

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



# Zellie's Weakness

Jean Aveline

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## About the Book

**It was the knowing boys that Zellie most feared. It seemed to be a rule of life, in Acacia at least, that it was the very worst boys who had the most profound knowledge of how to touch a girl, and it was the very worst boys who saw all of Zellie's weaknesses, from honesty to soft heartedness to carnality, in a glance.**

Zellie is young and fun-loving with an insatiable appetite for sex. But the gated community of Acacia, where fine facades hide dark secrets, is a dangerous place for an excitable and free-spirited girl to live. After escaping from the clutches of her lustful neighbour Rodrigo and his sadistic cousin Eduardo, Zellie begins an unwitting journey of erotic discovery, finding no shortage of eager teachers amongst the wealthy and debauched residents of Acacia. Wise beyond her years in the ways of the flesh, she faces a final challenge: can she contain her libidinous cravings before she loses all control?

## About the Author

Jean Aveline is a British author who lives and writes in Thailand.

*By the same author:*

EXPOSING LOUISA  
GISELLE  
SISTERS OF SEVERENCY

# ZELLIE'S WEAKNESS

*Jean Aveline*



## Aunt Shelby

SIX MONTHS AGO, at that time of the evening, Zellie would probably have been lazily sitting out in the back garden, thinking about nothing in particular. She might have been humming the words of a song or chatting on her mobile. She might have been trying out a new pen colour for her homework. A book might have held her attention for a few minutes. Time would have passed until her mother had finally told her it was too cold to stay outside.

Today, laziness was a thing of the past.

Clutching her school books to her bulging breasts, she had already walked hard for an hour and was not even home. She had slipped from her school by a hole in the fence as her friends had sauntered out of the front gates. She had cut through an area of scrub thick with midges. Brambles had torn at her stockings. She had trudged along beside a broad slow river where dragonflies dipped long red tails in soupy water. She had clambered over sun-hot rocks and soaked her shoes in a reeking marsh. She had cut through the car park of her local supermarket where men had stared (at her shoes, at her stockings, at her breasts). She had circled behind the fine stone-built church where once, long ago, she had been baptised in silk and holy water. She had crept along a urine-soaked alley beside a car repair shop, holding her breath and listening so intently for the sounds of boys that her ears had hurt.

And finally, after nearly an hour, she had almost made it home.

If she had taken the direct route, she could have walked it in ten lazy minutes. Even now, when she could see her house not fifty metres away, the ordeal was not over. Rodrigo would be sure to be looking out for her and Rodrigo was becoming more and more demanding. Worse, his cousin Eduardo was staying and, like boys everywhere, in pairs, they liked to show off. Yesterday, they had showed off so much that her pussy was still sore.

So, Zellie watched carefully from the dusty bushes next to the alley until she was sure no one lay in wait. Then she ran as fast as she could along the tree-lined street. From left and right, fine houses watched her long legs flash in the slanting sunlight. They saw her school skirt whip up. They saw the golden flesh of her slender arms and the goose bumps of anxiety there. If they'd had very good eyes, and were rude enough to stoop, they would have glimpsed the rounded behind, and the meagre white cotton beneath the nylon of her tights. If they had been male houses, their chimneys would have shot heavenwards.

She was twenty metres into her dash when a group of boys (younger boys, not the dangerous kind) shot out of a driveway right in front of her, their bicycles muddy and their faces shining with excitement. One of them shouted her name.

Zellie's nerves were not as good as they used to be. Startled, she felt her books and papers spill from her arms and scatter across the pavement. The boys laughed. They weren't bad boys - Zellie knew them all - but, just for a moment, they sounded like a pack of hyenas. Then Tom, the oldest and kindest, dropped his bike and asked if she needed a hand. She flashed a smile, then knelt and began scrabbling like a mad girl.

Still scanning the street for older boys - for the sort who would do more than just laugh at her - she scooped up the



geography of America and grabbed the mathematics of ancient Greece. She reacquired the history of England from the long grass beneath a cherry tree and tucked Evolution into a dictionary of French, creasing the pages of both. Tom crouched down and rescued the animal kingdom from a muddy puddle. Flecks of mud stained her blouse as he dropped it into her arms. More mess! She thanked him as calmly as she could.

The boys watched her for a moment as she flicked through her stuff, making sure that everything was there, then suddenly they were gone. It was as if the air had parted and they had dived into the opening.

Zellie was alone. She needed to be quick. Just as she decided to run, a pen fell from an exercise book. It rolled across the pavement to hide itself under the overhanging branches of a bush. It was a special pen, a present from her mother before she had disappeared so suddenly and inexplicably. Her eyes swept the street again. A shadow moved in a window of the Prentice house, panicking her. It was boy-shaped. Will Prentice was growing by the day. I'll come back tonight, she thought. I'll bring a torch.

She ran off as fast as she could, her heart in her mouth. A man appeared in front of her and she gave a little shriek. But it was only Mr Angelo.

Kindly, ancient Mr Angelo, face scoured by smile lines, stiffened at the sound of the shriek and raised the watering can in his hand high, as a shield. Portia, his sleek retriever, made a play dart at her ankles. Zellie's legs, as athletic as they were long, as agile as they were golden, sidestepped them both adroitly.

By the time Mr Angelo started to smile a welcome, she was past him. Portia woofed.

'Is there a fire?' he called.

'Toilet!' she shouted over her shoulder, then blushed. How could she have shouted out 'toilet' in the street where she lived?

She ran on. Rodrigo's house was next. She refused to look. She blocked her ears with a thought. If he was on his balcony she wouldn't see him. If he called to her she would be deaf.

Only another twenty metres!

Still no Rodrigo. Still no Eduardo. God was good. God was as kind as Mr Angelo, who had always let her look through his telescope at the stars above. Her legs were tired now. At her groin, the muscles ached, but then they had ached all day. Eduardo had stretched her further than a girl should be stretched . . .

There were only two more houses now: the Henderson house and Jimmy's place.

Mrs Henderson was unloading her car. Ten or more white plastic bags filled the back of her four-by-four. She gave Zellie a pained look. Mrs Henderson was always pained and nothing anybody ever did or said seemed able to change that.

Zellie flashed a smile anyway. Zellie had been trained to smile beautifully in any situation. On another day, she would have offered to help. Helpfulness was one of Zellie's weaknesses. But this was not an evening to be helping. Guilt stabbed into her heart as she swept on by.

Jimmy's house seemed empty. Nothing leapt from the bushes that surrounded it. The clever topiary - swans, top hats, chessmen - did not come alive and grab her.

At last she was home. The deep shadows and still warm air of the driveway enfolded her. The old timber and brick house, wrapped in a bright wreath of gold and red ivy, smiled down. The flame bushes, where she had played hide and seek so many times with Jimmy, rattled their leaves in welcome.

Six months ago she would have been safe. Her mother would be waiting in the kitchen with crackers and cheese. Or she would be sunbathing on the patio with an empty lounge beside her and Zellie would collapse into it to tell

her day, her *whole* day, in a long, sweet revelation. But everything had changed when her mother went away to work in a foreign land.

Now, Zellie was facing a more serious challenge than eating crackers and cheese. She needed to get to her room without being seen by the twins. She needed to change her torn stockings. She needed to dry and polish her shoes.

When she was younger, she would have climbed the big old tree if she had wanted to enter the house secretly. Now that she was a grown-up, it would not be dignified. Even so, she glanced at the thick strong branches of the cedar standing at the side of the house, branches that looped from the balcony of her bedroom all the way over to the balcony of Jimmy's bedroom in the house next door.

For a moment, she wondered if she should risk going out into the street again and asking if she could use that aerial highway. Jimmy was her friend. He would never say no. But he would have asked why, and Zellie could not have lied. It was another one of her weaknesses. She could never tell a lie. And she could never tell Jimmy about Rodrigo and the things he made her do.

So, it was more worry, more scrabbling to be safe. She thought of the front door with its creaking hinges. She thought of the side door that was usually locked. She realised that her only chance was to head for the patio door.

Her aunt would probably be resting in her room. The twins would probably be in the kitchen making a mess - apple pie mess, popcorn mess, chocolate cake mess. With mess they were creative and this was the time of day for mess. Later, it would be the time of day for Zellie to clean up.

She passed under the tall cedar tree, pushed through the bushes that were supposed to keep out the burglars, slipped past the tool shed, skirted the fish pond and stepped out onto the open patio as nervously as a deer stepping out of its forest.

All was silent. All was still.

She walked as boldly as she could. If the twins or her aunt saw her, it was important that she did not look secretive. No one liked secrets. No one liked Zellie to have secrets.

The French windows were open and she stepped into the sitting room as carefully as an assassin. There was a smell of old flowers: her aunt liked pot pourri. Draped over the back of a chair was a half-completed piece of crochet - a tablecloth perhaps, a toilet roll concealer, a doily.

Her aunt liked pot pourri and crochet. She also liked the twins and religion. She did not like much else and she certainly did not like Zellie.

'The angels look out for good children,' she had said once. 'But whatever walks with you, my girl, scuttles on hard claws and smells of sulphur.' Alarmed, Zellie had rushed upstairs to the bathroom. She had scrubbed herself for an hour and then asked her aunt if she smelt any better. 'You are looking for a good hiding, girl!' her aunt had told her, and within half an hour Zellie had learnt not to cheek her elders and betters.

The crochet was a bad sign. Her aunt did not leave things lying around. Neatness was a virtue as was cleanliness and punctuality. Zellie had transgressed mightily in all these departments so her eyes scanned the room intently. It was mostly in shadow. The windows were covered by heavy drapes. Light was one of the things her aunt did not like. Not in excess.

There were half a dozen places where a person could sit and not be seen. It was the biggest room in the house and filled with sofas, sideboards, easy chairs, tables, chaise longues, screens, knickknacks and flummery from every corner of the world. Each piece was an heirloom, a hand-me-down, a container of family history.

This was the special heart of a special house. It had been her mother's favourite room because her mother had loved entertaining. Friends and family were lured to sit in the chairs with lovingly made food, the promise of an attentive

listener, the siren sound of rich laughter from mother and daughter, and sometimes, when he wasn't buried away in his study, witty conversation from a clever but oversensitive and fragile father. The room had forgotten all that now, the memory driven away by the scent of dead flowers and the click of crochet needles. People were one of the things that Zellie's aunt did not like.

A tiny sound warned Zellie that trouble was coming - a wheeze, her aunt's dry, creaky, waking-up wheeze.

'Who is it?'

The voice was drowsy. Zellie looked at the door to the hallway. Hard parquet flooring lay like a minefield all around it. If she slipped off her shoes, if she was quick -

'Who's there?'

In the shadows of the sofa, a figure stirred. Two bright points of light told Zellie that she had been seen. Zellie had hesitated and was lost.

'It's me, Aunt Shelby.'

The woman rising from her bed of crochet materials - balls of purple and green, balls of grey and yellow - was neither an aunt nor a Shelby. Yet Zellie called her 'Aunt' because that was how she had been bidden and because compliance was one of Zellie's weaknesses.

Zellie *was* a Shelby, as was her father. In Acacia, Shelby was a name to be proud of. The school Zellie attended was the John Shelby Universal High School. The local newspaper was the *Shelby Herald*. The local hospital was a Shelby Hospital, one of many in that part of the world.

Zellie's grandfather had made his money with skill, hard work and luck in the area of personal communications. Towards the end of his life, he had viewed the mouldering piles of cash and stock with increasing suspicion and had disposed of it all in a fury of philanthropic endowments. Thus, instead of using it to make his children idle, vain and empty-headed, he had used it to spread his own good name far and wide - though some had said it was the fear of God,

a camel and the eye of a needle. Either way his children, and their children after them, cut free, spread and prospered like hardy weeds, occupying every niche available to the quick and the clever.

The woman yawning and straightening her hair and bringing her face to a focus as sharp as a thistle was not a Shelby except by association, and the association was of such a dubious kind, no one of any authority had explained it to Zellie, as yet.

Jimmy said that he had heard from somebody, who had heard it from somebody else, that Aunt Shelby had been wild once. The same unknown source contended that Zellie's dark horse uncle - Uncle Hum - had ridden her carelessly, producing what Jimmy now called the evil twins.

'Come here, girl!'

Zellie felt her stomach sink through the floor. She approached the wiry form of her aunt, praying that the gloom would save her. It did not. Aunt Shelby sat upright, as thin and hard as a broomstick (a broomstick that the twins rode to Black Mass on moonless nights, if Jimmy was to be believed), and she subjected Zellie to a full examination with scorching eyes.

'What in heaven's name have you done to your stockings?' Aunt Shelby asked, her voice as dry and scratchy as an old gramophone recording.

This was not a voice that Zellie had heard before her mother had been kidnapped/murdered by terrorists, seduced by a dark lover, lost her mind, or any of the other rumours that had emerged from Tunisia, the last country anyone could be sure she had been alive in.

The Aunt Shelby that Zellie had known before she moved in and took over the running of Zellie's home and life had a voice as sweet as honey. She had a smile as wide as salvation. She had been virtually a saint and the perfect choice to plug the gap in Zellie's life. It hadn't been many

weeks, however, before the honey became vinegar and the smile, brimstone.

Whatever the old woman had cooked for Zellie's father in her oven of fundamentalist zeal had rapidly driven him to drink, and a cold exit from hearth and home. In fact, Zellie's father had drunk himself into and out of rehab so many times he was no longer allowed within a hundred yards of Zellie or the house.

'Well?' Aunt Shelby bellowed. 'Answer my question!'

Zellie began a long description of the scrubland behind the school.

Her aunt cut her short. 'And what were you doing in the scrubland at the back of the school?' Her voice rose in pitch then fell with a sudden, flat certainty. 'No. Don't tell me. There is only one reason a girl waits in the bushes.'

'I wasn't waiting,' Zellie protested.

Aunt Shelby raised a bony hand. 'Shh. I am not going to let you mither me today.'

'Mithering' was only one of the words Aunt Shelby had taught Zellie since her arrival. Other words were nincompoop, fathead and slattern.

Aunt Shelby brushed a few stray pieces of hair back into the bun atop her head, trying, it seemed, to compose herself, trying not to let the girl in front of her destroy her precious peace of mind. It was a futile effort. Aunt Shelby's eyes had continued their examination of Zellie unbidden, and she found herself staring at wet muddy shoes and the trail they had left across the beautifully polished parquet floor.

'Your shoes!'

Zellie hastily stepped out of her shoes and tried to explain how marshy the land beside the river was.

'And I suppose you were by the river for the same reason you were in the bushes!'

Zellie didn't know what to say. It was impossible for her to lie but it was even more impossible to tell the simple -

complicated - truth that her clitoris had grown lately. That not only had it grown physically, to an impressive extent, but that it had grown in its capacities. The pip of flesh that had for so long been so peaceful and so modest had lately elongated and thickened to become a *finger* of flesh.

Even more than that, it had become a sort of radio tower that could detect boys and their desires at a distance and it could transmit desire in return, drawing boys of all kinds like a magnet draws iron filings.

Neither of these things - finger nor magnet - was in Zellie's control.

Even less in her control were the feelings her clitoris produced if a sweet boy smiled at her or a badly intentioned boy touched her, whether it be ever so lightly or ever so clumsily or, most disturbingly of all, if a boy touched her ever so *knowingly*.

These were things that Aunt Shelby should not be told because they would be a burden and her aunt already had too many burdens ranging from mithering children to mysterious headaches and too many taxes.

So, Zellie shouldered the burden instead and was learning the pleasures and pains of adulthood without being a trouble to anyone.

Luckily, her aunt was never much interested in what Zellie had to say so Zellie was neither obliged to tell the truth or bite her tongue. It was Aunt Shelby's assumption that Zellie lied about everything and Aunt Shelby preferred to reach her own conclusions. For once, her assumptions were not too far wide of the mark, missing the point by only 180 degrees.

'Boys! You've been chasing boys again.'

'No aunt, not chasing -'

Aunt Shelby's eyes hardened further. Popped from her head, they could have been used to cut glass. She raised her hand and Zellie stifled her protests. She knew that from this point on anything she said would be in vain and her



head slumped onto her chest. There was only one way forward from here, only one way to assuage her aunt's rage. A sacrifice was required, a sacrifice of live human flesh - the flesh of her behind.

'Don't argue, girl. Go and wait in the games room.'

'But, Aunt -'

'Every word will earn another swat!'

'Yes, Aunt.' With her shoes in her hand and her heart in her boots, Zellie trudged out of the sitting room.

The games room was a late addition to the house, built out into the garden and reached by a little corridor. It was surrounded on all sides by bushes and trees which had been allowed to grow so that the light inside was greenish and dim.

Like every other part of the house, it contained history. There were old dolls and balls that no girl had played with in years. There were party dresses Zellie wouldn't wear again unless she fell through a looking glass. There were saved birthday cards - some signed by hands that no longer lived and others by hands that had hardly learnt to write. In a corner there was the paddling pool where Zellie had first learnt that frogs liked water - yuk! It was deflated now and sad looking. There was a kayak - very small - in which Zellie had once followed her father down the broad slow river. The prow of her father's kayak, very large and very red, could still be seen jutting from the roof of the tool shed. The red was turning to green where algae grew. A length of frayed mooring rope dripped from its very tip and swung gently in the breeze.

For a moment, Zellie stood in the centre of the room, her hand resting on a half-sized ping pong table. A doll's house stood on its slate-grey surface. If she were in a better mood, she could have greeted its inhabitants by name. There were books. There was one complete wall of books. On the floor were boxfuls of books. There were books which told a

history that Aunt Shelby didn't believe in. Books which described a geography Aunt Zellie wasn't interested in. Books which contained a poetry that Aunt Shelby despised. Books, books, books. Unread, they could never protect Zellie.

There were many things besides these items but only one that truly mattered. Brown and fly-blown, there was the cupboard. Coffin-sized and sombre, it had a character that Aunt Shelby did approve of. Aunt Shelby had filled it with canes and paddles.

Abandoning the table, Zellie waited dutifully beside the grave column. Her wide blue eyes gazed through the window and out onto the darkening patio. Shoeless, her feet were cold. Tights-less (tights were not allowed in this room), her calves were prey to a draught from beneath the garden door. She shivered. She eyed the door which betrayed her. She remembered her mother in its frame.

She waited and waited. Aunt Shelby had a sense of drama, undeveloped by books, but richly embroidered by experience. She knew that a good beating could only begin with a good overture. A sumptuous feast of silence. A poignant anticipation. A firing-up of the memory of former beatings. A certainty of future beatings.

When Aunt Shelby finally appeared, she was a new woman. All sleepiness was gone. She was brimful of vigour and a whirlwind of determination. Zellie turned towards her slowly, a soft column of misery, twisting slightly at the waist, pale fingers pulling gently at her skirt. For a moment, their eyes met. Zellie's were resigned, rounded, puzzled. Aunt Shelby's were star-bright and narrow, glittering in a face dark with anger. They gazed at each other like different species.

The more Aunt Shelby glared, the more puzzled Zellie became. How could a pair of torn stockings turn the veins in Aunt Shelby's forehead into high-pressure hoses? How could Zellie's damp shoes wear so badly on her aunt's pinched

nerves? How could a few muddy footprints lead to this? It was a puzzle. Yet Zellie was not one for shirking responsibility. Something that she had done had prompted all of this. And since letting Aunt Shelby beat her was the only way her aunt could regain her ease, Zellie was resigned to allowing it.

Of course, her behind was not the thing that Zellie would have most liked to offer the older woman. If Aunt Shelby could have been soothed by a cuddle, Zellie would have given that more gladly. If Aunt Shelby could have been eased by a good listening to, Zellie would have opened her ears with a more enthusiastic heart. Unfortunately, none of these things could avail.

'You are the most incorrigible girl I have ever had to deal with,' her aunt declared.

'I'm sorry, Aunt Shelby.'

'I believe you have no shame.'

'I do, Aunt Shelby.' Zellie had more shame than she could ever describe to Aunt Shelby.

'You stare at me as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth.'

'It would, Aunt Shelby.' Many things had melted in Zellie's mouth (many more things had wanted to).

'You stare at me as if you *pity* me.'

'I do pity you, Aunt Shelby.'

Zellie's pity, hopelessly broad, indiscriminate and, at that moment, as sensitive as sandpaper, deepened as the colour of Aunt Shelby's face deepened. In a second, the skull-stretched skin went from red to scarlet and Zellie groaned with guilt.

Whatever she had said wrong this time was very, very wrong. Her aunt didn't even reply. Instead, she threw open the door of the cupboard and seized her favourite paddle.

'Over the table!' she snapped.

Zellie approached the ping pong table like a sacrificial lamb, meek and mild, soft and round. She laid her torso across the grey-green surface and stretched out her arms

until her fingertips came to rest against the neglected doll's house. Her bare feet stretched up on tiptoe. The finger between her legs twitched.

Before her aunt had arrived, before Aunt Shelby's distinctive brand had been laid across Zellie's behind, that finger had been a stub - simple and innocent, a fully integrated part of her body, like any other organ. Now, it was finding its own life.

It was a difficult birth.

As each stroke was applied, Zellie felt the finger quiver and stretch out. She wriggled. She squirmed. She parted her legs to ease the pressure on that treacherous digit. She tipped her pelvis back to give the heat a chance to dissipate. She thought of things that sex had never touched (finding only a few). She tried to concentrate on the pain. She leant into it, *hard*, but the bitterness was not enough. The finger grew, the finger wriggled.

'Keep still, girl!' The paddle rose. 'And think of your sins.' The paddle fell. 'The Devil will not dwell beneath my roof.' The paddle broke the air in two.

The lamb *tried* to think of her sins but the more her aunt tried to beat the wickedness out of her, the deeper the wickedness sank. The more Aunt Shelby struck at the head of the Devil, the more securely his cloven hooves wedged themselves in Zellie's pussy. The harder her aunt struck at the Devil's horns, the more his hooves kicked and slipped. The more he kicked, the more of Zellie's wholesome flesh was displaced; outwards into the finger; down into the finger; through into the finger.

If Aunt Shelby had tried to remove a nail from a wall with blow after blow from a hammer, she would have had more chance of success. A hundred more blows and Old Nick would be buried to his fur-skirted waist. Two hundred more and he would be living inside Zellie's womb.

A more clinical woman might have noticed the little gurgling sounds that came from the back of Zellie's throat.

She might have smelt the sickly musk of sexual dysfunction. She might have connected the slow shuffling of Zellie's feet with the flicked-back whites of her eyes and the pumping of her pelvis and realised that Zellie, fucked by the Devil's hooves, was coming. But Aunt Shelby was a doer not a thinker. Her mother before her had been the same.

Had Aunt Shelby the time or inclination to read learned journals, she might have known that no laboratory rat had ever learnt a single behaviour from the application of electrical shocks (the preferred punishment of the scientific community). If she had shared her life with thinkers and ponderers, she might have noted that whilst a dog can be cowed by a lash, even broken, it could not be taught a single trick.

Perhaps Aunt Shelby was enjoying herself too much to risk a shaft of thought falling across her motives. The procedure offered so many satisfactions. She was able to revel in self-righteousness. She could cosy up to the idea that a good beating had never done *her* any harm (when the opposite realisation would have been so very painful). She could enjoy the support of the broomstick of authority as it lay firmly along her calcifying spine (a broomstick that also tweaked her ring of power, a ring that in normal circumstances pumped black gold only once in three days, but that after a good beating opened with blissful, sensual ease). She could enjoy other releases too. The adrenaline that coursed through her veins opened passageways in her brain that she rarely dared to tread. Boulder-sized feelings of inferiority were clubbed aside as she stood tall above the doubled-up flesh of the lamb. Sand grains of doubt were driven out by the certainties of the cane. The exercise brought a rosy glow to her cheeks. There was the warm sense of obligations fulfilled, guidance offered, love delivered, with each smarting blow.

The psalms that she sang worked on different tissues. Psalms were the only poetry that Aunt Shelby had ever

admitted to her life. She had long underestimated their power. They not only bathed, they inflamed her starving creative organs. They opened her imaginative eye, sometimes sleepily, sometimes to such a width that towards the end of a good beating the air was filled with angels. Cherubs would pluck on tiny harps and count out the strokes. Muscular Seraphim would hold the lamb firmly down. The Archangel Michael himself sometimes appeared at the end and, as Aunt Shelby fell to her knees to thank the Lord for *His* strength in *her* purpose, the highest beside the Trinity would lay the gleaming sword of justice on her shoulder and a spark of the divine would leap into Aunt Shelby's chest. Yet, when silence returned there was no satisfying afterglow. When all songs had been sung, when all orgasms were concluded, when both holy spirit and girlish mucus flowed no more, it was a sad, flat games room to inhabit.

Aunt Shelby left at speed. Zellie was left to stand in a corner for the contemplation of her crime. She snivelled, she rubbed her behind (though rubbing was forbidden). She remembered times when communication had a wider conduit than a quarter-inch cane. She consoled herself with images of her mother. She struggled with herself. She struggled against nascent feelings of anger towards her aunt. She struggled against feelings of self-pity. She struggled against the desire to take away the pain of it all with exercise of finger and *finger*.

There were many sighs. Many tears were shed that were not shed for the pain of her beating. She worried how she would get home tomorrow, without muddy shoes and torn stockings. She worried how she would get home *any* day. She worried that the finger would get bigger and bigger. She worried that she would like it.

There were self-recriminations - how could she be so weak? How could her girlfriends regulate their lives, their feelings and their reputations, when she could regulate

nothing? Her own reputation was so tarnished that no image of goodness would ever be reflected again. She went through the long conversations she'd had with her mother on the nature of love and sex. She reaffirmed in her mind that sex without love was a barren field filled with tares and stones (though the thrill of that field almost made her faint).

She offered herself hope that some day a boy would appear who would look beyond the finger of flesh and hear a deeper sound than her whimpers of arousal. She offered herself the hope of a boy who would take her to his *heart* when no other boy had even troubled to take her to his *bed*, preferring instead to fuck her where she stood, lay or sat, on discovery.

Half an hour passed in these thoughts, then the twins appeared. Her aunt had probably sent them to tell her it was time to go to her room, but the twins were in no hurry. They installed themselves on the sofa opposite the ping pong table and snickered and whispered. Zellie did her very best to remain still, to stifle her tears, to steel herself for what Jimmy would call their evil and what she called their playfulness.

'You can turn round if you want to,' Purity called.

Zellie preferred not to.

'I think it would be better if you did,' Charity added, an undertone of menace in her voice.

Reluctantly, Zellie turned. Now they could see her tear-stained face. Now they could see her shiny nose. Now the doubts and self-recriminations had as unsympathetic an audience as could ever have been assembled.

'Mama sure took her time today,' observed Purity.

'She needed to take her time,' averred Charity.

As the girls spoke, Zellie looked from one face to the other. Plain, pustuled and sexless (they could so easily have been boys), these were the faces of a new world for Zellie. It seemed less kind than her old one. It seemed to have no key. It left Zellie feeling that somehow she didn't really