It was several seconds before Louise was sure that the redness before her eyes was only the redness of the dying fire; longer still before she was sure that this feeling in the small of her back was only the ache and stiffness that comes from falling asleep in an armchair. But there was no mistake about the screaming. Louder and louder it sounded from the floor above, and still half-dazed Louise looked at the sitting-room clock. Two o'clock, of course. She struggled to her feet and stumbled upstairs to Michael's room.

He did not seem to have woken anyone yet. Mechanically, as if she had pressed some button to set this maternal robot of a self in motion, Louise scooped him out of the cot and carried him downstairs to the scullery.

While she fed him he was quiet, eyeing her impassively over the curve of her breast, and he sucked down the milk in great satisfied gulps. And then, when he had finished, he began to cry again.

How he cried tonight! Worse, it seemed to Louise, than he had ever been before. Struggling, kicking, threshing about on her lap; pulling himself up, as if with desperate purpose, into a standing position against her shoulder, and then, once there, crying more desperately than ever. He did not seem to be exactly angry – nor frightened – nor in pain. His crying had that senseless, timeless quality that

she remembered from the occasional bad nights of Margery and Harriet's babyhood. If only they could *tell* me what's the matter! she remembered thinking, and now, at eight and six, they *were* able to tell her what was the matter. Able, and indeed willing, to tell her for hours on end and with scarcely a pause for breath. And how blessedly comprehensible it all was. How utterly different from this senseless, soulless noise which seemed to destroy all possibility of human contact. When a baby was like this, nothing could be got across to him, nothing at all, not even the warm primitive contact of hugging him to her breast ...

Louise became aware of a sharp, insistent knocking on the wall. It must have been going on for a minute or more, but she had at first drowsily supposed it to be the dripping tap; now, with sickening certainty, she knew what it was. It was Mrs Philips. Mrs Philips, who was having a new hot-water system put in upstairs, and who would therefore be sleeping in the downstairs back room – the one that adjoined Louise's kitchen. Now, for whatever length of time that leisurely, chain-smoking plumber chose to spend on the hot water system, for so long would Louise's kitchen and scullery cease to be a refuge at night.

The knocking grew more insistent; and, with no plan in her head other than to get out of range of Mrs Philips, Louise blundered with her baby through the kitchen and into the hall. The sitting-room? But that was directly below hers and Mark's bedroom; within five minutes he would be down, distracted and irritable, to bombard her with that mixture of ill-timed criticism and impractical advice which was the last straw on these weary nights. And

Miss Brandon's door would be heard, opening and shutting reproachfully...

Louise looked this way and that, like a cornered rat, and her eye fell on the pram.

Well, why not? An outing in the pram always soothed Michael by day – why not by night too? And here she was, already dressed after falling asleep in the armchair. Only her coat to put on, and in two minutes she could be out of hearing of Mrs Philips – of Mark – of Miss Brandon – of all the censorious lot of them!

The night air was cold and exhilarating. Louise felt suddenly awake – vividly, poignantly awake, as she had not felt for weeks. Michael was quiet now; he stared wide-eyed at the wonder of the street lamps as they passed above his face. How wise he looked, how ageless under the ageless night! Louise could scarcely keep from running, so light, so strong had she grown through sleeplessness. The pram was no burden to her; it seemed endowed with a half-life of its own as it raced along before her. She could have imagined that she wasn't pushing it at all; that instead it was pulling her along the sleeping streets. But that, of course, couldn't be happening; it would be against the laws of nature.

Yet the laws of nature seem different at night, when there is nothing – nothing at all – between you and the Milky Way. At such times the laws that rule the movements of the stars come very close; and yet their very closeness may make them unrecognisable – as a much-photographed celebrity might be if he suddenly walked into your kitchen. For a moment it seemed to Louise ridiculous to doubt the existence of miracles; how could any

sane person imagine that a power that could set the nebulae in motion should be unable to push a pram along a suburban road without Louise's help. . . ?

All at once, the disembodied lightness, the sense of vision, were gone, and Louise looked about her, shivering and a little scared. She had not come so very far after all – that skimming, birdlike swiftness of movement must have been mostly imagination – but she was approaching the main road already. Any moment now she might meet somebody – a policeman maybe – who would ask her what she was doing, taking a baby out at this hour of the night, and then what would she say? That the baby wouldn't sleep – that he was disturbing the neighbours? But that sounded ridiculous – people just don't take babies out in the middle of the night for such a reason. Yet it had seemed at the time a sufficient reason – it still seemed so. How could she have ignored Mrs Philips' knocking? How could she have allowed her own household to be kept awake all night? Taking the baby out in the pram had been the only possible thing to do. She had been driven to it. She had had no alternative.

In that case, why did she fear having to explain it to a policeman? If her action was really sensible and necessary, why should it sound so silly? More than silly; mad. Perhaps it *was* mad. Perhaps this was just the way mad people did feel – that they were being logically and inevitably driven to their crazy actions; that they had no alternative.

Louise stood still, and with her hand resting lightly on the handle of the pram she gazed up at the night sky, which held no faintest glimmer of dawn. Wasn't it during the hours before dawn that sick people were most likely to

die? Perhaps it was during those same hours, too, that sane people slipped over into madness. . . ?

The Hours Before Dawn **by Celia Fremlin is published by Faber & Faber in July (£7.99)**