

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Dry Spell

Clare Chambers

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About the Book

In 1976 four students took a trip to the desert. Now the repercussions of that fateful summer are coming back to haunt them...

And repercussions are just what Guy doesn't need: his wife, Jane, is moving swiftly from slightly eccentric to downright peculiar, their three-year-old daughter seems set on destroying Jane's sanity, and now even God's gone quiet on him.

As for Nina, she's having enough trouble with her son, James. He's got exams looming, a new girlfriend with pneumatic breasts and now, it seems, he's on drugs. Nina certainly won't welcome any ghosts from the past.

Life isn't going smoothly for anyone. But when Hugo, long-forgotten agent of misfortune, threatens to pay them all a visit, disaster seems unavoidable.

About the Author

Clare Chambers was born in Croydon in 1966 and read English at Oxford. She wrote her first novel, *Uncertain Terms*, during a year in New Zealand, after which she worked as an editor for a London publisher. She is also the author of *Back Trouble*, *Learning to Swim* and *In a Good Light*. She lives in Kent with her husband and three children.

Praise for Clare Chambers

'Exquisite: beautifully written, addictive reading' Anna
Maxted

'Charming . . . A funny and moving story with a great deal of
style' *Sunday Telegraph*

'To those searching for intelligent, well written romantic
comedy, Clare Chambers is a diamond in the dust'
Independent on Sunday

'A perfect novel' Lisa Jewell

'A funny book which slips in some acute and painful
observations on the side' *The Times*

'Modern, intelligently observed and highly original'
Daily Mail

'An intelligent escapist read . . . well written and funny'
Daily Express

'Funny, poignant and beautifully written, this is an
enchanting book' Katie Fforde

'To warm the heart and chill it is a rare ability'
Evening Standard

'An elegantly crafted, gently poignant coming-of-age love
story that I couldn't put down' Melissa Nathan

'A warm bath of a book - you slip in and just don't want to
get out' Victoria Routledge

By the same author

UNCERTAIN TERMS
BACK TROUBLE
LEARNING TO SWIM
IN A GOOD LIGHT

A DRY SPELL

Clare Chambers



arrow books

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To Peter

MEMO**To:** All committee members**From:** A.P. Thoday, Chairman, Royal Geographical Society Expeditions and Fieldwork Committee**Date:** 20th September 1976

Following the recent tragic events in Algeria involving a party led by one of our members, it has been suggested that aspects of the Society's advice to travellers and expedition leaders be reviewed and updated. Possible areas for discussion at the next meeting (19th October 1976) include: general safety; co-operating with host nations; insurance; legal considerations; unofficial 'blacklists' of hostile nations/regions; consular responsibilities, etc. Revised agenda attached.

1

1

As soon as her son, James, started driving lessons, some months before his eighteenth birthday, Nina Osland sold her car. She knew he would have to have one eventually - modern life without the car was no fun at all, as she was soon to discover - but she was damned if he was going to kill himself in hers.

Unfortunately, the man who answered her advertisement in *Loot*, also a worrier, was buying a car for his seventeen-year-old daughter, reasoning that she would be safer behind a wheel after dark than walking the street - a statistical fallacy. He brought her along for the test drive. She was slim and blonde with a pierced navel displayed in defiance of February weather between the bottom half of a cropped T-shirt and jeans, and large, unnaturally high breasts jammed together by a cruelly wired bra.

She can practically rest her chin on them, Nina thought, handing over the keys to the father, who had just emerged from a rust inspection of the car's undercarriage.

'Do you keep it in the garage?' he asked, squeezing behind the steering wheel and ramming the front seat backwards with the screech of metal on metal.

'Not often,' said Nina, who had decided she wouldn't volunteer prejudicial information - the dodgy catch on the rear seatbelt for example - unless she had to but neither would she lie. The careful deployment of truth and silence was something she had inherited, or perhaps learned, from her diplomat father, and, besides, James had appeared on the doorstep to eavesdrop. His hair was unbrushed and he held a dry Weetabix in one hand. He ate the wretched things on the hoof, leaving flakes like monster dandruff all over the house. She waved him back inside, unwilling to have her sales pitch overheard.

‘Do you want to take it for a drive?’

The girl was in the passenger seat. Nina watched her surreptitiously checking her make-up in the mirror on the sun visor. She caught Nina’s eye and blushed through a mask of foundation.

‘Do you mind?’ said the man. ‘Just round the block. See how it runs?’

‘Go ahead.’ I wonder if she’s had implants, Nina wondered idly.

‘Don’t you want to come with me?’ the man asked, a little embarrassed. ‘I mean, in case I steal it.’

‘No, it’s okay.’ Nina smiled. ‘After all you might kidnap me.’

‘You think I look more like a kidnapper than a car thief,’ he said. ‘That’s interesting.’

‘You don’t look much like either,’ Nina admitted, observing him properly for the first time. Before he had spoken she had written him off as beneath her interest, but now she bothered to look she could see a tall, balding man in his mid-forties, with tired eyes and a pleasant, decent face. A man who loved his daughter.

‘To be honest I’m more worried about getting lost,’ he said. ‘I might never find my way back.’

‘You can take James with you,’ said a voice which Nina recognized as hers but which seemed to have come direct from the devil himself. I have seen the future, she thought, as she watched James climb into the back seat behind the girl.

An hour later she was three thousand pounds richer but could take no pleasure from the fact.



It was two months before Nina saw the girl again, and this time she was wearing even less. Nina had already deduced that James had acquired a girlfriend, noticing, for instance,

that he was more often out than upstairs playing on his computer, and that he had become much more punctilious about his appearance than his schoolwork. Her heart had heaved in her chest when she saw the tubes of face-wash and spot-cream in the bathroom and caught the aftershock of some new, peppery cologne in the back of her throat. James was also spending more time than ever loitering in the back garden talking on his mobile phone - a phenomenon baffling to Nina as whenever his friends came round they seemed to get along quite happily all evening without ever resorting to speech. Reception was apparently poor inside the house - which contained a normal phone to which he had unrestricted access - so James was obliged instead to pace up and down outside like a water diviner in search of a powerful signal. Sometimes, when it rained, Nina would see him duck into the callbox on the corner of the street for shelter, and emerge minutes later, still talking.

The day Nina caught them in bed together started badly and went downhill. To begin with, a woman claiming to be a Bosnian war widow had knocked on the door asking for a donation of second-hand clothing. Nina had given her a cashmere jumper which had a small moth-hole in one sleeve but which she still occasionally wore. Later, when she went out, Nina found it stuffed in a hedge two gardens down. She took it back home again and restarted her journey with a heart hardened against humanity. She was on her way to perform the melancholy duty of clearing a dead woman's flat so that the council could take possession. Irene Shorrocks, James's grandmother and Nina's comforter and friend, had lived most of her sixty-seven years in East Dulwich and had spent much of the brief interval between retirement and death attending car boot sales. The flat, which grew to resemble a series of walk-in cupboards, was crammed from floor to ceiling with cardboard boxes and black bags of unsorted 'bargains'. Ever since she had named Nina as her executrix, Nina had sent up a nightly

prayer for Irene's health and longevity: *Oh God, please let Irene outlive me.*

On this particular morning, as Nina waited for a bus at Crystal Palace, perched on one of the narrow pivoting seats which seemed to have been designed expressly to tip her off into the pile of broken glass at her feet, she felt moved to do a brave and foolish thing. The bus stop had been thoroughly trashed: every pane was broken and every surface sprayed with runic obscenities. The timetable had been ripped out to reveal a fixed notice of apology for its absence. Only a true misanthropist could have devised such a system, Nina was thinking, when she became aware of the sweet, sharp smell of vinegar penetrating the miasma of exhaust. The other person at the stop, a tall, round-shouldered girl in a denim skirt and white slingbacks, was eating chips from the paper, pulling each one into her mouth with plump, painted lips. Nina's stomach gave a loud rumble, which she covered with a sudden burst of throat-clearing. The Bosnian refugee, on top of her other misdeeds, had interrupted Nina's breakfast. In the distance a bus shimmered into view. The girl and Nina swayed forward with one movement to read the number and then back again, disappointed. The chips were as good as finished. The girl screwed up the wrapper, passing it from hand to hand to wipe her greasy fingers, and then, glancing first at Nina, and then at the waste bin not five paces away on the kerb, chucked the whole thing on the floor.

Nina, who would chase a sweet wrapper across the street on a windy day if it fell out of her pocket, was appalled. All right, so there was a fair amount of debris on the pavement already, but really, there was no excuse for apathy on that scale. Images of similar civic outrages rose up before her and she felt her stomach begin to churn with indignation against this invisible army of litter-louts and queue-jumpers, smokers on the underground and defilers of public lavatories. Calm down, she told herself. Don't get involved.

But it was no use: various sarcastic turns of phrase were already suggesting themselves.

'It's a long walk to that bin, isn't it?' she said, anger making her voice sound treacherously upper class. The girl was only momentarily taken aback before she advanced on Nina, hissing like a swan, and gave her a terrific shove in the chest which sent her toppling backwards through the missing pane of the bus shelter into the crushed glass on the concrete below. 'Slapper,' was the girl's parting shot as she walked off up the road on her peeling stilettos.

'You want to get down the hospital, get yourself checked out,' the house-clearance man advised, once Nina had explained the reason for her late arrival. He had been sitting in his van outside Irene's eating a bacon roll when she arrived, flustered and sore. There had been no shortage of helpers after the event to pick her up and brush her off and call out the emergency services, but once she had established that her cuts and grazes were superficial she wanted nothing more than to be on her way. When the assembled bystanders realized she was uninjured and reluctant to call the police or exploit the dramatic potential of the incident they lost interest. Someone hailed her a taxi and she made her escape, vowing to resist all future impulses towards heroism.



They were in the darkened sitting room watching a stand-up comedian on the television. There was an empty pizza box along with two bottles of Coke on the coffee table in front of them. James had his arm around her shoulders and they were both slumped well down on the couch, bent-necked, when Nina walked in. He gave the faintest twitch of unease, but otherwise didn't move.

'Oh, Mum, this is Kerry,' he said.

'Hello, Kerry,' said Nina, itching to turn the overhead light on and get a proper look at her. In the bluish glow from the TV she looked more like a ghost than a girl, but she was recognizable as the person who had come to buy the car. Nina could see the studs in her nose and navel glinting.

'Hello,' said Kerry without taking her eyes off the screen.

'She's shy,' James would say later, in her defence. This excuse, intended to mitigate a range of small discourtesies and anti-social habits, cut absolutely no ice with Nina.

The comedian was telling an obscene joke, so Nina decided to stand her ground for a moment in case they thought she was embarrassed. 'I'm not wanting to rush you off,' she said from the doorway, 'but how are you getting Kerry home?' James and his male friends were accustomed to walking vast distances to each other's houses or the pub at any hour of the night, and she didn't want the poor girl with a bare tummy getting a chill or worse.

'Cab,' said James, patiently.

'Well, goodnight then. Nice to have met you,' Nina said to Kerry, not without irony.

I might as well go to bed, she thought. I'm not going to sit out in the kitchen like the family dog. Normally when James brought friends home they didn't lay claim to the sitting room but skulked in his bedroom playing tapes. This departure struck Nina as significant.

It must have been after one o'clock when something woke her. She had fallen asleep sitting up in bed over the *Times* crossword with the light on. Her pen had actually skated across the page leaving a broken line - something she thought only happened in cartoons. She jerked her head up sharply - guiltily even - like someone in a theatre caught napping by the applause.

It must be Kerry leaving, she thought, waiting for the sound of the door, but the house was silent and dark. Then she heard it again: an unfamiliar, female cough. Nina crept on to the landing. James's door was - unusually - closed, a

thin blade of light visible along its lower edge. Nina crossed the floor in two strides, knocked once loudly, setting off a frantic scuffling from within the room, and walked in without waiting for a reply.

The two of them were huddled, bare-shouldered under the duvet. Their clothes, which had obviously been shed in some haste, lay in mixed heaps on and around the bed. The only light was from the angle-poise desk lamp, which had been turned to face the wall. They looked so crestfallen that Nina almost felt sorry for them, but then her indignation returned, along with the sense that she'd been made a fool of.

'Not in my house,' she said, pointing at James, and then to Kerry, 'Get dressed. I'll call you a taxi.' She had the grace to step outside while Kerry got out of bed and struggled into her bra and knickers. 'Does your father know you're here?' she added over her shoulder.

'I told him I was staying over with a friend,' came the reply.

'We weren't doing anything, Mum,' said James, in a tone that managed to combine supplication with reproach. 'We were only having a cuddle.'

It's so unfair, Nina thought, having to play the heavy parent all on my own. A great bubble of self-pity stuck in her throat and she withdrew to her bedroom on the pretext of phoning for a cab so that she could give her pillow a few good stiff-armed wallops and compose herself before facing them again.

When she heard the clatter of the car's diesel engine outside Nina came downstairs and pressed a ten-pound note into Kerry's hand. 'That's for the fare,' she explained, as if there could have been any misunderstanding as to its purpose.

'Oh. Right,' said Kerry.

No doubt in her circles that meant 'thank you', thought Nina. James was hovering. He looked as though he might be

going to kiss Kerry goodbye, but a glance at his mother, now sitting on the second stair in her tartan dressing gown, made him lose courage. 'I'll call you,' he said instead, and they exchanged meaningful smiles before the door was closed and James had to turn back to face the inquisition.

'Mum.' James opted for the pre-emptive strike. Once Nina got started on one of her lectures she was unstoppable - by the time she was done with him he'd have forgotten what it was he wanted to say. 'I've already told you we weren't doing anything. But even if we were, I'm seventeen, nearly eighteen. I'm old enough to join the army and die for my country' - this was the line he always peddled when lamenting his inability to buy a drink in the pub. 'I'm old enough to get married, to be a father . . .'

'That's precisely what you will be if you carry on like that,' Nina interrupted. 'What are you going to do if she gets pregnant?'

'She won't get pregnant.'

'She might. That's what it's for, in case you hadn't realized.'

'We haven't even had proper sex yet!' James practically shouted.

'Yet?' said Nina in a shrill voice, thinking, what does he mean 'proper'? 'You're planning to, then?'

James mimed banging his head against the banisters. 'What century are you living in, Mum?'

Nina, who considered herself the model of a modern, liberal, emancipated parent, was stung by this. 'It's not sex *per se* I'm worried about,' she said, changing tack. 'I'm not trying to protect your virginity.'

'Too late anyway,' James couldn't resist muttering.

Nina swallowed. 'It's the girl I'm thinking of. You wouldn't be the one saddled with an unwanted pregnancy.' That's it, she thought. This is a feminist issue. 'Apart from anything else, this is my house and I don't want you bringing a

procession of girls back here under my nose. It's not as if you've been going out together for any time at all.'

'So how long would we have to be going out for it to be okay?' James wanted to know. He was leaning against the closed front door, in T-shirt and boxers, not having bothered to get properly dressed.

'I . . . I don't know. I haven't got a specific timetable worked out,' said Nina, outmanoeuvred.

'So, basically, as long as we don't do it here, and Kerry doesn't get pregnant, you don't mind?' said James, attempting to tease out the main thread of Nina's tortuous logic.

'No. Yes. I mean I still *mind*, but I know I can't stop you, so I'd rather you at least respect the . . . er . . . sanctity of this house.' No, that wasn't it at all, thought Nina. She didn't give a bugger about the house, and she certainly hadn't meant to convey that she'd be thrilled at the thought of them screwing in potting sheds and in the backs of cars. She felt all her anger dissolve into weary confusion. Perhaps it was cracking my head on the pavement earlier, she thought. It's made my brain go woolly. 'I was assaulted at the bus stop today,' she said. 'On the way to Irene's.'

'What? How come?' said James, glad that the argument had burnt itself out, and congratulating himself on having escaped so lightly.

'I ticked this girl off for dropping litter and she knocked me backwards into a pile of broken glass.' Nina pulled up one of the wide sleeves of her dressing gown and craned back to inspect the grazes on her shoulder.

'God. Why didn't you say before? Did you call the police?'

'No. It would have made me late for the house-clearance man,' Nina replied. 'As a moral crusade it was a bit half-baked, I'm afraid.'

'Perhaps you should avoid moral crusades - they're obviously bad for your health,' James suggested, with a hint of a smile.

Nina went to pat his cheek – a gesture he hated – and he ducked away, pleased nevertheless that they were friends again. They hardly ever quarrelled.

‘Well, goodnight then,’ said James, sliding home the bolt on the front door.

‘Goodnight,’ said Nina, and then halfway up the stairs she turned. ‘Why don’t you invite Kerry to lunch one Sunday so I can meet her properly? I don’t want her to think I’m an old dragon.’

James laughed, uneasily. That was exactly what she did think. ‘I don’t know about lunch. The thing is she doesn’t like eating in front of other people. She’s not used to sitting around a table and stuff. She’d be embarrassed.’

Of course, thought Nina. You don’t get a figure like that by eating normal meals. She probably prefers raiding the fridge at midnight and then sticking two fingers down her throat.

‘Not lunch then,’ she said. ‘Something else.’

‘Whatever,’ said James in his amiably non-committal way. Nothing would ever come of that little proposal, it was clear.

What a depressing day, Nina thought, as she tossed the *Times* crossword aside and climbed back into bed. On the bedside table, next to the alarm clock and the herbal headache pills was one of the half a dozen items she had salvaged from Irene’s flat: the last photograph of Irene’s son, Martin, taken through the open window of a Land Rover parked outside the meteorological station in In Salah, Algeria, in 1976. Beside it was a picture of Nina, aged twenty-one, holding James as a six-month-old baby. Their cheeks were touching and Nina was smiling into the camera, with the confidence of someone still young and beautiful enough to outshine an angelic infant. But James was already looking away, his attention caught by something off to the left.

She suddenly felt overwhelmed with grief and nostalgia – for her own lost youth, and for James’s babyhood, which was so irretrievably remote now; and because the best of their

relationship was in the past. He'd been such an easy baby, so easily comforted. She recalled fleetingly but with perfect clarity the sensation of razor-sharp infant toenails raking her back: James had been a gregarious sleeper and had often crept into bed with her in the middle of the night. It was one of the things that had kept her single. From the moment he was born her vocation had announced itself: James. She would have to be everything to him - mother, father, brother, sister, friend - since everything he lacked was her fault. Once when he was nearly three he had asked if he could have a party for his birthday - he had picked up the concept from a children's television programme. 'How can you have a party, darling?' Nina had said. 'You haven't got any friends.' She hadn't intended the remark to be wounding - he had no friends only because he was still too young for nursery, and Nina knew no one else with young children. But it evidently had been, because the following day when they were out in the car he had said, quite unprompted, and with great dignity, 'The sky is my friend.'

Well, he didn't need the sky any more and pretty soon he wouldn't need her either. These meditations were interrupted by a tap at the door which then opened a fraction. 'I forgot to tell you,' James whispered through the chink. 'There's a message on the answering machine for you.'

'I'll listen to it tomorrow,' Nina replied. She was in a nice warm patch of sheet and couldn't be bothered to move. It was probably something to do with work. Nina had trained as a social worker with Lambeth Council, but was now a guardian ad litem, representing children's interests to the courts in custody disputes. Her clients frequently had out-of-hours crises. Whoever it was could jolly well wait.

'Someone called Hugo,' said James, withdrawing. 'Calling from Australia.'

Nina leapt from the bed as though she'd sat on a scorpion, her heart galloping in her ribs. In her haste, her left foot got

tangled in the duvet cover and she fell, striking her face on the corner of the ottoman and dragging the bedclothes on top of her. This is prophetic, she thought, lying stunned on the floor. She put her hand up to her nose and caught the first drops of blood. Even after eighteen years, at a distance of twelve thousand miles, and without raising his hand, Hugo was still an agent of disaster.

It was going to be a smacking sort of week. On Monday Harriet had crayoned all over one of her sister's schoolbooks and, when given the mildest reprimand, hurled the book at the fish tank. On Tuesday she had thrown the most spectacular tantrum outside the school gates because Jane had refused to let her walk through the nettle patch at the edge of the playing field. On Wednesday Jane had woken up in a foul mood anyway and it hadn't taken much at all, just a dropped bowl of Weetos - unforgivable, that one really, Jane thought. And today here they were in the doctor's waiting room together because she couldn't leave Harriet with Guy or he'd want to know *why* she was seeing the GP, and Harriet had been running around climbing on and off the chairs and doing that very high-pitched squeal for fifteen minutes now. Half the people waiting were glaring at her, Jane, as though they'd like to tear her heart out if she didn't belt the child soon, and the other half looked as though they might report her to the social services if she did.

The place was punishingly overheated for a spring day, the windows locked and barred, the radiators throbbing. God only knew what diseases were being incubated and circulated around her. Harriet came wheeling towards her, saw her expression and wheeled away again, cannoning into the coffee table, sending a pile of magazines slithering on to the floor. A ripple of tuning and tongue-clicking ran around the waiting room. Beads of sweat began to break out on Jane's brow.

'Harriet, come here,' she said, trying to be both discreet and menacing. 'Go and play with the toys,' she went on, changing her mind, and pointing at the plastic basket of grubby teddy bears and chewed books which comprised the recreation area. Attempts to bribe Harriet to keep still and/or

quiet with promises of sweets had failed, as had threats of vague and then specific punishments to be administered later. Jane had tried to restrain her in her arms but, though only three, Harriet was as strong and slippery as a giant fish.

Jane's older daughter, Sophie, now five and at school, had never been like this. She had been a compliant, docile child - inclined to tears, perhaps, but easily comforted. Harriet had shown signs of obstinacy from birth, rejecting all the efforts of her mother and the hordes of professionals and experts in lactation who had been summoned to persuade her to feed from the breast; crying inconsolably every waking minute for the first three months of her life. These early symptoms had now mutated into general defiance, disobedience and a thorough contempt for maternal authority. Jane had only ever wanted girls: she thought they would be gentler, less boisterous than boys, and fondly imagined that life with daughters would be much as depicted in *Little Women* - sitting by the fireside in the evenings embroidering samplers or singing madrigals around the piano. The reality had been a shock and a disappointment. Now she thought boys might not have been such a bad idea. The ones she saw at Harriet's playgroup seemed affectionate, simple creatures, devoted to their mothers.

The old lady beside her, bow-legged and bunioned (Jane was looking at people's feet rather than making eye-contact by this stage), let out a hiss like a punctured tyre as Harriet tripped over her walking stick for the second time. *Crack*. Jane's open palm caught Harriet on the back of the leg with a sound like gunshot. The child collapsed as if she had indeed been felled by a bullet, her wails rending the silence. Right, we're going, thought Jane.

'Jane Bromelow,' said a disembodied voice and an outstretched hand appeared through a hatch, holding her medical notes in their brown cardboard wallet.

Oh God, thought Jane desperately, manhandling the still sobbing Harriet towards the surgery door. As if it's not going to be embarrassing enough, without *this*.

The doctor, a youngish woman she had never seen before, gave her a wintry smile as Jane dumped Harriet at a small table strewn with more chipped and sticky toys. 'Just sit there for a few minutes,' Jane said.

'What can I do for you -' the doctor glanced at her notes '- Mrs Bromelow?'

Jane looked at the woman's left hand. No wedding ring. She would have liked a married woman doctor ideally; a married woman doctor stuck at home all day with a small child. But that was asking the impossible - even Jane had to accept that.

'Well, I'm probably wasting your time,' Jane said, already abject and apologetic.

The doctor smiled. They all said that, and went on to waste it just the same.

'It's probably not even a medical matter.' She glanced at Harriet, who was now trying to brush the matted hair of a one-armed Barbie doll, and wondered how much of all this she would take in and later repeat. 'It's just that for a while now I seem to have no . . . er . . . libido, if you know what I mean. I seem to have gone right off it,' she finished lamely.

The doctor nodded. 'Are you on the combined pill?'

Jane shook her head.

'Because that can sometimes account for it.'

'Only I'm not,' said Jane.

'Mmm. Are you getting enough sleep? Do the children disturb you?'

'I could always use a bit more sleep. And sometimes they come in, you know, when they've had nightmares. But not all the time.'

'Perhaps you feel inhibited because they might hear you?'

'Maybe.'

'Otherwise relations with your husband are all right?'

'Oh, fine, fine.' Jane pictured Guy, still loyally wearing that horrible pullover she'd knitted him in the early days of their marriage, with a sudden rush of affection.

'Have you talked to him about this?'

'Oh no. I wouldn't want to hurt his feelings. He'd take it personally. And it's not personal. It's not as if I daydream about having sex with other men.' Oh blast, she hadn't meant to say 'sex' in front of Harriet. 'I think he's sort of starting to guess though.'

They had been in bed a few nights previously when Guy had said out of the blue as she was dropping off to sleep, 'Do you have any sexual fantasies?'

This sort of conversation, Jane knew from experience, was likely to be a prelude to a gentle hint that she might like to be a bit more adventurous in that department, and was therefore best headed off.

'Er . . . yes, I suppose so.'

'Go on, tell me.'

'No, no, you'd be shocked.'

'No I wouldn't,' said Guy, suddenly aroused.

You would mate, thought Jane. Because my sexual fantasy is NOT HAVING SEX. But instead she said, 'I think the thing about fantasies is they only work in your head. The minute you try to discuss or enact them they don't work any more.'

'I suppose so,' said Guy. 'But, you know, if there's ever anything you want me to do, I'd do it for you, however weird it seemed.'

'Thank you,' said Jane, kissing him, but failing to reciprocate the offer. 'I'll bear it in mind.' And the discussion had died there.

'Are you happy with your method of contraception?' the doctor inquired. 'Fear of pregnancy can be an inhibiting factor. Perhaps you might like to try something safer?'

Like the libido-reducing pill? thought Jane. 'Maybe,' she said.

'You don't have any psychological problems - any bad experiences with sex in the past that you might need to work through? I could put you in touch with a counsellor.'

'Oh, no, no, I don't think counselling,' Jane said hurriedly. How ever would she fit that in? She couldn't very well take Harriet along. Besides, Jane was a thorough sceptic where that sort of thing was concerned. Even coming to see the GP was a great concession.

'There are these sex therapists,' the doctor was saying, rolling her eyes. She seemed to be having trouble with her contact lenses. 'But they generally like people to come along as a couple. So if you don't feel like involving your husband . . .'

'No, not yet. Perhaps . . .'

She was interrupted by a yelp of alarm from the doctor, who shot out of her swivel chair and made a lunge for Harriet, who had abandoned Barbie and had one hand in the washbasin, from which she produced a used speculum. Jane and the doctor exchanged horrified looks as Harriet dropped the instrument back in the bowl with a clatter.

'Here.' The doctor pumped a dollop of antibacterial hand-wash from a dispenser on the side into Harriet's hands and scrubbed them vigorously. 'I'm so sorry about that,' she said faintly, envisioning piles of lawsuits landing on her desk the following morning.

Jane shouldered her bag. 'My fault,' she said. 'Come on, Harriet. I'll think about your suggestions. You've been very helpful,' she lied.

'You could try and experiment with different positions,' was the doctor's final offering before Jane opened the door. 'Women's bodies change after childbirth. Perhaps there's a bit of underlying discomfort that's putting you off.'

'Yes, thank you,' said Jane, now desperate to be on her way.

Different positions, she thought scornfully, as she led Harriet back through a now quiet waiting room. If modern