’. Jessica always ran ahead and undid the clasp and then they both pushed at the gate and swung on it as it opened. Their mother had to heave and shove at the buggy because all the winter mud had dried into deep awkward ruts that the wheels got stuck in. They swung on the gate to close it as well. Jessica checked the clasp. Sometimes they hung upside down on the gate and their hair reached the ground like brooms sweeping the dust and their mother said, ‘Don’t do that.’

The track bordered a field. ‘Wheat,’ Jessica said. The wheat was very high although not as high as the hedges in the lane. ‘They’ll be harvesting soon,’ their mother said. ‘Cutting it down,’ she added, for Joanna’s benefit. ‘Then we’ll sneeze and wheeze, the pair of us.’ Joanna was already wheezing, she could hear the breath whistling in her chest.

The dog ran into the field and disappeared. A moment later he sprang out of the wheat again. Last week Joanna had followed the dog into the field and got lost and no one could find her for a long time. She could hear them calling her, moving further and further away. Nobody heard her when she called back. The dog found her.

They stopped halfway along and sat down on the grass at the side of the track, under the shady trees. Their mother took the plastic carrier bags off the buggy handles and from one of the bags brought out some little cartons of orange juice and a box of chocolate finger biscuits. The orange juice was warm and the chocolate biscuits had melted together. They gave some of the biscuits to the dog. Their mother laughed with her down-turned mouth and said, ‘God, what a mess,’ and looked in the baby-bag and found wipes for their chocolate-covered hands and mouths. When they lived in London they used to have proper picnics, loading up the boot of the car with a big wicker basket that had belonged to their mother’s mother who was rich but dead (which was just as well apparently because it meant she didn’t have to see her only daughter married to a selfish, fornicating waster). If their grandmother was rich why didn’t they have any money? ‘I eloped,’ their mother said. ‘I ran away to marry your father. It was very romantic. At the time. We had nothing.’

‘You had the picnic basket,’ Jessica said and their mother laughed and said, ‘You can be very funny, you know,’ and Jessica said, ‘I do know.’

Joseph woke up and their mother undid the front of her strawberry-covered dress and fed him. He fell asleep again while he was sucking. ‘Poor lamb,’ their mother said. ‘He can’t shake off this cold.’ She put him back in the buggy and said, ‘Right. Let’s get home, we can get out the garden hose and you can cool off.’

He seemed to come out of nowhere. They noticed him because the dog growled, making an odd, bubbling noise in his throat that Joanna had never heard before.

He walked very fast towards them, growing bigger all the time. He was making a funny huffing, puffing noise. You expected him to walk past and say ‘Nice afternoon,’ or ‘Hello,’ because people always said that if you passed them in the lane or on the track, but he didn’t say anything. Their mother would usually say, ‘Lovely day,’ or, ‘It’s certainly hot, isn’t it?’ when she passed people but she didn’t say anything to this man. Instead she set off walking fast, pushing hard on the buggy. She left the plastic bags of shopping on the grass and Joanna was going to pick one up but their mother said, ‘Leave it.’ There was something in her voice, something in her face, that frightened Joanna. Jessica grabbed her by the hand and said, ‘Hurry up, Joanna,’ sharply, like a grown-up. Joanna was reminded of the time their mother threw the blue-and-white-striped jug at their father.

Now the man was walking in the same direction as they were, on the other side of their mother. Their mother was moving very fast, saying, ‘Come on, quickly, keep up,’ to them. She sounded breathless. Then the dog ran in front of the man and started barking and jumping up as if it was trying to block the man’s path. Without any warning he kicked the dog so hard that it sailed into the air and landed in the wheat. They couldn’t see it but they could hear the terrible squealing noise that it was making. Jessica stood in front of the man and screamed something at him, jabbing

her finger at him and taking great gulps of air as if she couldn’t breathe and then she ran into the field after the dog.

Everything was bad. There was no question about it.

Joanna was staring at the wheat, trying to see where Jessica and the dog had gone and it took a moment for her to notice that her mother was fighting the man, punching him with her fists. But the man had a knife and he kept raising it in the air so that it shone like silver in the hot afternoon sun. Her mother started to scream. There was blood on her face, on her hands, on her strong legs, on her strawberry dress. Then Joanna realized that her mother wasn’t screaming at the man, she was screaming at her.

Their mother was cut down where she stood, the great silver knife carving through her heart as if it was slicing butcher’s meat. She was thirty-six years old.

He must have stabbed Jessica too before she ran off because there was a trail of blood, a path that led them to her, although not at first because the field of wheat had closed around her, like a golden blanket. She was lying with her arms around the body of the dog and their blood had mingled and soaked into the dry earth, feeding the grain, like a sacrifice to the harvest. Joseph died where he was, strapped into the pushchair. Joanna liked to think that he never woke up but she didn’t know.

And Joanna. Joanna obeyed her mother when she screamed at her. ‘Run, Joanna, run,’ she said and Joanna ran into the field and was lost in the wheat.

* * *

Later, when it was dark, other dogs came and found her. A stranger lifted her up and carried her away. ‘Not a scratch

on her,’ she heard a voice say. The stars and the moon were bright in the cold, black sky above her head.

Of course, she should have taken Joseph with her, she should have snatched him from the buggy, or run with the buggy (Jessica would have). It didn’t matter that Joanna was only six years old, that she would never have managed running with the buggy and that the man would have caught her in seconds, that wasn’t the point. It would have been better to have tried to save the baby and been killed than not trying and living. It would have been better to have died with Jessica and her mother rather than being left behind without them. But she never thought about any of that, she just did as she was told.

‘Run, Joanna, run,’ her mother commanded. So she did.

It was funny but now, thirty years later, the thing that drove her to distraction was that she couldn’t remember what the dog was called. And there was no one left to ask.

II
Today

Flesh and Blood

THE GREEN RAN the whole length of the village, and was bisected by a narrow road. The primary school looked over the village green. The green wasn't square, as he'd first imagined, nor did it have a duck pond, which was something else he had imagined. You would think, coming from the same county, he would know this countryside but it was alien corn. His knowledge of the Yorkshire Dales was second-hand, garnered from TV and films – the occasional glimpse of *Emmerdale*, a semi-conscious night on the sofa watching *Calendar Girls* on cable.

It was quiet today, a Wednesday morning at the beginning of December. A Christmas tree had been erected on the green but it was still as nature intended, undecorated and unlit.

The last time (the first time) he had come here to scope out the village it had been a Sunday afternoon, height of the midsummer season, and the place had been humming, tourists picnicking on the grass, small children racing around, old people sitting on benches, everyone eating ice-creams. There was a kind of sand pit at one end where people – natives, not tourists – were playing what he thought might be quoits – throwing big iron rings as heavy as horseshoes. He hadn't realized people still did things like that. It was bizarre. It was medieval. There were still stocks on the green, by the market cross, and – according to a guidebook he had bought – a 'bull ring'. He'd thought of the Birmingham shopping centre of that name until he'd

read on and discovered its purpose was bull-baiting. He presumed (he hoped) that the stocks and the bull ring were historic – for the tourists – and not still in use. The village was a place to which people drove in their cars in order to get out and walk. He never did that. If he walked, he started from where he was.

He hid behind a copy of the *Darlington and Stockton Times* and studied the small ads for funeral homes and decorators and used cars. He thought it would be a less conspicuous read than a national newspaper, although he had bought it in Hawes rather than the village shop, where he might have drawn too much attention to himself. These people had a well-developed radar for the wrong kind of stranger. They probably burned a wicker man every summer.

Last time he'd been driving a flash car, now he blended in better, driving a mud-spattered Discovery rental and wearing hiking boots and a fleece-lined North Face jacket, with an OS guide in a plastic wallet hanging round his neck that he'd also bought in Hawes. If he could have got hold of one, he would have borrowed a dog and then he would have looked like a clone of every other visitor. You should be able to rent dogs. Now *there* was a gap in the market.

He had driven the rental from the station. He would have driven all the way (in his flash car) but when he had got into the driving seat and switched on the engine he found his car was completely dead. Something mysterious, like electronics, he supposed. Now it was being nursed in a garage in Walthamstow by a Polish guy called Emil who had access (a nice euphemism) to genuine BMW parts at half the price of an official supplier.

He checked his watch, a gold Breitling, an expensive present. Quality time. He liked male paraphernalia – cars, knives, gadgets, watches – but he wasn't sure he would have laid out so much money on a watch. 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth,' she smiled when she gave it to him.

‘Oh, fucking hurry up, would you,’ he muttered and banged his head off the steering wheel, but gently in case he attracted the attention of a passing local. Despite the disguise, he knew there might be a limit to how long you could hang about in a small place like this without someone beginning to ask questions. He sighed and looked at his watch. He’d give it another ten minutes.

After nine minutes and thirty seconds (he was counting – what else was there to do? Watching the watch.) a vanguard of two boys and two girls ran out of the door of the school. They were carrying football nets and in a well-practised manoeuvre erected them on the green. The green seemed to serve as a school playground. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be educated in a school like this. His primary school had been an underfunded, overpopulated sinkhole where social Darwinism applied at every turn. Survival of the fastest. And that was the good part of his education. His proper education, where he had actually sat in a classroom and learned something, had been provided courtesy of the army.

A stream of children, dressed in PE kit, poured out of the school and spread over the green like a delta. Two teachers followed and started dishing out footballs from a basket. He counted the children as they came out, all twenty-seven of them. The little ones came out last.

Then came what he was waiting for – the playschool kids. They gathered every Wednesday and Friday afternoon in a little extension at the back of the school. Nathan was one of the tiniest, tottering along, holding on to the hand of a much older girl. Nat. Small like a gnat. He was bundled into some kind of all-in-one snowsuit. He had dark eyes and black curls that belonged incontrovertibly to his mother. A little snub nose. It was safe, Nathan’s mother wasn’t here, she was visiting her sister who had breast cancer. No one here knew him. Stranger in a strange land. There was no sign of Mr Arty-Farty. The False Dad.

He got out of the car, stretched his legs, consulted his map. Looked around as if he'd just arrived. He could hear the waterfall. It was out of sight of the village but within hearing of it. Sketched by Turner, according to the guidebook. He meandered across a corner of the green, as if he was going towards one of the many walkers' paths that spidered out of the village. He paused, pretended to consult the map again, ambled nearer to the children.

The bigger kids were warming up, throwing and kicking the ball to each other. Some of the older ones were practising headers. Nathan was trying to kick a ball to and fro with a girl from the infants' class. He fell over his own feet. Two years and three months old. His face was scrunched up with concentration. Vulnerable. He could have picked him up with one hand, run back to the Discovery, thrown him in the back seat and driven out of there before anyone had time to do anything. How long would it take for the police to respond? For ever, that was how long.

The ball rolled towards him. He picked it up and grinned at Nathan, said, 'Is this your ball, son?' Nathan nodded shyly and he held out the ball like a lure, drawing the boy towards him. As soon as he was within reach he gave the ball back with one hand and with the other touched the boy's head, pretending to ruffle his hair. The boy leaped back as if he had been scalded. The girl from the infants' class grabbed the ball and dragged Nathan away by the hand, glaring over her shoulder. Several women – mothers and teachers – turned to look in his direction but he was studying the map, pretending indifference to anything going on around him.

One of the mothers approached him, a bright, polite smile stuck on her face, and said, 'Can I help you?' when what she really meant was 'If you're planning on harming one of these children I will beat you to a pulp with my bare hands.'

‘Sorry,’ he said, turning on the charm. He surprised even himself sometimes with the charm. ‘I’m a bit lost.’ Women could never believe it when a guy admitted to being lost, they immediately warmed to you. (‘Twenty-five million sperm needed to fertilize an egg,’ his wife used to say, ‘because only one will stop to ask directions.’)

He shrugged helplessly. ‘I’m looking for the waterfall?’

‘It’s that way,’ the woman said, pointing behind him.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I think I’ve been reading the map back to front. Well, thanks,’ he added and strode off down the lane towards the waterfall before she could say anything else. He’d have to give it a good ten minutes. It would look too suspicious if he went straight back to the Discovery.

It was pretty at the waterfall. The limestone and the moss. The trees were black and skeletal and the water, brown and peaty, looked as if it was in spate, but maybe it always looked like that. They called the waterfall a ‘force’ around here, which was a good word for it. An unstoppable force. Water always found a way, it beat everything in the end. Paper, scissors, rock, water. May the force be with you. He checked his expensive watch again. He wished he still smoked. He wouldn’t mind a drink. If you didn’t smoke and you didn’t drink then standing by a waterfall for ten minutes with nothing to do was something that could really get to you because all you were left with were your thoughts.

He searched in his pocket for the plastic bag he’d brought with him. Carefully, he dropped the hair into it and closed it with a plastic clip and pushed it into the pocket of his jacket. He had been clutching the thin black filament in his hand ever since he plucked it from the boy’s head. Job done.

Ten minutes up. He walked quickly back to the mud-caked Discovery. If he didn’t hit any problems he’d be in Northallerton in an hour and back on the train to London.

He jettisoned the OS map, left it on a bench, an unlooked-for gift for someone who thought walking was the way to go. Then Jackson Brodie climbed back in his vehicle and started the engine. There was only one place he wanted to be. Home. He was out of here.

The Life and Adventures of Reggie Chase, Containing a Faithful Account of the Fortunes, Misfortunes, Uprisings, Downfallings and Complete Career of the Chase Family

REGGIE SPOONED SOME kind of vegetable mush into the baby's mouth. It was just as well the baby was strapped into his high-chair because every so often he would suddenly fling out his arms and legs and try to launch himself into the air like a suicidal starfish. 'Uncontrollable joy,' Dr Hunter had explained to Reggie. Dr Hunter laughed, 'Food makes him *very* happy.' The baby wasn't fussy, the vegetable mush ('sweet potato and avocado') smelled like old socks and looked like dog diarrhoea. All the baby's food was organic, cooked from scratch by Dr Hunter before being mashed up and frozen in little plastic tubs so that all Reggie had to do was defrost it and warm it through in the microwave. The baby was just a year old and Dr Hunter still breast-fed him when she came back from work. 'So many long-term benefits for his health,' she said. 'It's what breasts are meant for,' she added when Reggie averted her eyes in embarrassment. The baby was called Gabriel. 'My angel,' Dr Hunter said.

This was Reggie's sixth month as Dr Hunter's 'mother's help'. They had agreed on this old-fashioned term at what passed for a job interview as neither of them liked the word

‘nanny’. ‘Like a goat,’ Reggie said. ‘I had a nanny once,’ Dr Hunter said. ‘She was an absolute horror.’

Reggie was sixteen and could have passed for twelve. If she forgot her bus pass she could still get on board for a child’s fare. Nobody asked, nobody checked, nobody really took any notice of Reggie at all. Sometimes she wondered if she was invisible. It was very easy to slip between the cracks, especially if you were small.

When her bus pass ran out Billy offered to make her another one. He had already made her an ID card, ‘So you can get into pubs,’ he said, but Reggie never went into pubs, for one thing she didn’t have anyone to go into a pub with and for another, no one would have believed the fake ID. Just last week, when she was doing the early Sunday morning shift in Mr Hussain’s shop, a woman had told her that she was too young to wear make-up. Reggie would have liked to say, ‘And you’re too old to wear it,’ but unlike, apparently, everyone else in the world she kept her opinions to herself.

Reggie spent her life going around saying, ‘I’m *sixteen*,’ to people who didn’t believe her. The stupid thing was that inside she was a hundred years old. And anyway Reggie didn’t want to go into a pub, she didn’t see the point of alcohol, or drugs. People had little enough control over their lives without losing more. Reggie thought of Mum and the Man-Who-Came-Before-Gary knocking back cheap white wine from Lidl and ‘getting jiggy’ as the Man-Who-Came-Before-Gary liked to call it. Gary had two big advantages over the Man-Who-Came-Before-Him – one, he wasn’t married and two, he didn’t leer at Reggie every time he saw her. If Mum hadn’t met Gary she would at this moment – Reggie checked her watch – be skimming barcodes over scanners and looking forward to her afternoon break (*Tea, Twix and a fag, lovely*).

‘Do you want a phone?’ Billy was always saying to Reggie, taking two or three out of his pocket, ‘Wadjyerwan

– Nokia, Samsung?' There was no point, Billy's phones never worked for more than a week. It seemed safer, in all ways, for a person to stick with her Virgin Pay-As-You-Go. Reggie liked the way Richard Branson had made 'Virgin' into a huge global brand name, the way the Catholics had done with Jesus's mother. It was good to see the word out there. Reggie would be quite happy to die a virgin. The virgin queen, *Virgo Regina*. A vestal virgin. Ms MacDonald said that vestal virgins who 'lost their sexual innocence' were buried alive. Letting the vestal fires go out was a sign of impurity, which seemed a bit harsh. How neurotic would that make you? Especially in a time before firelighters.

They had done an unseen translation together of some of Pliny's letters. 'Pliny the *Younger*,' Ms MacDonald always emphasized as if it was of crucial importance that you got your Plinys right, when in fact there was probably hardly anyone left on earth who gave a monkey's about which was the elder and which was the younger. Who gave a monkey's about them, period.

Still, it was good to think that Billy was willing to do things for her even if they were nearly always illegal things. She had accepted the ID card because it was a handy kind of thing to have when no one believed you were sixteen but she had never taken up the offer of the bus pass. You never knew, it might be the first step on a slippery slope that would eventually lead to something much bigger. Billy had started with pinching sweets from Mr Hussain's shop, and look at him now, pretty much a career criminal.

'Have you had much experience with children, Reggie?' Dr Hunter had asked at her so-called interview.

'Och, loads. Really. Loads and loads,' Reggie replied, smiling and nodding encouragingly at Dr Hunter, who didn't seem very good at the whole interviewing thing. 'Loads, sweartogod.'