

‘Do you think I mollycoddle Marcie?’ she asked Rhona, accepting a chocolate cream as she watched the girls building a house together on the carpet. ‘Do you think I’m becoming one of those mums who obsesses about her child to the exclusion of all else?’

‘I don’t think so. After all, you went back to your job at the library as soon as Marcie went to school. We all worry if we’re doing the right thing. I think you’re an excellent mum.’

Susan cheered up a little but was still thinking about this as she drove back home.

Reaching the brow of the hill that looked down on their village she felt a glow of pride as she saw their house on the outskirts. It was small but pretty, freshly painted in a snowy white with blue window frames, and well set back from the road. Susan had insisted on a detached house in a quiet neighbourhood. She herself had grown up in a terraced house and her bedroom window was almost on the streetfront. As a child she had often been woken by people in the street, shouting, laughing and swearing as they came out of the pub. She’d made sure Marcie was protected from all that. Her bedroom was at the back of the house and very quiet, with midnight blue wallpaper showing pictures of white fluffy clouds and the moon and stars. From the ceiling hung cutouts of Mother Goose, Peter Rabbit, the cow jumping over the moon, and a host of other figures from nursery rhymes. Martin had once remarked that going into the room was like walking into a spider’s web, constantly having to brush things off your face. But that was just his ill-judged attempt at humour, and she’d given him one of her looks.

She saw smoke curling from their chimney. Martin must have lit a fire. She felt warm and secure. The trees were still bare, but at the sides of the road she noticed that the snowdrops were already peeping out from the frost.

Perhaps she was not giving quite as much attention to her driving as she should, but she thought she was giving the cyclist ahead of her enough room as she passed. The cyclist obviously thought differently, and Susan heard a loud and aggressive remark. She looked in the mirror: the bicycle was still upright and moving forwards, and although the shopping bags on the handlebars were wobbling rather violently, both cyclist and bicycle were unscathed.

That was a relief.

‘What did she say?’ she asked Marcie.

Marcie looked coy. ‘She called you a rude word,’ she said.