The Hungry Ghosts

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Extract

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Ingrid – 2003

The one person you can reliably guarantee will be missing from a funeral is the deceased. Then why, at the funeral of Ralph Safford, did I have the distinct impression that two people were missing? I suppose that my charge, Lucy Holiday, the deceased's sister, was largely responsible. I had been employed as a carer for Lucy for several years now. Childless, widowed, in her eightieth year and in fragile health, Lucy defied expectations, clinging tenaciously onto life. On the day of her brother's funeral, Lucy, with her wisp of wild, white hair, and bright, periwinkle-blue eyes, was enjoying a rare moment of lucidity. She sat in her wheelchair alongside the pew-end, humming tunelessly to all the hymns, her eyes darting around the congregation, and alighting first on one face then another.

At length, she gestured for me to lean closer, and closer still, then whispered in my ear in her scratchy-record voice, 'Ingrid, where is Alice?'

To which I naturally replied, 'Who is Alice?'

She fidgeted with the fabric of her black polyester dress, and rubbed her matchstick legs before answering, and so long was she that I couldn't help wondering if I'd lost her again. 'Alice is my niece,' she said at last, on a rising note of triumph.

'The daughter of your brother Ralph?' I sought confirmation.

Lucy nodded her affirmation. I was puzzled. As far as I knew, Ralph Safford only had three children. I had met the family a few times since they settled in England four years ago. I recalled the first

occasion being held at the Saffords' home, Orchard House, at a party to celebrate their return from abroad. Besides this, Lucy had spoken of them, if not often, certainly enough for me to be well acquainted with their names. Jillian was the eldest, and Nicola the middle child, while Harry was the baby of the family. But of this 'Alice', up to now I had heard nothing. With Lucy's customary fits and starts, I had also gleaned a little of the deceased's life, certainly enough to whet my appetite for more. Here, it seemed, was no ordinary man. Apparently Lucy's brother and his family had lived overseas, in the then British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, where he had been employed by the government. 'A high-ranking official,' Lucy had confided to me with a knowing wink, on more than one occasion, often adding enigmatically, 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.' Quite what this meant I did not know. However, it only seemed to enhance the impression that Lucy's brother had been out of the ordinary. Apparently too, the Saffords lived at one of the most enviable addresses at the summit of Victoria Peak. This, Lucy had explained, was the highest mountain on the island, and was known locally simply as 'The Peak'. I had also discovered that Ralph and his wife Myrtle only returned to England a year or so after Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997, though it seemed the children departed some time earlier. But of Alice, until today, there had been no mention. I was intrigued. However, the middle of a funeral service was neither the time nor the place to probe family history, unearthing who knew what skeletons. So when Lucy asked me yet again where Alice was, I did my best to bring the matter to a close for the present.

'I expect she's up at the front with Myrtle, your sister-in-law,' I whispered. Then, without thinking, I added, 'All three children are sitting alongside their mother.' But to my relief Lucy gave another nod, and seemed satisfied.

The priest was offering up prayers now, and a bald patch on the crown of his head loomed somewhat indecently into sight. I could not help noticing that it was a surprising shade of mustard yellow, and gleamed dully with beads of perspiration.

I straightened up, and tried to concentrate on the proceedings once more. Though this was easier said than done, I thought, as the vicar's nasal voice see-sawed on monotonously. But again Lucy beckoned me down to her, frantically flapping her crêpe-paper hand, freckled with age-spots, and roped with prominent, deep-blue veins.

'Four,' she said, and for a moment I was nonplussed.

'Four?' I repeated at a loss.

This time Lucy raised her cracked voice to its very limit. 'Four,' she huffed. And then, when I still looked blank, 'Four children. Ralph had four children.' This last, she said so loudly that several heads turned to glare in our direction.

'I'll find out where she is later,' I hissed, enunciating each word as clearly as I could, without causing further disturbance. Luckily at that moment the organ struck up, and though I could see Lucy was speaking again, her words were drowned out by a thunderous rendition of 'Onward Christian Soldiers'.

And to be honest as the service went on, and, it seemed, Lucy quietened down, I let her supposed concerns slip to the back of my mind. Naturally, with a job like mine, funerals have a way of cropping up regularly. But for the most part these occasions have the sting taken out of them. The death of an elderly person who has lived their life to the full is both inevitable and, in a way, a cause for gratitude. They have managed to reach the end of the game despite the many hazards life would have thrown in their path. Bearing this in mind, my primary concern as a carer for those of advanced years is that my patients make a good end. And yet . . . and yet, the more times I witness death, no matter how peaceful it is, the less comfortable I am with it. These days, I can't help wondering if behind that pallid face, those fluttering breaths, that seemingly limp body, a tussle with death is playing out, fuelled by regrets, opportunities missed, words left unspoken, and last but not least, the indignity of it all.

But for now I abandoned this unsettling train of thought, and cast my eyes around the beautiful old Sussex church. I took in the small sober congregation, clad in their suitably melancholy outfits. These faces were, I noted, no different from the many others I had seen at

past services, obviously more unsettled by this grim reminder of their own mortality than distraught with grief at the passing of another. The prickle on the back of the neck, the leaden sensation in the stomach, the feet squirming in their shoes, the longing to be outside filling your lungs with fresh air, the sudden shadow subduing the chirpiest of characters, these were not signs of sorrow, oh no, but of their own disquiet. Nor could I claim that I was exempt from such reflections. Sooner or later, the service, you knew, would be yours. And at sixty-two the 'sooner' undoubtedly applied to me.

Despite this, I let my eyes linger on Ralph Safford's coffin, set to one side of the altar. There was no denying it made a fine spectacle, fashioned in a rosy mahogany, or at least the veneer of it, with flowers draped luxuriously over the lid. I picked out some of my favourites – fragrant lilies, golden roses with tight corollas of whorled petals, fluffy cream carnations, lacy lilac delphiniums, and strident white and yellow gerberas, all arranged in glorious sprays. The soft colours were echoed in the arrangements that were decked throughout the church. The magnificent stained-glass windows drew me too, weathered by time and changing seasons. The summer light, as it poured through them, was transmuted into magical colours, iridescent beams moving over the patina of old wood, transforming the wan faces of the mourners into something unearthly. For a while I became wholly absorbed in a particularly lovely pair of arched windows, depicting two cloaked women in lucent blues and purples and silvery greys.

Then my attention was drawn back to the service again. Nicola Safford was addressing the congregation, delivering a eulogy to her father. Impeccably dressed, she had shown no sign whatever of nerves, or indeed heartache, as she strode confidently up to the lectern. Then, like a consummate actress, she had paused, her eyes sweeping over the pews to ensure she had the full attention of her audience. Now, unsurprisingly, her delivery was flawless – word-perfect, in fact one might almost have said a little too well rehearsed. She spoke of the years of sublime happiness the family spent together in Hong Kong, of her father's absolute devotion to his wife and his children, and of the invaluable contribution he had made on the island.

'He was at the helm in good times and bad, serving his Queen and country without flinching. He faced the challenges of keeping the colony on an even keel throughout the period of unrest that culminated in the riots of 1967. With immense bravery he stood proud, in the front line. He defended the citizens of Hong Kong from the bloodthirsty insurgents who threatened the stability of the island. Under my father's auspices order was restored. And for his exceptional contribution to his monarch, Queen Elizabeth the Second, and to the British government of the time, he was awarded the OBE, and made an Officer of the British Empire.'

I listened, rapt, as Nicola Safford's clear, well-modulated voice, echoed off the stone walls of the thirteenth-century church, revealing yet more admirable facets to her father's character. Finally softening her tone, lowering her gaze, and blinking back tears that very nearly convinced me, she spoke of the love she had for her father.

'I was so grateful . . . grateful for the opportunity to demonstrate the veneration in which I held my father, grateful to be close to such a fine man, doing what little I could to ease his passage through those final years.' Her last words, delivered at a slower pace, the volume swelling, the pitch deeper, resonated like the closing chord of a great symphony. Nor do I think I imagined the slightly awkward moment that followed, in which the impulse to applaud had to be quelled by the mourners.

Nicola Safford's address had certainly pushed Lucy's perturbation to the back of my mind. But if I thought I had heard the end of Alice, I was mistaken. In fact it was just the beginning. Later, when the service had finished, and my charge and I joined the little queue, to pay our condolences to Myrtle Safford and the children, Lucy took up the same refrain. Where, she wanted to know, was Alice? She could see Harry, Jillian and Nicola, but surely Alice should be with them. It would have mattered to Ralph that his youngest daughter was here. Alice would have wanted to attend too. Even, more ominously, what had they done with her? There was no doubt about it, I had a Miss Marple kind of curiosity awakening inside me.

I soothed Lucy as best I could, easing her forwards in her chair

and plumping up the cushions behind her, checking that she was comfortable. Then, as we neared Harry Safford, I promised her that I would make inquiries about Alice. I shook her nephew's clammy hand, reminded him of my name, told him how sorry I was for his loss, how beautiful the flowers were, and how moved I had been by the service. This over, I had the distinct impression that Harry had already dismissed me from his mind. But once set in motion I am like an ocean liner: it takes considerable effort to stop me. I leaned in towards Harry, resolved not to move on until I had questioned him on behalf of my charge. I took a deep breath. Suddenly I felt nervous. How ridiculous, I told myself, as I sent out the first scout in search of Alice.

'Your Aunt Lucy is feeling a bit anxious,' I told him, pushing my rimless spectacles more firmly up my nose with a fingertip. 'She wants to know where your sister Alice is?' Did I imagine it or was there a flicker of something in his cold, bluish-grey eyes. Recognition? Anger? Or perhaps even fear?

'Alice?' he queried with a dry little laugh. 'Really? Who is Alice?' He placed crossed hands over his rotund belly, almost defensively.

'Forgive me. I thought that Alice might be your sister,' I explained. 'Your Aunt Lucy seems convinced you have another sister. Alice?'

'Well, my aunt is mistaken,' Harry said curtly, looking at my charge with undisguised displeasure. He bent over the fragile form of Lucy and bellowed, 'What rubbish are you talking now, Aunty, getting Ingrid all upset? Ralph would be ashamed of you making up such silly things.' I detected, though subtle, a slightly lazy 'r' in his speech.

'I'm not upset,' I assured Harry Safford. 'It's just that your aunt seems so certain. She keeps saying that Alice should be here. She seems concerned that something may have happened to her.' Harry arranged his features in an expression of extreme bafflement. But I was not to be so easily thwarted. I pointed my next words. 'To Alice I mean. That something may have prevented Alice from coming.'

'What is all this nonsense, Aunt Lucy?' Harry blustered, his face reddening, more with annoyance, I guessed, than embarrassment.

'Why is Harry shouting at me?' Lucy wanted to know, hunching

further down in her chair. 'I'm not deaf. But then he always was a bully.'

Now it was my turn to colour. The old, like the very young, do not screen their words, parcelling them up and sending them out in acceptable packages for this world to receive, as most of us do.

'I'm sorry,' I apologised on behalf of Lucy. 'She's a bit tired, and probably a touch overwrought with the emotion of the day.'

'It's quite understandable,' Harry said shortly, eyes unblinking, giving me a perfunctory smile. He turned away from us then towards his mother and sisters, ruffling back his short ash-grey hair in an impatient gesture.

'It's just that Lucy appears to be quite fractious about . . . well . . . about Alice you see,' I persisted.

Reluctantly Harry turned back. But this time he recruited his sisters to add weight to his own voice.

'Aunt Lucy has been bothering Ingrid with foolish stories about someone called Alice,' he said, with the air of a parent whose tolerance is being pushed to its absolute limits. Again, I thought I saw a furtive glance pass between Nicola and Jillian.

Jillian, a large lady, whose considerable height was diminished by her width, gave a slight shiver before speaking. She tossed back her startling, shoulder-length red hair, greying at the roots. 'Poor Aunt Lucy,' she said at last. 'She gets very muddled.' She reached out a hand tentatively and touched her aunt's bony shoulder. It was hard for me to read the expression in her flint-grey eyes, with her large, square-framed glasses reflecting back the bright sunshine at me. She did not, I observed, have her sister's dress sense. The variation in shade, however slight, from the black tailored trousers, to the dark navy jacket, was disconcerting. Added to this, the jacket appeared rather snug and the trousers at least one size too large.

'That's right,' Nicola chimed in, her tone liberally soaked in pity, 'poor Aunt Lucy hardly knows what day it is, bless her.' She shot me a swift appraising look, critically taking in my own cheap black suit, practical flat shoes, and hurried attempt to pin up my straight salt and pepper bob.

She was a little shorter than her sister, and slimmer in build. From a distance her outfit had looked smart, but close up it was stunning. The knee-length black dress with matching jacket, delicate gold flowers stitched into the fabric, had the unmistakable sheen of heavy silk. The outfit was finished off with inky stilettos, a designer's golden tag glinting at their heel backs. Her hairstyle was eye-catching too. The overall shade was altogether more natural than her sister's, a deep mocha-brown, aflame with red and gold highlights. It was cut into irregular bangs that suited the fine bone structure of her face. But bizarrely her hands, I noticed, were those of a nineteenth-century scullery maid, rubbed red and raw. Now she fixed me with her own inscrutable eyes, just the colour of the slab of liver I had purchased for Lucy from the butcher's that week.

'You really shouldn't be concerning yourself with Aunt Lucy's ramblings, Ingrid. Surely you're experienced in caring for the elderly? You should know what to expect.' And I could have sworn there was a warning edge to a voice that had an unsettling, forced brightness in it.

'Of course,' I said, understanding that the conversation had been brought to a close.

I pushed Lucy onwards, briefly shaking Myrtle Safford's hand. The matriarch of this family was a tall woman with a proud but guarded face, gimlet eyes, glittering jewels, and outdated clothes which nevertheless screamed quality. However, I barely had time to express my sympathy, before her children whisked her away to speak to a less troublesome mourner. My thoughts in turmoil now, I steered my charge to a quiet spot in the churchyard, beneath the shade of an oak tree encircled with a wooden seat. I tucked a cheerful tartan rug I had brought with me about Lucy's knees, and told her gently that she must be mistaken about Alice. Was she perhaps thinking of someone else, from her husband's side of the family? Another niece or perhaps the child of a friend? When she said nothing, I crouched before her, my hands resting on the arms of her wheelchair, levelling my gaze with hers. For a moment her sharp blue eyes had a promising intensity about them. She opened her mouth and took a shaky but deliberate breath.

'You see, Ingrid, Alice is . . . is . . .'

'Is what?' I urged her eagerly. But the elusive thought had wriggled away, and Lucy's eyes suddenly shut tremulously. 'You're tired. I'll take you home now,' I told her, unable to keep the disappointment from my voice.

But just before I helped her into my car she grasped my bare arm. I had peeled off my jacket by then and was only wearing a short-sleeved cream blouse. Now Lucy's fingers scrabbled against the flesh of my forearm, splayed and light as birds' feet.

'Where is Alice? Alice should have been here. Ralph would be most upset, Ingrid, you know,' she croaked. Shortly after this I bundled her into the car, and she immediately fell into a deep sleep, snoring lightly.

I was staying overnight with Lucy in her small terraced house in Hailsham. After her tea, cottage pie and raspberry jelly, I decided a warm bath might settle her for the night. I never quite got used to the shrivelled bodies I handled daily, with their spun-glass bones and their tracing paper flesh. As I sponged the curve of Lucy's back, knotted and wrinkled as the bark of some ancient tree, my mind played over the events of the day. No matter which thread of thought I plucked at, they all seemed to lead back to Alice, as if by merely uttering her name Lucy had conjured up her ghost. Later, when my charge was tucked up in bed, just before I slipped out her false teeth, I tried once more.

'Are you sure your brother Ralph had a fourth child, a child called Alice?' I asked softly.

The last thing I wanted to do was to distress Lucy just before she fell asleep. But I needn't have worried. She looked at me blankly, and then the coquettish smile of a flirtatious young woman wreathed her wizened face.

'Who . . . is Alice?' she said.

For the remainder of the evening I watched a bit of television, and then settled to a crossword puzzle. I like doing crosswords, everything fitting into its correct space, all the words connected, interdependent. Just before turning in, I drew back the green velour curtains,

and stared out into the tiny garden. The pane had misted lightly with the cool of the night. I wrote the name 'Alice' very carefully on it with my index finger.

'Alice who?' I whispered and climbed the stairs to bed.

Myrtle – 2003

I am sitting in the back room of Orchard House. I am always sitting in the back room waiting for something to happen. And when you sit, as I do, for hour after hour, you find yourself reminiscing. You cannot help it. You begin to wonder about how it all came to pass. The young look forward. The old look backward.

I remember the child I once was, the child who visited Kew Gardens with Mother and brother Albert. I craned my small neck, looking at the red pagoda that rocked upwards, diminishing into the unremitting drabness of an oyster-grey sky. And I dreamed my dreams. All the way home, as the bus rumbled and coughed, and juddered and spluttered, through London traffic, I watched a fly fling itself against a sooty pane of glass. Turning my head, I could see Albert, beautiful Albert, with his piercing ice-blue eyes, sensuous red mouth, and dark curls. And I could see my mother, her brown hair neatly crimped, her own prim mouth, bright with deep pink lipstick, her round cinnamon eyes, dancing with obvious delight. Their heads were touching, mother and son, their voices low and intimate, washed into one another. Close as conspirators they were, oblivious of me, gazing at them from across the aisle. So I turned away, back to the fly buzzing and battering itself against the glass, its frenzy futile. I imagined smashing that pane of glass with a closed fist, hearing it shatter. I pictured the fly bursting out into the infinite space, and whirring away, hardly daring to believe its luck.

I recall how years later, shortly after the war, my gentle giant of

a father died. His disease-ridden heart, the organ that had prevented him fighting for his country and earned him a coward's feather, finally gave out in peacetime. It seized up and froze before a plate of pink blancmange. As the breath trickled out of him he keeled over, right into the cold, gelatinous pinkness of it, a single bubble of breath breaking the surface seconds after. I remember my dismay looking on, knowing I had lost my only ally in the gloomy red-brick house in Ealing.

And I recollect my first sight of you, Ralph – dark, tall and dashing, with alert steely-blue eyes, clasping a camera before you. You were covering an amateur show for the local rag, and had come to photograph its parochial stars. I was numbered among them. Gwendolen in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. At best, my performance could be described as lacklustre; at worst, wooden. But you, it appeared, had seen a different play altogether, as you posed me for your photographs, your face so animated, those beguiling eyes of yours sparkling. Next to your striking looks, it was the enthusiasm that captured and held me. It was as if there was nothing you couldn't do with it. Take a shabby little amateur production in a village hall, with threadbare costumes and tatty scenery, and transform it into a glittering spectacle, showcasing the astonishing talent that lay at the heart of a thriving community. Or, perhaps, take a dull British girl destined for banal suburbia and transform her into a shimmering princess?

'What a superb show! I don't know when I've laughed so much. And you, well, you were wonderful Miss Lambert, entrancing. I brought Lucy, my sister, along too. And she loved your performance.'

That's what you said to me, as you pushed a strand of hair back from my face and, with a finger under my chin, adjusted the angle of my profile. You were wonderful. I knew I wasn't. Hadn't the director, Ron Fowler, spent eight weeks informing me of the fact? And all the while his invective boomed out, those expressive fingers of his would spear back his leonine mane, and his fleshy cheeks would colour plum-red.

'Do lighten your delivery, Myrtle. This is Wilde at his finest, witty,

effervescent repartee. It's a comedy, darling, not a wake. Must you keep clinging onto the furniture, lovey? Anyone would think you were on the *Titanic*, hanging on for dear life, seconds before the bloody thing went down. Sweetheart, do pick up your cues a bit more promptly, you're slowing down the pace to a deathly crawl. Must you keep folding your arms, darling? You look like the genie from Aladdin, not the alluring Gwendolen Fairfax.'

They just kept coming, and the worst of it was knowing the comments were completely justified. I had no talent: my foray into amateur theatre only served to confirm what I had always suspected. I did not have the fascination of the sea about me, no glittering treasure lying undiscovered many fathoms down. It was disheartening to realise the truth. Oh Ralph, I just wanted to shine for a time, the way Albert did, for Mother to be just a little in awe of me . . . as if . . . as if I really was an interesting person. Is that too much to ask?

You did that. Looking back, I think something in your exuberance answered to my reticence. I was self-contained, you were abandoned. Opposites attract, isn't that what they say? But I knew, almost immediately I knew. As I sat there wishing I was not quite so tall, that my hair would not fall so stubbornly straight, that I could instil some mysterious depths into my eyes, like Rita Hayworth or Bette Davis, and your camera clicked and flashed, I knew. You were my ticket out of there, away from Mother and the ever-present reprobation in those grim button eyes of hers, away from Albert, the brother, the boy, the son and heir, who had been given so many gifts that there were none left over for me. And away from the gloomy corners of the red-brick house, and the grey that I felt my soul was steeped in.

I sensed you were attracted to me that first meeting. It was quite enough to be going on with. Had director Ron only known it, I followed my dismal debut as Gwendolen Fairfax with a breathtaking improvisation of Myrtle Lambert, the woman every man wants by his side, his perfect helpmeet, the accomplished hostess, the contented housewife, the adoring lover. I gave it everything I had, because, you see – and here, believe me I am not exaggerating – my future relied

upon it. And when you didn't ask for your money back, but seemed entirely swept away by the illusion, indeed, just kept following curtain-call with curtain-call, I knew I had a triumph on my hands. Maybe not worthy of the Oscar which all Hollywood actresses hanker after, but then who wanted some old statue gathering dust on their shelf when instead they could have handsome, dynamic Ralph Safford for their very own. And more, a life as far away from dreary Britain as it was possible to get, thrown in with the bargain.

So we were married – you for love, and me for . . . ah Ralph, for a force much stronger than that: the longing for freedom. I was entirely satisfied with the arrangement, and be honest, so were you, to start with anyway. When you were posted to Africa, Kenya, as a government photographer, I was by your side. You whisked me away, leaving Mother seething far behind in the red-brick house, claiming she had been abandoned by the pair of us.

I used to love sitting on the veranda of our bungalow in Kenya, sipping scotch. I close my eyes and I am there. It is very hot. The air pulses with the heat. The chill of England seems so distant. I open my eyes sleepily, just a fraction, smile and take another sip of scotch. Having a drink together in the evenings was all part of the ritual. Do you recall, Ralph? The servant bringing the bottle of scotch on a tray, together with the ice tub and two glass tumblers, each already filled with chunks of ice. I loved the way the ice cubes chimed as I rolled them round the glass. I loved the whisper of the cold, golden liquid going down, a thread of flame tightening inside me. I was enthralled by the extremes, the last rays of the dying sun scalding through me, the cold of the frosted glass against my cheek. Sunsets were very different in Africa, weren't they, Ralph? The sun was a fireball that sank very slowly into the parched red clay. The skies were almost obscenely brilliant – topaz, coral, mauve, malachite, banks of radiance shifting from second to second. Actually, I found the evening displays a trifle vulgar, wasteful, the squandering of so much colour.

It's raining now, an insistent drumming on the rooftop, runnels of rain coursing down the sash windows, the sound of spattering droplets

closing in on me. It always seems to be raining here in England. It wasn't like that in Hong Kong, was it Ralph? Except of course during the typhoon season, or when the mists settled on the Peak, and the mizzle closed in.

God alone knows what possessed Nicola to choose that dreadful wallpaper for this draughty room. White flowers plastered over a red background. It calls to mind the new regional flag they've chosen for Hong Kong. An uninspiring design if you ask me. It looks like one of those handheld windmills you buy at a fair, or at the seaside. Hardly something you can take seriously. It can't be compared to the Union Jack. Now there's a flag you can be proud of, a flag that means something.

The roof of this wretched building leaks. Why Nicola persuaded us to buy it I will never know.

'Orchard House. The two of you will love it.' That's what she said, as if we didn't have any choice in the matter. And, quite honestly, looking back, I'm not sure we did.

There are buckets placed at strategic points to catch the drips. I can hear them plinking now. It is a bit like a form of Japanese water torture, waiting for the next plink, watching the buckets and pails slowly fill, wondering when the silvery skins will rupture, and the collected rain will trickle down the sides and soak into the Persian rugs. I think I can say that the state of the roof is the most weighty problem here, but there are others. Damp in general, peeling wallpaper, rotting window-frames and cracked panes, missing floortiles, banging pipes and a faulty central-heating system, to name but a few. I think we may even have a bit of woodworm on the first floor that needs treating. Oh, we have mice too. Larry, my son-in-law, claims he's dealing with them. But I doubt it. He says a great deal, and as far as I can see does very little. And Jillian's not much better. What I wouldn't give for a couple of amahs to set the place to rights. I thought Nicola said that having Jillian and Larry living with us was going to make life much easier, that it would alleviate all our difficulties. What's more, I could have done without the boy being foisted on us. Amos. What a ridiculous name for a child! It's not even as if

we're great ones for religion. Besides, I have never been maternal. I can't think why Jillian and Larry spent all that money trying to have a baby. When the doctor told her they had problems (something odd about Larry's sperm, not that I pressed them for any details you understand), in my opinion she should have just accepted it. I would have. Gladly, as it happens!

I'm sorry, Ralph, but you know I never really wanted children. Not all women hanker after a family you know. We aren't all programmed for reproduction. Some of us don't need miniature replicas of ourselves to make our lives complete. Conversely, in Alice's case, far from completing me, she very nearly destroyed me. I had her for your sake you know, so you can't blame me entirely for what happened, what happened to our daughter, Alice. You were determined to have your son, weren't you? Oh, you never put it into so many words, but the understanding was implicit. I did my best, Ralph. You must give me that. I tried my hardest to produce your boy, your heir. And if it did take me four goes, I managed it in the end. Don't judge me, Ralph, wherever you are now. You have no idea what it was like for me producing girl after girl, producing Alice at that hospital in Ealing. I had to feel Mother's scorn at my inability to get a son for my husband – not once, not twice, but thrice. After all, she had managed the feat first time, hadn't she?

We didn't put Alice's name on your gravestone. The children wanted to make a dedication to you, a personal thank-you to their father. We talked about adding her name after theirs, but in the end we decided it wasn't appropriate. We felt she hadn't earned her place there. And Ralph, this once you weren't around to make a fuss. So there it is, Jillian, Nicola and Harry, but . . . no Alice. If you want my opinion, and you never really did when it came to Alice, this is as it should be.

'Is it a boy?' I asked the midwife repeatedly. She was quite terse with me in the end.

'It's a girl,' she snapped. 'I've told you it's a girl, a lovely girl.'

That was an oxymoron to me by then, Ralph. Can you understand that? I'd had Jillian and Nicola, and each of those pregnancies

cost me dearly. But as a man you could never appreciate that. Besides, delivering Alice was meant to be my last messy natal performance. I deserved to have a boy. I deserved a son by then. You know what they say, Ralph, third time lucky. Well, it wasn't for me. Having Alice was the most unpropitious thing that ever happened to me. Our daughter, our third daughter filled me with dread. But not you, oh no. You adored her, didn't you?

The midwife was a big, hearty woman, with apple-red cheeks, and large pink hands, butcher's hands I recall. She reached towards my chest and started fumbling with the tie of my nightie.

'No! No, no!' My voice was pitched too high. It reeked of panic.

'Put her to your breast,' she urged, still pulling at the lacing. She had a slight burr to her voice, though what the accent was I couldn't tell you.

I thrust her hand away. 'I am not feeding it myself. I need a bottle,' I told her succinctly. I had an image of a stray dog then, a dog I had seen on the streets of Nairobi, its dugs heavy with milk, puppies suckling frantically at them. Its eyes were rolled upwards to heaven, you could see their whites, but it lay in the gutter, and was coated with filth.

I suppressed a shudder. She stopped scrabbling at my painfully engorged breasts and nudged the baby forwards instead. I took it awkwardly, as if I thought it might bite me at any moment. I looked into the face. The wispy hair was lighter than Nicola's. The mouth that rooted hopefully towards me was pretty enough. But the eyes unsettled me. They were the rich brown of tobacco, and preternaturally alert. They were needy too. I have been told a newborn cannot focus immediately, but as this child stared steadily up at me I had my doubts. Returning her gaze, what I felt was not a trickle of love, but a wave of cold dislike. 'She' meant that I would have to do it all once more. She was unnecessary, surplus to requirements. She did not even have the decency to look abashed, as Nicola had done. And quite suddenly, with the smell of disinfectant and warm sweet blood, and the distant muted sounds coming to me from far corridors of rolling trolleys and muffled voices and footsteps, I felt afraid.