Opening Extract from...

KISS MYSELF GOODBYE

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This is not a Life. It isn't a nice rounded biography nestling in the reliable recollections of friends and family. In this book, nobody's recollections are reliable. It is a personal memoir that turned into a quest while I wasn't looking, a frustrating sort of quest in half a dozen separate stages which at first didn't seem to connect, not least because each stage was criss-crossed by false trails and blocked off by outright lies.

It's my own quest entirely, and any errors or misunderstandings are mine and nobody else's. I can only say that I have tried to uncover the truth as far as I could retrieve it from the corrosions of time. The truth turns out to be painful – well, that's no surprise – but I didn't expect how gay the lies would be.

F. M.

I

Angmering-on-Sea

Sometimes, even now, I try to get to sleep by recalling, in the right order, the houses where my Aunt Betty lived. There is, to start with, Blue Waters, Angmering-on-Sea, in West Sussex, a low-slung added-on-to white cottage with blue shutters that seems to have sunk below the level of the garden. The lawn behind the house runs down or rather up to the sea wall. Beyond the sea wall you can just see the heads of the taller passers-by stumbling along the pitiless shingle. In the middle of the lawn there is a small round pond with stone steps surrounding it and a lead cherub that dribbles water onto some dozy goldfish. Nearer the house there are rose beds that my aunt prunes so hard I cannot imagine them ever flowering in the summer, though they do, big cabbagey blooms in violent reds and oranges, to be deadheaded just as hard as soon as they show the first sign of being over. If it is hot, she wears a strange playsuit knitted loosely like a string bag for the deadheading; it looks out of place and childish on her leathery limbs. Along the side of the garden a line of conifers – pines, I think, they smell piney – swish gently in the sea wind and confer a quiet you do not expect so close to the sea.

When my sister and I first go there in the summer of 1945, there are concrete tank barriers ranged across the middle of the garden, like the teeth of some underground giant who has been munching up the lawn. I am six and Francie is four. I like to think of the German tanks smashing through the garden wall and then

getting stuck on the tank barriers, giving us time to arrest the crews and give them cups of tea while we wait for the police to arrive. But then the Panzers might never get this far. For if you open the gate in the wall, there in front of you are the tangled, already-rusted girders of the tank traps that are the first line of our anti-tank defences, and running in and out of them the restless, milky sea that sweeps beyond them up to the top of the shingle at high tide. The traps linger on for years after the barriers on the lawn have been removed. They are encrusted with barnacles and dried seaweed, and it is easy to bark your bare legs as you climb through them on the way down to find a patch of sand. Only at low tide is there any real stretch of sand, and then the sea is too shallow to swim in without wading out miles.

I like to think of Angmering as eternally menaced by invaders. My uncle insisted that this was probably where Julius Caesar came ashore in 55 BC, though the history books I read all agreed that the

Georgie, FM, Francie at Blue Waters, summer 1945

Romans waded onto the shingle miles along the coast at Pevensey. I loyally stuck, however, to the Angmering theory, in my dreams seeing the Roman chariots with knives sticking out of the wheels creaking up the beach, and then falling foul of the great concrete blocks that, in the dream anyway, were already in place.

At first my uncle and aunt rent Blue Waters. Then, when the owner wants it back, they rent the place next door, White Wings, a larger affair with Dutch gables painted pink and a pillared loggia. After White Wings they move inland, to Castlewood House, Englefield Green, Surrey, a white stucco mansion also with blue shutters, more of a turquoise blue, and lovely gardens stretching down the slope to the edge of Windsor Great Park. There is a little gate into the park at the end of the garden and you can walk across a narrow plank bridge over the ditch beyond the fence and through the forest to Virginia Water. If you go around the left-hand side of the lake, you come to an artificial waterfall known as the Cascade, and beyond the Cascade you come to the Roman ruins brought from Leptis Magna near Tripoli to amuse George IV and re-erected here, rather inaccurately, by Sir Jeffry Wyatville, his court architect. At times during the bombardment of Libya in 2011, it looks as though these may be the only ruins of Leptis Magna to survive, although NATO assures us that their commitment to avoid collateral damage includes the great archaeological sites. It is a strange place for them to land up, though, within earshot of the traffic from the A30.

Castlewood is the sort of house described as imposing, and years later Prince Andrew and Fergie take a lease on it, from 1987 to 1990, which is about half of their brief and stormy marriage. At Castlewood, for the first and perhaps only time in my life with them, my uncle and aunt entertain on quite a

scale. Their guests are mostly showbiz people who have alighted in the neighbourhood, which is handy for the film studios and for the West End too.

Aunt Betty has the dining room redecorated for the entertaining. A fashionable painter-designer called Arthur Barbosa is commissioned to do *trompe-l'œil* landscapes round the walls. Barbosa specializes in the Regency style. He is the illustrator whom Georgette Heyer prefers for her dust-jackets of Regency bucks handing dangerous ladies out of curricles, and the Castlewood murals are in this line. He also does theatrical designs and he decorated the inside of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor's yacht. Sometimes the dining-room door is left open and I can peer in and watch him at work on his stepladder. It is exciting to watch his brush moving steadily over the plaster. To me Arthur looks infinitely dashing with his mustachios and his piercing eyes, just like an artist should. Apparently he thinks so too, because when he does the colourful jackets for the first Flashman novels, he models the figure of Flashy on himself in a dashing blue uniform, which does not entirely please their author, George MacDonald Fraser. On the dining-room walls Arthur is painting only in black, grey and white, and I wonder why because I am too young to have heard of grisaille. Anyway, it is piquant to think of the Duke and Duchess of York 30 years later having their stonking rows there while the phaetons and curricles trot on along the walls with their ladies and bucks on top.

To this elegant dining room comes, among other stars, Mary Martin, who has rented nearby while she is singing 'I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair' in the West End production of *South Pacific*. A couple of times she brings over her teenage son, Larry Hagman, who is going to be an actor too and later reaches superstardom as JR in *Dallas*. Closer and more permanent friends are Nanette Newman and Bryan Forbes, who

is a bit like my Uncle Greig in looks – the wavy hair, the smiley eyes – though in nothing else. To me, easily the most thrilling neighbour is Diana Dors, who lives in the village and often rings up for a chat. There is nothing like the shock of hearing her voice when I happen to answer the phone. She was born in Swindon and her husky voice still has a touch of Wiltshire in it: 'Hi, this is Di Dors, and who am I speaking to?'

Aunt Betty loves shows as well as show-people and she takes Francie and me up from Castlewood to the new American musicals in the West End: *Damn Yankees*, *The Pajama Game*, *Kismet*, *Daddy Longlegs*. She gives us high tea at the Causerie in Claridge's before or after the show, depending on whether it is a matinée. My uncle and aunt have a suite permanently reserved for them at Claridge's, which they call The Pub. They say this is a cheaper arrangement, although I don't see how it can be. Sometimes we go up to the suite for a rest before the show or have our tea brought to us up there. I don't think I've been to a proper hotel before, and I am awed by the silence and the thick carpets and the soft clunk of the lift. Inside the suite, there is a French rococo clock on the mantelpiece and eighteenth-century-style furniture in matching green brocade and fruit in Chinese porcelain bowls. I can see that it's all meant to look like a grand person's drawing room, but somehow it doesn't and I feel uneasy, more like I feel in a dentist's waiting room.

In my perverse puritanical way, I also find the actual shows rather noisy and unconvincing. Just as I remember the gothic-style cinema in Salisbury better than the films my mother and I see there, so it is the journey up to town that sticks in my mind: the Rolls gliding with its faintly sick-making motion through the Surrey woods past the fantastical salmon-pink and white pinnacles of Royal Holloway College, then on up the A30 to where it meets the Great West Road and those amazing Art Deco factories – Gillette and Beecham and, best of all, the

Jantzen swimwear sign with its ever-diving lady in whose glow the narrator first kisses Jean Duport in Anthony Powell's novel *The Acceptance World*.

Aunt Betty loves nightclubs and dancing too. At home she will often sketch out a few steps of the Charleston while dusting and plumping up the cushions, which she can't refrain from doing although she has a perfectly good maid called Mabel. When we are older, she takes us to the nightclubs that she knew in the 1930s and that have survived the war – the Café de Paris, the 400 – and I sit glum and ungrateful while she clicks her fingers and sings along to the music of Harry 'Tiger' Roy, who winks and tips his baton to her as an old friend. Harry is getting on a bit and so are his bandsmen. The numbers they play have a pre-war swing to them. There's one that stuck in my mind, though I have not heard it played anywhere else since:

I'm gonna kiss myself goodbye
Oh goodbye, goodbye
I'm gonna get my wings and fly
Up high, up high

It is at the Café de Paris that Aunt Betty takes us to see Sophie Tucker sing. By now 'the last of the Red-hot Mommas' is long past her best, huge and rouged and powdered and monstrously corseted, none of which stops my aunt whooping with delight when she wheezes, scarcely pretending to sing, 'Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, But Oh, How a Fat Girl Can Love'. After the show we sit on velvet banquettes in the foyer and Sophie Tucker comes out to say hello. The foyer is really only a narrow passage and it seems even narrower as she graciously inclines to greet us, depositing a faint dusting of powder on the shoulders of my new, first grown-up suit.

FM, Uncle Greig, Francie, Georgie – waiting for Sophie Tucker,
Café de Paris 1957

'This is my nephew,' Aunt Betty says. 'He's going to be a writer.' I don't know how she knows that this is my ambition because I myself am not at all sure about it. I certainly do not remember telling her, and if I ever did, I now wish I hadn't. Aunt Betty is not keen on books, and having your head stuck in one is not something she approves of. It is the opposite of living and having a good time.

'That's swell,' Sophie Tucker says, giving me a puffy grin. 'I've always had a lot of time for the guy with the pencil.'

It is about this time – no, it must be a few years earlier – that Uncle Greig and Aunt Betty tell us that in future we are to call them 'Unca' and 'Munca' after the two mice in Beatrix Potter. We don't like this at all. It seems a childish idea, all the more inappropriate because it is the adults who have thought of it. I do not much care for Beatrix Potter anyway and prefer Little

Grey Rabbit. Also, I cannot resist pointing out that in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* there is only one relevant mouse, not two, and it is called *Hunca* Munca. But we fall in line, and I'll fall in line here too, having registered my protest. For this is to be Munca's story, and quite a lot of it will be about the right to choose what you are called, so we had better start as we shall be going on.

Most of the showbiz characters disappear off the radar when Unca and Munca leave Castlewood and briefly return to Blue Waters. It is as though my aunt only has to be in Surrey for a year or two before she hears the slap and surge of the tide on the shingle and has to up sticks and get back to Sussex by the sea – although she never does anything seasidey like swimming or sailing. Nor does Unca, except that about once a year he takes a boat to go mackerel-fishing. The second spell at Blue Waters cannot have lasted very long because I am still at school when they are back in Surrey again, this time on the other side of the A30 in a house on the Wentworth Estate called Holthanger. For Munca's dissatisfaction works in reverse too. After a couple of years by the sea, she yearns for the Surrey heathlands where she can grow azaleas and rhododendrons and see some showbiz people again. The only show-people we know of in Angmering are several members of the Crazy Gang; not Bud Flanagan himself but Chesney Allen, I think, and possibly Nervo and Knox. But whichever they are, Unca and Munca don't actually know them, although Munca does take us to see them at the Palladium. In fact, apart from that star-studded flurry at Castlewood, my aunt and uncle lead a rather quiet life and don't appear anxious to make new friends. Certainly they don't seem to have many old friends. It is as though by these frequent changes of residence they are making a conscious effort not to put down roots, as though they too were part of the floating population of actors and tycoons who come and go around them. The other reason Munca keeps on moving house

is that she likes doing them up, although the interior of the new home always ends up looking much like the interior of the old one, which is the case with most people because, after all, they still have the same furniture and pictures.

Holthanger is a peculiar dwelling, built of muted brick but mostly painted white and shaped like a ship with portholes along one side. It is moored by the third fairway of the West Course. After the war, the West Course became known as the Burma Road, apparently not because of its notorious difficulty but because the fairways had been left to grow wild for fear that enemy planes might land on them, and in 1945 German prisoners of war were put to work clearing the vegetation, as the British prisoners had been by the Japanese in Burma, and the British officer in charge had quipped: 'Let this be their Burma Road.'

From the garden you can glimpse through the shrubbery the garish costumes of the golfers processing down the slope (this was the era when golfers still wore Val Doonican sweaters and Technicolor slacks) and hear their cries of delight as they see how far their drives have rolled down the hill. In the early morning when the dew is still on the fairways I sneak out through the gate in the rhododendrons and play a few holes free of charge until I hear the first fourball of the day approaching over the hill. Then I shrink back into the woods, intending to make out that I am just going for a walk, though I have no idea how I would explain the golf bag on my back. In the summer of 1959 Wentworth hosts the Canada Cup and I follow round the American pair, Ben Hogan and Sam Snead, both clad in dazzling white with white peaked caps that make their leathery old faces look even more ancient. How graceful and merciless they are.

For me, even then, when I was in my teens, there is a mysterious allure about these swooping fairways and dark thickets of rhododendron with the opulent villas half-seen through the gaps, the lives lived in them unknowable, impermanent like the

landscape they hide away in. Beyond these secret colonies of the rich, the golf course opens out towards the railway line, and you can see over to the distant high wasteland, still the haunt of Gypsies and escaped pumas. Once, not so long ago, before the railway came, these manicured swards were heathery waste too. I like the idea of the whole thing: the newness of the estate and the people who live there, their obsession with privacy, their indifference to the country beyond. There is a kind of magic about it all, a not entirely pleasant kind. This is Munca's territory, where nobody is quite at home and nobody stays very long. Even the children at the children's parties seem to change each birthday. The parents who come to collect them scarcely know each other, and exclaim with noisy delight when they recognize a face – 'Oh yes, we met at the Club, it must have been the Club.'

For Unca and Munca the golf course is just a place to take the dogs for a walk, except that Munca never goes for a walk. In fact she almost never leaves her domain except when she puts on her jewels and climbs into the Rolls to go up to London. At Holthanger the furthest she goes is to the end of the lawn to retrieve the errant golf balls that have sailed through the trees and that she then resells on behalf of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals.

Munca believes that in most respects, animals are superior to human beings. She has a sizeable aviary in the house and spends much of the day cleaning the place out and tweeting back at the canaries and budgies and finches as they flit around her. Through the big window of the aviary I watch her dusting down the perches and seed trays, as she puckers her lips and blows kisses to the lovebirds to persuade them out of their cages so she can sweep their floors.

The rest of the house is under the control of four standard poodles, three white and one chocolate. In coffee shops today, 'standard' is a euphemism for 'small'. Here it is a euphemism for

'enormous and terrifying'. The white ones are called Zephyr, Beau and Yogi Bear, but I am so scared of them I can never remember which is which, although I know the chocolate one is called Peter. When the poodles first arrived, they were bigger than I was and their bark never lost its power to make me jump. Also on the strength is a representative of the smaller breeds, sometimes yappy, sometimes snuffly, a terrier or a Pekingese. Apart from *Country Life*, the *Pekingese Gazette* is almost the only periodical in the house and, as I am always desperate for something to read, I develop a modest expertise in the malformations of Pekes' testicles. These are due to irresponsible breeding strategies, it seems, monorchism being all too often found.

Like the birds, the dogs require a good deal of maintenance and, wherever Unca and Munca are living, there is a procession of visiting vets and poodle-clippers, varied by the occasional attendant on humans, such as a coiffeur or manicurist. In Blue Waters days, these are usually called up from Worthing, which is only a few miles away and offers a wide range of services to cater to Munca's needs, especially dentists and hygienists. Munca's favourite dentist is so highly rated that her old friend Doris McNicol comes all the way from Sunningdale to have him sharpen her teeth, not an operation I have ever heard of before. Aunt Doris, as we are instructed to call her, though we are also told she isn't an aunt at all, is a stout, friendly woman, but Munca says she is spoilt.

Once or twice Munca's favourite horoscopist, also based in Worthing, makes a house call. Munca is allergic to organized religion in any form but takes the truths and techniques of astrology for granted. Years later, she has my elder son's horoscope cast at birth and presents it to us (I had been hoping for a cheque). I meant to keep it to see how its predictions pan out, but have since lost it.

This addiction to the ancient wisdom of the Babylonians might seem to go badly with Munca's other addiction, which is

to modern things and generally to be where it's at. Holthanger is a pioneering building by the modernist architect Oliver Hill, and it is chosen as House of the Year in 1936. If you look at the website of the Royal Institute of British Architects, you can still find photos of the sliding doors out to the loggia and, especially, of the great drum staircase, which is visible through the circular glass windows from the rough along the neighbouring fairway. The staircase looks a bit like a miniature edition of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. But when I think of the house, I think of the huge poodles barring the way upstairs to the children's loo, which I am desperate to get to. The poodles are the same off-white colour as the stair carpet, and sometimes I don't see them drowsing at the curve in the staircase and I retreat hurriedly when they start barking.

Holthanger, Wentworth – the staircase

The aviary and the dogs follow my uncle and aunt back down to Angmering, and once more to Blue Waters, which has just come up for sale. But then, after only a year or two, they move next door again to White Wings, which is now renamed Preston House, as though the house needs to make a fresh start under its new owners. This turns out to be their final residence. My parents never come to stay at any of these houses, although they do drive up from Wiltshire to take me out from school for lunch at Holthanger and Castlewood. The neighbourhoods that Unca and Munca like to live in are not the kind of places my parents care to frequent. There is no way of stating this without making my parents sound snobbish, because in this respect snobbish is what they are. It is odd really that Munca should have been chosen to be my godmother as well as my aunt, because she and my mother have never shown the slightest desire to be friends. Nor, as I say, is Munca in the least bit religious, although she tells us that she was brought up as a Roman Catholic, which seems to be what turned her off religion. Of course she is rich and my parents are not, so that may be the reason why they asked her to be my godmother. Or it may be simply because I was christened just as war was breaking out and it was difficult to round up anyone to be a godparent in those frantic days.

At all events, Aunt Betty is a tremendously dutiful and affectionate godmother. So she is much more than an aunt to me. This is also because she is unlike anyone else I have met, alarming and warm at the same time, in an electrifying way. I can't take my eyes off her as she skitters about the sitting-room plumping up cushions that people have just got up from sitting on. I am conscious of her generosity too. There is always a large cheque at Christmas and on my birthday, and she is lavish with every kind of treat and, above all, with her time. I suppose that in our childhood we spent more time with her than with anyone else outside our immediate family – my sister certainly did.

Looking back, I do find it strange that my sister and I should have spent so much of our holidays at Blue Waters and all the other houses that Greig and Betty lived in. It wasn't just that my mother didn't get on with her sister-in-law at all. The old affection between my father and his younger brother had also cooled with their marriages and the war. The only reason we went almost every holiday was because the seaside air was thought to be good for my asthma, which was at its most violent then. Even I could see how my convulsive wheezing alarmed my parents. By the time Greig and Betty moved inland, our staying with them had become a fixture that could not easily be broken. My parents probably also thought that Munca would show us a better time than they could afford stuck out on Salisbury Plain with a Morris Ten that didn't work. Certainly my mother never showed any resentment that Munca should play such a large part in our lives. But then she wasn't one for showing resentment at the worst of times. And I now see how desperate she must have been for any sign that my asthma was improving.

Nor did Munca's sense of obligation fade after I had grown up. Now and then, a letter would arrive from her on her distinctive blue writing paper, datelined Preston House, or sometimes Claridge's. The letters are full of affection and invitations to come and stay at whatever house they happen to be living in at the time, also joshing rebukes that I do not write more often. She signs herself 'Your old squaw Munca'. A Native American squaw is certainly what she looks like and I am surprised that she is aware of the resemblance and can joke about it. The desk at which I am writing this, a sturdy Georgian scrolled oak affair, was a wedding gift from her. So I have a solid reminder of her every time I sit down to work, and, although she professed to be uninterested in anything to do with books, I wonder if this is what she intended.

With the poodles and the birds come also the chauffeur Ron Haynes, Pam the nanny (who later marries Ron), the sisters Olive and Mabel Salmon, the cook and maid, the Rolls-Royce and the chocolate Mercedes coupé, which has the number plate URA1, not a cheap extra even at this date. Ron puts on his peaked cap to drive them up to London in the Rolls to stay the night at The Pub. When Unca drives over to the factory in Bristol, where he stays from Tuesday to Thursday or Friday, he sometimes takes the chocolate Merc instead of the Rolls. Being a good driver is one of the few qualities that my father readily concedes to his younger brother, but only on the grounds that 'Greig's got nothing else in his head to think about', implying not without truth that his own crumps and contretemps with the law are due to the fact that he is thinking of something else at the time, most notoriously when he buys a copy of the new edition of the Highway Code in Warminster and is reading it at the wheel on the way home when the police car stops him. The episode is reported in the *Daily Mirror*, which I am rather proud of.

Unca's factory is Lennards Shoes, an old-established business, started by five Lennard brothers in Leicester who later trade under the charming name of the Public Benefit Boot Company before reverting to Lennards. By the 1930s the firm has finally settled in its present headquarters in Staple Hill, Bristol, and has 250 shops all over the country selling to mid-range customers – not as smart as Dolcis or Clarks but a step up from Freeman, Hardy and Willis. Lennards is, I sometimes think, Uncle Greig's only real love. He is never happier than when browsing at shoe fairs in Rome or Bologna, or opening new branches in Ghana and Nigeria, selling to customers, many of whom have never worn shoes before and may perhaps be more easily pleased. 'Walk to success in Lennards shoes' is the jingle sung on commercial radio across West Africa. He especially enjoys the fashion side

of the business, always alert to see whether peep-toe or chisel-toe will be the season's new shape and eager to experiment with new colours and combinations, such as sylvana, taupe, whisky or mahogany. His own wardrobe is full of garments I have not seen elsewhere: silk pyjamas from Sulka, cashmere boxer jackets, 1930s-style belted overcoats. Some of these come to me as cast-offs but usually don't fit very well. Unca's mellow voice and faintly confiding manner have an unobtrusive charm. He is on distant terms with his elder brother Bill, who is said to have made some unforgivable remark to him, but nobody seems to know what it was. My father for his part likes to record the fact that their mother was longing for a daughter after two sons and several miscarriages and insisted on dressing Greig in girls' clothes until he was seven.

What his brothers do not say is that Greig is the only member of the family for generations who has made a huge success of his career – the only one indeed who has actually made anything since the original Mounts stopped making maps in the nineteenth century. The mystery, though, is how he gained control of Lennards in the first place, since he started out with no more money than my father had, which was virtually nothing.

'Oh darling, my foster-father put Greig into Lennards after he was invalided out with his lungs,' my aunt would say. But who was this foster-father? Who, come to that, was her father? There was a copy of *Debrett's Baronetage* on the shelves at Blue Waters, the only house I have known to contain this esoteric volume except Kellynch Hall in *Persuasion*. There, Munca is described as 'dau. of late John Anthony Baring of New York', but she has no trace of an American accent and never speaks of the late John Anthony at all, still less of her mother, and nobody seems to have a clue who he is or was. Someone tells my parents that he had been a bootlegger who possibly traded under another name.

Munca's only known living relative is her brother Archie, known as Buster, a restless dark figure who rarely appears at Angmering, being mostly occupied in marrying and unmarrying, at least according to his sister. His only recorded achievement is to have ridden a motorcycle on the Wall of Death, but I don't know whether he ever did this for a living. Occasionally Lyn, his delightful dark-haired daughter from one of these marriages, who is the same age as my sister, stays at Blue Waters and he comes to pick her up, always appearing to be in a steaming hurry and on the verge of losing his temper. Munca's relations with her brother seem to be fragile at best, and when she refers to him, which is rarely, it is as something of a lost cause.

We are also fascinated by how old Munca is, obviously quite a bit older than Unca, even discounting his boyish looks. It is hard to tell from her face. She has a sallow complexion and bright, rather hooded eyes and a flattened aquiline nose and a wide scornful mouth that goes with her proud, flaunting way of holding her head back. She really does look quite like a Red Indian chief in a silent movie or one of those alarming Graham Sutherland portraits of famous monsters, Somerset Maugham perhaps or, when hung with jewels for a night out, Helena Rubinstein. When we ask her age, because this is a question children can ask and love to ask, she gives the classic response, 'older than my teeth and younger than my little finger'. If we press her, she admits to being the same age as my father, that is, only four years older than her husband, who was born in 1911.

It certainly came as a surprise to my mother when Betty gave birth to a daughter in October 1941, only a month after she herself had had Francie. My mother was startled not only because she thought her sister-in-law might be too old to have

a child but also because there had been no word of her being pregnant. 'Betty just went off to Cornwall and came back with a baby,' my mother said to one of her sisters. But then in the middle of 1941 it was as much as anyone could manage to look after their own lives.

Georgie, as Serena Georgeanne is always known, is brought up to be something like a sister to Francie, or at least that is my aunt's intention. Francie goes to stay with Unca and Munca most holidays, even when I don't. The two girls are constantly photographed as a duo. When they are 18, Munca gives a coming-out dance for them at The Pub. More insistently, she never stops pointing out how alike they are, how alike all three of us are. 'Look, hasn't Georgie got the Mount nose' – or the Mount eyes or some other feature that we are alleged to have in common. The three of us are photographed crouching by the little round pond on the lawn at Blue Waters and the resemblance between us is commented on once more. Yet apart from having fair hair and being quite tall, Georgie does not really resemble us at all. She is far prettier, her smile more radiant, her eyes more sparkling and, in any case, her nose is not quite the one she started with, having been operated on, for reasons somewhere between the therapeutic and the cosmetic (sinuses are mentioned). Her manner too is more effervescent, her responses quicker than ours or those of our other Mount cousins. Anyone outside the family meeting her for the first time is instantly struck by how different she is from the rest of us.

At the same time, although Georgie has the best of everything, I do not think that we are envious of her. More is expected of her than is expected of us. She always has to be the neatest girl at the party, have her hair brushed a hundred times a night, display perfect manners at all times. Is this quite normal, because she is an only child and all her parents' hopes are pinned on her? Or is there something odd and heightened about the expectation?

Now and then my sister and I catch glimpses of some harsher disciplines at work: there are summonses to Munca's bedroom, and once or twice I hear the slap of a hand or the smack of a hairbrush. Afterwards Georgie seems not just tearful but baffled or distracted, as if she is still not quite sure how she was supposed to behave. Even when she is grown up and every man wants to go out with her, a kind of awkwardness clings to her, as though all this carry-on is a language she has had to be taught. I don't mean just the social niceties. She has been thoroughly schooled in all of those, just as she has been to Heathfield School, Ascot, and the best dancing class, Miss Vacani's in the Brompton Road, and the best riding school, somewhere in Windsor Great Park. It is more that she seems not completely at ease in ordinary casual conversation and has to deploy the quick wit she was born with to cover up her uncertainty and to be like everyone else. At the time, of course, none of this seems to matter a bit, because she has such amazing sparkle.

Despite her efforts to turn Francie, and to a lesser extent me, into Georgie's siblings, Munca remains dissatisfied with Georgie being an only child. I don't know whether Georgie herself ever said she would love to have a sister, but at all events, when she is eight or nine, an adopted baby sister suddenly arrives, out of the blue, like a food parcel during the war. Someone tells us she came from Canada. We wonder why she had to come from so far away, but at any rate here she is and we do our best to play with her.

We played ring-a-ring-a-roses on the soft damp grass and then sat round the pond with the cherub in the middle, splashing each other, but quite gently so as not to give the frills on her dress a soaking. Then – perhaps this was a little later, the next day perhaps – we played hide-and-seek in and out of the pine trees at the side of the garden. I remember the resiny smell and the frills of Celeste's frock – we are told she is named after Celeste in the Babar books – just visible around the leathery

russet tree-trunks. It was perhaps the next day, which was calm and sunny, that we took her down to the beach, each taking an arm and swinging her over the shingle until we reached the sand. Celeste chuckled with glee. Munca watched us when we were playing on the lawn, then followed us down to the beach and watched us again from over the garden wall, as though it would spoil the experiment if she got too close.

Playing with Celeste, Blue Waters, 1950

I wondered whether Celeste was her real name, or whether that was another of Munca's inventions. I wondered too what her parents would have thought of Munca. But then I remembered that they wouldn't have been allowed to meet my aunt and uncle because the hand-over would be managed by an agency. Though I was not quite eleven, knowing about the adoption system is something children find out about very early, because the subject is so crucial to them. You cannot help imagining what it would be like to be adopted, and that's why 'you're adopted' is the worst insult you can throw at another child and why there's so much adoption in children's stories, but not so much in grown-up novels, because the fear of not having your own parents looking after you is supposed to fade along with other childish fears, to be replaced by other fears – the ones that don't fade.

What I also went on wondering was whether Georgie herself had actually asked for a little sister, or whether Munca had just presumed that this was something she ought to have, like a pony or a top-of-the-range bicycle. I didn't like to ask Georgie herself, because if she said, Yes, she had asked, that would make her sound like a spoilt child having her every wish gratified, and if she said, No, she hadn't asked, that might have cast doubt on whether she really wanted a sister. Or perhaps I didn't think those things through but just thought the subject was too delicate for me to raise.

I soon grew fond of Celeste, very fond; so did Georgie. We liked her clucks and gurgles, and applauded her first words and sentences, and we admired the way she set off after the dogs, quite fearlessly, and didn't flinch when they surrounded her, bounding along beside her while she trotted off to some corner of the garden on her chubby little legs. Her not being a bit frightened of the dogs put me to shame, but I didn't mind that. All the time we played, I could see Munca smiling her glittery

smile as she pruned the bare branches of the standard roses. I felt proud to be part of this arrangement, which seemed to be going so well, although it was the last thing I had expected when I had got off the train at Angmering.

My parents too were surprised when I told them. 'Oh, adopted, really, that's nice. Does she look like Georgie at all?' My mother said. I retorted, 'No of course she doesn't, she's adopted,' I retorted. 'Silly question,' my mother agreed. I sensed some reservation, though, some unspoken thought, which annoyed me. I now considered myself as a key part of the adoption team and I only wanted to hear positive things. 'Well, I think that's lovely for Georgie,' my mother said, seeing what was expected of her.

That summer, the summer of 1951, I didn't go to stay with Munca. We went to Brittany instead, my first trip abroad and my first foreign food – omelettes at Mont St Michel, snails in garlic butter at St Malo, and my mother let me taste her frogs' legs – like chicken she said, but a very scrawny chicken, I thought. Stumbling across the stony beach reminded me of Angmering, and I missed Celeste as much as I missed Georgie. The Christmas holidays were too short that year to fit in a visit to Angmering, so it was the following Easter that I went back there again.

I couldn't wait to see how Celeste had progressed; not just how much she had grown, but how much her vocabulary had enlarged. I was a regular reader of the feature 'Increase Your Word Power' in *Reader's Digest*, which Munca subscribed to, though I never saw her reading it or anything else much. I had persuaded Georgie that it was part of our duty of care to increase Celeste's word power. Georgie didn't take much persuading, because she had a bossy streak like me, and we started writing down in a green notebook all the words we had heard Celeste use and then teaching her new ones to add to the

list and how to say them properly: no, Celeste, wardrobe not warrobe. She never seemed to pay much attention at the time, but the next day she would point at the little French walnut wardrobe in Munca's bedroom and say 'wardrobe' quite beautifully. We had started teaching her French cricket too, but she didn't really get the hang of the game. What she liked doing was hiding behind whoever was batting and then popping out her dark curly head as a surprise. That's how I think of her still, the dark head darting out one side or the other of Georgie's knees and the upright bat.

That was a Gray's Junior model. For my birthday I had got a larger Select bat, and I took it with me to Blue Waters so I could practise, in the hope that I might get into the Second XI. Georgie came out to greet me; she was definitely taller now and had just gone to Heathfield School at Ascot, a posh boarding school where quite a lot of the parents were divorced and several of them lived in Switzerland.

'Where's Celeste?'

We were halfway between the front gate and the front door, and Munca was coming out of the house towards us. I could see she was in a hurry but trying not to show it.

'She's gone back to her family,' Munca said. 'They'll look after her much better than we could, now that Georgie's away at Heathfield. It was so kind of them to let us have her for so long. We really loved having her, didn't we darling?'

'But wasn't she—?'

I hesitated, not quite daring to say the word, though I think I would have in the end, if not there and then, because the question mattered so much. But Munca saved me the trouble.

'No, she was never properly adopted, darling. We just borrowed her to help her parents out. You had such fun together, didn't you?'

'Oh,' I said. 'Yes, yes, we did.'

It was true that Munca had never used the A-word before, but everything she had said since Celeste first arrived was clearly meant to make us think that she was here for keeps, that she would always be Georgie's little sister. Now suddenly she wasn't. And I knew that could not be right, because children are as clearly seized of the fundamental laws of adoption as any family barrister. After all, everyone is usually an expert in the subject closest to their heart. And what we know is that adoption is a permanent thing. You can't just send a child back like a toy you have got bored of. But it goes deeper than that. Adoption is meant to be a sort of magic, to offer a kind of rescue, salvation even, that is not to be tampered with or desecrated. The romance of Celeste's coming had taken hold of my mind. The mysterious circumstances that had stopped her parents from being able to look after her seemed all the more compelling because it was part of the rules that we should not know what those circumstances were or indeed who the parents were. Was her mother dead or drunk or bankrupt, her father in jail, or dead too, perhaps both of them killed together in a car accident? Now, suddenly, those terrible circumstances had apparently melted away, and so quickly, almost overnight.

The lawn and the shingle seemed empty without that cheerful chubby little figure stumping along chuckling at the dogs. I expected that what Munca had said was only a preliminary, that more would be said once I had settled in, perhaps by Uncle Greig, grown-up legal stuff. Once or twice, I looked at him, and I thought he was going to say something, but then Munca came into the room with her glittery look and he thought better of it. Celeste had become an unperson. I suppose it was the first time in my life this had happened to someone. Whenever it has happened since, in public or private life, I often think of how suddenly Celeste had disappeared from our conversation, as suddenly as she had gone away.

Much later, half a century later in fact, I discover that what we were told was untrue. Marguerite Celeste Mount was adopted by Mr and Mrs G. R. Mount of Blue Waters, Angmering-on-Sea, on 30 April 1950, a week after her second birthday, under an adoption order made by the High Court of Justice (Chancery Division). Celeste was as fully and legally adopted as any child ever has been. But Unca and Munca never mention her name, and we somehow know that it is not a subject to be raised. So Georgie becomes an only child again.