

Emptiness

by
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It was five o'clock on Tuesday morning, with an hour still to go before dawn, when Ruth found the abandoned baby. The plaintively mewling infant—who was less than a week old, if appearances could be trusted—had been laid in a cardboard box in a skip outside a former newsagent's in St Stephen's Road. The skip was there because the shop was in the process of being refitted as an Indian takeaway. Ruth was coming home from the offices of an insurance company in Queen Street, where she'd been sent to work the graveyard shift by the contract cleaning firm that employed her. She was all washed out, drained of all reserves of strength and momentum.

Ruth knew that she ought to call the police so that they could deliver the baby to social services, and that was what she vaguely intended to do when she plucked the child's makeshift crib out of the skip. The first thing she did thereafter, obviously, was to stick an experimental finger into the baby's open mouth. When she felt the nip of the newborn's tiny teeth the vague intention ought to have hardened into perfect certainty, but it didn't. She was adrift on the tide of her own indolence, rudderless on the sea of circumstance.

The baby sucked furiously at the futile finger, desperate to assuage a building hunger. In order to get it out of the infant's mouth Ruth had to tear the finger free, but the ripped flesh on either side of the nail didn't bleed. The pain quickly faded to a numbness that was not unwelcome.

The baby had thrashed around vigorously enough to work free of the shit-stained sheet in which it had been wrapped, and Ruth took note of the fact that he was a boy before wrapping him up as best she could in the cleaner part of the sheet. Her own kids were both girls. Frank had done a bunk while they were supposedly still trying for a boy; if they had succeeded in time, she would have stood exactly the same chance as everybody else of giving birth to a vampire—the publicly-quoted odds had been as short as one in fifty even then, fourteen years ago. The nearest payphone was a quarter-mile up the road, practically on the doorstep of the estate. By the time Ruth drew level with the booth she had not brought her resolve to do the sensible thing into clearer focus. The baby had stopped crying long enough to look into her eyes while she rearranged the sheet by the glare of a sodium street-light, but it had only been a glimpse. Temptation had not closed any kind of grip upon her—but fear, duty and common sense were equally impotent. When she reached the phone booth she paused to rest and consider her options.

If she did as she was supposed to do the baby would be fitted with a temporary mask and whisked away to one of the special orphanages that were springing up all over. Once there he would be fitted with a permanent eyeshield, stuck in a dormitory with a dozen others and fed on animal blood laced with synthetic supplements. He would go straight into a study-programme and would remain in it for life.

The primary objective of the study programmes was to find a cure for the mutant condition, enabling its victims to survive on other nourishment than blood. Their secondary objective was to find a way of helping the afflicted to survive longer than was currently normal. Nobody thought the scientists were knocking themselves out to obtain the latter achievement while the former remained tantalisingly out of reach. There was a certain social convenience in the fact that real vampires, unlike the legendary undead, rarely survived to adulthood. The average life-expectancy of an orphanage baby was no more than thirteen years; the figure was probably three or four years higher for babies raised at home, but they were in a minority even in the better parts of town. The best reason why so many vampire babies were abandoned was that they were direly unsafe companions for young siblings; the more common one was that the neighbours would not tolerate those who harboured them.

In theory, Ruth's younger daughter was still living with her in the flat, but in practice fifteen-year-old Cassie spent at least five nights a week with her boyfriend in a ground-floor squat. Even if she were unwise or unlucky enough to become fixated on the child, sharing donations with her mother wouldn't do her any harm. In any case, Cassie's blood was probably too polluted by various illegal substances to offer good nourishment to a fortnight-old vampire. All in all, Ruth thought, there was no very powerful reason why she shouldn't look after the baby herself for a little while, if she wanted to.

Carefully, she counted reasons why she might want to hesitate over the matter of handing the baby over to the proper authorities.

Firstly, the flat had been feeling empty ever since Judy had moved to Cornwall with the travellers, even before Cassie took up with Robert. No matter how much she hated the work itself, Ruth simply didn't know what to do with herself any more when she wasn't working.

Secondly, she'd put on a lot of weight lately, and everyone knew that nursing a vampire baby, if only for a couple of weeks, was one hell of a slimming aid.

There wasn't a thirdly; Ruth wasn't the kind of person to take any notice of those middle class apologists for the "new humankind" who were fond of arguing that vampire children were the most loving, devoted and grateful children that anyone could wish for and ought not to be discriminated against on account of unfortunate tendencies they couldn't help. She didn't have any expectations of that kind—her own children hadn't given her any reason to.

In the end, Ruth decided that there was no hurry to make the call. Surely nobody would care if she waited for

a little while, provided that she didn't hang on too long. If it were only for three or four days, she could probably keep the baby's presence secret from the Defenders of Humanity, and if she couldn't she could hand the baby over as soon as she had to. It was no big deal. It was just something to do that might even do her a tiny bit of good. Just because she was pushing forty, there was no reason to let go of the hope that she might still be worth something to someone.

Unfortunately, Cassie made one of her increasingly rare raids on her wardrobe later that morning, before Ruth had had time to get her head down for a couple of hours. The baby was asleep but Ruth hadn't taken him into her bedroom. The dirty sheet had been swapped for a clean one but he was still in the old cardboard box—which was anything but unobtrusive, sat as it was on the living-room table.

"Why aren't you in school?" Ruth demanded, hoping to distract her daughter's attention and ensure that she didn't linger.

"Free period," Cassie replied, ritualistically. "What's that?"

"None of your business," said Ruth, defiantly.

"Whose is it? Is baby-minding a step up from office cleaning or a step down? Can't its mum find anything better to keep it in than a cardboard box?"

Cassie peered into the makeshift cot as she spoke, but the baby's eyes and lips were closed, and there was nothing to betray its true nature.

"Shh!" said Ruth, fiercely. "You'll wake him up." There was, of course, little chance of that, given that the sun was shining so brightly, but Ruth figured that there was no need to let Cassie in on her secret yet if she could possibly avoid it. Her tacit arrangement with the baby was, after all, strictly temporary.

Fortunately, Cassie showed no inclination to inspect the visitor more carefully. Sexual activity hadn't made her broody. In fact, when Ruth had first tackled her on the subject of contraception, Cassie had sworn that if ever she fell pregnant and couldn't face an abortion she'd jump off a top-floor balcony. Most people who said things like that didn't mean them, but Cassie was short for Cassandra, and ever since Robert had told her what the name signified in mythology Cassie had taken the view that whenever it was time for one of her gloomy prophecies to come true she'd have to make bloody sure that it did.

When Cassie had gone Ruth unearthed an old cot from the junk-cupboard under the stairs. Two baby-blankets and a couple of baby-gros were still folded neatly within it, although she had to run the vacuum over them to get rid of the dust. She left the baby asleep with the bedroom curtains drawn while she hiked over to Tesco's in search of Pampers, red meat, Lucozade, iron tablets, and various other items that now had to be reckoned essentials. Luckily, she'd been off-shift on Friday and Saturday and hadn't been able to collect her pay until Monday, so she was as flush as she ever was.

By the time she got back the sun was at its zenith and she was twice as exhausted as before, but the baby was awake and whimpering and she knew that she'd have to feed him again before getting some sleep on her own account.

The thought of putting the vampire to her breast again made her hesitate over the wisdom of her decision not to call Social Services, but as soon as she looked down into the child's tear-filled eyes her squeamishness vanished, as it had the first time when the child had been terrified and starving. His gaze had filled up once again with tangible need. He was thin and pale and empty, and the pressure of his eyes renewed Ruth's awareness of her own contrasting fullness: her too-substantial flesh; her still-extending life; her superabundant blood.

It did hurt when the teeth clamped down for the second time on the tenderised rim of the nipple, but once they were lodged the anaesthetic effect of the baby's saliva soothed the ache away.

Ruth couldn't feel or see the flow of blood as the child took his nourishment. Vampires only used their teeth for holding on—they took the blood by some kind of suction process that drew it through the skin without breaking it. When he released her again, already falling back to sleep, there was no leakage from the residual wounds. The control that vampires exercised over the flesh of their donors was ingenious enough to forbid any waste.

When she had put a clean disposable on the baby and put him down again Ruth fought off her tiredness for the fourth time and made herself a meal. She knew that she had to eat regularly and well if she were to be adequate to the baby's needs, even for a fortnight. She had a second cup of tea in order to maintain her fluid balance but she left the Lucozade for later. Before she finally went to bed she phoned the agency to say that she had flu and that she would have to come off the roster for at least a week, until further notice. Her supervisor didn't protest; Ruth's attendance record was better than average and there was no shortage of night-cleaners in the area.

She slept very soundly, as was only to be expected. She didn't dream—not, at any rate, that she could remember.

Cassie didn't figure out what kind the baby was until Thursday evening, at which time she threw an entirely predictable tantrum.

"Are you completely crazy?" she demanded of her mother. "It's kidnapping, for God's sake—and the thing will bleed you to death if you let it. It's a monster!"

"He's a human being," Ruth assured her. "His mother obviously couldn't cope—but she didn't turn him over to the authorities either. She'd be grateful to me if she knew. It's only temporary, anyhow. It's kindness, not kidnapping."

"It's suicide!"

"No it's not. They're not dangerous to adults, even in the long run. A couple of weeks will only make me

leaner and fitter. I need to be fitter to do that bloody job five and six nights a week. It'd be different if there was a child in the house, but there isn't, is there?"

"They're cuckoos," Cassie blustered. "They're aliens, programmed to eliminate all rivals for their victims' affections. Why do you think they keep them masked in the homes? That's where he belongs, and you know it—in a home."

"He is in a home," Ruth pointed out. "A real home, not a lab where they'll weigh and measure and monitor him like some kind of white rat. He's entitled to that, for a little while at least. There's no need to tell anyone—it's my business, not yours or anyone else's."

"It is so my business," Cassie retorted, hotly. "I live here too—I'm the rival that the cuckoo is programmed to squeeze out while he squeezes you dry and leaves you a shrivelled wreck."

"I thought you had decided that this place is just a hotel," Ruth came back, valiantly. "A place to keep your stuff, where you can get the occasional meal and take a very occasional bath whenever you happen to feel like it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mum. I want that thing out of here—now, not next week or next month."

"Well, it's not what I want," Ruth informed her, firmly. "It's just for a few more days. Stay away if you want to. You usually do. Don't interfere."

Cassie told her boyfriend straight away, of course, but it turned out that she didn't get the response she expected. If he'd been the kind of Robert who condescended to be called Rob or Bob he'd have run true to form, but even on the estate there were kids with intellectual pretensions. Robert hadn't left school until he was eighteen and he would tell anyone who cared to listen that he could have gone to university if it hadn't been for the fact that the teachers all hated him and consistently marked down the continuously assessed work he had to do for his A levels.

Robert came up to inspect the infant at eleven o'clock on Friday morning. Ruth had had a busy night but her nipples had now adapted themselves to the baby's needs and the flow of her blood had become wonderfully smooth and efficient. The numbness left behind when the child withdrew wasn't in the least like sexual excitement but it was delicious nonetheless. She was tired, certainly, but she wasn't dish-rag limp, the way she had been after finishing a long night-session in some glass-sided tower. Although she was keen to get to bed she knew that she could stay awake if she had to, and she knew that she had to persuade Robert not to do anything reckless. It was a pleasant surprise to find that he was a potential ally.

"Do you know whose he is?" Robert wanted to know, as he stared down into the cot with rapt fascination. The baby's eyes were closed, so the fascination was spontaneous.

"No," said Ruth. "I've kept my ears open, but I didn't want to ask around. The neighbours haven't cottoned on yet—Mrs Hagerty next door's as deaf as a post and if the Gledhills on the other side have heard him whimpering they haven't put two and two together. He doesn't scream like ordinary babies, no matter how distressed he gets—not that he gets distressed, now that he's safe. He's a very sensible baby."

"I could probably find out who dumped him," Robert bragged. "It must be one of the slags on the estate—it's easy enough to do a disappearing bump census when you've got connections."

Robert didn't have connections, in any meaningful sense of the word. He was a small-time user, not a dealer. He didn't even have any friends, except Cassie—who would presumably dump him as soon as she found someone willing to take her on who was slightly less of an outcast.

"It doesn't matter where he came from," Ruth said. "The important thing is to make sure that he doesn't come to any harm. You have to stop Cassie shooting her mouth off to the Defenders."

"She wouldn't do that," Robert assured her, with valiant optimism. "She's with me—she knows that all the scare stories are rubbish. We don't believe in demons or alien abductions or divine punishment. We know that it's natural, just a kind of mutation—probably caused by the hormones they feed to beef cattle or pesticide seepage into the aquifers."

Ruth knew that Robert probably hadn't a clue what an aquifer was, but she didn't either and she wasn't about to give him the opportunity to run a bluff.

"He needs me, for now," she said. "That's all that matters. It's only temporary. When he's strong enough, I'll hand him over."

"Does it hurt?" he wanted to know. Ruth didn't have to ask him what he meant by it.

"No," she said. "And it isn't like a drug either. Not pot, not ecstasy. He isn't even particularly lovable. Little, helpless, grateful . . . but no cuter than any ordinary baby, no more beautiful. Alive, hungry, maybe even greedy . . . but it's my choice and it's my business. I don't need saving from him—and I certainly don't need saving from myself."

"They must always have existed, mustn't they?" Robert said, following his own train of thought rather than trying to keep up with hers. "Much rarer than nowadays, of course—maybe one in a million. Intolerable, in a pre-scientific age. Automatic demonization. The idea that the dead come back as adult vampires must be an odd sort of displacement. Guilt, I guess. Never seen one close up before. Quite safe, I suppose, while the sun's up. Safe anyway, of course, if you're sensible. Adaptation makes sure that they don't kill off their primary hosts. What's good for the host is good for the parasite."

"He still needs to feed during the day," Ruth pointed out. "He wakes up from time to time. But it's perfectly safe. He doesn't intend to hurt anyone. He doesn't hurt anyone."

She smiled faintly as Robert took a reflexive step backwards, mildly alarmed by the thought that the child might open its eyes and captivate him on the instant—but Robert regained his equilibrium as she finished the last sentence.

"What do you call him?" Robert asked. He was being pedantic. He hadn't asked what the baby's name was because he knew that Ruth couldn't know what name the child's real mother had given him, and wouldn't feel entitled to give him a name herself when she knew that she would have to hand him over in a matter of days.

"I don't call him anything," Ruth lied, before adding, slightly more truthfully: "Just the usual things. What you'd call terms of endearment."

Cassie's boyfriend nodded, as if he knew all about terms of endearment because of all the things he said to Cassie while subjecting her exceedingly willing flesh to statutory rape.

The boy was long gone by the time the baby bared his teeth again and searched for his anxious provider with his pleading and commanding eyes. Ruth was certain that Robert had had nothing to worry about; the infant knew by now who his primary host was, and he only had eyes for her.

It was Ruth's rapid weight-loss that finally tipped off Mrs Hagerty, and it was Mrs Hagerty—despite the fact that her own kids were in their thirties and long gone—who passed the word along to the Gledhills so that the Gledhills could make sure it got back to the local chapter of the Defenders of Humanity.

Fortunately, the conclusion to which the stupid old bat had jumped was only half-correct, and the rumour that actually took wing was that the child was Cassie's and that Ruth had decided to take him on in her daughter's stead. This error qualified as fortunate, in Ruth's reckoning, because it persuaded the Defenders of Humanity that shopping her as a kidnapper would be a waste of time. If the baby had been Cassie's, the whole thing would have been a family matter, much more complicated than it really was.

When she knew that the secret was out Ruth expected shit and worse through the letter-box and a flood of anonymous letters in green crayon, but the Defenders of Humanity were canny enough to try other gambits for starters. The first warning shot fired across her bows was a visit from the vicar of St Stephen's. She could hardly refuse entry to her flat to an unarmed and unaccompanied wimp in a dog-collar, although she wasn't about to make him a cup of tea.

"You must put your mind at rest, my dear," said the vicar, hazarding an altogether unwarranted and faintly absurd familiarity. "It is not because it was conceived in sin that the child is abnormal."

"No," said Ruth, as noncommittally as she could.

"There is no need for shame," the vicar ploughed on. "It is not your duty to accept this burden. There is no reason at all why you should not deliver the infant into the hands of the proper authorities, and every reason why you should."

"That's what God wants, is it?" Ruth asked.

"It is the reasonable and responsible thing to do," the vicar assured her. "Your first duty in this matter is to your daughter, your second is to your neighbours, and your third is to yourself. For everyone's sake, it is better to have the child removed to a place of safety. While it remains on the estate it is bound to be seen as an increasing danger, not merely to your own family but the families of others. I do not ask you to concede that the child is an imp of Satan, but I do ask you to consider, as carefully as you can, that even if it is not actively evil it is an unnatural thing whose depredations pollute the temple of your body. It is a bloodsucker, my dear, which only mimics the forms of humanity and innocence in order to have its wicked way with you—and I use that phrase advisedly, for what it does is a kind of violation equally comparable to vile seduction and violent rape."

"Suffer the little children to come unto me," Ruth quoted, endeavouring to quench the fire of zealotry with a dash of holy water—but to no avail.

"It is not a child, my dear," the vicar insisted, all the while keeping his eyes averted from the cot. "It is a leech, an unclean instrument of temptation and torment. If you would be truly merciful, you must give it up to those who would keep it safely captive."

"Well," said Ruth, "I'm grateful for the lesson in Christian charity, but I think he's about to wake up. I'm sure that modesty forbids. . ."

Modesty did forbid—and the first note didn't arrive until the following day, when the vicar had washed his hands of the matter.

GET RID OF IT, the note said. IF YOU DON'T WE WILL. Apart from the lack of punctuation it was error-free, but given that the longest word it contained was only four letters long it was hardly a victory for modern educational standards.

The notes that followed were mostly more ambitious, and the fact that the longer words tended to be misspelled didn't detract from the force of their suggestion that if Ruth wanted to spill her blood for vampires there were plenty of people living nearby who would be glad to lend her a helping blade.

Cassie was incandescent with rage when she heard what was being said about her.

"How dare you?" she yelled at her hapless mother. "How dare you let them believe that it's mine?"

"I never said so," Ruth pointed out.

"But you didn't bloody deny it, did you? You let that shit the vicar blether on without ever once telling him that you found the little fucker in a rubbish skip. Mud sticks, you know. Some round here will remember

That was on the second Saturday, by which time Ruth had had the child in her care for twelve days. She had not really intended to keep him so long, and his tender care had already turned nine-tenths of her spare fat into good healthy muscle, so one of her reasons for keeping him had melted away. As for the other, she was almost out of cash and she really needed to get back to work. The fact that she would have nothing to do when she wasn't working was

no longer a significant issue, given that if she couldn't feed herself properly she'd soon be no use at all to the baby.

For once, reason stood fair square with bigotry. Both asserted that she must not keep the baby any longer—but their treaty had been made too late. Ruth's devotion to blood-donation had passed beyond the bounds of reason, and whatever failed intellectuals like Robert might think about the cleverness of the adaptive strategies of vampires, baby bloodsuckers had no means of dispossessing themselves of primary hosts that were no longer adequate to their needs. The baby was just a bundle of appetites, a personification of need. He had learned to lust after Ruth's breast, and he could not help the instinct that guided his tiny teeth. He could not let her go—and his incapacity echoed in her own empty heart.

Despite what Cassie had said, the police did not put in an appearance on Saturday night; they had their own cautious rules about picking up vampire babies after sunset. Ruth contemplated doing a runner, but she hadn't got anywhere to run to so she decided to front it out. When the WPC turned up on her doorstep on Sunday morning Ruth wouldn't take the chain off to let her in.

"There's no baby here, and if there was he wouldn't be a vampire, and if he was he'd be mine and I wouldn't be interested in giving him up," Ruth said, breathlessly. "Don't come back without a warrant, and even then I won't believe that it gives you any right."

"It's not my problem if you don't care to cooperate, love," said the WPC, shaking her head censoriously. "Just don't come crying to me when your hall carpet goes up in flames."

Ruth had taken the child to the supermarket a couple of times before the word got out, but she didn't dare do it once the local Defenders knew the score and she certainly didn't dare to go out and leave the poor little mite alone while she spent the last vestiges of her meagre capital. She wasn't surprised when Cassie refused point blank to fetch groceries for her—but she was pleasantly astonished when Robert not only said that he would but that he would chip in what he could spare to help her out.

"We shouldn't give in to ignorance," he declared. "We have to stand up for our right to take our own decisions for our own reasons in our own time according to our own perceptions of nature and need." The false-ringing speech didn't mean much, so far as Ruth could see, and even if it had it wouldn't have been applicable to her situation, but she figured that Robert's muddied principles would buy her a few extra days before she finally had to let go. Even though she'd always intended to let go in the end, she thought that she was damned if she'd give the so-called Defenders of so-called Humanity the satisfaction of seeing her do it one bloody minute before she had to.

There were no more notes, and nothing repulsive came through the letter-box in their stead. The Defenders of Humanity knew that the message had been delivered, and they also knew that they only had to wait before it took effect. They knew that as long as they were vigilant—and they were—there was no danger to any human life they counted precious. Besides which, they simply weren't angry enough to march up the concrete stairs like peasants storming Castle Frankenstein, demanding that the child be handed over to them for immediate ritual dismemberment. Things like that had happened twenty years before, but even the most murderous of mobs had lost the capacity to take the invasion personally once the numbers of vampire babies ran into the thousands. Even the most extreme religious maniacs lacked the kind of drive that was necessary to sustain a diet of stakes through the heart, lopped-off heads, and bonfires, night after night after night without any end in sight. By now, even the dickheads on the estate couldn't summon up energy enough to do much more than write a few notes and wait for inevitability and the law to take their natural course.

In a way, Ruth regretted the lack of strident enmity. There was something strangely horrible in the isolation that was visited upon her as she eked out her last supplies and went by slow degrees from slim but robust to thin and tired. It was, she thought, as much the loneliness of her predicament as the baby's ceaseless demands that made her so utterly and absolutely tired. She had not realised before how much it meant to her to be able to shout good morning at Mrs Hagerty or glean the available gossip from Mrs Gledhill's semi-articulate ramblings.

The baby was a continuous source of comfort, of course, and that would have been enough in slightly kinder circumstances, but his powers of communication were limited to moaning and staring, and they just weren't enough to sustain a person of Ruth's intellectual capacity. He loved her with the kind of unconditional ardour that only the helpless could contrive, and she was glad of it, but it simply wasn't the answer to all her needs.

She knew that the end of the adventure was coming, so she made every attempt to milk it for all it was worth. She became vampiric herself in her desire to extract every last drop of comfort from her hostage. She had never been subject to a desire so strong and yet so meek, a hunger so avid and yet so polite. She had never been looked at with such manifest affection, such obvious recognition or such accurate appraisal.

She flattered herself by wondering whether even a vampire would ever be able to look at any other host with as true a regard as her temporary son now looked at her. She took what perverse comfort she could from the fact that nothing the orphanage would or could provide for him would ever displace her as an authentic mother. For as long as the baby lived, it would know that she was the only human being who had ever really loved it, the only one who had ever tended unconditionally to its real needs.

But it wasn't enough, and not just because there wasn't enough time.

By the time she had had the baby for nineteen days Ruth was at the end of her tether. Cassie had not come near her for a week, and had somehow contrived sufficient emotional blackmail to keep Robert away too. The wallpaper had begun to crawl along the walls. She was out of Pampers, out of Lucozade, and out of tinned soup.

She decided, in the end, that she would rather die than hand the baby over, although she knew as she

decided it that she was being absurd as well as insincere. She tried with all her might to persuade him to feed more and more often, but he would not take from her more than he needed or more than she could give, and she had always known that this was the way that things would finally work out. She grew weaker and weaker while she could not bring herself to bite the bullet, but she was never drained to the dregs.

In the end, she didn't need to contrive any kind of melodramatic gesture. She only had to make her way next door and ask the Gledhills to call an ambulance, not for her but for the child. It would not take him to a hospital, but that wasn't the point. It was far, far better—or so it seemed—to surrender him into the arms of a qualified paramedic than to let him be snatched away by a blinkered policewoman or a so-called social worker.

She cried as she handed him over. Her tears dried up for a while but when night fell and the time of his usual awakening arrived she began to cry again. Her breasts ached with frustration, and the waiting blood turned the areolas crimson. She knew that the hurt would fade, but she also knew that the nipples would be permanently sensitised. She would never recover the lovely numbness that she had learned so rapidly to treasure. She would never see eyes like his again. No one would ever understand her as he had. No one would ever think her the most delicious thing in the world.

She wondered whether they used contract cleaners at the orphanages. She wondered whether it would be possible, in spite of her lack of formal qualifications, to retrain as a nurse or a laboratory assistant, or any other kind of worker that might be considered essential by the scientists for whom vampires were merely an interesting problem. She made resolutions and sketchy plans, but in the end she went to sleep and did not dream—at least so far as she could remember.

She went back to work the next night. It was hell, but she survived.

The labour left her desperately devitalised for the first couple of weeks, but she soon began to put on weight again and her desolation turned first to commonplace debilitation and eventually to everyday enervation. Mrs Hagerty began to respond to her shouted good mornings and Mrs Gledhill began filling her in on the gossip. Cassie resumed regular expeditions to her wardrobe, and slightly-less-frequent ones to the bathroom. Robert dropped in more often than before, stayed longer, and talked nonsense to her for hours on end.

It wasn't great, but it was normal. Ruth had learned the value of normality—but that wasn't why she remembered the baby so fondly, and sometimes cried at night.

Things had been back to normal for nearly three months when Cassie, still three weeks short of her sixteenth birthday, found out that she was pregnant, panicked, and jumped off a top-floor balcony.

The autopsy showed that the child would have been a vampire, but Ruth knew that that didn't even begin to justify Cassie's panic, or even to reinforce the ironic significance of her name. She would have been able to get an abortion. She would have been able to hand the baby over to Social Services. She would have been all right. She would have been able to resume normal life. There was no reason to kill herself but stupidity and sheer blind panic. It wasn't Ruth's fault. It wasn't anybody's fault. It was just one of those things. It would have happened anyway—and it wouldn't have happened at all if Cassie had only had the sense to talk to somebody, and let them soothe her terror away.

Robert was heartbroken. He moved out of the squat into Cassie's old room, but the consolation with which he and Ruth provided one another was asexual as well as short-lived. Within a month he was gone again, just like Frank, along with the intensity of his grief and the pressure of his need.

Once Robert had gone, Ruth never did figure out what to do with herself during the day, or during the long and lonely nights when she wasn't on shift cleaning up the debris of other people's work and other people's lives—but every time she went past a rubbish-skip while walking the empty streets in the early hours of the morning she kept her eyes firmly fixed on her fast-striding feet, exactly as any sensible person would have done.