

ONE SUMMER

by Sally Alter



My Books

Fiction

- *Shards of Glass*

Non Fiction

- [*How to Live with Bipolar*](#)
- [*Bipolar I Disorder Rescue Plan*](#)
- [*37 Symptoms of Bipolar Depression*](#)
- [*The Bipolar Guide*](#)
- [*A Practical Guide to Overcoming Loneliness*](#)

Poetry

- [*We Never Did Mornings*](#)

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ONE SUMMER

Last year, my niece by marriage came to stay with us for a week shortly after her father died. Her mother, newly widowed, thought it best for Julie to leave London for a few days and spend some time in the country. Of course, there's nothing glamorous about the country, at least not where we live, but I thought it would sound quite fascinating for a young girl who had never left the claustrophobic streets of London.

When we were asked if we would like to have Julie visit us, Paul and I didn't hesitate. We had only met her once at our wedding, a quiet child of about twelve years old, but now that she was fifteen I felt sure she would be a beautiful young lady and we would get on very well. She would probably take to the baby right away, and we could have fun together shopping in the town.

Paul and I were quite excited that Julie would be our first visitor since we had completed the new extension to the back of the house. The crimson geranium, with petals as wide as dinner plates would now have some relief from the constant attention of a stray dog.

Julie's holiday was beginning to feel like Christmas. I celebrated by going into town and buying some new lacy sheets for the bed, and Paul washed the truck for the first time in six months.

I like living in Somerset. I did a year or two of teaching after college, but I really wasn't dedicated like some of my colleagues. I always felt I should be putting more of myself into it and came up short every time. Life is slow here, it's true, but I can't see the point in dashing around and sitting in traffic jams for hours. Also, now that we have Sonia, I wouldn't like to leave her with some stranger while I went out to work.

We are quite isolated here, our only neighbors being about half a mile away, but funnily enough that separation seems to make us friendlier towards each other. We often get together when the weather's nice and have a barbeque on the lawn, or sometimes we go into Tavistock to see a play and enjoy a meal in the little Italian Bistro down Lover's Lane.

Rena and Martin are rather eccentric people, not the kind you'd expect to find living in a remote hamlet in the middle of nowhere. He is a graphic designer and she's an artist, so they are both able to work from home.

My clothes are quite drab next to Rena's; cotton dresses in the summer and baggy sweaters with jeans in the winter. I feel strangely excited being seen in town with my exotic friend. Rena loves to rummage through all the old clothes in junk shops and emerges with the most amazing finds that everybody else has missed. She has beautiful dark hair almost down to her waist, but she usually rolls it up in a knot under an exotic, rust-colored turban with sequins on it that nobody but Rena could get away with. I look at her sometimes and wish I had that Romany gypsy look, but I am as plain as day.

I call her about once a week, and when I have time to visit, I take a leisurely stroll with the baby along the hedgerows past the little Methodist church on the corner. I like to bake pies and cakes, so I often take something freshly-made for my unconventional neighbors. When the chickens are laying, I take a basket of free-range eggs.

Rena usually takes a break and pulls her artist's smock over her head when I visit. Then we sit down in her battered, old arm chairs and drink a glass of red wine together. At first, I felt guilty drinking anything alcoholic so early in the day, but I now think of it as a kind of barter system. I sip a glass of wine and she enjoys pies and fresh eggs.

One day I took an apple pie I had baked for her in the morning. She was pleased to see me and was excited to show me her latest painting. She paints mainly abstracts,

and to be honest, I dread her showing them to me as they made no sense at all. Always brightly colored, the lines and squiggles meant nothing as far as I could tell.

"It's lovely," I said and hoped she would accept that compliment.

We sat down and had the usual glass of red wine. Rena prefers red wine, and not being used to anything else, I found it quite tasty.

"My niece Julie is coming to stay soon," I told her. "She's fifteen and just lost her father."

Rena sniffed the air, a mannerism that rather annoyed me, I have to admit. "What are you going to do with a fifteen year old child?"

"That's easy," I said, feeling suddenly awkward. "We can do all kinds of things together."

"Teenagers live in a different world. What we like usually bores them rigid."

I thought about that and suddenly felt rather out of my depth. "Oh, I don't know," I said, nervously. "We can probably do some gardening together. The runner beans need tying back and the strawberries need picking. She probably doesn't have much of a garden in London."

Rena sniffed the air again. "I think you'll have your work cut out looking after Julie."

July 15th came along, and Paul, Sonia and I packed into the old truck and went to meet Julie at Holwell Station. The train chugged into the station at precisely 3.15 p.m., and we looked around for Julie on the platform. In no time at all, people were buzzing everywhere; those getting on the train and those getting off, people there to greet them. There was laughter and cries of excitement from some, then they dragged their luggage down the flight of steps and were gone.

The platform emptied out quickly, all except for one girl who was sitting on a bench with her feet up on her suitcase. She had dark brown hair, almost black, long on top of her head and shaved at the sides. I thought she looked quite out of place in the quiet village of Holwell. She must have got off at the wrong station.

I was just about to ask her if she needed any help when I was stopped short. Surely this wasn't Julie?

Paul glanced at me, and then he strode over towards her. "Julie! Heh! It's grand to see you," he said, cheerfully, rubbing his hands together. "How was your journey?"

No response. She didn't even look at him, just hoisted up her overlarge suitcase and started walking quickly towards the exit. Paul rushed up. "Here, let me help."

Still no response, as if he wasn't there, as if he hadn't spoken. She changed hands when she got to the exit, threw her beaded handbag over her shoulder and bumped her way down the steps.

When we all got to the bottom, Paul looked at Julie's flushed, heart-shaped face with its blank expression.

"This is my wife, Margaret, and Sonia our baby."

Looking back, I don't know why I expected her to respond to the baby, or even to me, but there was nothing but this dreadful vacant look.

"How far is it to your house?" Julie asked, suddenly. "I want to walk."

"No, no, you can't walk," I said, alarmed. "It's at least six miles and the weather's turning nasty. I wouldn't be surprised if there's another storm coming. It's been raining on and off all week."

Paul put Julie's suitcase in the bed of the truck, strapped the baby in her car seat, and opened the passenger side door for me. Julie didn't wait for him to open the door for her. She lowered her head and climbed into the back seat beside Sonia.

It was a miserable journey back to the farm house. They say 'silence is golden,' but whoever said that obviously hadn't been stuck in a confined space for ten minutes with a sullen teenager. I was quite relieved when we got home.

I unstrapped Sonia's car seat and Paul took Julie's case into the kitchen. As always, the Aga was on, and the kitchen felt pleasantly warm. Paul thinks it's stupid to warm the house in the middle of summer, but these old houses don't hold the heat and, just like my mother, I feel the cold.

Paul took Julie's things up the narrow staircase and Julie plonked herself down in the kitchen.

"I'll put the kettle on," I said, smiling. "Then you can tell me about your school and your favorite subjects." I could feel an unfamiliar chill creep up my spine as I reached for the mugs on the shelf.

Julie rummaged around in her beaded handbag and slapped a tea bag down on the kitchen table. "I only drink Chai," she said, giving me a cold look.

I thought it best not to argue with her, so I said, "Oh, I've never had Chai tea. Have you got one I could try?"

Another tea bag was produced from her handbag and shoved in front of me. I smiled, and said, "Thank you."

I have to say, that tea was awful, so thick and bitter, but at least I tried to drink it. I gulped down what I could, vowing to myself that I would never drink Chai tea again.

Later, after I had shown Julie to her room, I put Sonia in her playpen and flopped down in the rocking chair.

I sat on the edge of the single bed and kicked off my shoes, sending one flying across the room. I didn't want to be there, that was for sure, but my mother had insisted

I went after dad died. I can hardly bear to think about it, but I was being sent away like the Jehovah Witnesses that came banging on the door on Saturday afternoons.

I ruffled my hair with my fingers and looked around the room that Margaret had allocated to me. What a mess. Blue-striped paper on the walls, and the worst red carpet I have ever seen. I went over and flipped back the matching blue duvet on the bed. "Oh, no, lace sheets! What was Margaret thinking?"

The first thing I did was unzip my suitcase and take out my diary. It was Saturday, and the journey down had taken up most of the day. That left Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Home again on Saturday. I sighed, wondering if it was worse here or at home. I didn't know anyone in Holwell, but at least I didn't have all the kids at school laughing at me, singling me out now that I had lost my dad.

I'd bought the diary before I came away. The colored pages reminded me of a rainbow. Gazing at the wall for a while, I tried to get some inspiration. Then I scribbled a whole lot of garbled rubbish about my journey down from London. So, this was supposed to be my holiday then?

I'd just got a new boyfriend and I knew my friend Amy liked him. I hadn't thought of it before, but maybe she would try to take him away from me while I was away.

Quickly, I took out my mobile phone and dialed Amy's number, but when I heard her voice, I snapped the lid shut. Amy would know it was me, of course, but what could I say if she called back? "Keep your hands to yourself. He's my boyfriend."

I made an ugly face in the mirror. It sounded paranoid, but I couldn't get the thought out of my mind.

The phone rang. "Jules, is that you?"

"Course it's me, Dumbo, who else do you think would be answering my phone?"

"Well, don't get so huffy."

I toyed with my favorite turquoise ring, sliding it up and down on my finger.

“How’re you getting on with your aunt and uncle?” Amy said.

“They’re okay. Margaret’s trying to be nice, but I don’t plan on having long conversations with her about sewing buttons on aprons.” I tugged the ring off my finger and placed it in the middle of the pillow. “They’ve got a baby, Amy. I’m not much good with babies. I don’t know what to say to them.”

Amy laughed. “You don’t have to say anything to them, silly. Just bounce them up and down on your knee and kiss them, or something.”

“I wish you were here,” I said, wistfully. “I’ve got to deal with them and this baby all on my own. I can’t imagine how I am going to last a week in dull old Somerset with these old people.”

“Just suck it up, Jules,” Amy said. “You can make it for a week. It’s a bummer but you’ll be back on Saturday, then we’ll go dancing at the Palais.”

I got off the bed and walked around the room. “You don’t sound as if you’re missing me much,” I said, quietly into the phone. “Have you seen anything of Brian?” I cut it short. If Amy had already seen him, I didn’t want to know.

Paul looked exhausted, when he finally came in from the yard. He smelled of dusty horses and manure. A strand of light-brown hair fell across his forehead as usual, and he flicked it out of the way. He scrubbed his hands at the sink, then reached over and picked up a chunk of newly-baked bread on the table. It was still warm, straight from the oven and smelled heavenly in the kitchen.

“So, this is Julie,” he said, glancing at me. He stuck his spoon in the last of my strawberry jam and spread a generous blob on his bread.

“I suppose it is,” I said, and shrugged. “Why didn’t your sister tell us how much she’d changed?”

“Cathy never tells me anything, Margaret,” he said, rolling his eyes. “We’ve hardly spoken to each other in years, remember?” He clamped the lid on the jam pot. “Julie ignores me. She ignores you. She even ignores Sonia! I think she could be civil, at least.”

I picked up a piece of bread and buttered it. “I told you we should have gone to Ted’s funeral, Paul. We were only thinking of ourselves; leaving Sonia with my mum, getting on and off trains, and losing our way. If we’d gone, we could have seen for ourselves how weird Julie is.” I sighed. “I have nothing in common with her, Paul. I don’t know what to say.”

“Hopefully, she’ll thaw out after a couple of days,” Paul said. “She must be starving, so she’ll have to socialize if she wants any dinner.”

“Well, she won’t be able to eat anything if I don’t get it on the table,” I said, grimly.

“I could eat a horse,” Paul laughed, lightening the atmosphere. “Not my horse of course, she’s too old and stringy.”

I had cooked a beef casserole because I thought that wouldn’t spoil while we were at the station. And I made a couple of cherry pies. One, I decided, I would save for Rena.

It started to rain outside, and the sky was dark gray. Another storm was coming, I thought.

“Oh, I hope she eats beef,” I said, suddenly realizing that some people are vegetarians and vegans. But it was too late now. If she didn’t like it, I would have to find her something else to eat.

I walked over to the bottom of the staircase. “Dinner’s ready, Julie,” I called. “I made a cherry pie for pudding.”

Nothing.

“Julie, are you coming down to eat?”

Again, nothing.

I took a deep breath and raised my voice. “I know you can hear me,” I shouted. “If you don’t come down now your dinner will get cold.”

No answer.

The chickens laid ten eggs the next morning; a rich shade of brown, heavy in my hand. “Good girls,” I told them, placing their offerings carefully in my basket. “I won’t break them,” I reassured them.

Julie was seated at the table when I walked into the kitchen carrying the eggs. I thought she had come round, and things were going to be more amicable between us, but I was wrong. She just wanted something to eat and was helping herself to a peanut butter sandwich and cup of her Chai tea.

I lifted Sonia out of her playpen, wrestled with the rag she gripped tightly in her little hand, and then sat her firmly down in her high chair at the table. “Good morning, Julie,” I said absently, trying to appear nonchalant.

I got the usual silent treatment that seemed even more personal now that we were alone in the kitchen.

“What would you like to do today?” I asked her, hoping for some kind of response.

In an instant, Julie stood up, peanut butter sandwich in hand, and disappeared out the back door.

When I ran out of the house, I had no plan at all. I looked left and then right and saw some goats in a pen looking slyly at me with their slit eyes. Keeping to themselves, they huddled up in a corner of the yard beneath a huge, thorny bush.

“Julie,” I heard Margaret call after me from the kitchen door. “Julie, come back here.”

“What do you want with me?” I yelled back at her.

“What will I tell your mother? I can’t tell her you ran away.”

“Tell her what you like,” I said, and stuck out my tongue at the goats. “I don’t care.”

Taking off around the front of the cottage, I ran until I was out of breath. Then slowing down in the narrow, one-way lane I walked along toe-to-heel in the uneven ruts like people did when they were caught for speeding. I found it difficult to walk in a straight line because the potholes were deep and full of rain water. I had to hold out my arms like wings at my sides so I could keep my balance.

I was pleased to get out of the house at last, but I didn’t know the village of Holwell and was surprised it had such a small railway station. When I looked it up, I could hardly find Holwell on the map. I had no idea where I was going. I could get completely lost in the labyrinth of winding lanes where there were no landmarks at all. The hedges were so high on either side, it was impossible to see anything but fields and farms. Cows and sheep. Sheep and cows.

I walked on for a little way. What did I care about the country? I just wanted to get back home where everything was familiar. I wondered if I had Paul and Margaret’s phone number just in case I did get lost. I poked around in the pocket of my jeans and found the piece of crumpled paper that my mother had insisted I take with me. But I wouldn’t phone them. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of knowing where I was.

I hadn’t heard a word from mum since I’d arrived. Not even after taking the train journey on my own. She obviously didn’t care about her only daughter. She didn’t even

want to know how I was getting on with Paul and Margaret? Or was she so engrossed in her own problems since dad died, she didn't have any time left for me? I'd been sent away because nobody wanted me around. Well, I would show them I didn't care about them either.

I stopped in the narrow lane and leaned against the wooden slats of one of the styles. Long pale grasses stirred in the cool breeze brushing against my cheek. I flicked off a red bug that was clinging to one of the stems.

A couple of black and white cows leisurely lifted their heads and stared at me.

"It's got nothing to do with you," I shouted at them. "Mind your own business."

I walked on realizing they were watching me through gaps in the hedge. Getting away from Margaret and Paul was all very well, but I was beginning to feel stupid. Perhaps I shouldn't have taken off like that. The Police would probably be sent out to find me.

I wandered on thinking about how I'd let my cup of tea go cold. I could do with that now to go with the remains of the peanut butter sandwich. I looked down and saw that the toes of my new, red boots had been totally ruined by the mud that lay in thick layers along the lane. I kicked a stone loose at the edge of the pathway. I hated this place. What was I supposed to do all day?

Suddenly, I heard a high-pitched noise like boys singing in a choir. Then a shiny, black bird flew swiftly by and darted into a hole in the hedge. I stood on tip-toes, parted the prickly twigs, and peered into a beautiful bird's nest. It was neatly made of moss and had been built in the fork of the bush. I was amazed to see five tiny chicks, their yellow beaks wide open, singing and pushing against each other to get a piece of the worm their mother had brought for them.

I got out my phone to tell Amy about the little birds, but it was out of range.

Clusters of wildflowers grew in the hedge, some with rosy, trumpet-shaped petals, and others with tiny, blue flowers the color of my eyes. Their pungent smell made me dizzy.

I had walked quite a way now but hadn't seen any sign of people at all. I could have landed on Mars for all I knew. Then I saw an old stone church at a cross-road ahead. It had a spire on top with a big brass bell. I hoped I would be able to hear it ringing tomorrow when all the people went to church. I walked across the gravel car park and stepped inside the church. I heard the heavy, wooden door close behind me.

Sunlight streamed in the stained-glass windows which was just as well, it was cold inside. I looked around at the wooden pews and saw dozens of footstools covered in a red material that looked like velvet. The church was tiny, and I thought it probably only held about fifty people. Our family didn't go to church, and this was the first one I had ever been in. It wasn't dark and creepy like I thought it would be. With the sun's rays shining through the windows, it was quite welcoming.

I walked to the front of the church and knelt down on one of the footstalls. Nobody was around, but I didn't feel alone. I sensed a loving presence there.

I hadn't ever thought about God, he hadn't been part of my life, but just then I felt sure he could see me kneeling there on my own. I expected him to be a punishing God and I lowered my head in shame, but the face I saw in my mind's eye was friendly and smiling. If that was what God was like, I wondered why I hadn't talked to him before.

Suddenly, all alone in the church, I felt like crying, but the tears were stuck in my throat and wouldn't come. I realized then that I hadn't thought much about my dad since he died. It had been too painful to truly think about him, so I had pushed all my memories to one side. But now, my chest felt very heavy and my memories of all the things I had done with him suddenly came back to me and flooded into my brain. It was like a movie, and I could see my dad with his arms around my shoulders.

I remembered going to the circus with him only last week when The Flying Eagles were in town. He had been healthy then, and I never imagined a heart attack

would take him away from me. We did a lot of things together, and I loved him more than anybody I knew. Suddenly, I began to shake, and a shiver crept up my spine.

“Why did you take him away from me?” I asked God in a small voice. “Why did he have to leave me all alone?” But no answer came, and I thought it must be God's way of punishing me because I had never been to church before. I promised I would go to church every week when I got home, if only God would bring my dad back to me. I just wanted to see him one more time.

I waited for some sign that God had heard me, but when nothing happened, I got up and walked back down the aisle to the front door.

I left the church, crossed the road, and ambled on down the lane. Then I saw a woman in a turban and a very dirty smock doing some weeding in the garden of an old, stone house. She didn't see me at first, but when I came closer, she straightened up and said, “Hello.”

The last thing I wanted to do was get caught up in a conversation with this woman. I didn't want anyone to know where I was. But she seemed nice enough, and stepped over the grass to meet me taking off her gloves as she came.

She smiled and said, “You must be Julie. I heard you were coming to stay with Margaret and Paul.”

So, she knew who I was already. That was sick. I just wanted to run away.

“Would you like a Coke?” she said, and I suddenly realized how thirsty I was.

“Yeah! That'd be nice.”

“Come in,” the woman said, opening the gate. “I'm Rena, and your aunt Margaret and I are friends.”

We went in the back door of the house and straight into the kitchen. It was very untidy with things left out on all of the counters. A pot boiled on the stove, and an open

bottle of red wine sat on the table. I looked across the room and saw an enormous, crazy-looking painting on an easel, and dozens of paint brushes and paints strewn all over the table. I could smell the oils and the turpentine which filled an open jar.

“Don't mind my mess,” Rena said, laughing, and pushing everything to one side. “Sit down, and let's have a chat. It's nice to have some company.”

I looked around and saw many other paintings crowding the walls. They didn't seem to be in any kind of order. There were groups here and there, and other paintings on their own. I couldn't say whether I liked them or not, really, but I hadn't seen many paintings before, so I wasn't sure what to think of them. We had art at school, but it was mostly drawing. I had never seen anything like this.

“Are you an artist?” I said, then immediately regretted it as Rena would think I was really dumb.

“Let's say I dabble,” she said, laughing. “But I do show in a couple of galleries.”

So, I had been walking down the lane and met a real artist out here in the middle of nowhere. How cool was that? I couldn't wait to tell Amy.

Rena went to the fridge and took out two bottles of Coke. She opened them and put them on the table.

“Will you show me how to paint?” I said.

“Sure,” she said, and I thought my stay with Margaret and Paul had suddenly looked up. But I still had to stay with them and the baby. I wished I could stay with Rena.

“I'll have to ask Margaret if you can come down,” she said.

We drank our Cokes together and I suddenly started to feel sad. My dad used to want me to paint. He even bought me a box of acrylics one Christmas, but I had no one to show me how to do it, so I didn't pay any attention back then. I started to think of dad

and could feel a knot tightening in my throat where all my tears were lodged. So far, I hadn't cried at all, and I was afraid of what would happen if I did. I felt sure if I cried, I wouldn't be able to stop. I missed him a lot. We had been a team, Dad and me, and he called me his 'little wonder.' I gulped down the tears. Why did he have to leave me like this?

I felt bad for thinking it, but I was glad Julie had run away. At least we didn't have to look at her sullen face all day. But, of course, that was foolish thinking, Paul would have to stop what he was doing now and go and look for her. And if we couldn't find her, we would have to call the police. How stupid I would look then.

I leaned out the back door, "Paul," I shouted. "Can you come here?"

"What is it?" he shouted back.

"I'll tell you in a minute."

I could hear him latching the gate out the back and knew that he had been seeing to the cows. I heard his heavy footsteps on the path, then he strode in the back door.

"What is it?" he said, breathlessly.

"Julie's gone."

"What?" he said, a puzzled look on his face.

Now I was feeling really guilty, but surely it wasn't my fault. I couldn't keep the girl on a lead like a dog, and I couldn't run after her and leave Sonia alone.

"She was in here eating a sandwich, then when I asked what she wanted to do today, she dashed outside. That was only five minutes ago, so she can't have got far."

"Why didn't you call me before?" Paul said.

I felt really stupid now and said, rather lamely, "I thought she would come back."

He grabbed some chocolate biscuits off the table and ran outside.

Paul stood in the dirt road and wondered which way Julie might have gone. The rain had stopped now but the road to the left was very muddy and full of horse droppings. Paul thought for a moment, then decided that Julie would have gone to the right. If she really had got lost, he wondered what on earth he would tell her mother.

Soon enough he came in sight of the Methodist church on the corner, but there was still no sign of Julie. He went inside and looked around. Nothing.

Paul crossed the road and walked up to Martin and Rena's place, thinking they might have seen her. He banged on the back door, and when Rena answered it, he stepped inside. "Hi Rena, have you seen ---?"

Paul stopped abruptly when he saw Julie sitting at the table staring up at him. He looked from Julie to Rena and wondered how long it would be before Rena would have let them know she had Julie in her house. But at least she was safe, and that's what mattered.

"We're having a nice chat," Rena, said, quite unashamed. "Come and sit down, Paul. Want a beer? "

"No, I have to get back, thanks." He looked at Julie. "You had better come with me, young lady."

She picked up her Coke and said goodbye to Rena.

When they got outside, Paul said, "Where did you think you were going, Miss?"

"I fancied a walk," Jullie said, and Paul was shocked that she had actually spoken to him.

“You don’t just wander off like that without telling Margaret where you’re going?” he said, crossly. “She's worried about you.”

“She needn’t have worried,” Julie said, matter-of-factly. “I would have come back.”

They walked back to the farm house together in silence. Julie took out her phone and played games on the way.

“So, there you are,” Margaret said, as they walked into the kitchen.

“I wasn’t lost,” Julie said. “I just went for a walk, that’s all.”

“I found her up at Rena's place,” Paul said. “They looked quite cosy together.”

“Well, that's good,” Margaret said. “At least we didn't have to get the police out to find her.”

Paul grabbed another handful of chocolate biscuits, kissed Margaret on the cheek, and went back outside.

I put the kettle on the Aga and marveled at the fact that Julie had spoken. Something must have come over her when she ran away. She must have decided to be civil, after all.

“So, what do you think of the countryside, Julie?” I said.

“It’s dull and boring.”

I can’t say I was shocked because Julie was from London and there were always plenty of things to do there. I was glad it was dull and boring where we live. I wasn’t one for drama. I got up and filled Sonia’s bottle with apple juice.

“Would you like to hold her?” I said. I wasn’t sure how that would go down but thought I would give it a try.

“I don’t like babies,” Julie said, pouting.

“Why ever not?”

Julie played with her turquoise ring, pushing it up and down her finger. “I don’t know what to do with them,” she said, in a small voice.

“You really don’t have to do anything,” I said, laughing. “She’s a good baby, she won’t cry.”

Julie nodded, and I carried Sonia over and settled her into her arms.

When Julie smiled at Sonia, the baby cooed with laughter. It was lovely to see them together.

Suddenly, Julie’s eyes filled with tears. She handed Sonia back to me and ran upstairs to her room. I put Sonia in her playpen and followed her. I found Julie lying face down on the bed sobbing her heart out. I reached out, instinctively, and put my hand on her shoulder. Julie sat up, still sobbing, so I put my arm around her and gave her a hug. It was heart-breaking to see her like that.

I gazed at the strange spiky bits of dark hair on the top of her head and realized how young she was to have lost her father. Now I could see that she was struggling not only to cope with her loss, but she had been thrown into a house full of strangers as well. I thought about my own selfishness and my lack of empathy. Why had I expected her to act normally as if nothing had happened? I held her tightly and rocked her in my arms. Now we could be friends.

The End