

Monday

It feels weird, watching Dad drive Mum off. She's hanging out the front passenger window waving with both arms until she disappears. Yelling her head off, 'Bee good!' No seat belt. She'd string me up for doing that, specially with Annie watching. *Terrible example to your sister.* Seeing Mum behave so unlike herself that she breaks to law, I should sense this could be a strange week.

Not that there's time to brood on how different things suddenly feel with Mum gone. I'm on duty now. Clocked on. In at the deep end. First job: keeping grip of Annie while she jackknives to escape my arms and chase Dad's car all the way to the station.

'Muuuummeeee!'

Loud enough to burst both my eardrums and blow the top of my head off, she's bawling.

'Shhhh, she'll be back soon,' I whisper into Annie's hair, cooing her close. Pinching Mum's trick in a situation like this. Harder to pull off than Mum makes it look, especially with a pair of flower-painted Doc Martin heels drumming holes in your pelvis. It gets me nowhere.

'Mummmeee! Want mummmmeeee,' Annie howls even louder, whacking her flying fists at my eye sockets.

For a three year-old, she packs a mean punch, does Annie, and the shock of her attack brings tears to my eyes. Can you believe that? Bubbling? I mean, I'm turned sixteen: OK. Just. And I know I don't look it – small for my age, as thoughtful adults keep reminding me – but I'm officially old enough to mind Annie this week while Mum does some course in Leeds. Don't ask me what. Children and social justice blah-de-blah. Open University summer snore-a-thon... Whatever it is, Mum has to do it, else she'll never get to retain as a social worker when Annie starts school.

'And you know that's the only reason I'm going away,' Mum said when all the details of her course arrived and it first dawned on her that I'd be better than anyone at childminding Annie. My dad, as per usual, had too many convenient problems at work to take a week off, and my gran with her bad legs wasn't fit. Mum was up to high-doh about hiring a nanny until it twigged that her own built-in Mary Poppins, aka yours truly, had been spit-spotting under her nose all along. Was Mum chuffed!

'I can relax knowing you're looking after Annie instead of some stranger. You're so good with her, Keith. I'd worry myself sick leaving Annie with anyone else, but I know I can trust you,' Mum tried to soft-soap me when I seemed a bit doubtful; *my* summer hols after all. Who wants to play mummies? Then my mummy promised, 'Of course, I'll pay you the going rate,' which kind of clinched things, since I'm always skint. Mum buttered me up too, in case I changed my mind.

'You'll have an easy week, Keith. You're Annie's hero.'