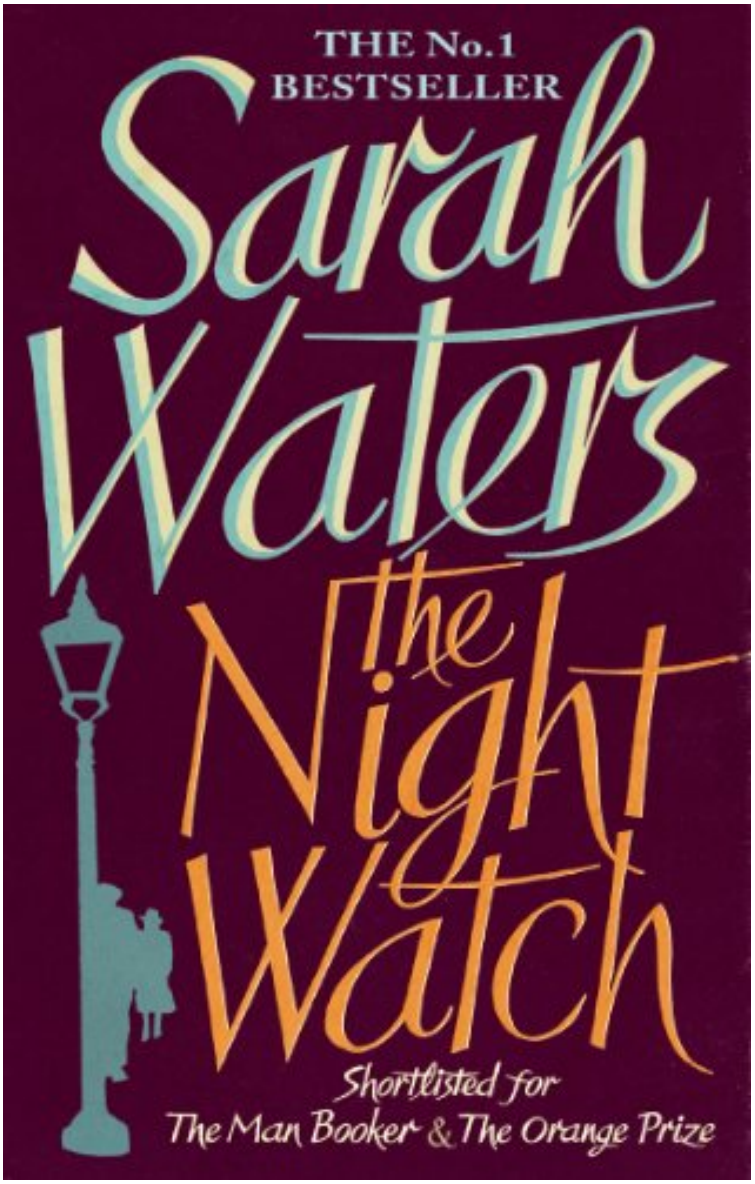
The Night Watch (English Edition)



Par Sarah Waters
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[Library ebook] The Night Watch (English Edition)

Par Sarah Waters : The Night Watch (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Night Watch (English Edition):

Description : Description du produitA novel of relationships set in 1940s London that brims with vivid historical detail, thrilling coincidences, and psychological complexity, by the author of the Booker Prize finalist Fingersmith. Sarah Waters, whose works set in Victorian England have awards and acclaim and have reinvigorated the genres of both historical and lesbian fiction, returns with novel that marks a departure from nineteenth century and a spectacular leap forward in the career of this masterful storyteller. Moving back through the 1940s, through air raids, blacked-out streets, illicit liasons, and sexual adventure, to end with its beginning in 1941, The Night Watch tells the story of Londoners: three women and a young man with a past-whose lives, and those of their friends and lovers, connect in ways that are surprising not always known to them. In wartime London, the women work-as ambulance drivers, ministry clerks, and building inspectors. There are feats of heroism, epic and quotidian, and tragedies both enormous and personal, but the emotional

interiors of her characters that Waters captures with absolute and intimacy. Waters describes with perfect knowingness the taut composure of a rescue worker in the aftermath of a bombing, the idle longing of a young woman her soldier lover, the peculiar thrill convict watching the sky ignite through the bars on his window, the hunger a woman stalking the streets for encounter, and the panic of another who sees her love affair coming end. At the same time, Waters is absolute control of a narrative that offers up subtle surprises and exquisite twists, even as it depicts the impact grand historical event on individual lives. Tender, tragic, and beautifully poignant, The Night Watch is a towering achievement that confirms its author as "one of the best storytellers alive today" (Independent on Sunday).

Prsentation de l'diteurMoving back through the 1940s, through air raids, blacked out streets, illicit liaisons, sexual adventure, to end with its beginning in 1941, The Night Watch is the work of a truly brilliant and compelling storyteller.This is the story of four Londoners - three women and a young man with a past, drawn with absolute truth and intimacy. Kay, who drove an ambulance during the war and lived life at full throttle, now dresses in mannish clothes and wanders the streets with a restless hunger, searching . . . Helen, clever, sweet, much-loved, harbours a painful secret . . . Viv, glamour girl, is stubbornly, even foolishly loyal, to her soldier lover . . . Duncan, an apparent innocent, has had his own demons to fight during the war. Their lives, and their secrets connect in sometimes startling ways. War leads to strange alliances . . . Tender, tragic and beautifully poignant, set against the backdrop of feats of heroism both epic and ordinary, here is a novel of relationships that offers up subtle surprises and twists. The Night Watch is thrilling. A towering achievement.ExtraitONESo this, said Kay to herself, is the sort of person youve become: a person whose clocks and wrist-watches have stopped, and who tells the time, instead, by the particular kind of cripple arriving at her landlords door.For she was standing at her open window, in a collarless shirt and a pair of greyish underpants, smoking a cigarette and watching the coming and going of Mr Leonards patients. Punctually, they cameso punctually, she really could tell the time by them: the woman with the crooked back, on Mondays at ten; the wounded soldier, on Thursdays at eleven. On Tuesdays at one an elderly man came, with a fey-looking boy to help him: Kay enjoyed watching for them. She liked to see them making their slow way up the street: the man neat and dark-suited as an undertaker, the boy patient, serious, handsomelike an allegory of youth and age, she thought, as done by Stanley Spencer or some finicky modern painter like that. After them there came a woman with her son, a little lame boy in spectacles; after that, an elderly Indian lady with rheumatics. The little lame boy would sometimes stand scuffing up moss and dirt from the broken path to the house with his great boot, while his mother spoke with Mr Leonard in the hall. Once, recently, hed looked up and seen Kay watching; and shed heard him making a fuss on the stairs, then, about going on his own to the lavatory.Is it them angels on the door? she had heard his mother say. Good heavens, theyre only pictures! A great boy like you!Kay guessed it wasnt Mr Leonards lurid Edwardian angels that frightened him, but the thought of encountering her. He must have supposed she haunted the attic floor like a ghost or a lunatic.He was right, in a way. For sometimes she walked restlessly about, just as lunatics were said to. And other times shed sit still, for hours at a timestiller than a shadow, because shed watch the shadows creeping across the rug. And then it seemed to her that she really might be a ghost, that she might be becoming part of the faded fabric of the house, dissolving into the gloom that gathered, like dust, in its crazy angles.A train ran by, two streets away, heading into Clapham Junction; she felt the thrill and shudder of it in the sill beneath her arms. The bulb in a lamp behind her shoulder sprang into life, flickered for a second like an irritated eye, and then went out. The clinker in the fireplacea brutal little fireplace; this had been a room for a servant, oncegently collapsed. Kay took a final draw on her cigarette, then pinched out the flame of it between her forefinger and thumb.She had been standing at her window for more than an hour. It was a Tuesday: shed seen a snub-nosed man with a wasted arm arrive, and had been waiting, in a vague kind of way, for the Stanley Spencer couple. But now shed decided to give up on them. Shed decided to go out. The day was fine, after all: a day in the middle of a warm September, the third September after the war. She went through to the room, next to this one, that she used as a bedroom, and began to get changed.The room was dim. Some of the window-glass had been lost, and Mr Leonard had replaced it with lino. The bed was high, with a balding candlewick bedspread: the sort of bed that turned your thoughts, not pleasantly, to the many people who must, over the years, have slept on it, made love on it, been born on it, died on it, thrashed around on it in fevers. It gave off a slightly sour scent, like the feet of worn stockings. But Kay was used to that, and didnt notice. The room was nothing to her but a place in which to sleep or to lie sleepless. The walls were empty, featureless, just as they had been when shed moved

in. Shed never hung up a picture or put out books; she had no pictures or books; she didnt have much of anything. Only, in one of the corners, had she fixed up a length of wire; and on this, on wooden hangers, she kept her clothes.The clothes, at least, were very neat. She picked her way through them now and found a pair of nicely darned socks, and some tailored slacks. She changed her shirt to a cleaner one, a shirt with a soft white collar she could leave open at the throat, as a woman might.But her shoes were mens shoes; she spent a minute polishing them up. And she put silver links in her cuffs, then combed her short brown hair with brushes, making it neat with a touch of grease. People seeing her pass in the street, not looking at her closely, often mistook her for a good-looking youth. She was regularly called young man, and even son, by elderly ladies. But if anyone gazed properly into her face, they saw at once the marks of age there, saw the white threads in her hair; and in fact she would be thirty-seven on her next birthday.When she went downstairs she stepped as carefully as she could, so as not to disturb Mr Leonard; but it was hard to be soft-footed, because of the creaking and popping of the stairs. She went to the lavatory, then spent a couple of minutes in the bathroom, washing her face, brushing her teeth. Her face was lit up rather greenishly, because ivy smothered the window. The water knocked and spluttered in the pipes. The geyser had a spanner hanging beside it, for sometimes the water stuck completelyand then you had to bang the pipes about a bit to make it fire.The room beside the bathroom was Mr Leonards treatment-room, and Kay could hear, above the sound of the toothbrush in her own mouth and the splash of water in the basin, his passionate monotone, as he worked on the snub-nosed man with the wasted arm. When she let herself out of the bathroom and went softly past his door, the monotone grew louder. It was like the throb of some machine.Eric, she caught, you must hmm-hmm. How can buzz-buzz when hmm-buzz whole again?She stepped very stealthily down the stairs, opened the unlatched front door, and stood for a moment on the stepalmost hesitating, now. The whiteness of the sky made her blink. The day seemed limp, suddenly: not fine so much as dried out, exhausted. She thought she could feel dust, settling already on her lips, her lashes, in the corners of her eyes. But she wouldnt turn back. She had, as it were, her own brushed hair to live up to; her polished shoes, her cuff-links. She went down the steps and started to walk. She stepped like a person who knew exactly where they were going, and why they were going therethough the fact was, she had nothing to do, and no one to visit, no one to see. Her day was a blank, like all of her days. She might have been inventing the ground she walked on, laboriously, with every step.She headed west, through well-swept, devastated streets, towards Wandsworth.No sign of Colonel Barker today, Uncle Horace, said Duncan, looking up at the attic windows as he and Mr Mundy drew closer to the house.He was rather sorry. He liked to see Mr Leonards lodger. He liked the bold cut of her hair, her mannish clothes, her sharp, distinguished-looking profile. He thought she might once have been a lady pilot, a sergeant in the WAAF, something like that: one of those women, in other words, whod charged about so happily during the war, and then got left over. Colonel Barker was Mr Mundys name for her. He liked to see her standing there, too. At Duncans words he looked up and nodded; but then he put down his head again and moved on, too out of breath to speak.He and Duncan had come all the way to Lavender Hill from White City. They had to come slowly, getting buses, stopping to rest; it took almost the whole day to get here and home again afterwards. Duncan had Tuesday as his regular day off, and made the hours up on a Saturday. They were very good about it, at the factory where he worked. That boys devoted to his uncle! hed heard them say, many times. They didnt know that Mr Mundy wasnt actually his uncle. They had no idea what kind of treatment he received from Mr Leonard; probably they thought he went to a hospital. Duncan let them think what they liked.He led Mr Mundy into the shadow of the crooked house. The house always looked at its most alarming, he thought, when looming over you like this. For it was the last surviving building in what had once, before the war, been a long terrace; it still had the scars, on either side, where it had been attached to its neighbours, the zig-zag of phantom staircases and the dints of absent hearths. What held it up, Duncan couldnt imagine; hed never quite been able to shake off the feeling, as he let himself and Mr Mundy into the hall, that hed one day close the door a shade too hard and the whole place would come tumbling down around them.So he closed the door softly; and after that the house seemed more ordinary. The hall was dim and rather hushed; there were hard-backed chairs set all the way around it, a coatless coat-rack, and two or three pallid-looking plants; the floor was a pattern of white-and-black tiles, some of which had got lost, exposing the grey cement beneath. The shade of the light was a lovely rose-coloured porcelain shellmeant for a gas-lamp, probably, but now fitted up with a bulb in a bakelite socket and a fraying brown flex.Duncan noticed flaws and features like this; it was one of the pleasures of life for him. The earlier they arrived at the house, the more he liked it, for that gave him time to help Mr Mundy to a chair and then wander quietly around the hall, looking everything over. He admired the finely turned

banisters, and the stair-rods with their tarnished brass ends. He liked the discoloured ivory knob on a cupboard door, and the paint on the skirting-boards, which had been combed to look like wood. But at the back of the passage that led to the basement was a bamboo table, set out with tawdry ornaments; and amongst the plaster dogs and cats, the paperweights and majolica vases, was his favourite thing of all: an old lustre bowl, very beautiful, with a design of serpents and fruits. Mr Leonard kept dusty walnuts in it, with a pair of iron nutcrackers on the top, and Duncan never approached the bowl without feeling, as if in the fibres of his bones, the fatal little concussion that would occur if some careless person were to take the nutcrackers up and let them slip against the china.The walnuts sat in the bowl today just as usual, however, the layer of dust upon them woolly, undisturbed; and Duncan had time, too, to look quite closely at a couple of pictures hanging crookedly on the wallfor everything hung crookedly, in this house. They turned out to be rather commonplace, with very ordinary Oxford frames. But that gave him a sense of pleasure, tooa different sort of pleasurethe pleasure he got from looking at a moderately handsome thing and thinking, Youre not mine, and I dont have to want you!When there was movement in the room upstairs, he stepped nimbly back to Mr Mundys side. A door had opened on the landing, and he heard voices: it was Mr Leonard, seeing out the young man who always had the hour before them. Duncan liked seeing this man, almost as much as he liked seeing Colonel Barker and the lustre bowl; for the man was cheery. He might be a sailor. All right, mates? he said today, giving Duncan a bit of a wink. He asked what the weather was doing now, and enquired after Mr Mundys arthritisall the while removing a cigarette from its packet, then putting it to his mouth, taking out a box of matches and striking a light: all perfectly easily and naturally with one hand, while the other, undeveloped arm hung at his side.Why did he come, Duncan always wondered, when he could get along so well just as he was? He thought that perhaps the young man wanted a sweetheart; for of course, the arm was something a girl might object to.The young man tucked the box of matches back into his pocket and went on his way. Mr Leonard led Duncan and Mr Mundy upstairsgoing slowly, of course; letting Mr Mundy set the pace.Blinking nuisance, said Mr Mundy. What can you do with me? Put me on the scrap-heap.Now, now! said Mr Leonard.He and Duncan helped Mr Mundy into the treatment-room. They lowered him into another hard-backed chair, took his jacket from him, made sure he was comfortable. Mr Leonard got out a black notebook and looked briefly inside it; then he sat facing Mr Mundy in a stiff chair of his own. Duncan went to the window and sat on a low sort of padded box that was there, with Mr Mundys jacket in his lap. The window had a bitter-smelling net curtain across it, slightly sagging from a wire. The walls of the room were done in lincrusta, painted a glossy chocolate brown.Mr Leonard rubbed his hands together. So, he said. How are we, since I saw you last?Mr Mundy ducked his head. Not too bright, he said.The idea of pains, still?Cant seem to shake them off at all.But youve had no resort to false remedies of any kind?Mr Mundy moved his head again, uneasily. Well, he admitted after a second, perhaps a little aspirin.Mr Leonard drew in his chin and looked at Mr Mundy as if to say: Dear, dear. Now, you know very well, dont you, he said, what a person is like, who employs false remedies and spiritual treatment at the same time? He is like an ass pulled by two masters; he moves nowhere. You do know this, dont you?Its only, said Mr Mundy, so awfully soreSoreness! said Mr Leonard, with a mixture of amusement and great contempt. He shook his chair. Is this chair sore, because it must support my weight? Why not, since the wood from which it is made is as material as the bone and muscle of your leg, which you say hurts from bearing your weight? It is because nobody believes that a chair mayhurt. If you will only not believe in the hurt of your leg, that leg will become as negligible to you as wood is. Dont you know this?Yes, said Mr Mundy meekly.Yes, repeated Mr Leonard. Now, let us make a start.Duncan sat very still. It was necessary to be very still and quiet through all of the session, but particularly now, while Mr Leonard was gathering his thoughts, gathering his strength, concentrating his mind so that he might be ready to take on the false idea of Mr Mundys arthritis. He did this by slightly putting back his head and looking with great intensity, not at Mr Mundy, but at a picture he had hung over the mantelpiece, of a soft-eyed woman in a high-necked Victorian gown, whom Duncan knew to be the founder of Christian Science, Mrs Mary Baker Eddy. On the black frame of the picture someonepossibly Mr Leonard himselfhad written a phrase, not very handily, in enamel paint. The phrase was: Ever Stand Porter at the Gate of Thought.The words made Duncan want to laugh, every time: not because he found them especially comical, but simply because to laugh, just now, would be so dreadful; and he always, at this point, began to grow panicked at the thought of having to sit so silently, for so long: he felt he would be bound to make some sound, some movementleap up, start shrieking, throw a fitBut it was too late. Mr Leonard had changed his posehad leant forward and fixed Mr Mundy with his gaze. And when he spoke again, he spoke in a whisper, intently, with a tremendous sense of urgency and belief.Dear Horace, he said, you must listen

to me. All that you think about your arthritis is untrue. You have no arthritis. You have no pain. You are not subject to those thoughts and opinions, which have illness and pain as a law and condition of matterDear Horace, listen. You have no fear. No memory frightens you. No memory makes you think misfortune will come to you again. You have nothing to fear, dear Horace. Love is with you. Love fills and surrounds youThe words went on and onlike a rain of gentle blows from a stern lover. It was impossible, Duncan thoughtforgetting, now, his desire to laughnot to want to surrender yourself to the passion of them; impossible not to want to be impressed, moved, persuaded. He thought of the young man with the wasted arm; he imagined the man sitting where Mr Mundy was now, being told, Love fills you, being told, You must not fear, and willing and willing his arm to lengthen, to flesh itself out. Could such a thing happen? Duncan wanted, for Mr Mundys sake, and the young mans sake, to think that it could. He wanted it more than anything.He looked at Mr Mundy. Soon after the start of the treatment he had closed his eyes; now, as the whispers went on, he began, very gently, to cry. The tears flowed thinly down his cheeks, they gathered at his throat and wet his collar. He made no attempt to catch them, but sat with his hands loosely in his lap, his neat, blunt fingers now and then twitching; and every so often he drew in his breath and let it out again in a great shuddering sigh.Dear Horace, Mr Leonard was insisting, no mind has any power over you. I deny the power of thoughts of disorder over you. Disorder does not exist. I affirm the power of harmony over you, over every organ of you: the arms of you; the legs of you; the eyes and ears of you; the liver and kidneys of you; the heart and brain and stomach and loins of you. Those organs are perfect. Horace, hear meHe kept it up for forty-five minutes, then sat back, quite un-tired. Mr Mundy got out his handkerchief at last and blew his nose and wiped his face. But his tears had already dried; he stood without help, and seemed to walk a little easier, and be a little lighter in his mind. Duncan took him his jacket. Mr Leonard rose and stretched, had a sip of water from a glass. When Mr Mundy paid him, he took the money with an air of great apology.And tonight, of course, he said, I shall include you in my evening benediction. Youll be ready for that? Shall we say, half-past nine? For he had many patients, Duncan knew, whom he never saw: patients who sent him money, and whom he worked on from a distance, or by letter and telephone.He shook Duncans hand. His palm was dry, his fingers soft and smooth as a girls. He smiled, but his look was inward-seeming, like a moles. He might, at that moment, have been blind.And how awkward for him, Duncan thought suddenly, if he were!The idea made him want to laugh again. When he and Mr Mundy were back on the path in front of the house, he did laugh; and Mr Mundy picked up his hilarity and began to laugh, too. It was a sort of nervous reaction, to the room, the stillness, the barrage of gentle words. They caught each others eye, as they left the shadow of the crooked house and walked towards Lavender Hill, and laughed like children.I shant want a flighty sort of woman, the man was saying. I had enough of that sort of thing with my last girl, I dont mind telling you.Helen said, We always advise our clients to keep as open a mind as possible, at this stage of things.The man said, Hmm. And an open wallet, too, I dare say.He wore a dark blue demob suit, already shiny at the elbows and the cuffs, and his face was sallow with a tired tropical tan. His hair was combed with fantastic neatness, the parting straight and white as a scar; but the oil had little crumbs of scurf caught in it, which kept drawing Helens eye.I dated a WAAF once, he was saying bitterly now. Every time we passed a jewellers shed just happen to turn her ankleHelen drew out another sheet. What about this lady here? Lets see. Enjoys dressmaking and trips to the cinema.The man leant to look at the photograph and at once sat back, shaking his head. I dont care for girls in spectacles.Now, remember my advice about the open mind?I dont want to sound harsh, he said, giving a quick glance at Helens own rather sensible brown outfit. But a girl in spectacleswell, shes let herself down already. Youve got to ask yourself whats going to go next.They went on like this for another twenty minutes; eventually, from the file of fifteen women that Helen had initially drawn up, theyd put together a list of five.The man was disappointed, but hid his dismay in a show of aggression. So, what happens now? he asked, pulling at his shiny cuffs. This lot are shown my ugly face, I suppose, and have to say whether or not they like the look of it. I can see already how that will turn out. Perhaps I should have had myself photographed with a five-pound note behind my ear.Helen imagined him at home that morning, choosing a tie, sponging his jacket, straightening and restraightening the parting in his hair.She saw him down the stairs to the street. When she went back up to the waiting-room she looked at Viv, her colleague, and blew out her cheeks.Viv said, Like that, was he? I did wonder. He wouldnt do for our lady from Forest Hill, I suppose?Hes after someone younger.Arent they all? Viv stifled a yawn. On the desk before her was a diary. She patted her mouth, looking over the page. Weve no one, now, she said, for nearly half an hour. Lets have a cup of tea, shall we?Oh, lets, said Helen.They moved about more briskly, suddenly, than they ever did when dealing with clients. Viv opened the lowest drawer of a

filing cabinet and brought out a neat little electric kettle and a teapot. Helen took the kettle down to the lavatory on the landing, and filled it at the sink. She set it on the floor, plugged it into a socket in the skirting-board, then stood waiting. It took about three minutes to boil. The paper above the socket was rising, where steam had struck it in the past. She smoothed it down, as she did every day; it lay flat for a moment, then slowly curled back up.The bureau was in two rooms above a wig-makers, in a street behind Bond Street Station. Helen saw the clients, individually, in the room at the front; Viv sat at her desk in the waiting-room, greeting them as they came in. There was a mismatched sofa and chairs, where people could sit when they came early. A Christmas cactus in a pot sent out occasional startling blooms. A low table held nearly current copies of Lilliput and Readers Digest.Helen had worked here since just after the end of the war; shed taken it on as a temporary thingsomething light-hearted, a contrast to her old job in a Damage Assistance department in Marylebone Town Hall. The routines were straightforward enough; she tried to do her best for the clients, and genuinely wished them well; but it was sometimes hard to remain encouraging. People came to look for new loves, but oftenor so it seemed to heronly really wanted to talk about the loves that they had lost. Recently, of course, business had been booming. Servicemen, returning from overseas, found wives and girlfriends transformed out of all recognition. They came into the bureau still looking stunned. Women complained about their ex-husbands. He wanted me to stay in all the time. He told me he didnt care for my friends. We went back to the hotel we spent our honeymoon in, but it wasnt the same.The water boiled. Helen made the tea at Vivs desk and took the cups into the lavatory; Viv was in there already, and had raised the window. At the back of their building there was a fire-escape: if they climbed out they could reach a rusting metal platform with a low rail. The platform shuddered as they moved about on it, the ladder heaving against its bolts; but the spot was a sun-trap, and they made straight for it whenever they had the chance. They could hear the ring of the street-door and telephone from there; and, like hurdlers, had perfected a way of getting over the sill of the window with great speed and efficiency.At this time of day the sun fell rather obliquely, but the bricks and metal it had been striking all morning still held its heat. The air was pearly with petrol fumes. From Oxford Street there came the steady grumble of traffic, and the tap-tap of workmen fixing roofs.Viv and Helen sat down and carefully eased off their shoes, stretching out their legstucking in their skirts, in case the men from the wig-makers should happen to come out and glance upwardsand working and turning their stockinged feet. Their stockings were darned at the toes and the heels. Their shoes were scuffed; everybodys were. Helen got out a packet of cigarettes and Viv said, Its my turn.It doesnt matter.Ill owe you, then.They shared a match. Viv put back her head and sighed out smoke. Then she looked at her watch.God! Theres ten minutes gone already. Why does time never go so quickly when weve got the clients in?They must work on the clocks, said Helen. Like magnets.I think they must. Just as they suck away at the life of you and mesuck, suck, suck, like great big fleasHonestly, if youd told me, when I was sixteen, that I should end up working in a place like thiswell, I dont know what I would have thought. It wasnt what I had in mind at all. I wanted to be a solicitors secretaryThe words dissolved into another yawnas if Viv hadnt the energy, even, to be bitter. She patted at her mouth with one of her slim, pale, pretty, ringless hands.She was five or six years younger than Helen, who was thirty-two. Her features were dark, and still vivid with youth; her hair was a rich brownish-black. Right now it lay bunched behind her head against the warm brick wall, like a velvet cushion.Helen envied Viv her hair. Her own hair was lightor, as she thought of it, colourless; and it did that unforgivable thinggrew absolutely straight. She wore it waved, and the constant perming dried it out and made it brittle. Shed had it waved very recently: she could catch the faint stink of the chemicals every time she turned her head.She thought over what Viv had said, about wanting to be a solicitors secretary. She said, When I was young, I wanted to be a stable-girl.A stable-girl?You know, with horses, ponies. Id never ridden a horse in my life. But Id read something or other, I suppose, in a girls annual or somewhere. I used to go trotting up and down the street, making clopping noises with my tongue. She remembered the thrill of it, very clearly, and had an urge to get up, now, and try cantering up and down the fire-escape. My horse was called Fleet. He was very fast and very muscular. She drew on her cigarette, then added in a lower tone, God knows what Freud would say about it.She and Viv laughed, flushing slightly.Viv said, When I was really young, I wanted to be a nurse. Seeing my mother in the hospital put me off that, thoughMy brother wanted to be a magician. Her gaze grew distant; she started to smile. I always remember. My sister and I made him a cloak, from an old curtain. We dyed it blackbut of course, we didnt know what we were doing, we were only kids; it came out looking terrible. We told him it was a specially magic one. And then my father got him one of those boxes of magic tricks, for his birthday. I bet it cost a fortune, too! He got everything he wanted, my brother; he was absolutely ruined. He was the sort of kid who, every time

you took him into a shop, hed want something. My auntie used to say, You could take Duncan into a wool shop, and hed come out wanting a ball of wool.She sipped her tea, laughing again. He was a lovely kid, really. My dad gave him that box, and he couldnt believe it. He spent hours reading the book, trying to work the tricks out; but in the end, you know, he put it all away. So we said, Whats the matter? Didnt you like the box after all? And he said, Well, it was all right; but hed thought it was going to show him how to do real magic, and it was just tricks. She bit her lip, and shook her head. Just tricks! Poor little thing. He was only about eight.Helen smiled. It must have been nice, having a baby brother. My brother and I were too close in age; we just used to quarrel. Once he tied one of my plaits to the handle of a door, and slammed it. She touched her scalp. It hurt like hell. I wanted to kill him! I believe I would have, if Id known how. I do think children would make the most perfect little murderers, dont you?Viv noddedbut a little vaguely, this time. She smoked her cigarette; and they sat together, for a minute or two, in silence.Theres that curtain come down, thought Helen; for she was used to Viv doing this: giving little confidences, sharing memoriesthen drawing back suddenly, as though she had given away too much. They had worked together for almost a year, but what Helen knew about Vivs home life shed had to put together from bits and pieces, scraps that Viv had let drop. She knew, for example, that her background was a very ordinary one; that her mother had died, ages ago; that she lived with her father in South London, cooking his dinners when she went home from work at night, and doing his laundry. She wasnt married or engagedwhich seemed odd to Helen, for such a good-looking girl. She never spoke of having lost a lover to the war, but there was somethingsomething disappointed about her, Helen thought. A sort of greyness. A layer of grief, as fine as ash, just beneath the surface.But it was her brother, this Duncan, who was the biggest mystery. He had some queerness or scandal attached to himHelen had never been able to work out what. He didnt live at home, with Viv and their father; he lived with an uncle or something like that. And though he was apparently quite healthy, he workedshed gatheredin an odd kind of factory, for invalids and charity cases. Viv always spoke about him in a very particular way; she often said, for example, Poor Duncan, just as she had a minute ago. But the tone could have an edge of annoyance to it, too, depending on her mood: Oh, hes all right. He hasnt got a clue. Hes in a world of his own, he is. And then, down would come that curtain.Helen had a respect for curtains like that, however, having one or two things in her own life that she preferred to keep in darknessShe drank more of her tea, then opened up her handbag and brought out a piece of knitting. Shed got into the habit, during the war, of knitting socks and scarves for soldiers; now, every month, she sent off a parcel of various lumpy, muddy-coloured items to the Red Cross. Currently she was working on a childs balaclava. The wool was second-hand, with strange kinks; it was hot work for summer; but the turns in the pattern were absorbing. She moved her finger and thumb rapidly along the needle, counting stitches under her breath.Viv opened her own bag. She got out a magazine and began to leaf through it.Want your Stars? she asked Helen, after a while. And, when Helen nodded: Here we are, then. Pisces, the Fish: Caution is the best course today. Others may not be sympathetic to your plans. Thats your gentleman from Harrow, earlier on. Wheres mine? Virgo, the Maiden: Look out for unexpected visitors. That makes it sound like Im going to get nits! Scarlet brings luck. She made a face. Its only a woman in some office somewhere, isnt it? Id like her job. She turned another couple of pages, then held the magazine over. How about that for a hair-do?Helen was counting stitches again. Sixteen, seventeen, she said, and glanced at the picture. Not bad. I shouldnt like to have to set and reset it every time, though.Viv yawned again. Well, thats one thing I do have: time.They spent a few more minutes looking over the fashions, then glanced at their watches and sighed. Helen made a mark on her paper pattern, and rolled her knitting up. They pulled on their shoes, dusted down their skirts, climbed back over the window-sill. Viv rinsed out the cups. She got out her powder and lipstick and moved to the mirror.Better freshen up the old war-paint, I suppose, she said.Helen briefly tidied her own face, then went slowly back up into the waiting-room. She straightened the pile ofLilliputs, put away the tea things and the kettle. She looked through the diary on Vivs deskturning the pages, reading the names. Mr Symes, Mr Blake, Miss Taylor, Miss HeapShe could guess already at the various disappointments that had prompted them to call: the jilts, the betrayals, the rankling suspicions, the deadnesses of heart.The thought made her restless. How horrible work was, really! Even with Viv to make it bearable, how awful it was to be here, while everything that was important to you, everything that was real, had meaning, was somewhere else, out of reachShe went into her office and looked at the telephone on her desk. She oughtnt to call at this sort of time in the day, for Julia hated to be interrupted when she was working. But now that shed thought of it, the idea took hold: a little thrill of impatience ran through her, she found herself physically almost twitching, wanting to pick the receiver up.Oh, bugger it, she thought. She

snatched up the telephone and dialled her own number. It rang once, twiceand then came Julias voice.Hello?Julia, said Helen quietly. Its only me.Helen! I thought you were my mother. Shes already called twice today. Before her I had the Exchange, some sort of problem with the line. Before that there was a man at the door, selling meat!What sort of meat?I didnt enquire. Cat meat, probably.Poor Julia. Have you managed any writing at all?Well, a little.Killed anybody off?I have, as it happens.Have you? Helen settled the receiver more comfortably against her ear. Who? Mrs Rattigan?No, Mrs Rattigans had a reprieve. It was Nurse Malone. A spear through the heart.A spear? In Hampshire?One of the Colonels African trophies.Ha! That will teach him. Was it awfully grisly?Awfully.Lots of blood?Buckets of it. And what about you? Been putting out the banns?Helen yawned. Not much, no.She had nothing to say, really. She had just wanted to hear Julias voice. There was one of those noisy telephone silences, full of the tinny electric muddle of other peoples conversations in the wire. Then Julia spoke again, more briskly.Look here, Helen. Im afraid Ill have to ring off. Ursula said shed call.Oh, said Helen, suddenly cautious. Ursula Waring? Did she?Just some tiresome thing about the broadcast, I expect.Yes. Well, all right.Ill see you later.Yes, of course. Goodbye, Julia.Goodbye.Puffs of air; and then the line went dead as Julia put the telephone down. Helen spent a moment with the receiver still at her ear, listening to the faint, gusty echo that was all that remained of the severed connection.Then she heard Viv coming out of the lavatory, and quickly and softly set the receiver back in its cradle.Hows Julia? Viv thought to ask, as she and Helen were going around the office at the end of that day, emptying the ashtrays, gathering their things. Has she finished her book?Not quite, said Helen, without looking up.I saw her last book the other day. Whats it called? The Dark Eyes of?The Bright Eyes, said Helen, of Danger.Thats right. The Bright Eyes of Danger. I saw it in a shop on Saturday, and moved it right to the front of the shelf. A woman started looking at it, too, after that.Helen smiled. You ought to get a commission. Ill make sure to tell Julia.Dont you dare! The idea was embarrassing. Shes doing ever so well, though, isnt she?She is, said Helen. She was shrugging on her coat. She seemed to hesitate, and then went on, You know, theres a write-up on her in the Radio Times this week. Her books going to be on Armchair Detective.Is it? said Viv. You ought to have told me. The Radio Times! I shall have to buy one on my way home.Its only a brief thing, said Helen. TheresTheres a nice little photo, though.She didnt seem as excited about it, somehow, as she ought to have been. Perhaps she was just used to the idea. It seemed an incredible thing to Viv, to have a friend who wrote books, had her picture in a paper like the Radio Times, where so many people would see it.They switched off the lights and went downstairs, and Helen locked the door. They stood for a minute, as they usually did, looking in at the wigs in the wig-makers window, deciding which wigs they would buy if they had to, and laughing at the rest. Then they walked together as far as the corner of Oxford Streetyawning as they said goodbye, and making comical faces at the thought of having to come back tomorrow and do another day, all over again.Viv went slowly after that, almost dawdling: gazing into the windows of shops; wanting the worst of the going-home rush to be over before she tried to catch a train. Usually she took a bus for the long journey home to Streatham. Tonight, however, was a Tuesday night; and on Tuesdays she took the Tube and went to White City, to have tea with her brother. But she hated the Underground: hated the press of people, the smells, the smuts, the sudden warm gusts of air. At Marble Arch, instead of going down into the station, she went into the park, and walked along the path beside the pavement. The park looked lovely with the late, low sun above it, the shadows long, cool-seeming, bluish. She stood at the fountains and watched the play of the water; she even sat on a bench for a minute.A girl with a baby came and sat beside hersighing as she sat, glad of the rest. She had on a headscarf left over from the war, decorated with faded tanks and spitfires. The baby was asleep, but must have been dreaming: he was moving his facenow frowning, now amazedas if he were trying out all the expressions he would need, Viv thought, when he was grown up.She finally went down into the Underground at Lancaster Gate; she only had five stops, then, to Wood Lane. Mr Mundys house was a ten-minute walk from the station, round the back of the dog-track. When races were on you could hear the crowdsa funny sound: loud, almost frightening, it seemed to surge after you down the streets like great waves of invisible water. Tonight the track was quiet. The streets had children in themthree of them balanced on one old bicycle, weaving about, raising dust.Mr Mundys gate was fastened with a fussy little latch, which somehow reminded Viv of Mr Mundy himself. His front door had panels of glass in it. She stood at them now, and lightly tapped, and, after a moment, a figure appeared in the hall beyond. It came slowly, with a limp. Viv put on a smileand imagined Mr Mundy, on his side, doing the same.Hello, Vivien. How are you, dear?Hello, Mr Mundy. Im all right. How are you?She moved forward, wiping her feet on the bit of coconut-matting on the floor.Cant complain, said Mr Mundy.The hall was narrow, and there was a moments awkwardness, every time, as he

made room for her to pass him. She went to the bottom of the stairs and stood beside the umbrella-stand, unbuttoning her coat. It always took her a minute or two to get used to the dimness. She looked around, blinking. My brother about, is he?Mr Mundy closed the door. Hes in the parlour. Go on in, dear.But Duncan had already heard them talking. He called out, Is that Vivien? V, come and see me in here! I cant get up.Hes pinned to the floor, said Mr Mundy, smiling.Come and see! called Duncan again.She pushed at the parlour door and went inside. Duncan was lying on his stomach on the hearth-rug with an open book before him, and in the small of his back sat Mr Mundys little tabby cat. The cat was working its two front legs as if kneading dough, flexing and retracting its toes and claws, purring ecstatically. Catching sight of Viv, it narrowed its eyes and worked faster.Duncan laughed. What do you think? Shes giving me a massage.Viv felt Mr Mundy at her shoulder. He had come to watch, and to laugh along with Duncan. His laugh was light, and dryan old mans chuckle. There was nothing to do but laugh, too. She said, Youre barmy.Duncan began to lift himself up, as if about to start physical jerks. Im training her.What for?The circus.Shell snag your shirt.I dont mind. Watch.The cat worked on as if demented while Duncan raised himself higher. He began to straighten up. He tried to do it in such a way that the cat could keep her place on his backeven, could walk right up his body. All the time he tried it, he kept laughing. Mr Mundy called encouragement. At last, though, the cat had had enough, and sprang to the floor. Duncan brushed at his trousers.Sometimes, he said to Viv, she gets on my shoulders. I walk aboutdont I, Uncle Horace?with her draped around my neck. Quite like your collar, in fact.Viv had a little false-fur collar on her coat. He came and touched it. She said, Shes snagged your shirt after all.He twisted to look. Its only a shirt. I dont have to be smart like you. Doesnt Viv look smart, Uncle Horace? A smart lady secretary.He gave her one of his charming smiles, then let her hug him and kiss his cheek. His clothes had a faintly perfumed smellthat, she knew, was from the candle factorybut beneath the scent he smelt like a boy; and when she lifted her hands to him his shoulders seemed ridiculously narrow and full of slender bones. She thought of the story shed told Helen that afternoon, about the box of magic tricks; and remembered him vividly, again, when he was littlehow he would come into her and Pamelas bed, and lie between them. She could still feel his thin arms and legs, and his forehead, which would get hot, the dark hair sticking to it, fine as silkShe wished for a moment that they were all children again. It still seemed extraordinary to her, that everything had turned out the way it had.She took off her coat and her hat, and they sat down. Mr Mundy had gone back out to the kitchen. There came the sounds of him, after a minute, preparing tea.I ought to go and give a hand, she said. She said this every time she came. And Duncan always answered, as he did now, He prefers it on his own. Hell start up singing in a minute. He had his treatment this afternoon; hes a little bit better. Anyway, Ill do the washing up. Tell me how you are.They exchanged their little pieces of news.Dad sends his love, she said.Does he? He wasnt interested. Hed only been seated for a moment, but now he got up excitedly and brought something down to her from a shelf. Look at this, he said. It was a little cop-perish jug, with a dent in its side. I got it on Sunday, for three and six. The man asked seven shillings, and I knocked him down. I think it must be eighteenth-century. Imagine ladies, V, taking tea, pouring cream from this! It would have been silvered then, of course. Do you see where the platings come off? He showed her the traces of silver at the join of the handle. Isnt it lovely? Three and six! That bit of damage is nothing. I could knock that out if I wanted.He turned the jug in his hands, delighted with it. It looked like a piece of rubbish to Viv. But he had some new object to show her every time she came: a broken cup, a chipped enamel box, a cushion of napless velvet. She could never help thinking of the mouths that had touched the china, the grubby hands and sweating heads that had rubbed the cushions bald. Mr Mundys house, itself, rather gave her the creeps: an old persons house, it was, its little rooms crowded with great dark furniture, its walls swarming with pictures. On the mantelpiece were flowers of wax and pieces of coral under spotted glass domes. The lamps were gas ones still, with fish-tail flames. There were yellow, exhausted photographs: of Mr Mundy as a slim young man; another of him as a boy, with his sister and mother, his mother in a stiff black dress, like Queen Victoria. It was all dead, dead, dead; and yet here was Duncan, with his quick dark eyes, his clear boys laugh, quite at home amongst it all.She picked up her bag. Ive brought you something.It was a tin of ham. He saw it and said, I say! He said it in the affectionate, faintly teasing way hed said smart lady secretary, before; and when Mr Mundy came limping in with the tea-tray, he held the tin up extravagantly.Look here, Uncle Horace! Look what Viv has brought us.There was corned beef on the tray, already. She had brought that last time. Mr Mundy said, By golly, we are well set up now, arent we?They pulled out the leaves of the table and put out the plates and cups, the tomato sandwiches, the lettuce-hearts and cream crackers. They drew up their chairs, shook out their napkins, and began to help themselves to the food.How is your father, Vivien? Mr Mundy asked politely.

And your sister? Hows that fat little chap? He meant Pamelas baby, Graham. Such a fat little chap, isnt he? Fat as butter! Quite like the kids you used to see about when I was a boy. Seemed to go out of fashion.He was opening the tin of ham as he spoke: turning its key over and over with his great, blunt fingers, producing a line of exposed meat like a thin pink wound. Viv saw Duncan watching; she saw him blink and look away. He said, as if with a show of brightness, Are there fashions in babies, then, like in skirts?Ill tell you one thing, said Mr Mundy, shaking out the ham, scooping out the jelly. What you never used to see, that was wheeled perambulators. You saw a wheeled perambulator round here, that was something marvellous. That was what you used to call top-drawer. We used to cart my cousins about in a wagon meant for coal. Kids walked sooner then, though. Kids earned their living in those days.Were you ever sent up a chimney, Uncle Horace? asked Duncan.A chimney? Mr Mundy blinked.By a great big brute of a man, setting fire to your toes to make you go faster?Get away with you!They laughed. The empty ham tin was set aside. Mr Mundy took out his handkerchief and blew his noseblew it short and hard like a trumpetthen shook the handkerchief back into its folds and put it neatly back in his pocket. His sandwiches and lettuce-hearts he cut into fussy little pieces before he ate them. When Viv left the lid of the mustard-pot up, he tipped it down. But the slivers of meat and jelly that were left on his plate at the end of the meal he held to the cat: he let her lick them from his handlick all about his knuckles and nails.When the cat had finished, she mewed for more. Her mew was thin, high-pitched.She sounds like pins, said Duncan.Pins?I feel as though shes pricking me.Mr Mundy didnt understand. He reached to touch the cats head. Shell scratch you, mind, when her danders up. Wont you, Catty?There was cake to be eaten, after that; but as soon as the cake was finished, Mr Mundy and Duncan got up and cleared the cups and plates away. Viv sat there rather tensely, watching them carrying things about; soon they went out to the kitchen together and left her alone. The doors in the house were heavy and cut off sound; the room seemed quiet and dreadfully airless, the gas-lamps hissing, a grandfather clock in the corner giving a steady tick-tick. It sounded laboured, she thoughtas though its works had got stiff, like Mr Mundys; or else, as if it felt weighted down by the old-fashioned atmosphere, like her. She checked the face of it against her wrist-watch. Twenty to eightHow slowly the time ran here. As slowly as at work. How unfair it was! For she knew that laterwhen she would want itit would seem to rush.Tonight, at least, there was a distraction. Mr Mundy came in and sat down in his armchair beside the fire, as he always did after dinner; Duncan, however, wanted Viv to cut his hair. They went out to the kitchen. He put down newspaper on the floor, and set a chair in the middle. He filled a bowl with warm water, and tucked a towel into the collar of his shirt.Viv dipped a comb in the water, wet his hair, and started cutting. She used a pair of old dressmaking scissors; God knows what Mr Mundy was doing with those. Probably he did his own sewing, she wouldnt put it past him. The newspaper crackled under her shoes as she moved about.Not too short, said Duncan, hearing her clip.She turned his head. Keep still.You did it too short last time.Ill do it how I do it. There is such a thing as a barbers, you know.I dont like the barbers. I always think hes going to cut me up and put me in a pie.Dont be silly. Why would he want to do that?Dont you think Id make a nice pie?Theres not enough meat on you.Hed make a sandwich of me, then. Or hed put me in one of those little tins. And then He turned and caught her eye, looking mischievous.She straightened his head again. Itll end up crooked.It doesnt matter, theres no one to see. Only Len, at the factory. I havent got any admirers. Im not like youWill you shut up?He laughed. Uncle Horace cant hear. He wouldnt mind, even if he could. He doesnt trouble over things like that.She stopped cutting and put the point of the scissors to his shoulder. You havent told him, Duncan?Of course I havent.Dont you, ever!Cross my heart. He licked his finger, touched his chest; looked up at her, still smiling.She wouldnt smile back. It isnt a thing to joke about.If you cant joke about it, why do you do it?If Dad should hearYoure always thinking about Dad.Well, somebody has to.Its your life, isnt it?Is it? I wonder, sometimes.She cut on in silenceunsettled, but wanting to say more; almost hoping that hed keep teasing her, for she had no one else to talk to; he was the only person shed told. But she left it too long; he got distracted, tilting his head to look at the damp black locks on the newspaper under his chair. Theyd fallen as curls, but as they dried they were separating into individual strands and growing fluffy. She saw him grimace.Isnt it queer, he said, how nice ones hair is when its on ones head; and how gruesome it becomes, the instant its cut off. You ought to take one of those curls, V, and put it in a locket. Thats what a proper sister would do.She straightened his head again, less gently than before. Ill proper sister you in a minute, if you dont keep still.He put on a silly Cockney voice. I was proper sistered!That made them laugh. When shed finished cutting he moved the chair aside and opened the back door. She got her cigarettes, and they sat together on the step, gazing out, smoking and chatting. He told her about his visit to Mr Leonards; about the buses he and Mr Mundy had had to take, their little adventuresThe sky was like

water with blue ink in it, the darkness sinking, stars appearing one by one. The moon was a slim and perfect crescent, almost new. The little cat appeared, and wound herself around their legs, then threw herself on to her back and writhed, ecstatic again.Then Mr Mundy came out from the parlourcame out to see what they were doing, Viv supposed; had perhaps heard them laughing, through the window. He saw Duncans hair and said, My word! Thats a bit better, now, than the cuts you used to get from Mr Sweet!Duncan got up and started tidying the kitchen. He made a parcel of the paper and the hair. Mr Sweet, he said, used to nip you with his scissors, just for fun. He rubbed his neck. They said he took a mans ear off once!That was all talk, said Mr Mundy comfortably. Prison talk: thats all that was.Well, thats what a man told me.They quarrelled about it for another minute or two; Viv had the feeling they were almost doing it on purposeshowing off, in some funny way, because she was there. If only Mr Mundy hadnt come out! He couldnt leave Duncan alone for a minute. Shed liked it, sitting on the step, watching the sky get darker. But she couldnt bear it when they started talking so airily about prison, all of that; it set her teeth on edge. The closeness and the fondness shed felt for Duncan a moment before began to recede. She thought of her father. She found herself thinking in her fathers voice. Duncan moved gracefully across the kitchen and she looked at his neat dark head, his slender neck, his face that was handsome as a girls, and she said to herself almost bitterly: All he put us through, look, and theres not a bloody mark on him!She had to go back into the parlour and finish her cigarette there, on her own.But there wasnt any point in getting worked up about it. It would wear her out, just as it had worn out her father. And she had other things to think about. Duncan made more tea, and they listened to a programme on the wireless; and at quarter-past nine she put her coat on. She left at the same time every week. Duncan and Mr Mundy stood at the front door to watch her go, like an old married couple.You dont want your brother to walk you to the station? Mr Mundy would ask her; and Duncan would answer before she could, in a negligent sort of way, Oh, shes all right. Arent you, Viv?But tonight he kissed her, too, as if aware that hed annoyed her. Thanks for the haircut, he said quietly. Thanks for the ham. I was only teasing, before.She looked back twice as she went off, and they were still there, watching; the next time she looked, the door was closed. She imagined Mr Mundy with his hand on Duncans shoulder; she pictured them going slowly back into the parlourDuncan to one armchair, Mr Mundy to the other. She felt again the airless, flannel-like atmosphere of the house on her skin, and walked more brisklygrowing excited, suddenly; liking the chill of the evening air and the crispness of the sound of her heels on the pavement.Walking quickly, however, meant that she arrived too soon at the station. She had to stand about in the ticket-hall while trains came and went, feeling horribly exposed in the harsh, dead light. A boy tried to catch her eye. Hey, Beauty, he kept saying. He kept going past her, singing. To put herself out of his way she went to the bookstall; and it was only as she was looking over the rack of magazines that she remembered what Helen had said, that afternoon, about the Radio Times. She took down a copy and opened it up, and almost at once found an article headed:DANGEROUS GLANCESURSULA WARING introduces Julia Standings thrilling new novel, The Bright Eyes of Danger, featured onArmchair Detective at 10.10 on Friday evening (Light Prog.).The article was several columns long, and gave an account of the novel in very glowing terms. Above it was a photograph of Julia herself: her face tilted, her eyes downcast, her hands raised and pressed together at the side of her jaw.Viv looked at the photo with a touch of dislike: for shed met Julia once, in the street outside the office, and had not taken to her. Shed seemed too clevershaking Vivs hand when Helen introduced them, but not saying, How do you do? or Pleased to meet you, or anything like that; saying coolly instead, as if shed known Viv for years: Successful day? Have you got heaps of people married? More fool them if we have, Viv had answered; and at that shed laughed, as if at a joke of her own, and said, Yes, indeed Her voice was very well-to-do, and yet shed talked slangily: louse up your plans, go dotty. What Helen, who was so nice, saw in her to like so much, Viv couldnt imagine. But then, that was their own business. Viv closed her mind to it.She put the magazine back in the rack and moved away. There was no sign, now, of the boy whod sung at her. The clock showed two minutes to half-past ten. She went across the ticket-hallnot towards the platforms, but back to the station entrance. She stood close to a pillar, looking out into the street: drawing her coat more tightly around her because, with so much standing about, shed got chilled.A moment later a car drew slowly up to the kerb; it came to a stop a few yards on, away from the worst glare of the station. She could see its driver as it passed, dipping his head, trying to spot her. He looked anxious, handsome, hopeless: she found herself feeling towards him much of what shed felt towards Duncan, earlier on; the same mix of love and exasperation. But there was still that edge of excitement there, too: it rose again now, and grew sharper. She glanced up and down the street, then more or less ran to the passenger door. Reggie leant across and opened it; and as she climbed inside he reached for her face, and

kissed her.Back at Lavender Hill, Kay was walking. Shed been walking, more or less, all afternoon and evening. Shed walked in a great, rough sort of circle, from Wandsworth Bridge up to Kensington, across to Chiswick, over the river to Mortlake and Putney, and now she was heading back to Mr Leonards; she was two or three streets from home. In the last few minutes shed fallen into step, and into conversation, with a fair-haired girl. The girl, however, wasnt much good.I wonder you can go so fast, in heels so high, Kay was saying.One gets into the habit, I suppose, the girl answered carelessly. Theres not much to it. Youd be surprised. She wasnt looking at Kay, she was looking ahead, along the street. She was meeting a friend, she said.Ive heard its as good an exercise, Kay persisted, as riding a horse. That its good for the shape of the legs.I couldnt really say.Well, perhaps your boyfriend could.I might ask him.I wonder he hasnt told you so already.The girl laughed. Like to wonder, dont you?It makes one think, looking at you, thats all.Does it?The girl turned to Kay and met her gaze for a secondfrowning, not understanding, not understanding at allThen, Theres my friend! she said, and she raised her arm to another girl across the street. She went on faster, to the edge of the kerb, looked quickly to left and to right, then ran across the road. Her high-heeled shoes were pale at the instep; they showed, Kay thought, like the whitish flashes of fur you saw on the behinds of hopping rabbits.She hadnt said Goodbye, So long, or anything like that; and she didnt, now, look back. She had forgotten Kay already. She took the other girls arm, and they turned down a street and were lost.TWOWheres your best girl? Len asked Duncan across the bench, at the candle factory at Shepherds Bush. He meant Mrs Alexander, the factorys owner. Shes late today. Have you had a tiff?Duncan smiled and shook his head, as if to say, Dont be silly.But Len ignored him. He nudged the woman who sat next to him and said, Duncan and Mrs Alexander have had a row. Mrs Alexander caught Duncan making eyes at another girl!Duncans a real heart-breaker, said the woman good-humouredly.Duncan shook his head again, and got on with his work.It was a Saturday morning. There were twelve of them at the bench, and they were all making night lights, threading wicks and metal sustainers into little stubs of wax, then putting the stubs in flame-proof cases ready for the packers. In the centre of the bench there ran a belt, which carried the finished lights away to a waiting cart. The belt moved with a trundling sound and a regular squeaknot very noisily but, when combined with the hiss and clatter from the candle-making machines in the other half of the room, just noisily enough so that, if you wanted to speak to your neighbour, you had to raise your voice a little louder than was really comfortable. Duncan found it easier to smile and gesture. Often hed go for hours without speaking at all.Len, on the other hand, could not be silent. Getting no fun out of Duncan now, he started to gather up spare bits of wax; Duncan watched him begin to press them all together, moulding and shaping them into what emerged, in another minute, as the figure of a woman. He worked quite cleverlyfrowning in concentration, his brow coming down and his lower lip jutting. The figure grew smoother and rounder in his hands. He gave it oversized breasts and hips, and waving hair. He showed it to Duncan first, saying, Its Mrs Alexander! Then he changed his mind. He called down the bench to one of the girls: Winnie! This is you, look! He held the figure out and made it walk and wiggle its hips.Winnie screamed. She was a girl with a deformity of the face, a squashed-in nose and a pinched-up mouth, and a pinched-up nasal voice to match. Look what hes done! she said to her friends. The other girls saw and started laughing.Len added more wax to the figure, to its breasts and bottom. He made it move more mincingly. Oh, baby! Oh, baby! he said, in a silly feminine way. Then, Thats how you go, he called to Winnie, when youre with Mr Champion! Mr Champion was the factory foreman, a mild-mannered man whom the girls rather terrorised. Thats how you go. I heard you! And this is what Mr Champion does. He held the figure in the crook of his arm and passionately kissed it; finally he put his fingernail to the fork of its legs and pretended to tickle it.Winnie screamed again. Len went on tickling the little figure, and laughing, until one of the older women told him sharply to stop. His laugh, then, became more of a snigger. He gave Duncan a wink. She wishes it was her, thats all, he said, too low for the woman to catch. He pressed the wax figure back into formlessness and threw it into the scrap-cart.He was always boasting privately to Duncan about girls. It was all he ever talked about. I could have that Winnie Mason if I wanted to, hed said, more than once. What do you think it would be like, though, kissing her mouth? I think itd be like kissing a dogs arse. He claimed he often took girls into Holland Park and made love to them there at night. He described it all, with tremendous grimaces and winks. He always talked to Duncan as if he, Len, were the older of the two. He was only sixteen. He had a freckled brown gypsy face, and a pink, plump, satiny mouth. When he smiled, his teeth looked very white and even inside that mouth, against the tan and speckle of his cheek.From Publishers WeeklyStarred . Waters (Fingersmith) applies her talent for literary suspense to WWII-era London in her latest historical. She populates the novel with ordinary people overlooked by history books and sets their

individual passions against the chaotic background of extraordinary times. There are Kay, a "night watch" ambulance driver; her lover, Helen; two imprisoned conscientious objectors, upper-class Fraser and working-class Duncan; Duncan's sister, Viv; Viv's married soldier-lover, Reggie; and Julia, a building inspectorcummystery novelist. The novel works backward in time, beginning in 1947, as London emerges from the rubble of war, then to 1944, a time of nightly air raids, and finally to 1941, when the war's end was not in sight. Through all the turmoil on the world stage, the characters steal moments of love, fragments of calm and put their lives on the line for great sex and small kindnesses. Waters's sharply drawn page-turner doesn't quite equal the work of literary greats who've already mapped out WWII-era London. But she matches any of them with her scene of two women on the verge of an affair during a nighttime bombing raid, lost in blackout London with only the light of their passion as a guide. (Mar. 23)