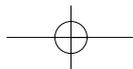


Flying for Frankie



Pauline Fisk is the much-loved author of eight children's novels, including *The Mrs Marridge Project*, *Sabrina Fludde* and *Midnight Blue* which won the Smarties Prize and was shortlisted for the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award. Pauline has five children and lives in Shropshire.



For Penny, who flew as well.

First published in 2009
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House, 74-77 Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber and Faber Limited
Printed in England by CPIBookmarque, Croydon

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ISBN 978-0-571-23619-0

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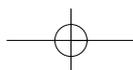
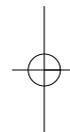
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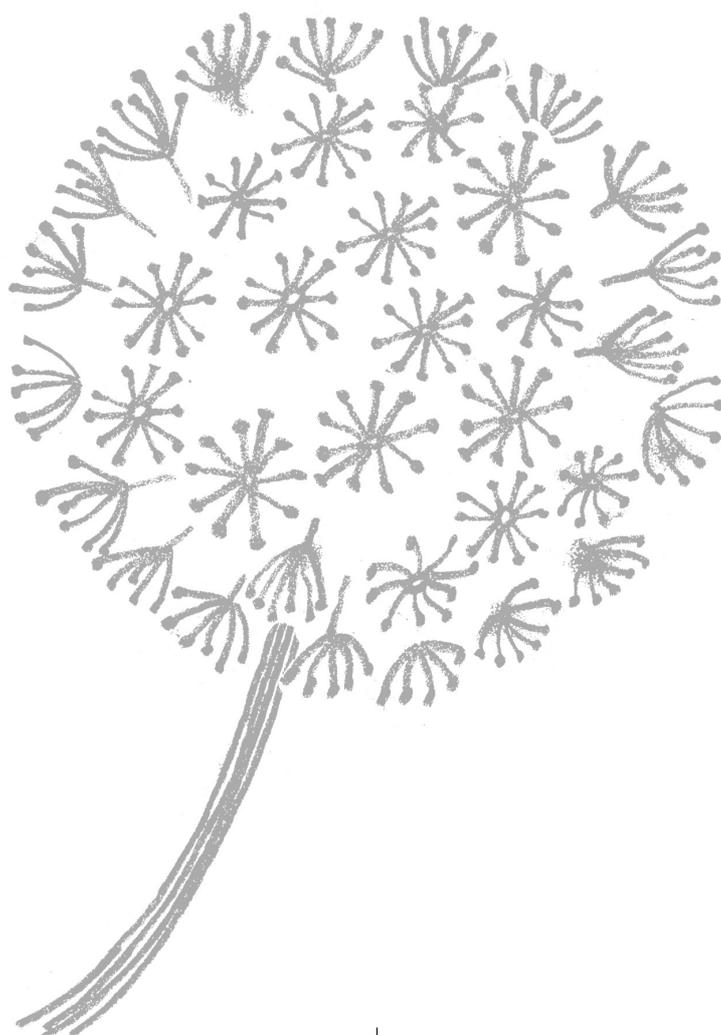
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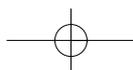
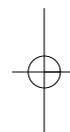
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Book One







The House on Clarence Street

My name's Charis Watts, which is sounded with a *k*, not a *ch* the way that Bryony Rogers does it to wind me up. My home's in Dartmouth, which my brother Damo reckons is a great place to retire to but the death of all hope if you happen to be under twenty-five. But I disagree. Dartmouth's what Damo made of it. If he chose to work the boats when he left school instead of becoming the blues guitarist he'd always wanted to be, no one was to blame but him. In fact, I said that once and I swear, if I hadn't been his baby sister, he'd have taken me outside.

Nowadays we live on Above Town in the house we bought from Henry Askew, who's one of the bosses where Dad works. But in the old days we lived on Clarence Street with Grandma, behind the whitewashed wall at the top of the hill. There's a

blue door in that wall, opening inwards from the pavement, and we'd go through it and up a flight of stone steps and our front door would be straight ahead of us, up a metal fire-escape.

Grandma occupied the sunny side of the house, which I suppose was only fair, seeing as she was the one, not us, who'd inherited it from the Johncox family as thanks for all those years of service as a nanny. She had the rooms with all the best river views, and the only bit that we could see was from the attic, where I had my bedroom. The window was tiny, and too high to look out of from my bed. If I stood on a chair, though, I could see all the way past the fine old houses on the Dartmouth waterfront to St Petrox's Church and the castle, where the river flows out into the sea.

I was born in Dartmouth, which means that ours is a proper local family with Dartmouth in our blood. We're not like some people, who have houses down here but live in London most of the time. Everybody knows us, which can be a bit claustrophobic sometimes, but at least things aren't as bad as they used to be when Damo was still living at home.

Damo Big-Mouth – that's what I always called him, because he could never keep things to himself. It used to drive me crazy walking past the Dolphin,

where Damo always drank, and the boys on the bench outside would call, *Hey there, Damo's sister*, as if I didn't have a name of my own. I'd only have to be wearing a new pair of shoes and they'd know how much they cost, where they came from and the trouble I'd had persuading my skinflint dad to buy them for me.

Dad would probably kill me if he knew I'd bought myself a book and was writing all this down, and so would Damo. But there's a story inside me that I've got to tell, even if it means being a big mouth too. I've known I should tell it for ages and finally it's got to the point where, if I don't do something now, I'll forget half of the things that matter and they'll all be lost.

What I really want to write about isn't Damo at all, or Bryony Rogers, for that matter, so I don't know why I mentioned them. It's Frankie that I want to write about, and something tells me that it's going to take more than one small exercise book, bought at Pillar's the newsagents. Francesca Diana Bradley, to give Frankie her full name. She came barging into my life without warning or invitation, and ended up becoming my best friend.

The Bradleys live across the river from us. Theirs is the big house on top of Kingswear Hill (Bradley Castle, people call it) that looks one way out to sea

and the other across the water to Dartmouth. People joke that with their tennis court, stable block, terraces and sweeping lawns, the Bradleys certainly know how to put the *king* into Kingswear. They say that, as you come into harbour, even at night time, Bradley Castle is the first thing you see. Nowadays the word is that the Bradleys are negotiating with the National Trust to buy part of the cliff top for a helicopter pad. But that's Dartmouth for you – always full of crazy stories. I don't believe it for one minute.

When we were small, Frankie's and my paths never crossed. I knew who she was, of course. I'd seen her enough times, driving off the ferry in one of her family's cars, or going up and down the river in one of their boats. People would say things like, 'There she goes, Little Miss Up-Herself.' But they didn't know what they were talking about. Underneath all that princess stuff, Frankie was a really down-to-earth, funny girl, and a loyal friend.

I know that now, but I didn't then. In those days, it wasn't just the rest of Dartmouth who called Frankie Little Miss Up-Herself. I did too.



Pink Flamingos

Frankie was born within days of me, but whereas I put in my first appearance in the cottage hospital on the Dartmouth waterfront (which was as far as Mum could get before I came hurtling out into the world), Frankie emerged into the private wing of the Royal South Hams.

In this, and every other way as well, there was no comparison between us. Frankie was the perfect baby who never cried, but I could have represented Britain in the baby-howling championships. She wore designer baby clothes. I wore other people's hand-me-downs. She was slim and golden, even as a baby apparently. I was curly and squat, and I stayed that way. (When Frankie insisted she'd give anything for my curly, dark looks, I knew she was lying to make me feel better.)

As we grew, the differences between us grew as well. Frankie's life was full of ballet, riding, water

sports and tennis, whereas mine was full of loafing around doing nothing in particular. While Frankie was always being whisked off somewhere in her mother's car, as remote and mysterious as a princess, I'd be sitting in front of the telly, or trailing around with Damo until he shook me off.

My life was dull, but Frankie's was gilded. Her parents held champagne parties on their boat for everyone to see and hear on both sides of the river, and they were always going abroad on flashy holidays. Frankie's father was as tanned as a film star, her mother as sleek and elegant as a supermodel. Every weekend her brothers came home from boarding school for the family to go sailing together, or wind-surfing, or riding their horses.

You'd see them trailing around Dartmouth in their jodhpurs or sailing gear, swaggering from shop to shop as if they owned them all. The older brother was known as 'Gorgeous George'. The Dartmouth girls were all over him, and they were all over his brother, Diggory, too, though he was younger and reckoned not to be half as good-looking.

The first time I ever crossed paths with the Bradleys was in the organic clothing shop, Green Flax, where Mum used to work until she got her present job as a medical secretary at the Royal South Hams. On Saturdays and in the holidays, I'd hang

around offering to help, but mostly getting under Mum's feet.

On the day in question, Gorgeous George came in, his little sister in tow, with a pair of loafers that he wanted changing. When he couldn't find his size, he demanded money-back. But Green Flax don't do money-back. They have notices about it all over the shop, but George got mad when Mum pointed them out and, when Mum wouldn't back down, Frankie got mad too. She obviously wasn't used to anybody saying no to the Bradley family. She even went so far as to swear at Mum – and then I got mad too.

'Hey, Little Miss Up-Herself – that's *my mother* you're talking to!'

I don't know why I did that. It's not like me to throw my weight around. Mum turned and glared, as if to say that she could handle this herself, thank you very much. But the damage was already done. Frankie looked stunned, as if she'd never been spoken to like that. Then George gave me a 'who the hell are you?' look, grabbed his sister's hand and went storming out of the shop, leaving the loafers behind. He swore they'd never come back, and neither would anybody else from their family, or their friends and neighbours or anybody else they knew.

'Do you realise what you've done?' Mum said, after they'd gone. 'That family spends a fortune in

this shop. You never, *ever*, talk to a customer like that!

After that – as if it was my doom – I couldn't get away from Frankie. She wasn't just 'the Bradley girl' any more. She was a person I'd crossed swords with – and she turned up everywhere I went. I'd only have to be strolling past the Dart Marina Hotel, and she and her mother would be sitting on the terrace having coffee. Or I'd linger outside the hairdresser's, wishing I could afford to go in and get my curls straightened, and Frankie would be there having her blonde hair highlighted.

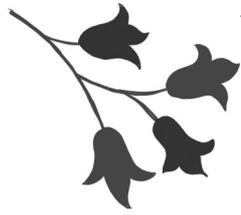
Why she bothered, I didn't know. She had hair to die for – long, thick, straight and naturally blonde. But she was never happy with it. Even though I didn't know her, that much was plain to see. She was always fiddling with it, and she had this way of pulling it over her face and then flicking it back – something I never understood until I saw her with school friends one day, and they were all doing it.

Frankie went to a school that was full of girls like her, with flicked-back hair. I guess it was some tribal habit. You could pick out the girls from that school simply by the flick. When you saw them all together with their long legs, pink skin, long necks and flicking heads, they looked like a flock of flamingos.

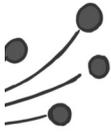
In fact, that's what I called them. *The flamingos*.

There was nothing to choose between them. I never thought of them as people who might be like me. Have the same feelings. Share any of the same hopes and dreams. And I certainly never thought I'd make friends with one of them. Not in a million years.

But that's exactly what I did. And this is how it happened.



Castle Cove



Castle Cove's the sort of place where anything could happen, even something as unlikely as Francesca Diana Bradley and me becoming friends. It's my favourite bit of Dartmouth – always has been, always will be – and it's where I am now, writing all this down.

For years, people passing on the cliff path never even knew that Castle Cove was there. It used to be my private place, which no one could get down to except me. People know about it now, because the steps have been repaired, the DANGER sign has been removed and a post has been erected, pointing the way down. But for years I had it to myself.

I even made a den down there, built among the roots of an old tree that grew out of the cliff. The tide had this way of washing things in just when I needed them. Once, when I got the idea of making a platform up in the branches of the tree, it brought

me a wooden pallet and a coil of rope. Then another time, when I was worrying about camouflage, it washed in a massive piece of netting that I draped over the den and covered with grass, seaweed and bracken.

In fact, I was working on my camouflage the first time Frankie went past. A shame I didn't do it sooner, that's what I thought. Frankie was out with her brothers in their father's boat, churning up the water in the bay and sending seagulls squawking up the cliff. When I heard them coming, I stood as still as a rock face, hoping they wouldn't notice me. But they must have noticed something because, a couple of days later, Frankie returned.

She was on her own this time, and in a little sailing dingy that I never noticed until too late. I looked up from making a wind chime out of bits of flotsam and there she was, pulling the boat up the beach. She'd already seen me and I knew there was nothing I could do. My day was ruined. I wished I hadn't come. There was nowhere I could run to, nowhere to hide, nothing I could do but watch Frankie walk towards me, the expression on her face telling me that she knew I was the girl who'd called her Little Miss Up-Herself.

'Hey, you – what do you think you're doing?' she cried as she approached. You'd have thought Castle

Cove was some private Bradley beach and I was trespassing.

I didn't answer, but then I didn't really need to. Already Frankie had swept past me. Telling her to get off my property had no effect. The Bradleys weren't the sort of people who needed permission to go anywhere, and Frankie was no different to the rest of them.

As if she owned it, she started poking around in my den. I followed angrily.

'What d'you think *you're* doing?' I said.

But Frankie didn't answer. She was too busy sticking her nose into everything. There was nothing I could do to stop her. She climbed up onto the platform and I hoped it would collapse. Then she climbed down again and dug around in the roots, finding the place where I hung my posters of Johnny Depp dressed as Captain Jack Sparrow.

'You don't fancy him, do you?' she said.

I could have died. 'What's it to you?' I said, turning bright red.

Finally I managed to get Frankie out of the den, even though I couldn't get her off the beach. She stood staring back at the den, and I could have sworn I saw envy on her face.

'Did you do all that yourself?' she said.

'What if I did?' I replied.

‘Well, if you did, I’ve got to say you’re brilliant,’ Frankie said. ‘Never in a million years could I have created something like that. It’s easily the best den I’ve ever seen. Although it could do with a bit of furniture. And some rugs might make it cosier. And, when it comes to posters, you could most definitely do better for yourself than Johnny Depp.’

I flushed again. As if she hadn’t noticed, Frankie started on about furniture her family was putting out that I could have if I wanted. No one would mind, she said. It wouldn’t even be missed. I only had to say the word and she could ferry it round.

I told her I wasn’t interested but next day, despite what I’d said, the furniture started arriving. I tried to make Frankie take it back, insisting I didn’t need it, but she lined it up on the beach and went off for more. Either she was mounting a takeover, I decided, or trying to wind me up for calling her Little Miss Up-Herself.

When the next lot arrived, I said again that the den was fine without furniture and, besides, it was mine, which meant it wasn’t her place to decide what went in it. But Frankie refused to take anything back, saying that, if I didn’t want it, I could let the tide carry it away.

Soon the beach was full of furniture. There was nothing I could do to stop it coming. It was good

stuff too. After Frankie had finally departed, I tried out a couple of wicker armchairs, marvelling at anybody wanting to put them out. Then I examined a table with a carved top. Then, finally, I unrolled a couple of threadbare Persian-type rugs and unpacked a stack of long velvet curtains. But I wouldn't put any of them in the den.

I didn't see Frankie for a couple of weeks after that. Eventually she returned but, by then, the table had been washed away and so had the curtains. Not that she made any comment. Instead, she came ashore, waving as if we were old friends.

I remember watching her, my heart sinking. I'd hoped I'd seen the last of her, but it seemed not.

'Hi,' she called.

'What do you want?' I replied, as suspicious as ever. But, by the end of that day, we had become friends.

How it happened I'm still not quite sure. To begin with, I tried ignoring Frankie. Then I tried being rude to her. Then I even tried to set her boat adrift, though without success. She sat at one end of the beach and I sat at the other, and slowly it came to me that a den with nobody in it but me wasn't half as much fun as one that could be shared.

By the time Frankie left that night, we'd hauled the furniture inside and started the process of trans-

forming the den into a home-from-home. But, more than that, we'd started to transform ourselves. Because somehow, beyond what either of us had expected, we'd discovered something in each other – a shared loneliness, maybe – that had brought us both to life.

Later, Frankie said that making friends had never come into it – she'd only bothered to get to know me because she wanted my den. But I knew that she was winding me up. Something genuine sprang up between us that day in Castle Cove, and it wasn't just a five-minute wonder either. It was something we both stuck with. Something that, over time, simply grew and grew.

Right from the start, though, our friendship had to be a secret. From that first day onwards, both of us understood that telling our families was not an option. The Bradleys would never approve of their princess of a daughter keeping company with some local girl whose parents were always out at work, leaving her to hang about Dartmouth from dawn to dusk. And I knew that if Damo ever found out, he'd embarrass me all over town, mouthing off about my closeness to Little Miss Up-Herself.

I remember Frankie and I talking about it one day – marvelling at the way, after all this time, we'd still managed to keep our friendship secret. We were

walking round St Petrox's Churchyard, reading inscriptions on graves, and Frankie said that, once you died, all your secrets died with you.

'I think it's sad,' she said. 'Once you go, so does everything you've ever done. The world carries on as if you'd never even existed. All that's left is a stone – and stones keep their secrets to themselves.'

I said that, when I died, I didn't want a stone at all, but to have my ashes scattered across Castle Cove. Frankie said she'd like that too but, knowing her luck, she'd end up in some massive family vault with railings round it and a statue of herself lying like a Tudor princess.

It was the only time I'd ever heard her joke about her family's aspirations and the crazy way they threw money about. I joked as well, saying that, if anyone in our family died, they probably wouldn't get even a headstone because Dad was too stingy to blow his money on the dead.

'If he dies first, Mum's going to spend his precious savings all in one go,' I said. 'That's her big secret. She says she's going to *spend, spend, spend.*'



*The Day We Talked
About Blood*

Things started changing the day we talked about blood. It was the weekend of the Dartmouth Music Festival. There were bands in all the pubs and concerts in the bandstand. The streets were heaving with buskers and every available open space had a musical event taking place. There were people milling everywhere, plastic beer glasses in their hands. Music was coming out of doors and windows all over town.

Even St Petrox's Church, down next to the castle, was swinging to the beat of some visiting London gospel choir. I could hear them from the den, where I'd gone to get away from Damo, who was swaggering all over town, trying to get in on other people's acts.

I hadn't expected Frankie to be there but the first thing I saw, as I climbed down the broken steps, was her boat, and I hadn't got much further before she

came running to greet me. Her parents were out and her brothers, who were meant to be looking after her, had gone to the music festival instead. So we had the afternoon to ourselves.

We spent the whole time in a world of our own. And I mean that quite literally – in a real world of our own. Over time, Castle Cove had transformed from private beach to make-believe kingdom to secret world. Once it had been just a beach with a tree at the top of it with the right-sized roots and branches to turn into a den. But, over time, it had become a country with boundaries, border posts and entry rituals that could never be divulged. The den was now a castle with lookout posts. It even had a throne room, where we, its queens, were crowned, and the whole place was governed by a parliament that we took turns to be in charge of as prime minister.

We never gave our kingdom a name, but we did give it a secret language. ‘Laftish’ was the word we used to describe the beauty of a day when the sun shines and everything goes right. ‘Hangly’ meant sad. ‘Clugs’ were people who spoil your fun. ‘Clugging’ meant being dragged away reluctantly, against one’s will. And the word ‘mesmiritious’ brought with it a sense of contentment so great that it simply couldn’t be improved upon, ‘I’m feeling mesmiritious’ being

as good as anything could ever get.

And that's how it was that afternoon, hanging posters of men, including Frankie's favourite, Orlando Bloom, in the throne room and sunbathing on a slab of rock. I remember the cliff above us being a mass of wild flowers and new green leaves. I felt wrapped up in a living, breathing world of sunlight and sea.

It was only when the sun started lowering that either of us realised how late it was. We didn't want to leave but knew we had no choice. Even I, whose parents rarely seemed to question where I was, knew that some explaining would have to be done.

Usually Frankie and I would go our separate ways right there on the beach, me climbing the broken steps and walking home, and Frankie crossing the water in her boat. Because it was so late, though, she transported me upriver to the higher ferry at the top end of Dartmouth, which was as near as she could get me to Clarence Street.

I remember us being out on the water, the evening sun shining down the river, making it look like a piece of crumpled cellophane. Frankie was quiet all the way, which wasn't like her, because she was usually such a talker. Her expression was set in marble and I wondered if something other than being late was bothering her.

We approached the higher ferry and she still hadn't said a word, so I asked if everything was all right. She said it was, but perhaps she said it too quickly or something, because the words rang hollow. Then, when we got up to the landing jetty, she said something else, and suddenly it was one of those conversations that you never forget.

I could hear blues music coming from the Dart Marina Hotel, which lies just beyond the ferry terminal. Now, every time I hear its sad, straining notes, Frankie's words come to mind.

'I think I might have started my periods,' she said. I don't know for sure, but nothing else makes sense.'

I remember my first reaction was, 'Is that all?' But my second reaction was envy. Suddenly it looked like Frankie was a grown-up, proper woman and I was left behind.

'What makes you think you've started?' I said, trying to disguise my true feelings.

'I don't know,' Frankie said. 'I could be wrong. But I'm getting spots of blood every time I pee, and if it's not my periods I don't know what else it might be.'

We'd reached the quay by now. Frankie leapt out, tied up the boat and held it steady for me to climb out too.

‘If you’re bleeding, you must have started your periods,’ I said. ‘Do you have any pain?’

I hoped she did. When she pulled a face, I remember feeling glad. Was pain conclusive evidence, she asked – as if *I* knew anything.

‘Why are you asking me?’ I said. ‘I’m hopeless at that sort of thing.’

When I’ve got time, I’ll give you all the details of my sex education, courtesy of Mum. It won’t take long, believe me.

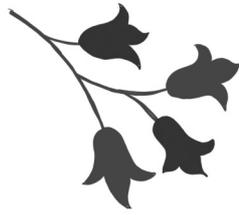
Frankie got back into the boat. She was beginning to look as if she wished she hadn’t mentioned the subject. I felt ashamed for being sharp with her.

‘You’re growing up,’ I said, in what I hoped was a softer voice.

‘It doesn’t feel like growing up to me,’ Frankie replied.

‘What does it feel like, then?’ I asked.

Frankie looked strangely blank. ‘I don’t know,’ she said, as if genuinely perplexed. ‘That’s the trouble. It feels like nothing. It’s hard to explain. A great big nothing inside of me, which should feel exciting and yet it doesn’t. In fact, I don’t know why I mentioned it. It’s probably nothing. Forget I ever said anything.’



Alf Resco's



The next time I saw Frankie was in the dark cavern at the back of Alf Resco's Coffee House, which was where we'd meet sometimes after school, tucked right at the back next to the coffee machine. We ordered milkshakes with cream and chocolate shakes on top and sucked them slowly through ice-clogged straws. It was ages since we'd seen each other, and to begin with Frankie was her usual self, full of funny stories about girls in her class. Finally, however, she ran out of things to say and I asked about the periods.

Frankie blushed, hushing me with a glance. They were fine, she whispered, but could I not shout from the rooftops? She didn't want the whole world knowing her private business.

'So, you've really started, then,' I said, trying to make a better job than last time of hiding my envy.

'It seems that way,' Frankie replied.

‘So what’s it like?’ I asked.

Frankie shrugged and changed the subject. There was no one sitting anywhere near us, but she wouldn’t talk about it until we’d paid for our drinks and were out of Alf Resco’s, walking down to the lower ferry, which would take her over to Kingswear.

We stopped on the quay where the cars queue up, watching the ferry with its little tug working its way towards us. Here Frankie confided that the blood wasn’t coming monthly, like she’d been led to believe, but only when she peed, and that she had an ache which hardly ever went away.

‘It’s really horrible,’ she said. ‘Sometimes I think I can’t live like this. I feel really depressed. I keep taking Mummy’s paracetamol and I’m worried that she’ll notice.’

It certainly sounded horrible. I remember staring across the water at the brightly coloured houses on Kingswear Hill, feeling glad, after all, that I hadn’t started my own periods. Frankie should tell her mother, I advised, and she agreed. But I could tell from her voice that she wouldn’t do it.

The ferry arrived and cars drove off it and other cars drove on. Just before Frankie walked down the ramp to join them, she dug deep in her school bag and said that, before she forgot, she had a present for me.

It was her old mobile phone. Up until that time I hadn't had one of my own and all our arrangements to meet had been done in school by email. Now, however, Frankie had a new phone and her old one, complete with about twenty pounds' worth of credit, was going begging.

That night I phoned her for the first time. I remember how excited I felt and how grown up as well. We talked about all sorts of silly things, just because we could. Then, in the dark, with nobody around to hear us, I brought up the subject of periods again. What did Frankie mean about pain? How bad was it? Did it ever go away? And the blood that came out in her pee – what was it like? Was it normal blood?

'I don't know,' said Frankie. 'What's normal for a period?'

'You should ask your mother, not me,' I said.

Frankie laughed at that. Would I talk to *my* mother about periods, she said. And the answer, of course, was no.

'What about one of your school friends?' I said. 'Or your teachers. Or you must have a school first-aid person, or nurse, or someone like that.'

'You're fussing. Stop it. There's really nothing wrong. This is just what periods are like. I wish I'd never mentioned it,' Frankie said.

I knew that I was fussing, but next time Frankie and I spoke on the phone I couldn't resist having another go. This time she got really mad at me and said that I was prying. But she did admit that the blood thing was still happening, and so were the pains.

When I got off the phone, I plucked up my courage and asked Mum what to do about period pains if they got really bad. I refused to give the name of the friend whose condition I was describing, which was a mistake, because she thought it was me. Before I was even halfway through going on about blood in pee, she was racing round the house looking for sanitary towels, as if it had never occurred to her that one day her daughter might grow up.

Eventually Mum found some and put them in a brown paper bag, giving them to me as if they were some terrible secret. She said I was to make sure I never ran out and, if I got blood on my knickers, I was to rinse them in cold water before washing them with soap. Also, if the pain got too bad, hot-water bottles always helped.

All the way through, I tried saying that I wasn't asking for myself. But either Mum didn't believe me or she didn't hear, too busy going on about how sad it was that little girls had to grow up.

In the end, it was Grandma who sorted me out. The house on Clarence Street was Grandma's kingdom, which she ruled through the party wall. No one could get away with anything without her knowing about it. No one could have a private conversation. Even in our side of the house, with the telly on or the radio, Grandma somehow managed to hear what people were saying.

We all hated it, but there was nothing we could do. Mum complained that she hated living in Grandma's house anyway, which she reckoned was like Doctor Who's Tardis in reverse – big on the outside but tiny when you got through the door. But Dad always refused to move. He was Grandma's one and only baby and she had him wrapped round her little finger. No way, he said, could his mother live on her own. And, besides, did we know how much houses cost in Dartmouth? We couldn't afford to live anywhere else.

No sooner had Mum whizzed off to recover from the shock of having a daughter old enough for periods than Grandma emerged through one of the doors, declaring that if *her* friend had blood in her pee, she'd make her see a doctor pronto.

'You should phone your friend back,' she said, 'and tell her so. If you don't, you might regret it, and life's too short for regrets.'