

Chapter 1

I wrote 'Well, that was that...' then tore up the paper. The waste paper basket was starting to overflow with my abandoned letters but, even for me, that start wouldn't do under the circumstances. I had plenty of time though. I didn't have to have the letter composed till Tuesday morning.

I began again, 'As you can see I have..' Stupid. Of course they were going to be able to see. I tore up that one too. Something simple maybe. 'Farewell..' No, no. Ridiculously archaic. 'Bye bye, daughters...' 'Tootleoo, kith and kin..' 'I set off on a mysterious journey..' Perhaps a long essay was the right thing. The problem was that I had never written a letter like this before, and, of course, considering its substance, clearly never would again. I had found myself in a situation where I could see no way, apart from abandoning all my principles, and employing slop and sentimentality, two things I abhor.

I had long since abandoned all hope of getting the letter right first time but had decided to write it in rough and copy it tidily later, in spite of the risk of being discovered. M'buta was perfectly capable of going through my wastepaper basket.

I sighed and began again, thinking that maybe I need give no explanation for my act. My reasons were fairly obvious, well, on the surface anyway. A poor old ill and bereaved woman who had lost the will to live. The truth was a little different, but the people around me were so lacking in imagination that there was no way I could have explained it to them. But it seemed a pity to go out in silence. This was my last chance of making any mark at all on the world. 'Goodbye' perhaps? Which meant, 'God bide with you.' No, no. I did not even believe in God. There is one thing I do believe in, and that's the truth. I

refused to allow my final statement to be a lie. Also, even if it had not been for its religious context. I felt the word 'goodbye' had become devalued by time and overuse. 'Fare well?' Yes, I definitely wished that those I left behind fared well. No matter what they thought of me - only quite recently Verity had called me an ungrateful old woman - I felt well intended towards them. I mean, look at the way in which I plan to take care not to be a trouble to them afterwards. I mean, it's not only that I care what I look like and do not think they will make a good job of me. No. I really am trying to be helpful. I had planned out carefully what I would be wearing and which jewels to put on.

I poised my pen as an idea came to me. Should I just this once, as it was a special occasion, pop a little word of affection in. 'Good bye, darlings,' ? I even went so far as to put it down, but it looked quite quite wrong. Not me at all. I hastily scratched it out again. Fancy me being remembered by such a trite phrase.

'She was really an old sweetie inside, not matter how much she might pretend otherwise,' I could hear M'buta telling the other people in her office. And all of them laughing and telling of other old people who pretended to be really nasty but in truth had hearts of sugar syrup. With a shudder, I scribbled through the sentimental words about ten more times so that they shouldn't even be legible when raised to the light. I did not want them to know that the thought had even occurred to me.

'I expect you will relieved to be free of me..' Ah that was more like it. 'And I will be at peace as well.' How did I know I would be at peace? I cannot imagine there is much peace while you are being rotted under the ground or cooked in a crematorium, or whatever it was they planned to do with me. Which, of course would not be me, because

the true part of me would be with Jack, as we had arranged. If I managed to make it in time.

I began to feel like my granddaughter, Naomi, when she toiled over her little bit of Friday homework. 'I've got to get it done by Monday, Grandma. Miss Packer will be cross if I don't.' For a moment I contemplated inviting Naomi round now, to help me. But dropped the thought in a moment. You can't ask a four year old to help her grandmother write a suicide note and anyway, because of the sweetie packets, I have not been able to have her round lately.

I began again. 'Dearest family...' This would include M'buta, who being my daughter's partner, was in the role of my son in law.

I had chosen the paper for my letter with great care. It was hand-made, acid free, and very expensive. Because, after I was gone, this letter would be the only thing my family would have to remember me by, I did not want the paper I wrote it on going acid or brittle.

My door handle gave a turn. Verity. When she could not open it, she called, 'Mother, have you locked it? What are you doing in there?' her voice stern and suspicious, the voice I had used to her when she was little and was naughtily putting on my lipstick.

I tried lying still in the hope that she would think I was asleep, even did a few snoring sounds in the hope that she would hear them through the door, but she kept rattling on the door handle 'Mother, open up at once.'

. 'Go away,' I shouted, abandoning the pretence of sleep. 'Leave me alone.' I knew it was useless though and if I did not open up to her, her suspicions would be aroused. Later she would search the room and find the pills. You might as well be a toddling child or a

pet dog by the age of eighty, the way in which people take control of every aspect of your life. Reluctantly I put my pad back in its hiding place, behind the dressing table mirror and dropped a couple of disguising tissues on top of the paper in the basket. Sooner or later they would find everything, unless Tuesday came first. It's because they found me out the first time, when I got them to take me to the seaside, that I had to take such care now.. Since that first and failed attempt, I have been getting no privacy or peace.

In an attempt to put them off the scent, lately I had been trying to appear jolly and though Verity kept asking me, 'Are you alright, Mother? Is your mouth hurting? Why are you stretching it in that funny way?' M'buta, who is, apparently my social worker, whatever that may be, was quite taken in. She even complimented me for looking so well and bearing up so wonderfully. But after a while I heard Verity tell her, in one of those silly whispers that people do when they want you to hear and pretend they don't, 'Don't be taken in by Mother. It's some new trick.' In fact the only one who had seen through my play acting right from the start was my granddaughter, Naomi. She is only four, and has special abilities. 'Why are you crying in the middle, Grandma?' she asked.

Well, of course I was. Jack and I had been married for sixty one years. After he died, M'buta said, 'At least you've got a daughter. And me. And a granddaughter. Some people don't have any one. You are luckier than a lot of people.' Well who bloody cares about a lot of people. And it's not just M'buta who goes on like that. It's everyone.

When I went to the eye hospital to tell them that my sight had gone so blurry that I could hardly read any more, they said, 'Your eyes are really good for your age.' Same with my hearing. 'There's no way of improving your hearing any further, dear. For your age it's very good.' What they really mean, of course, is, that I'm lucky to be alive at all, let

alone be able to hear or see. And how I wish they wouldn't call me 'dear.' When M'buta first became my social worker and called me 'Arrabella,' I told her I had not given her permission to address me thus. After all she is a girl several years younger than my own daughter. She had had the grace to look a little embarrassed. 'What would you like me to call you?' she asked.

I like, in general to be addressed by my full name by everyone who is more than ten years younger than me, whether I know them well or not, apart of course for child or grandchild. But there was a problem with this as far as M'buta and names are concerned. M'buta is not only my social worker, but also my daughter's lover, so even I could hardly expect her to call me 'Lady Cunningham-Smythe'. Mother-in-law, or even Mother might have been OK if she had been a male but did not seem to be appropriate in M'buta's case.

For a while there seemed to be no solution to this problem and she told me that she was worried in case the house caught fire and she was unable to call me and alert me to the danger. Which is a situation that does not worry me at all, because I was planning to die anyway. But to M'buta, me being burnt to death is a very bad thing, and would probably get her into awful trouble and she would certainly lose this present job because I would not be there for her to care for any more.

Chrissy, the woman who has been doing for me for about twenty years, and is the sort that takes liberties when it suits her and if it suited her otherwise, would be calling me 'Arrabella', calls me by my full name because she is a snob. Apart from that, though, she behaves in ways that I find unpleasantly familiar. Once, finding I could bear her endless showing off prattle any more, I gave her the sack. I told her I no longer needed her. I said that as from Monday, she must not come. You would have thought she had not heard a

word I said. She continued to turn up as usual, and did her non-cleaning making-a nuisance-of-herself as merrily as ever.

‘I told you to leave,’ I shouted on Monday morning.

‘Oh, did you, Lady Cunningham-Smythe.?’ she said vaguely then continued with her useless duster whacking which always produces more dirt than it removes.

‘Depart, woman,’ I roared. Nothing would budge her.

‘I couldn’t abandon you, Lady Cunningham Smythe. It’s not in my nature to abandon the sick and aged.’

‘She does a good job of cleaning, no matter what you say,’ said Verity. ‘And M’buta trusts her to keep an eye on you.’ They are all in cahoots. There’s nothing I can do with a gang like that.

I mean, look at the problems I had collecting the pills. It would have been perfectly simple if it had not been for their intrusive prying. Paracetamol is only sold in little packets of ten tablets. You know - so that people will find it difficult to gather enough to commit suicide. So therefore you need to go to several chemist shops to gather enough of them to do the job. And with my mobility problem, of which all these experts also say, ‘You get around very well for your age, dear,’ this is not very easy. For a while I tried saving up the sleeping pills the doctor had given me, but M’buta found them hidden in my drawer and took them away saying, ‘Ladyma,’ - that’s how we have solved the problem of names in case the house burns - ‘it’s horrid of you to be thinking of such a thing. Imagine how sad Verity and Naomi would be, let alone myself. And Gump. How could you even think of abandoning your poor little dog.’

I love Gump. Once I whispered in his ear, when I was sure no one was listening, 'I love you, Gump.' I admit I felt instantly embarrassed. He may be only a dog, but who knows what dogs understand? But all the same I thought it would be a good thing if I was out of the way and someone younger and more agile looked after him.

As for Naomi, because of the sweetie packets I am lost to her already.

Naomi is my granddaughter, because she is Verity's child. I had, in fact, tried to persuade my daughter to have a child for some years. 'You will be sorry when it is too late,' I said. And 'Even though you are a lesbian you should swallow your distaste and become pregnant. You are not too bad looking. I'm sure there must be some man somewhere who will oblige. You needn't get married, or anything and can always have a shower after.'

'You don't know what you're talking about, Mother,' she said crossly.

'If that was the case, how do you think I and your father produced you?' I asked her. I felt I had scored a point there but instead of taking it up she said, in a self pitying voice, 'I don't know why you even bothered to have a child.'

'What? Are you saying I wasn't a good mother? You can't possibly accuse me of neglecting my duty in that area.' I was outraged.

'Well, you weren't cuddly,' she said.

'You were a great joy to me when you were little.'

'Really?' she said. 'I never knew.'

'I did not like the way she spoke at all,' I told M'buta later. 'There was a distinct ring of sarcasm in her tone.'

'I'm not surprised,' M'buta said. 'You ought to wrap it up a bit, Ladyma.'

‘What do you mean?’ I asked her crossly. ‘Now what have I done wrong?’

‘Couldn’t you tell her you love her a bit?’ asked M’buta. She sounded quite shy to say the word, ‘love.’.

‘Since you tell her that all the time, I can’t see any need for me to do it,’ I told her sternly.

I and Jack were married for more than sixty years and in all that time never once did I use sentimental language. Even our decision to do away with ourselves when the separation time was approaching was done in a businesslike, practical and unsentimental manner. We collected the sleeping pills without even bothering to hide them, those being the days before I had a social worker poking through everything.

Unfortunately, after Jack died, M’buta found the pills and threw them all away.

‘You stop thinking about dying all the time and whenever you feel down, just pour out your feelings. You can tell me anything, Ladyma. I’m a good listener,’ she said. Well, of course she is. It has cost us taxpayers a lot of money to have her trained to listen.

After that they kept thinking up things ‘to cheer me up.’

‘I do not need cheering up,’ I told them. When you are a bereaved person, you can be as furious as you like, and no one likes to say boo to you.

But nothing stopped them. They kept organising silly outings, inviting me to come and do things that I had never had the smallest appetite for, a visit to the zoo, shopping at Harrods, an afternoon at the cinema. They even wanted to take me to see the remake of ‘Mary Poppins.’ You really would think I had become a child again. It was when they suggested a picnic by the sea, that an idea came to me. They all seemed gratified and hopeful when I accepted. They did ‘there, she’s coming out of it’ looks to each other. By

this time I had managed to assemble a small collection of sleeping pills, by pretending to put them in my mouth when M'buta gave them to me. Not enough to do the full job, but enough, I thought to be effective when in the sea.

'And I shall swim,' I told them. 'So please go and buy me a bathing suit,'

Verity and M'buta went rushing, as though the sun had come out suddenly, after a lot of rain.

I waited till they were all sitting on the beach, if you could call that heap of oil stained cobbles a beach, then I said I thought I would have a little paddle in the sea before lunch.

'In memory of Jack.'

Verity and M'buta nodded, looking moved and un-suspicious. Gump, who follows me everywhere, leapt up and tried to come after me, so I asked Naomi to be a dear little girl and hold onto him while I paddled because I didn't want him to get wet and shake water all over the picnic rug.

'I've never known you to mind about a thing like that before, Mother,' said Verity in a surprised but pleased voice..

'I am trying to follow your and M'buta's advice and be less selfish,' I told her, and managed to put on a saintly sort of smile which did not, this time, draw from her the question, 'Is your mouth hurting, Mother? Why are you stretching it like that?'

Gump howled and wriggled as I walked away, but after a while Naomi managed to stroke and tickle him into calmness. When I reached the sea and looked back, he had subsided into her arms and looked comfortable and happy. The sight made me feel a little bit cross, as though he had been treacherous.

By the time I reached the water, I could just make out Naomi waving.

I woke up in hospital. Apparently life savers had pulled me out and saved my life. I was furious. And that was the start of them poking around. This was a situation that Jack and I had not thought of, that the time would come when other people would poke their noses in, and prevent the surviving one from doing away with his or herself.

It took me four months, after that, of surreptitious buying and hiding, to get together enough paracetamol in their silly little packs of ten. I would so much have preferred to do it with sleeping pills, but there was no way now that M'buta and her spy, Chrissy, were on to me. It was touch and go with my new hoard several times and I had had to have a huge show down with M'buta, shouting that I was surely entitled to some sort of privacy and how dare she go through my drawers and that sort of thing. I foiled her, though. Through a little bit of play acting, I managed to divert her attention from my growing collection of pain killers by continuing to pretend I was holding back sleeping pills.

This is where Naomi comes in. You may be wondering how it came about that my lesbian daughter is a mother. It was like this. About five years before, Verity told me 'I am giving you a grandchild, Mother.' My gaze rushed instantly to her stomach, which looked as flat as ever.

'I'm not pregnant yet,' she had said. 'I have decide to become impregnated, though.'

'Oh. So M'buta has had a successful sex change has she?'

'No need to be sarcastic,' said Verity.

'How are you getting this child, then?'

'At a fertility clinic.'

Yes. Of course. I might have known. 'What does M'buta think?'

‘She keen. As long as the man is black. And they’ve got some black men on their books.’

‘There you are,’ I said. ‘Problem solved.’

‘She thinks a thousand pounds is too much, though.’

‘Yes, I see what she means. She would probably have been able to pick up a child absolutely free from an orphanage or somewhere..’

‘You don’t understand anything,’ cried Verity. She sounded quite aggrieved though I couldn’t imagine what I had said wrong. I mean it was true, wasn’t it? There must be children all over Africa who have lost their parents and are in need of a good home..

Verity is a writer but because her books are ‘literature’ she does not get very much money for them. And although M’buta has a full time job, she has to send a great proportion of what she earns back to her mother in Zimbabwe. The two of them are always pretty broke.

‘I’m sure you could get a man to do the job for nothing,’ I suggested ‘Men always find sex enjoyable. All you need to do is dye your hair and put aside your glasses.’ I did think to myself that if it had been M’buta, not Verity who was planning pregnancy, there would have been no problem at all in getting a man to create the child for M’buta is seriously beautiful in a way that only a tall slim black girl can be.

‘But I have persuaded her that we could spend some of the royalties of the ‘The Sunset Kiss’ on the procedure.’ You make love to create a child in the conventional manner, but if it is done by any other means, it is called ‘a procedure.’

The Sunset Kiss’, Verity’s latest book had just come out. It had M’buta’s photo on the back instead of Verity’s and M’buta’s name as the author and had done rather better than

the previous ones. It is the story of a beautiful lesbian couple, one black, one white, who are being forced to separate forever. They go to the seaside, eat a lot of sleeping pills, kiss each other then wade into the sea and die.

‘The Sunset Kiss’ sold like hot cakes, which made me feel scornful of the reading book buying public who hardly bought Verity’s books at all when it was her on the cover and were so enthusiastic when it was M’buta.

I had one more go at persuading my daughter to create her baby in the normal way. ‘You did sex once before and it wasn’t the end of the world, so why not save all that money and do it just once again.’

‘Mother, really.’ She always gets angry when the Don situation gets discussed. When she produced the young man, Jack had been thrilled. Even I had been pretty impressed, and also relieved that at last our daughter was behaving like other girls.

Don had been good looking and well dressed but when the relationship ended Verity told me that they had made love only once and that she had found the experience slobbery, unhygienic and uncomfortable.

When it was clear that Verity was determined to have a child without enduring sex, I agreed to go with her to the Bereton Clinic. I was, in fact, rather curious. Chrissy worked there on a Tuesday and often talked about the place. Her face would light up with excitement whenever she mentioned it. ‘You should see the young men,’ she would rave. ‘They are absolutely gorgeous.’

Verity asked me to come with her on the day of the AI procedure because M’buta could not get away. I had never been to such a place before. It was as grubby and shabby as to be expected with Chrissy as cleaner. But Chrissy assured my daughter that not only

was the Bereton the cheapest fertility clinic around, but that it also had a fantastic reputation for success. 'I can promise you, Verity, that I don't know a single woman who has not got pregnant eventually and most of them get done the first time.'

Chrissy came rushing out of some dungeon-like back room still wearing her soiled overall and handed Verity a tattered album. 'It's the photos of the fathers. You go through that, Verity, and choose the one you want. And when you've chosen, we've got some tapes of the fathers' voices.'

'The whole set up looks most unprofessional,' I told my daughter. 'I think you should go somewhere else.'

But already Verity was going, eagerly through the photos.

'Hush, Mother,' she said. Then having gone through the album from start to finish, began to go back to the beginning again.

'I haven't got all day,' I told her.

'I don't know why you came in the first place. We are choosing the father of your first grandchild. I really do think you might be prepared to take a bit of time over it,' she said. 'There. What do you think? Does he look like M'buta?' She held up the album, showing the photo of a handsome young black man. 'I think he's perfect,' she said. 'He's even a social worker like M'buta.'

Certainly the young man seemed ideal and there was not any sign that he had white blood, but I suppose in these times you can never tell.

'Hundred percent Zimbabwean,' said Verity, as though reading my mind. She had told me earlier that this was important. If the father was already of mixed race, then there was a risk of the baby being a white throw back.

So, when nine months later the baby was born, and turned out to be perfectly blonde and as white as milk, I felt furious on my daughter's behalf.

She was lying in the hospital bed, looking into the baby's face, an expression of perfect doting on her own. 'You get cheated right left and centre these days. I expect you will be sending her back,' I said.

Verity looked up quickly, gave me one of those horrible scowls that turned even me silent and went back to baby adoring again.

'Any way, I don't expect M'buta will be best pleased,' I said crossly, as I got up to leave.

And it was true. M'but became quite sulky when she came to see the new baby.

'Well, you have the solution,' I told her. 'Next time, you be the one to get pregnant. That will ensure the baby turning out the right colour and also it's your turn to go through all that suffering and discomfort..'

M'buta instantly lost her temper and began shouting, 'Don't you start, Ladyma. I never wanted a child in the first place.'

For a while, after Naomi was born, Verity and M'buta had frequent quarrels about the baby, Verity accusing M'buta of not loving Naomi and M'buta saying that, even though the baby was nothing to do with her, she did more for it than its birth mother.

These quarrels even went on a bit as Naomi got older. 'I am the one that hugs her, puts her to bed and reads to her, sings lullabies to her on car journeys while you have your mind on your latest book or are hunched over your computer not noticing anything else in the world,' M'buta would say.

Verity would shout, 'You don't have to look after her. No one asked you to.' And M'buta scream, 'You're a cold fish and should never have been allowed to have a child. There should be a law against women like you having babies. If I had not been there, that poor little mite would have had a childhood of grim perfection and cautious choosiness.'

'I think it's ridiculous the way you slobber all over her as though she was something to eat.' Verity would shout back. 'And I wouldn't have chosen you if I had been a perfectionist and choosy.'

By the time Naomi was three, M'buta and Verity seemed to forget that she was white. She was their child and they loved her. Rightly so, because Naomi was a very nice person, perceptive and compassionate. After Jack died she asked me, 'Granny, why are your eyes sad all the time? Is it because Grandpa is dead?'

'Of course not,' I told her crossly. 'I will be dead soon, and so what is there to be sad about?'

But, as though she had not absolutely believed me, she said, 'You mustn't get sad, Grandma, in case you hurt your blood precious.' This is a subject on which she is a little confused. I tried to straighten her out once or twice, but without success. She was clever too. She and I used to play some thrilling games of snakes and ladders, and she was pretty good at draughts. Her drawings were stuck up all over my kitchen wall.

Then there came the paracetamol situation and I could not allow Naomi to visit me any more.

'What has she done? Why are you being so nasty to her?' M'buta and Verity kept asking. 'She keeps crying and saying Grandma doesn't love me any more. How could you be so cruel?'

‘Because of my blood pressure,’ I said. ‘You couldn’t expect an old woman in my condition to entertain a toddling child. Even the sound of her voice sends my blood pressure up.’

So that M’buta would not find my pills, I had put them into sweet packets. M’buta only smiled when she saw them. Next time Naomi came, M’buta told her, ‘Wait and see what a lot of naughty goodies your grandma has got for you.’

For the rest of the morning Naomi kept pestering me, ‘Where are the naughty goodies, Grandma? When am I going to get them?’

Really, when you start to lie there is no end to it. I had to pretend I couldn’t find the sweets and went through a great huge pantomime of pretending to look for them with Naomi helping me and me terrified that she would find them. And then when M’buta came to fetch her, she asked Naomi, ‘Well darling, how many sweeties did your granny give you today?’ and looked suspicious when Naomi said, ‘Grandma couldn’t find them.’

That was how it became impossible for me to have Naomi in my house. I had gone to such an enormous lot of trouble to get those pills together and did not dare risk losing them, for I knew that this was my last chance.

I had bought them one Tuesday. This was Chrissy’s day off and also the day M’buta works at a children’s clinic. Verity never comes round during the day on a week day. She is very disciplined about her writing, and works for a strict number of hours through thick and thin.

I called a taxi and told the Pakistani taxi driver that I was looking for a certain type of medicine and that it was quite rare so I needed to visit a lot of chemists and supermarkets. I told him that it might take all afternoon before I ran the stuff to ground. At first it was

not too difficult. I hid my little packets of pills in my bag and got into the taxi telling him, 'No. They didn't have it either.' After a while, when I could fit no more packets into my bag, I began putting them into my pockets and then when they were full I had to stuff them down my jumper until I think even the taxi driver began to suspect something funny was going on and started questioning me about this very rare medicine that was not even available in the big Boots and at the same time looking suspiciously at my bulging pockets, so that I thought he thought I was shop lifting and that it was touch and go whether he would report me to the police, in which case all would be lost. But in the end he left me at my flat with a hundred and twenty pills, which I thought would be more than enough to do the job. He held my arm as I went up the steps, then helped me open the door, me all the time worrying that packets would start falling out of my jumper and give the game away. My last sight of him as I closed my front door, was his expression of doubt. For the rest of the evening I really did half expect a visit from the police, but luckily nothing happened.

Then, after I got in, and the taxi had gone, I saw that I did not have enough whisky left to swallow the pills down so had to ring M'buta and ask her to bring me some the following day.

'Surely you haven't drunk the bottle I brought last week,' she said disapprovingly.

'I am thinking of doing a little entertaining,' I told her.

In spite of a few exhortations about the effects of alcohol on blood pressure and arthritis, she did as I asked.

'I am glad to see you are coming out of the doldrums, Ladyma,' she said.

I began to imagine next Tuesday when I would fall into a dreamy drunken sleep, waking up to find Jack at my side. I feared he might disapprove a bit at my being drunk, but felt sure he would forgive me when he understood that it had helped me get to him.

Before he lost his memory, he and I had often planned our after-death meeting which we knew was not going to be easy, for we would be without any of the things that make it possible to meet people who they are alive. We would, we thought, find ourselves in a sort of murky featureless dark in which we would have to make great efforts of will to hold onto enough of our identities to be able to recognise each other. Although we did not know how time operated after death, just in case identity leaked away with the kind of time we get here, we decided that the left behind one should follow the gone ahead partner as quickly as possible.

Have I mentioned that Verity was pregnant a second time by now. In spite of Naomi being the wrong colour, she had returned to the Bereton Clinic. She wanted the new baby to be the blood sibling of Verity. The baby was due in a couple of weeks. I felt that this was a good time to go. Verity, M'buta and Naomi would all have better things to think about than my demise, when this new baby was born.

I would have liked to wait to see the new baby, but dared not take the risk in case I was too late for Jack.

That week seemed to go on forever. People kept talking to me about plans for next week, next month, next year, which I had to pretend to be interested in. And every chance I got when I was not being spied upon, I would toil at my farewell letter.

Tuesday at last. The letter was ready. I was not entirely satisfied but thought it good enough. I spent the day getting ready. I had plenty of time. I had the flat to myself till evening, when Verity usually dropped in to say goodnight.

I knew exactly what I wanted to look like in my coffin. I put on my black cocktail dress and the pearl earrings that Jack had given me for my twenty first birthday. I powdered my nose, carefully applied ruby lipstick and did my nails. At last, feeling that I had done a good job, I looked at myself in the mirror and saw that the outfit would not do at all. The black looked depressing and the lipstick was too bright for death. I took off the cocktail dress and put on my red coat and skirt instead. I sprayed a little perfume behind my ears. Instead of the pearls, I put on the diamond necklace that Jack had given me for our golden wedding anniversary.

I was just spreading my packs of pills on the bed when there came a noisy knocking on the front door. For a moment I thought of ignoring it but then I realised that if it was Verity or M'buta and I did not answer the door, they would not just stop knocking and go away, but would force their way in somehow, find me, and have me stomach pumped or something.

It probably was neither of them, for they never came on Tuesdays, but all the same, just in case, I went down and opened the door. M'buta stood there looking desperate and holding Naomi by the hand.

'You've got to look after her, Ladyma, blood pressure or no, because the baby's on the way and I've got to take Verity to hospital and the baby sitter has suddenly rung to say she's not coming.'

'It's not due for a fortnight,' I said, feeling somewhat aghast.

‘It’s early. Here’s Naomi, I’ve got to go.’ She was panting.

‘I can’t possibly look after Naomi,’ I told her firmly. ‘I have plans.’ I tried to shut the door, but she got her fingers round it and clung on.

‘It’s urgent, Ladyma. There’s no one else.’ M’buta was gasping as though she had been running. ‘I can see you’re going out somewhere, but this is an absolute emergency.’

I still kept on trying to shake my head and shut the door, but it was no use. Sadly and reluctantly I opened the door and let my granddaughter in.

Naomi raced ahead of me into the house, shouting, ‘You’ve got to have me now, even though you don’t want to.’

. I went crossly after her, trying to project my thoughts to where ever Jack was, ‘I’m sorry. There’s been a bit of a hitch.’

Naomi stopped suddenly in the middle of the drawing room and stared at me as though seeing me for the first time.

‘You look beautiful, Grandma,’ she said. ‘Where are you going? To a party?’

‘Not a party,’ I told her. ‘I’m going to a different place.’

‘I could come with you,’ she said.

‘That’s out of the question,’ I told her. Really this was too aggravating for words.

Naomi went prancing round the hall. ‘Anyway, I’m here now and I promise I won’t hurt your blood precious. I’ll be really really careful, I promise.’

‘You’d better,’ I told her grimly and was briefly tempted to give her a little hug. She rushed past me into the bed room. ‘Oh, look, you found the naughty goodies.’ She had seen all the sweetie packets on the bed and was already reaching out to snatch by the time

I got there. I grabbed them from her hands, but she clung on. 'I want them. I want them. Why can't I have them?'

Verity had told me she had been behaving badly lately but this was the first time I had seen her behaving like this. 'Ever since you refused to let her visit you she has been having tantrums. I'm sure there's a connection and it's because she feels rejected.'

'Oh, rubbish,' I said. 'All four year olds are as wicked as Hell. I remember you at that age. And what a ridiculous idea, a four year old caring whether her sick old Granny invited her round or not.'

'Put them down,' I yelled now. 'You promised you wouldn't hurt my blood precious.' I was even starting to talk like her in my desperation. She dropped the pills at once, and stared at me guiltily.

'I'm sorry, Grandma.'

'It's alright,' I said. 'Let's make some fudge. Home made fudge is even better than all those sweets from the shop.' I had been trying to use up all the food in the house before dying, because I hate waste, but luckily there was still lots of sugar, a little bit of butter, and a pint of milk because I had miscalculated when I went shopping the previous week.

'Be careful. Don't let it splash on your skin,' I told her as we stirred. 'It's dreadfully hot.'

'How can you tell when it's ready?' she asked.

'When it's brown and wrinkly like me.'

After that she kept looking into my face then back into the saucepan and saying, 'It's getting a bit more like you.' Till at last there came the moment when she shouted, 'It's exactly like you, Grandma. It's ready.' Later, when we had cooled, cut, eaten, wiped

fingers and washed mouths, Naomi said, 'I like your lipstick, Grandma. Can you put some on me too?'

So we sat at my dressing table and first tried out lipsticks and then I took out my jewel box and began putting necklaces onto Naomi, while she sat gazing admiringly at her reflection.

'Now nail polish, Grandma,' cried Naomi, bouncing up and down on the dressing table stool. She spread out her baby fingers and I unscrewed the nail polish bottle. I had reached the first little piggy went to market finger when I heard a sharp snapping sound.

'What's that?'

Naomi was still staring at her reflection.

'Did you hear something, darling?'

'It might be rats,' said the little girl casually. 'They made a noise like that when Mummy had them.'

'Rats? Your mother had rats?' The idea of my orderly daughter coping with rats was rather pleasing.

The sound came again, not so loud this time and it was followed by a soft thud as though something was being thrown onto the carpet. The sound had seemed to come from upstairs, not from the hall. It wasn't at all the sound a rat might make. My heart began to beat with a little rhythm of fear. I told myself I was being ridiculous, that it was only birds walking on the roof but still felt worried.

I tried to reassure myself. It couldn't possible be a burglar, though. There was a security light that came on automatically when anyone entered the garden. There were

neighbours just a stone's throw away. Of course there was no one walking about up there.

Naomi wriggled off the stool and began tramping slowly round the room, her lips pouted as she blew on her newly vanished nails. 'This is how M'buta does it,' she said.

There came another sound. Definitely from above this time. The creak of a door being opened.

'Stop,' I whispered. 'Stay exactly where you are. Don't make a sound. It's a new game. Called 'Statues in the dark.' You're out if you make a sound or move a finger.'

Naomi stopped and waited, her fingers still outspread.

I went over, switched off the bedroom light and softly opened the bedroom door. Holding my breath, I peeped out. There was no light on downstairs. I held my breath and stood listening but the house had become silent.

I tiptoed back to where the child stood in her 'statues in the dark' posture.

'Come,' I whispered. I took her hand. The nail polish wasn't dry and gummed to my palm. We tiptoed back to the dressing table, where I sat, pulling her onto my knee. I put my arms round her and strained my ears. There came the sound of creaking floorboards.

'What do you think it is, Naomi?' I whispered. I was eighty and Naomi was four. Her hearing must be sharper than mine.

'Perhaps its an escaped tiger.' She snuggled against me and pressing her ear to my chest, whispered,. 'I can hear your heart ticking. Am I winning statues in the dark?'

'Sh, sh.. Can you hear that funny noise?'

Naomi straightened and tilted her head, listening. After a while she flopped back against me and whispered casually, 'It's probably only Teddy.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘I left him in the bathroom. He must have got magicked and is walking about up there.’

A fresh shot of fear pulsed through me. ‘Is that what you can hear?’ I asked.

‘Somebody walking about?’

Naomi nodded solemnly.

There was a telephone on the landing. I wondered if I dared leave her sitting here and rushing to it, phone 999. But at the thought there came a new sound, the soft rustling of shoeless feet, the sound of someone tiptoeing down the stairs.

There came another long shivering silence. Then Naomi said, ‘I’m tired of statues in the dark. I want to play something else.’

‘Sh. Listen.’

From downstairs Gump, who had been shut up in the kitchen with his dinner, suddenly began barking.

‘You said Gump never barks except when burglars come,’ said Naomi sternly, as though she had caught me out in a lie.

I put a finger across the child’s lips and whispered, ‘Sh, sh.’

‘You’re smidging my lipstick, you’re smidging my lipstick,’ complained Naomi, and began wriggling to escape my clutch.

‘Can you still hear it?’ I whispered.

‘No. Let me go. Put me down, Grandma. You’re squashing me.’

For what seemed like ages, but perhaps was only a couple of minutes, Gump went on barking. I could hear no other sounds now. The dog’s voice drowned everything. Then

Gump's barks suddenly became transformed into a short series of high pitched shrieks. Followed by silence.

'Why did he do that, Granny?' whispered Naomi. I felt her body grow tense as though she was catching my fear. I was feeling sick with horror and sorrow as I whispered back, 'Perhaps a mouse trod on his toe.'

Naomi gave a little giggle and relaxed again. We stayed like that for a long time and after a while Naomi sank softly against me and fell asleep.

I must get to the phone. That was the only hope.

Sooner or later, and probably sooner, the person who was in the house would discover us in the darkened bedroom.

Slithering gently from under the child's sleeping body, I crept across the room, to the door and silently pushed it a little way open. The passage was still dark. There was no light anywhere. No sound either. Perhaps whoever had been in the house had gone out again through the back door. I could see the phone on the landing, now only a few feet away. One soft step and I was there

. I lifted the receiver. And there was no dialling tone. The line was dead.

Until that moment, I suppose, I had managed to reassure myself that in a moment I would find a bird in the kitchen or some stray cat that had got in through an upper window, that Gump had stopped barking because even dogs make mistakes and he had realised there was nothing to bark at. But when I found the line dead, I was filled with a terrible fear. For some reason there seemed no need to keep silent any more. The dead line made me understand that the person in the house knew perfectly well I was here. I rushed to the kitchen, flung open the door and switched on the light.

The loyal little dog that Jack had loved so much was white no longer but stained with the scarlet of his own blood, with more blood pooling onto the kitchen floor from his cut throat.

Rage and urgency overwhelmed fear. Naomi was alone up there in the bedroom. I took the stairs three at a time and rushed into the dark bedroom. For a moment I couldn't see anything, though I could hear the sound of breathing, then a gulping noise. Then my sight adapted to the dark to see a shadowy figure, face obscured in something black so that only the eyes were visible. The intruder, Naomi clutched in his or her arms, was making for the open window. A black gloved hand was clasped over the little girl's mouth so that the only sounds she could make were these frantic gulpings. I did not wait to think. I reached out and seized my powder pot, the great jar of crystal filled with pink perfumed face powder, the sort I have worn ever since I was a girl and which Verity always jeers at for being so old-fashioned, and hurled the contents into the kidnapper's eyes, at the same time screaming 'Help, help, burglars, burglars.' The intruder dropped Naomi and began to wildly wipe at its eyes as the neighbours' windows began opening and voices started calling back. Still yelling, I grabbed my grandchild, while the intruder, stumbling and gasping, rushed for the window and went leaping out. I held the trembling Naomi tightly and the two of us listened to the sound of the intruder kicking and bumping against the walls and windows as he or she climbed down to the ground. The security lights came on, people came rushing to our garden, and I caught a brief glimpse of the running intruder, who then vanished into the trees before any of the neighbours could catch up with him or her.

I held my grandchild for a long time and the two of us shivered together. Neighbours came in and brewed tea, then made cocoa for Naomi. One of the neighbours rang the police. I brought out my whisky and we all had a little swig while everyone gathered round the cocoa-sipping Naomi and asked questions. The police arrived and made her describe what had happened and asked if she had managed to see the face of the person who had so nearly captured her.

His face had been covered, she said. She had only seen his eyes which looked shiny but because it was dark she couldn't see what colour they were.

It did not seem like a failed robbery. There seemed to have been no attempt to steal anything apart from the child. Someone suggested that the intruder was a woman who had lost her own child, and was now going madly round trying to steal another as a replacement. M'buta arrived looking hysterical, Verity had been in labour all day and the baby was still not born. M'buta said that she had nearly had a heart attack when the police told her. I think it is a good thing for a social worker to experience their own panics every now. 'I haven't told Verity. We'll have to let her know after the baby is born, though. Tell me everything that happened.'

The story had been told so often by now, each new arrival being given a description of the silent intruder, the murder of Gump and the face powder attack, that it had taken on a nice steady rhythm in which little contradictions and queries had all been neatly sorted out.

'But what about your blood pressure and your arthritis?' cried M'buta. Everyone of the friends and neighbours had asked this question too.

‘Lady Cunningham-Smythe temporarily overcame her disabilities to save her little granddaughter,’ would be the headlines in tomorrow’s daily paper.

‘My granny is the bravest person in the world and she fought with a dog murderer and threw powder at them so that they ran away,’ said Naomi. She had made this statement several times already and each time it was greeted with a satisfactory burst of compliments both for her and for me.

M’buta said, giving me a complicated kind of look which I could not quite interpret. ‘The whole thing seems so unlikely. In all my years of working as a social worker, I have never heard of such a kidnapping done like this, unless the kidnapper was someone who knew the child. A parent for instance.’

‘What about that little American film star,’ suggested someone. ‘She was kidnapped by a stalker.’

‘Well, yes, but Naomi is not an American film star.’

‘I did Holy Mary in the school nativity play,’ said Naomi proudly.

‘There you are,’ said someone. ‘Maybe there was a loony in the audience who got a thing about Naomi.’

‘Why should they be a loony?’ demanded M’buta hotly. ‘Naomi is a very lovely little girl.’