

Hidden Works

by Sasha Troyan

Would you like to take a tour of the park? Recently, they've put up the strangest statues. I don't understand them, but they tell me you don't have to. I'm curious to see what you think. Do watch the steps. The last one is chipped. We have to cross the lawn, but first we should stop at the guard's cabin and procure a map. It's probably best if you're the one to ask. They're sometimes reluctant to give us maps, but they would never refuse a visitor. I find that a map helps me avoid looking at the water.

Lovely. I knew they would give you one. We are here, where the X is. If we continue along this path, we will reach the first statue. Such a shame they have no flowers. Not even a dandelion. They mow the lawns so often. Autumn? Yes, but even during the summer there are none. When I describe the flowers in the Hadfields' garden, the dahlias and the roses and the snowballs, they get impatient. They yawn without covering their mouths. They want to know about mother and father, my brothers. I try to guess what they want to hear, but somehow I'm never able to please them. Once I asked them what they wanted me to say and their response was not in the least helpful; nothing in particular, just what is on your mind. When I give them the facts, they don't seem interested. They scratch their ear, or they turn the pages of their notebook. They never come out and say that it was my fault.

All day long I go over and over what happened, the same way I used to examine the children's clothes, inch by inch, the collars, the cuffs, the elbows, the buttons. I tried

to be the very best nanny I could. No. No. I am to blame. You'll see. I misread the situation completely.

I had seen the advertisement in *The Lady*. It was the last advertisement and on the back of a page. The typed words skidded into the top margin and I had to turn the magazine in order to read it. I think it went something like "Looking for capable nanny with excellent references to take care of two darling girls, ages 8 and 10. A third child on its way. Handsome wages. Must be willing to move to Paris. Contact Mrs. Hadfield at Brown's Hotel. "

I thought I'd love to move to Paris. I even liked the sound of their name. The word 'darling' caught my attention. It's not the sort of word one expects to find in an advertisement. But what attracted me above all was the thought of the baby not yet born. What could I not do, if I had him or her from day one!

Even after all that has happened, I cannot help reliving the excitement of that first interview. How can I describe Mrs. Hadfield to you? The day I went for the interview she wore an elegant cream suit with matching shoes. Her stockings glimmered. Light filtered through the white tulle curtain, highlighting her long blond hair.

In retrospect, she seemed distracted, overly anxious that I should accept the job. She seemed to think that I would not find the salary adequate compensation. She fumbled through her handbag, taking out a photograph. "The girls with their father," she said. "This is Nathalie," and this is "Beatrice." I found my gaze drawn to the man standing between the girls. I suspect largely because the photograph cut him off at the neck. I wondered what his face looked like. He was tall, slim, but not boyish. The most

beautifully dressed man. Perfectly cut jacket. His hands, which rested on the girls, were large and powerful.

I am struck by the fact that Mrs. Hadfield was as anxious that I should accept the job as I was to be hired which should have made everything perfectly easy but neither of us perceived this at the time. She confided to me later that she had interviewed a number of nannies before me who had told her that two children and one baby were too much to handle.

It's such a relief to talk to someone sympathetic, not that they aren't sympathetic here, but they're always jotting things down.

I wish you could have seen their house in Paris, an hotel particulier, they call it in French, situated at the end of a quaint street, called Rue de Pomereu, in the sixteenth arrondissement. I believe the President's mistress lived nearby. Boxes of geraniums decorated every house.

I had the nicest room on the third floor right next to baby Xavier's room. The first time I saw him, he was sucking his two fingers, staring with a solemn expression at the shadows of leaves on the wall. At first he did not notice me, but then he did and he smiled. He smiled without taking his fingers out of his mouth! He was such a healthy baby. Sometimes I would get back aches from carrying him. Eighteen pounds and he was only four months old. All he did was sleep and eat. People were always complimenting me. I loved getting him all dressed up and pushing him in this big fancy navy blue pram. I dressed him all in white; white bonnet and white socks and white everything and then I would walk him down Ave Victor Hugo. They treat you differently when they think you're a mother. Open doors for you. Let you go in front of a queue. The older women

always stopped me. They couldn't resist his curls and his blue eyes. He had the longest black eyelashes.

He looked just like his father. Mr. Hadfield was every bit as handsome as the photograph suggested. He wore pink shirts and ties with animals on them.

During the next four months, however, between the time I arrived at their house in Paris and our departure to their country house, I hardly saw Mr. and Mrs. Hadfield. Mr. Hadfield was never at home, always on business trips, and Mrs. Hadfield was always studying. Mathematics! She'd given it up when she got married, but then took it up again and so I was left completely in charge of the children. I hardly saw the parents.

I do recall Claire--Mrs. Hadfield insisted I call her Claire--coming to my room once or was it twice. I was dusting books. I did not hear Mrs. Hadfield's knock. I didn't even hear the door open. It was the draft which caused me to turn. "I feel so old," Mrs. Hadfield said. She had just turned thirty. If you had seen her standing with her hand resting on the doorknob. The loveliest hands, long fingers, a narrow wrist. She looked barely twenty. A few days later, she stood in the doorway of my room again, holding a box of tissues. "Juliet," she said. I was darning one of the children's socks. They always walked around the house in their socks. Sometimes, I imagine I can hear the slip slide of their footsteps running down the hallways here. Or I imagine Mrs. Hadfield dressed in white, her face reproachful, as she stands in the doorway of my room.

"Juliet," she said, "I'm sure you are aware of what is going on. What do you think I should do?" Just like that. The cook had made some remark but I did not know the particulars. Mrs. Hadfield sat down beside me on the bed. She stared at her lap. I was not sure how to reply. The silence prolonged itself. At last I said, "The same thing happened

in the family I worked before yours.” She continued to sit there, staring at her lap and I observed the way the light almost reached the tips of her shoes.

I don’t want you to think that I was unsympathetic to Mr. and Mrs. Hadfield’s problems. I just didn’t think it was my place to give advice. Of course, it worried me and I couldn’t help wondering.

Yes, I still wear my uniform here. The fabric has become so worn it’s very soft.

I’ve always admired the way you iron. I noticed your beautifully pressed skirt. Pleats are so difficult. Shall we sit down on that bench? I have brought a plastic sheet. It’s lovely to see you. My umbrella? Mrs. Hadfield’s aunt offered it to me for my birthday. She arrived a week before we left for the country. A tall thin woman with gray hair whom I didn’t really take much notice of at first.

The Hadfields owned a house about an hour and a half south of Paris. I don’t remember the drive itself, but I do recall the house. It was something out of a fairy book: an old stone house that had once been a mill. Water ran beneath it. The garden surrounding it was composed of small green islands connected by rather flimsy wood bridges.

I was delighted with my room. The walls were covered with a nice bottle green cloth. But what I liked most were the roses. They climbed up the outside wall and peeked in through one window. Yellow roses with a dab of pink. Without my glasses, I could not see their stems, and the roses seemed to float through the air.

I had almost finished unpacking. I was examining the diapers, thinking I should use a little bleach the next time, when Mrs. Hadfield appeared in the doorway. The softest footsteps. She often frightened me. “I’d like to take Xavier for a walk.”

“He’s sleeping,” I continued to fold.

“I just want to hold him.” She reached into the crib. Xavier started to cry. I thought she would put him down, but she didn’t. She rushed out the room and down the steep stairs. I ran after her with Xavier’s blue and white striped sun-hat.

She’d never acted in this way before, but I told myself that it was probably because she was upset over Mr. Hadfield not coming to the country.

A little later wandering out into the garden, I saw Mrs. Hadfield leaning over Xavier, blowing on his stomach. His laughter drifted across the lawn.

Sometimes, I imagine I can hear him chuckling here. An old man laughs just like him. He looks a little like him too. A bald head and big ears. It upsets me that I can no longer picture Xavier’s ears. They were covered with a fuzz of hair.

I almost had Xavier weaned but he still liked to be breastfed when he first woke in the morning and before going to bed. That evening I recall pausing in the doorway of Mrs. Hadfield’s room, giving her time to do up her bra. Xavier lay beside her, asleep. I leaned over and was about to lift him, when Mrs. Hadfield said she wanted him to sleep with her.

I suggested that changing his schedule was not a good idea. It’s upsetting for children. I worried that he might fall off her bed.

“Just this once, Juliet,” she pleaded.

They asked me here if it upset me to let Xavier sleep with his mother. Of course, it did. Then they asked me if I considered Xavier my child. I thought of all the children I looked after as my children in the sense that they were my responsibility, but I was also always very careful, not to let myself grow too attached to them; after all, I knew that I

would eventually have to leave after their formative years. No, what upset me was the unexpectedness of her behavior. I had gotten used to a certain routine. I admit that I do not like change. But I ought to have been more sensitive to Mrs. Hadfield's feelings.

I remember standing outside the girls' room, smoking in the corridor, out of habit really, because with Xavier sleeping in his mother's room there was no need to. I didn't like Xavier to smell of cigarettes. At times, I could see the girls quite clearly but at others it was too dark. Beatrice had a slight cold and made a rasping sound. They lay curled up next to one another, their dark heads outlined against the white pillow.

Looking back, it's my own foolishness that pains me the most. I ought to have paid more attention. You're very kind, but if anything, I was not hard enough on myself. Not that young, older than Mrs. Hadfield. I had just turned thirty-two.

I had trouble sleeping that night. I often have difficulty sleeping. Mother's remedy? Fancy you remembering that! Rum and milk was her remedy for everything. The first time you slept over you wore pale yellow pajamas with a pattern of carrots that belonged to your brother. Yes. But often I wish I didn't remember in quite as much detail.

The following days were uneventful. No. No. There was no more friction between Mrs. Hadfield and me. She spent her time locked in her room. In fact, the aunt called a friend of the family's, a doctor, not a real doctor, but you know the kind they have here, psychiatrists.

I don't want you to imagine that Mrs. Hadfield and I didn't get along. One day the aunt and I managed to persuade Claire to go on a picnic. Mrs. Hadfield played with Xavier on the blanket. She tickled him and then she said she wanted to change him. On

the blanket I put out everything she would need; the nivea, a fresh diaper, some baby powder, the safety pin with the blue duck. As she released his diaper, a streak of yellow pee rose in the air almost touching our faces. We laughed and laughed. We could not stop. I like to recall that moment. The sun had moved from behind the clouds and the light shone on Xavier and Mrs. Hadfield and they looked like a painting.

There is a painting here that I cannot look at. They put it in the hallway. It seems like a harmless painting, a tea pot, with a pink flower drawn on one side, resting on a wine colored cloth. It's the background that disturbs me, the dark green. You can see the down strokes of the paint brush like water.

Always there was the sound of water in that house. Even when I was sleeping I felt as if I were floating.

When I was not thinking of the girls or Xavier, I thought of Mr. Hadfield. I continued to hope that he would come. I imagined that he might show up unexpectedly. Thinking I heard the sound of his car roll across the gravel yard, I would rush up to my bedroom window, only to see the doctor's car, a blue Peugeot with a broken fender.

The doctor came every day. I caught sight only of a shock of white hair, a narrow face, a thin nose. He had such a soft voice. He must have been close to forty. He wore his clothes very tight and he walked with tiny quick steps.

It was the aunt who drew my attention to the doctor. "Not a bad looking man, is he, Juliet?"

"No," I said.

He listened attentively. With his sad blue eyes that seemed to take in everything, I thought that perhaps he had suffered some secret tragedy. A widow perhaps. He did not

wear a ring. I remember one time, in particular, we were talking about Mrs. Hadfield. He placed his hand on my arm, by my elbow. I hurried off under the pretext of having to tend to Xavier, ignoring the sound of his quick footsteps following me. I had reached the top of the stairs. I was a little out of breath. He stood in a pool of light at the bottom of the stairs.

“Juliet. You forgot this.” He held up Xavier’s blue and yellow striped sun bonnet.

He even climbed the stairs, meeting me midway, to hand me the bonnet.

No, no. With Mr. Hadfield there was never any question of—after all he was a married man but with the doctor it was different.

Another time, one evening, I was walking with Xavier in my arms through the garden along the bank of dahlias. I was thinking that the gardener must have a liking, the French word ‘penchant’ actually came to me first, which pleased me immensely, for red and orange, because almost all the flowers were that color, the banks of flowers seemed in flame, when I came upon the doctor around a bend. He stood staring at my favorite statue. Yes, there were statues there too, but old French ones, nothing like these. A statue of a mother and child. “What’s the use,” he muttered and turned. He was holding a bouquet of wild flowers. He asked me if I liked flowers. I said I did. “Here,” he said, holding them out. I was so taken aback that I took them with my free hand. I held Xavier in the crook of my left arm. Then he said that the statue reminded him of someone. I said it reminded me of someone too. “Who?” He asked.

“Mrs. Hadfield.”

“The same nose,” he said.

“And the chin,” I said. We went on to discuss Mrs. Hadfield’s interests. I was only too happy to expound on Mrs. Hadfield’s numerous accomplishments. “A mathematician, also extremely knowledgeable in Art.” Meanwhile, the doctor was very attentive, taking my arm to help me over one of those moldy bridges. He also offered to hold the flowers for me since Xavier was getting quite heavy and required both arms. We lapsed into silence upon reaching the bank of silver willows. Their reflections quivered across the surface of the water.

Suddenly, he announced that he must get back to the house, and he ran off, forgetting to give me the bouquet of flowers.

The following days passed in a flash. Each morning I would lean out my window, elbows resting on the windowsill, and stare down at the river rushing beneath the house.

I was so happy. I floated. I glided. I flew.

I recall only one awkward moment. I was staring at myself in the full length mirror in my room. I had let my hair down so that it hung to my waist and I was remembering the way the doctor had taken my elbow when I realized that someone was standing in the doorway. Mrs. Hadfield. I wondered how long she had been there. I blushed. You know how I blush. There is no way of disguising it, even my ears go red. Her long slim feet were reflected in the mirror. My own feet suddenly looked broad, my ankles thick and my salmon colored dress dull. How could I have imagined even for a moment that I was close to handsome? With such a wide rib cage?

But even the awkwardness of that moment was offset by Mrs. Hadfield’s sweetness. She was very kind.

“Juliet,” she said. “You should always wear your hair down.” And then she placed all her dresses on her bed. “Take whatever you want. I’ve decided I need a change.” I could not believe that she wanted to get rid of perfectly new dresses. Some she had bought only a few months before. I couldn’t possibly take all of them. That would make me seem too greedy. I kept fidgeting with my hands, taking up one dress then another until Mrs. Hadfield remarked, “If you don’t like them or if you don’t think they’re suitable don’t feel obliged.” Imagine!

“No, no, it’s just--they’re all so beautiful.”

“Take all of them then,” she laughed and then she asked if I would like to accompany her to Paris on a shopping expedition. The aunt would look after the children. I said I would.

From a less selfish standpoint, I drew comfort from Mrs. Hadfield’s suggestion. She seemed to be recovering from Mr. Hadfield’s absence. Up to that time, she had hardly emerged from her room or only for the doctor’s visits. Now she was proposing a trip to Paris!

Approximately three weeks later, I was staring out the living-room window—I had my glasses on—when I noticed that the doctor had forgotten his briefcase on the roof of his car. Before I could warn him, he had started up his car and his briefcase slid off the roof. It hit the gravel and opened, papers fluttering across the yard. He stopped the car, and I was about to step out to help him when Mrs. Hadfield ran out the front door. I intended to go to my bedroom, but as I passed the half open door of the aunt’s room, she peered out and suggested we have tea.

Returning a few minutes later, with a tray upon which I had placed a pink napkin, a silver tea-set and a few chocolate fingers, I felt the aunt staring at me. After pouring our tea, I sat down in a chair with a straw seat. I stared down at the aunt's beige shoes, noticing that her feet were swollen, and I tried to think of something to say, but I couldn't come up with anything.

"I do like our doctor," she said, at last. "He's such a nice man."

I attempted to hide my embarrassment by concentrating on wiping the corners of my mouth.

"He seems completely taken with Claire."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed, Juliet," the aunt said.

"I don't understand."

"Claire and the doctor," the aunt said.

"Mrs. Hadfield and the doctor?"

Fortunately, the great-aunt didn't realize the nature of my confusion. I had some difficulty sitting through tea. At last, I said that I thought I heard Xavier crying, and I rushed to my room. I pulled back the white gauze from his crib. There was something unbearably sweet about his expression. I held my hand in the light then twisted it from side to side so that its shadow was like that of a bird.

Although I knew that what the aunt had revealed was true, I could not quite accept it until I had seen it with my own eyes. The very next day, as I passed the windows of the living-room, on my way to hang up laundry, I caught sight of Mrs. Hadfield and the doctor sitting in the living-room. They were not talking. Mrs. Hadfield was pulling at one

of the pearl buttons on her silk shirt, reminding me of the times she fidgeted at table, and Mr. Hadfield would place his hand over her hand. They did not say a word, but it was in the very quality of the silence that I understood.

I started hanging the sheets. The line was placed too high for me or perhaps I was too short for it. On top of that, it was windy. I had the greatest difficulty getting the sheets over the top. When at last I had succeeded, the girls started playing hide and seek behind the sheets. All you could see were their shadows. "Juliet, Juliet," they called pressing their hands and bodies against the damp sheets. Their hands were not clean. I begged them not to touch the sheets. I had had such a time putting the sheets up. At last, I sat down beneath a tree and cried. The girls had never seen me crying. Poor dears. I think it frightened them. They tiptoed up to me. "Juliet," Beatrice said. "We're sorry. We won't do it again."

"We won't do it again," Natalie repeated.

I reached out and hugged them. I held them tight, too tightly perhaps, because they broke away from me.

Mrs. Hadfield must have caught sight of me through the living-room window. She shouted that you had called for me. That was the last straw. Missing your call. I ran up to my room where I admit I had a glass of sherry. Just a glass. They make so much of that here. As if that explained anything. They have to pin it on one thing, like the tail to the donkey. Do you remember that children's game? I never wanted to play it. I knew I was bound to put the tail by the ear. I often think that if I had spoken to you things would have turned out differently. No. no. You were on vacation. How could you know? I tried

to write you several times, but something would happen and I would feel the need to revise what I had written, and so the letters were never sent.

I remember sitting down on my bed and placing Xavier across my knees. He liked to stare down at the pattern of the carpet. I rather liked looking at it myself: the swirls of red and blue and brown. In the distance, I heard the sound of the lawn mower.

I have come to a distressing point. There are holes in my story, hours I cannot account for. These are not deliberate omissions. I have tried to remember, but my mind remains blank, as if someone had punched a hole in the roll of tickets that make up my memory.

All I remember is finding Xavier on the floor. How he had got there I had no idea. He screamed, his face turning bright red. I was so frightened I burst into tears. I sobbed and sobbed. I expected everyone to come running upstairs, to ask me what had happened. But no one did. I examined his head very carefully. I saw that he was a bit red by his left ear. I rocked him until he quieted, seeing a French song I had learned from the girls. "La veille de la chant de l'heur."

Now I cannot bear the sound of the lawnmower, and as soon as I hear it coming I run. I cover my ears. Sometimes, they tease me. Juliet. Juliet. Do you hear the lawnmower? I cover my ears, and I inspect every inch of my clothes to make sure there's not one little piece of grass. Once they filled my shoes with grass.

You do not say anything. I cannot bear to think that I have gone down in your esteem. I know I'm bound to, but I keep hoping, hoping, that you will understand. Oh my dear! Nothing like this. The worst thing you can imagine. And it was all my fault! If only I had paid attention! If only I had not been so caught up with myself!

I did not have the heart to look at the dresses Mrs. Hadfield had given me. I had thrown them into my suitcase and pushed it under my bed. If I heard the doctor's car enter the yard, I stayed in my room.

"We hardly see you," he said once, coming upon me unexpectedly in the kitchen. A week before, I would have misinterpreted this comment. Then Mrs. Hadfield entered. She placed her hand on my arm.

"Juliet and I are going shopping tomorrow. You haven't forgotten?"

"No, no." I had hoped that Mrs. Hadfield had forgotten about this expedition, but I couldn't think of how to get out of it diplomatically.

In the car, she said, "I hope you don't think too badly of me, Juliet."

"Oh no, Mrs. Hadfield. It's not my place."

"The last year has not been easy."

"I'm sorry."

"It can't always be easy for you, either."

"I can't complain."

"You are lucky to have such a good disposition. When I'm feeling a little low, as I sometimes do, I think of you."

"Oh Mrs. Hadfield, you're too kind."

"I've been meaning to say this for quite some time. I do hope we can be friends."

She reached over and took my hand in hers. I let her hold my hand for as long as I thought was necessary then took it back. Now I wish I had held it a little longer or given it a little squeeze.

Instead, I looked out the window at Paris: the streets, the shops, Faubourg Saint Honore. I would never have dared enter these shops without Mrs. Hadfield. One was called, Belles du Jour. It had the thickest carpet. Your feet literally sank in. At first, the shop girl's attitude towards me was dismissive, which wasn't surprising. She focused her attention on Mrs. Hadfield. Mrs. Hadfield tried dress after dress. The shop girl was particularly enthusiastic about a black dress. Mrs. Hadfield asked for my opinion and I replied that while I thought the black dress she wore was not unbecoming, nothing was unbecoming to Mrs. Hadfield, the blue dress was even more flattering.

"Quite right," Mrs. Hadfield said, and the poor sale's girl's face fell. After that, she was all smiles with me.

If our shopping expedition had been limited to buying clothes for Mrs. Hadfield, it would have been a delight. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hadfield decided that she wanted to buy me a dress. She confided that one of the reasons she had wanted to go shopping was that she and the doctor were planning to throw a party. The doctor was also going to give a piano recital.

"We both need something special to wear," she said. Mrs. Hadfield had the best of intentions, and I'm sure she would have stopped immediately had she known the agony I went through trying dress after dress. They looked all wrong and though I knew I might alter the bodice or the hem, once I had glanced at the price tag, which amounted to a month's salary, I became breathless and immediately pulled off the dress, saying that it was not right. I recall one particularly uncomfortable moment, when I stood wearing a white dress that made me look especially short and buxom, and Mrs. Hadfield and the

sale's girl attempted to persuade me that I looked lovely. Seeing that I was not going to buy a dress, Mrs. Hadfield urged me to buy a hat, a green hat with purple flowers.

The following days were filled with preparations for the party. They hired a couple of maids for the day, another cook, a butler. They wheeled the grand piano into the living-room.

The afternoon before the party I took a long bath, rinsed my hair with beer, painted my toe nails and fingers nails a pale pink. I had decided to wear a pale pink dress with a scooped neck that had belonged to Mrs. Hadfield. I was just thinking that my neck looked a bit bare when I heard a knock on the door.

"Juliet, I thought you might like to wear this." She held out a beautiful pearl necklace with a silver clasp.

"Oh no, I couldn't," I said.

"It will look perfect with your dress and hair," she said. "Go on. I'll be offended if you don't."

I remember leaning out the window with the girls, watching the cars roll up through the white gate and onto the gravel yard. Soon the yard filled and cars had to park along the road leading to the house.

I hesitated for a long time before going downstairs, but the girls were very eager. They pulled me by both hands. "Just a minute," I said readjusting the bodice of my dress before picking up Xavier. You know how I dread entering a room full of strangers.

Everyone was dressed very elegantly, of course, but no one could compare with Mrs. Hadfield. She wore my favorite of the new dresses I had helped her choose; a sea

colored dress and around her neck she wore a coral and pearl necklace I had never seen before. I wondered if the doctor had given it to her.

I stood in one corner as unobtrusively as possible. But an old man of at least seventy placed his hand on my arm and told me that he was wearing a disguise of an old man in order to attract young pretty women like me. I tried to pull away, but he held my arm fast and asked, "Don't you believe me?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a driver's license that said he was twenty-one.

When everyone had arrived, Mrs. Hadfield announced that the doctor would play a few pieces at the piano. He was dressed in a very tight gray suit. He played something very difficult. His fingers moved ever so fast and he kept crossing one hand over the other. During the recital I worried that the books upon which he was perched would slip and that the doctor would land on the floor. I could not get the girls to sit still. The recital was rather long. At one point, Xavier cried and I was rather glad of an excuse to rush out with him. I recall standing outside in the dark, staring at the rectangles of light projected from living-room windows onto the courtyard.

The meal was sumptuous. There were three different kinds of pates, foie gras and even caviar. There were pheasants, chestnut puree, which Xavier loved and for dessert, flans, fruit tarts, and bottles and bottles of champagne.

Around eleven, it became clear to me that everyone was under the influence. There had been some talk of swimming in the pool. The girls begged me to let them stay up but around midnight I managed to get them to bed, not without some difficulty. I actually had to bribe them by promising to take them to the movies. It was quite a relief to see them safely tucked in their beds. The aunt had retired several hours before.

Sitting in one of the windows of my room, sipping champagne in the dark, I listened to the sound of the river rushing beneath the house, people's voices, laughter, drifting across the lawn. I suddenly felt the urge to walk towards the voices. I thought I would just go out a minute. I would be able to hear Xavier should he cry. I tiptoed downstairs, stumbling on the last few steps, catching my balance at the very last moment by grabbing onto the cord. Beatrice appeared at the top of the stairs. She stood in her white nightdress. She asked if I was all right.

"Fine dear," I said. "Go back to bed." I stepped out the back door. The air was warm and moist. The scent of the flowers very strong. I felt terribly relaxed as if I could easily have floated across the lawn.

As I drifted, still holding my glass of champagne, the lights of the pool came on and the pool stood out against the dark, a perfect turquoise rectangle. A few people were dancing while others stood drinking.

I was standing by the pool when someone tread on my heel. When I turned I found it was Mrs. Hadfield..

"Oh Juliet," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"No, no," I said. "I hardly felt it."

"Could you help me?" She reached for the zipper at the back of her dress. I obeyed automatically.

Mrs. Hadfield stepped out of her dress. She slipped off her panties and bra and before I could say anything dived into the pool. I shall never forget the sight of her white body as it arched gracefully in the air before hitting the water. She dived beautifully. Several people followed suit, including the doctor.

“Why don’t you come in, Juliet?” Mrs. Hadfield called out from the pool.

“Go on,” the doctor said.

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly,” I said.

I was standing by the edge of the pool feeling a little awkward, wondering if I should return to the house, when someone pushed me from behind. I did not see who it was. I just felt their hands on my back.

The water was cold. My heart started to contract. I thought I was going to suffocate. I started kicking, flailing my arms, but my dress constricted my movements. I gasped and spluttered. I thought I would drown. At last, I managed to grab hold of the edge of the pool and pull myself out. My hair had come undone. I felt furious, angrier than I’ve ever been. I marched up and down the side of the pool. I shouted. I waved my arms in the air. I don’t remember everything I said. I do recall shouting, “I worked for two months to buy these shoes.” I threw them into the pool. The doctor dove for them, but I threw them back in. “They’re ruined now,” I said. People started to wander back to the house, but I followed across the lawn.

I can hardly tell you. It was so embarrassing.

When I saw the champagne glasses standing so beautifully in rows on the table, I could not resist. I threw one after the other against the fire place. I can still hear the sound of crystal breaking. I cut my feet, but people continued to talk as if nothing was happening.

Several hours later, I found myself lying on my bed. The ivy leaves were dark outside my window. The room seemed to turn. I felt as if I were on one of those wheels one sees at fairs; the kind that go round and round so fast people gradually slide up the

wall. I lifted Xavier from his crib and rocked him for a moment. He smelt like milk. It made me weep.

I packed my bags, and then I sat in a hard backed chair and waited for day to come. The sky gradually turned from black to violet to gray and then to pink. Mist rose from the grass. I remembered my shoes. As I plodded over to the pool, the girls in their nightdresses followed me barefooted. “Are you going swimming?” Beatrice asked.

When they saw my shoes at the bottom of the pool, they asked me why they were there, and I could not think of a satisfactory explanation, one that would not reveal the foolishness of the night before. The girls pulled off their nighties and jumped into the pool. They each handed me a shoe.

My bags were packed. I expected Mrs. Hadfield to dismiss me. After the scene of the night before that would have been the natural thing, don’t you think? But when she came into the kitchen, she smiled and addressed me as she usually did, “Good morning, Juliet.” She even gave me a little hug while I stood by the stove. I could not bear it. I would rather have had her give me a stern lecture. I blurted out, “I’m so sorry about last night. I can assure you that it will never happen again.”

“Oh Juliet!” she said. “Don’t speak of it. We all had a few too many. I just hope your shoes are all right. If they’re not, we’ll have to go into town and buy you a new pair.”

Then the aunt entered the kitchen. She did not say anything, but she puckered her lips at me the same way she did when a dish she disliked was placed before her. As soon as the girls had finished breakfast, she asked Mrs. Hadfield if she would like to go for a little walk in the garden. I suppose the aunt thought she had gone far enough so that I

could not hear her conversation, or perhaps she did not care if I heard for she said in a rather loud voice, “I really think the girls should go to boarding school.”

I was shocked, hurt. I remember trying to reassure myself by thinking that this was just talk. They could not possibly send the girls away, and what about Xavier?

Of course now, I realize that the aunt was quite right to suggest boarding school. The goings on in the house were most irregular. I would have forgiven the great-aunt if she had not gone further, much further than that. You see, I could not bear the thought of being separated from Xavier or the girls.

I was ironing in my room. There was no pressing need to, but the conversation I had just overheard had upset me. I was having trouble with the puff sleeve of Beatrice’s dress. I heard the slow climb of the aunt coming upstairs. By the time she reached my room, she was breathing loudly. I suggested she sit down, but she walked over to the window. She reached out and touched one of the yellow roses and it dissolved in her hand. She let the petals drop onto the window sill and the floor of my room.

At first, she flattered me. “Juliet, I have been meaning to talk to you for quite some time and now that I’m leaving—”

“I did not know.”

“You are still young, attractive. Have you ever thought that you might marry and have children yourself? Lead your own life. Wouldn’t you like to try something different?”

“I am perfectly happy as a nanny.” I continued to iron.

She sighed then tried to fold one of the shirts I had placed on the bed.

I am sure she had the best of intentions and had I responded gratefully she would not have said what she did.

“Do you not think it would be best for the children’s sake?” she asked.

“Am I not fulfilling my duties satisfactorily?” I pressed down on the iron.

“You know perfectly well what I’m referring to.” She glanced at the empty glass on the table by the puzzle.

I picked up the glass and hurried to the bathroom where I rinsed it out.

“You are being very selfish.” She followed me into the bathroom. She stood on the landing, twisting her skirt around her waist. Then she walked down the stairs. I recall her bony back, how it stood out. I felt the impulse to call her. I thought she might turn, but she didn’t.

I knelt on the floor and gathered the petals, remembering the first time I had seen the girls. They had been pulling petals off roses. They dropped the petals into a big round glass vase and the petals floated on the surface of the water. It reminded me of the Spanish family I had worked for whose daughter Alicia would always say, “Las Flores duermen,” the flowers are sleeping.

I filled my glass. I love the amber color of sherry. The sweet taste. I was about to take a sip when there was a knock. Mrs. Hadfield walked in. “Oh Juliet. She looked about the room, her gaze finally resting on Xavier’s crib. “Is he asleep?”

“No,” I said. “He just woke up.”

She reached into the crib and lifted him out.

Often during that summer I had the feeling of scenes being repeated but with greater intensity. I remember leaning out my window and seeing Mrs. Hadfield walking

with Xavier in her arms along the half mowed path. She wandered up to the section that had not been cut then turned back.

I would not have thought the aunt's departure would sadden me, but it did. Just after she left, I remember lifting Xavier from his crib, swinging him up in the air, but he did not chuckle. Perhaps he sensed my anxiety. Suddenly, I felt afraid of dropping him, or of hitting his head by mistake.

I recall nothing more. Once again I have come to a hole in my story. Hours that cannot be accounted for. I awakened to find myself lying on my bed. The house was still, the ivy leaves dark outside my window. I watched the ceiling whirl then I sat up slowly. I was seized with terror and I stumbled over to Xavier's crib. He was sleeping so quietly that I could not hear him breathing. I placed my hand on his head. It was warm. His hair was soft like the down of a baby bird.

I ought to have talked to Mrs. Hadfield immediately. I often wonder what would have happened if I had confided in her. She might have confided in me. I was toying with the idea when I heard voices coming from downstairs. "I'm so sorry," Mrs. Hadfield said. "Really, I am." This was followed by the low indistinct murmur of the doctor's voice. I could not make out what he said. Then I heard a loud bang. The front door closed shut.

Leaning out my window, I observed the doctor drive away in his blue Peugeot.

The very next morning another opportunity to talk to Mrs. Hadfield presented itself. Mrs. Hadfield informed me that she would be leaving for a few days. I assumed she had ironed things out with the doctor, or perhaps she was going to find Mr. Hadfield. Naturally, I did not ask. No doubt I liked the thought of having the children all to myself. I should have told her then and there that I did not feel up to being left alone. I remember

her saying to me, “Juliet, I want you to know what a difference it makes having you here.”

The evening of her departure Mrs. Hadfield could not make up her mind whether or not to take Xavier. I reminded her that Mr. Hadfield did not like taking the baby or the children on a trip. Mrs. Hadfield hastened to tell me that the doctor was different. “He likes babies,” she said. This remark seemed to confirm that she was indeed leaving with the doctor.

Mrs. Hadfield’s indecision distressed me greatly. It was not so much the thought of her taking Xavier but the uncertainty. Just in case, I packed his clothes, his diapers and all his necessities.

Before going to bed, Mrs. Hadfield decided she would take Xavier after all. I recall standing for a long time that evening watching him sleep. Sometimes, he would lift his hand and touch his cheek, as if he felt something had brushed it.

The next morning, however, Mrs. Hadfield changed her mind again at the very last minute. “You take such good care of him.” She rested her hand on my arm and kissed my cheek. She wore a white tulle dress with a pattern of butterflies. She had never looked so beautiful. She got into her car, closed the door, then opened it, and I thought she had changed her mind, but it was just to give Xavier one last kiss. I passed him to her and she kissed his forehead before passing him back to me.

It is strange how certain sentences apparently devoid of meaning come back to you. “Are you sure you have everything you need?” she asked, before starting up the car.

They have asked me here about these spells. How do you explain them? I do not. Until that summer I had experienced them only occasionally.

After Mrs. Hadfield's departure, the children and I wandered out into the garden. Mushrooms had grown around the base of the statue of mother and child. The girls amused themselves by pulling the mushrooms off and placing them in a large bucket with water then offering it to me as soup. I worried that the mushrooms might be poisonous and insisted they wash their hands. After that they wanted to play hide and seek. I sat down beneath a tree and closed my eyes and counted to one hundred. I had placed Xavier beside me on a blanket. I must have fallen asleep. When I awakened, it was much later and Xavier no longer lay on the blanket. I jumped up and called for the girls and Xavier. They were nowhere in sight. I called until my voice was hoarse.

Then I ran into the house, rushing from room to room. They were not there either. I raced back out into the garden, wandering further into the forest. What if they had taken the canoe? Sunlight flickered between the branches of the trees onto the water. I passed an abandoned railroad track, I had never seen before. As soon as Mrs. Hadfield returned I would give in my resignation. If only, only, I could find Xavier and the girls.

Then I caught sight of them, lying beneath a tree. I ran over. The shadows of the leaves flickered across their bare arms and their legs. I leaned over and picked up Xavier. I brought him to my face so that I could breathe in his sweet smell. When the girls awakened, I was so relieved I hardly told them off for taking Xavier. On our way home, we were quiet. I had determined at last that I must call Mrs. Hadfield. I could not wait.

I was making my way to the telephone when it rang. I expected to hear Mrs. Hadfield's voice on the line. But it was a police officer. He asked for Mr. Hadfield. I said that he was not in. In his absence, I was in charge of the children. He told me that they had found Mrs. Hadfield. His words did not make sense. I almost said but she isn't lost.

He said that she had driven her car over a bridge into the river. Only a few miles down. I could not believe it. I stood shaking. The police officer kept repeating, “Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle.”

Oh my dear. Do you hear them? Voices coming from the chapel. What are they saying? Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi dona nobis pacem. What does it mean? You were always so good at Latin. Lamb of God, who takes away the worlds sins, grant us peace. How beautiful. If only it were true!

Are you sure you are not getting tired? We could rest under that portico. I like to listen to the birds. They make their nests in the eaves. Look. Three sparrows. They have tiny red flecks on their breasts and heads. They must be cold and yet they sing so joyfully.

That is one of the hardest things for me here. There are no children. Occasionally, a visitor will bring a child, but very rarely babies. I’m afraid to approach the children. I’m afraid they’ll scream.

I like to watch the old people bathe. They’re the closest thing to children here. It does not matter that their hair is white or gray or that they are bald. One man has huge pointed ears, a mischievous smile that reminds me of Johnny the boy I looked after before the Hadfields.

Sometimes, I imagine finding in my mailbox a letter from Mrs. Hadfield saying that she forgives me. I know it is impossible, but I imagine its white envelope, the mauve interior and her elegant handwriting across the page. Dear Juliet, I have been meaning to write.

I do not mind the rules, the regulations. I wish I had some form of occupation. What is there to do but think about the past when there is no present or future? I know I will not stay here forever. But what will I do then? It's kind of you to offer, but you do not have room. This morning they fitted me with contact lenses. I can see everything terribly clearly now, even the imprint of leaves across the pavement. Oh! For a moment, I thought that was Mrs. Hadfield. Just the hair. Not a bit like her. Look, it says on this map that there is a whole category of statues which are called Hidden Works, a dream journal buried near a tree. What a wonderful idea! And what do you suppose these are? They look like doors half buried. My favorite are the deer. Do you see them? Just little branches put together. They look as if they are going to fly through the air.