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Muriel Spark

The Biography

Written by Martin Stannard

Published by Phoenix

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MURIEL SPARK

The Biography

MARTIN STANNARD



PHOENIX

CHAPTER 1

Night and Day

1962–1918

Muriel Sarah Camberg arrived in the middle of the night (3 a.m., 1 February 1918) and immediately became her parents' princess. Later in life, she would occasionally amuse herself with the fantasy that she was a real princess, kidnapped by gypsies (her parents). She saw her life as a Cinderella story – and Rossini's *La Cenerentola* was not one of her favourite operas for nothing. How she had emerged from that family intrigued her. She was born in a small rented flat at 160 Bruntsfield Place, in the Morningside district of Edinburgh. Her brother, Philip, had made his appearance in the middle of the day five and a half years earlier,[1] in another flat, down the hill and round the corner at 55 Viewforth. He welcomed his new sister guardedly. As they grew up together this emotional distance increased. And they remained night and day to each other for the rest of their lives, uncomplementary (and sometimes uncomplimentary) opposites. 'My brother', she remarked to me, 'is like a Chekhov short story. When you meet him you'll know what I mean.'

During April 1962, with the great success of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* behind her and life as a celebrity ahead, she began to reflect on all this. She was back in Edinburgh, attending her father's deathbed in the Royal Infirmary. What was she doing in the elegant North British Hotel when her mother, brother and son were gathered in the family home? By hitching her legs up on to the window-sill of her room she could prop herself on one side or the other. The broad sash was lifted,

opening, to the left, on the craggy outcrop of Arthur's Seat, to the right on Princes Street Gardens, just coming into bloom in cold spring sunshine. Above everything loured the castle, erupting between the Old Town and the New. This brutal caesura, dividing the tangle of ancient closes from the rational elegance of eighteenth-century town planning, seemed to her somehow symbolic. There was a link, as yet still an abstraction, between the topography of Edinburgh and the topography of her mind. Most people in her circumstances would have been saturated in melancholy. But Muriel was not like most people. Her response to the world was rarely one of self-pity. She was an artist, a channel through which impressions could flow, a cold medium. At moments like this, when she could feel an image crystallising, the thrill of creation isolated her from the injuries of the terrestrial world and she would give herself up to the process, never knowing where it might lead. On this occasion she felt 'an inpouring of love'[2] for her native city: its style, its tricks of speech, its provincial puritanism and cosmopolitan hauteur. It was the city itself rather than her family that had nurtured her as an artist.

She belonged nowhere, was determined to belong nowhere and to no one. 'It was Edinburgh', she wrote, 'that bred within me the condition of exiledom: and what have I been doing since then but moving from exile into exile?' This was not a lament. Exile for her, as for James Joyce, was the natural condition of the artist. 'It has ceased', she wrote, 'to be a fate, it has become a calling.'[3] Edinburgh was her Dublin, redolent of escaped impositions yet bred in the bone of her art. It was the locus of conflicting memories: of those who had tried to impose guilt for the audacity of claiming independence, of the solid pleasures of a well-regulated, prelapsarian life. Her father, Bernard (Barney) Camberg, was a Jew; her mother, Sarah (Cissy) Camberg (née Uezzell), a woman of eclectic religious tastes, had been brought up as a Christian but, probably to please him, had married him in a synagogue. It was a liberal-minded, happy-go-lucky family. Having married out, Barney maintained an unswerving devotion to his wife and daughter. There were others, Muriel felt, who had betrayed her. And as she looked out over the city she realised that this unexpected welling-up of affection 'was psychologically

connected with my love for my father and with the exiled sensation of occupying a hotel room [...] meant for strangers'.[4] Now that he was dying, she would soon, metaphorically speaking, be homeless. She had cast herself out as a young woman and had never wished to return. Nevertheless, Edinburgh was the home which had made her independence possible, and, for her, all the positive qualities of 'home' centred on her father.

The day of his death – 21 April 1962 – was for Muriel something of an epiphany, and the necessary metaphor centring on the castle began to take shape. 'To have a great primitive black crag rising up in the middle of populated streets of commerce, stately squares and winding closes', she wrote, 'is like the statement of an unmitigated fact preceded by "nevertheless".' The speech habit, she now remembered, which had always fascinated her when listening to her teachers or to the murmuring tight-lipped women in musquash coats taking tea at MacVitties, was that 'word of final justification', 'nevertheless':

> [...] my whole education, in and out of school, seemed even then to pivot around this word. [...] I approve of the ceremonious accumulation of weather forecasts and barometer-readings that pronounce for a fine day, before letting rip on the statement: 'Nevertheless, it's raining.' I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea. I act upon it. It was on the nevertheless principle that I turned Catholic.[5]

Edinburgh had taught her this, epitomised paradox. It was a grand European city; nevertheless, it was provincial. It was her home, had given her a strong civic pride; nevertheless, she was, in terms of class and her father's religion, an alien. It had instilled in her a fundamental feminism and exactness of mind; nevertheless, she was not a 'political' feminist and she was, first, last, and always, a poet. Human beings could organise themselves into complex and comfortably self-justifying structures: towns, families, languages, systems of manners and authority; nevertheless, in the midst of everything and usually ignored reared the savage 'unmitigated fact' of death. This ultimate point of reference, of departure, had fascinated her since adolescence. She had always been

a 'watcher', an outsider, silently recording the antics of anyone who swam into her gaze. Now the sustaining fiction of her childhood – the supportive family – had died with her father. And although she could look out on the city with the nostalgia of one who was grateful to have known a place where she had once felt safe, she knew that the last shadow of its unqualified love had faded. From that point, she was on her own, and she began to make arrangements to live abroad. It was the hinge of her life, the point at which the second half of her existence began to rewrite the first.

*

Bruntsfield Place today is much the same as it was during Muriel's childhood: a city street, a ribbon of commerce servicing the residential areas near by. Respectable grey stone tenements rise three floors above a string of small shops. Between these shops, at regular intervals, the heavy staircase doors are tight-shut against strangers. A pile of surnames details the occupants. In 1918, visitors stood between Miss Morrison's confectionery and Lauders' Shoes to pull a brass knob which, through an elaborate connection of wires, rang the bell. It tinkled frequently in the Cambergs' first-floor flat, and Muriel listened for it eagerly. Then someone would go out on to the landing, pull a lever to open the street door, and shout down enquiry and welcome. The district was like a village within the city, Mrs Camberg one of its 'characters'. These regular callers brought a welcome gust of the outside world with them when dropping in on her for a chin-wag over a cup of tea, something to eat, possibly a full meal. No one left that house hungry or without the latest neighbourhood gossip.

Beyond the front door, the main bedroom was immediately to the left, at one end of a central corridor and, next to it, the sitting room, a parlour kept conspicuously tidy with a sofa, a piano, an ornate over-mantel and the bay window. Off this room was a windowless bed-closet. These rooms overlooked the street, with its rattling electric trams, and the more elegant terrace of Bruntsfield Gardens. At the other end of the corridor were the small back bedroom, the bathroom, the coal cellar and the kitchen, which also had a bed-recess. Lodgers (who included

Professor and Mrs Rule) usually occupied the main bedroom, occasionally the sitting room. Most of the life of the house took place in the kitchen. Muriel's parents usually slept in the boxroom off it. When her maternal grandmother, Adelaide Uezzell, moved in during 1927, Muriel gave up her back bedroom and for six years slept on a sofa in the kitchen. It was there that Cissy held court.

This large room looked out on to a back green enclosed in a square by the tenements of Bruntsfield Place, Bruntsfield Avenue, Viewforth and Montpellier. As usual in Edinburgh, the grassy space was shared by them all as a place to hang out washing or as a safe area for children to play. To the left of the kitchen window stood a gas oven and, on the left-hand wall, a cast-iron cooking range, remnant of Edwardian days. Over this hung a grim photograph of some Jewish patriarch whose identity Muriel never discovered. Its only interest for her was that it suddenly fell and smashed on the evening before her maternal grandfather's, Tom Uezzell's, death.[6] The most important item stood in the centre of the room: an eight-seater table which often groaned with food like an inexhaustible smorgasbord.

Cissy was twenty-nine when Muriel was born, Barney thirty-two. In terms of economic classification they were working-class but they had risen somewhat in the social scale by moving up the hill from Viewforth. Morningside was the province of the professional classes and their new situation brought with it the strain of keeping up appearances. Bruntsfield Place was comfortably petit-bourgeois. Few of its residents were working-class. Fewer still were Jewish. Muriel's brother felt this sense of alienation intensely: the embarrassment of having to take in lodgers, the whiff of anti-Semitism. As a lad, Barney had run away to sea but been quickly tracked down and returned. Then he had completed an apprenticeship as a motor-car engineer, although he never earned his living doing this.[7] Jobs were scarce. Both parents were anxious about financial security and keen to provide for their children's advancement. So Barney took skilled factory work at the North British Rubber Company and remained with the firm, as a fitter and mechanical engineer, until he retired at the age of seventy.

It was tough work. On lathes and drilling machines he would shape the heavy castings for a motor-car tyre known as 'The Clincher'. Each day he would be out of the house early in his overalls to walk a mile down Viewforth to the huge brick building at Castle Mills. In fine weather he would see the Firth of Forth glittering in the distance. In winter he would frequently arrive soaked and frozen for his eight-hour shift. Often it was longer. Whenever there was overtime, he took it. Each night he would return as black as soot, sometimes bearing large boxes from the factory to bust up for firewood, then bathe, change into suit, tie and well-brushed shoes for the evening's alternative life. This might be work or play. They could not exist on his wages, not, at least, if they were to maintain some sense of style – and Barney and Cissy enjoyed clothes, dancing and a drink. He smoked ten Players a day and sported a homburg. She was, Philip remembered, 'a real hat woman. She had to go out looking like a millionairess even if she only had two pennies in her pocket.' Always well-dressed, she had the bearing of the late Queen Mother. Both parents were determined to send their children to fee-paying schools. So, throughout Muriel's early childhood, they took in lodgers and Barney would occasionally disappear into the gloaming to arrange some small-scale, tax-free deals in second-hand furniture. He acted as an agent. Someone would want something. He would find out how to get it and take commission. Tired as he was, he enjoyed his trading. He often thought of establishing his own firm, and this dream reflected a persistent anxiety. 'My father's family did not think too highly of him', Philip recalled, 'for the simple reason that he was just a working engineer. [. . .] The rest of the family were in business and if you're not in business, according to them, you're nobody.'

One senses that Barney was a frustrated man: resilient, droll, industrious, yet taciturn and lacking the real fierceness of ambition. When he mentioned the idea of opening a shop, Cissy would dissuade him. Think of the outlay . . . Think of the risk . . . Once, Professor Rule offered him a much better job in America. But Barney was anxious about uprooting the children and, anyway, Cissy, constitutionally nervous, would not take the chance. When living in their first flat in Viewforth, she had

suffered a breakdown after disturbing an intruder, and she never allowed anyone to forget it. From that point, she drank every day to steady herself: small quantities of 'port wine' at first; later, a bottle of Madeira a day. If she were going on a journey, she would always take her silver flask. She was never drunk but she liked being queenly. Alcohol released her vivacity and transformed inhibitions into eccentric self-confidence. Barney, it seems, ignored her habit, happy to reclaim a handsome wife who could laugh and go out on the town with him. He was a protective, courtly husband. Occasionally he would lament that, had it not been for her, he might have been a greater success. But this was, more than anything, a family joke. Marrying Sarah, and defending her, had signalled a cooling of relations with his own people. She was also working-class, Gentile, and a Sassenach to boot. Philip had only the faintest knowledge of his paternal grandparents, Muriel none – Barney never talked about them – and neither knew much more of their father's siblings. The family extended rather to Watford and to Cissy's parents and brothers.

There was little time or money for holidays. On sunny weekends or bank holidays, the Cambergs might board a tram for the nearby beaches of Portobello. These were Philip and Muriel's only bucket-and-spade excursions with their parents. She had warm memories of being carried back, contented in her father's arms, along the last, gaslit stretch of pavement. But for Barney's free fortnight, usually during late summer, they would head south. 'I used to put all the chairs together in the hallway like a train weeks before we went,' Philip recalled:

> Such a build-up of excitement until [. . .] we got a cab down to the Caley [Caledonian] Station. Mother would make sandwiches for the trip – eggs and cress and sometimes ham and fruit and of course her bottle of wine. The most amazing thing was, before the train started to go Mother would be giving our sandwiches to any other people in the carriage, so that by the time we got to Carstairs, all the food was gone.[8]

Reckless hospitality was Cissy's most endearing characteristic. As fast as anything came in, it went out. Slender means, she determined, need not

constrain magnanimity, and thus the financial pinch was eased by gusto and style. The Cambergs were a short family – short of cash, short in stature, small figures in the rarefied class-structure of Edinburgh – but they walked tall, and in Watford enjoyed a certain cachet among their country cousins.

Watford in the twenties was a tranquil market town encircled by fields, not, as now, by motorways and the seamless brick infill of Greater London. The city was a train ride away through farmland. Many Watford folk knew their wild flowers; agricultural life still ebbed and flowed in seasonal rhythm. This is the Watford the Camberg children visited. At first they all stayed with Cissy's parents, Adelaide and Tom Uezzell, sleeping in one tiny bedroom above their shop-of-all-sorts at 288 High Street. Across the road, in a tumbledown row of cottages, lived one of their rare customers, an ancient, inquisitive woman: Mrs Longnose to Tom. The marketplace was a stroll away where farmers still clicked and whistled their cattle into pens, and stalls were heaped with fruit and vegetables. Philip remembered a thunderstorm which so terrified the pigs that they broke loose and stampeded, squealing past the house. But the town was already changing. He also remembered an accident in which a lorry knocked down a young girl and terribly injured her. Barney carried her into the house, distressed, the blood soaking his jacket. Behind No. 288 ran the Bushey Arches, a viaduct carrying the new electric railway. The cottages opposite were demolished to make way for a sour-smelling gasometer. Although its rural traditions continued, Watford had already provided substantial acreages for the capital's printing industry – and work for Muriel's male cousins.

In retrospect, it seems appropriate that Muriel should have spent so many contented hours of her childhood in close proximity to hot type. But in those days she knew nothing of it. She flew box kites with Philip, played among her grandfather's chickens and rabbits in the back garden, went on picnics to Croxley Green, Hemel Hempstead, St Albans. One precious day would be set aside for an excursion to London. Her absorbing interest, however, was the Dickensian atmosphere of the shop itself.

While Philip was train-spotting, she would be pattering about Adelaide's skirts, watching, listening. She was always listening.

Muriel's experience of similar establishments in Edinburgh was quite different. Miss Morrison's side of the confectionery counter had been built up to lend an air of authority. She ran a tight shop. Any child attempting purchases without parental supervision would be closely questioned as to the source of the cash. The Uezzells' way of doing business was to provide a ramshackle assortment of goods: sweets, penny packets of tea and of arrowroot biscuits, mineral waters, ginger beer, lemon squash. On the counter, beneath a fly-blown glass cover, sat an ancient cake laced with 'telegraph wires' of crystallised sugar. Fruit and vegetables crowded the large, open front window. Odd groups of children (unsupervised) wandered in, as did the local geriatrics, an occasional policeman and, of course, the family. Three doors down, at No. 282, Cissy's brother Phil, Alice and their six children[9] lived in equally cramped conditions, until they moved to No. 292, and eventually to a larger place in the suburbs.

Uncle Phil was a railwayman turned tailor, his sideboard crammed with precious thread and fabrics. Alice had been a professional cook for gentlemen's clubs in London. They were of the skilled working class, providing service for the gentry. Their children were brought up with strong discipline but, in comparison with Philip and Muriel, ran free. All went out to work at fourteen, the three boys entering 'the print'. While deeply respectful of their parents, they saw themselves as belonging to a more adventurous generation. Roger Uezzell's first job was to carry printers' proofs to London three times a day by train, and he used his season ticket regularly in the evenings to escape to the city's entertainments. 'I liked me London,' he said with a wry smile in interview, but as to Muriel, whom he had known quite well during their childhood, he was utterly baffled by what she had become, had never read her work.[10] Printing may have been her male cousins' trade but writing was not important to this family. They were simple folk, lively and warm. Describing their father, Phyllis and Roger remembered 'a dead gentleman',[11] strict but genial, always laughing, often at himself,

close to his sister and, like her, generous, affectionate, sentimental.

Uncle Phil and Cissy must often have talked of their brother, Harry. He is the wraith-like figure who appears briefly with his brass buttons gleaming in Muriel's 'The First Year of My Life'. Gassed in the First World War, Harry had returned to marry Bessie, a silly creature in family lore, and to live in Edinburgh where Barney had found him a job at the rubber factory. By her Harry had a son and daughter before dying in their infancy of a tubercular throat. Bessie had revisited Watford briefly, then disappeared to the South-West. Uncle Phil begged her never to part with the children, to come to him if ever she needed help. She promised. Later it emerged that she had placed them in separate orphanages. The ghosts of those lost children still haunted the Uezzell clan in the 1990s. 'It broke Dad's heart,' Phyllis remarked – and the anecdote says much about the determination to maintain family unity which Phil and Cissy shared. Both were loyal to their curious parents.

Adelaide and Tom were an odd couple. She was tiny, brisk, smart-tongued, and with a face fit to terrify those of nervous constitution. But she had her softer side – for those she liked. As a single woman, she had been in service, possibly with Lady de Rothschild's household.[12] When married, she marched with the Watford Suffragettes. Exploring the shop one day, Muriel discovered handbills wrapping dusty bundles of candles: 'Votes for Women!' 'Why do you Oppress Women!'[13] Adelaide filled her granddaughter's head with stories, acted them out and rapidly became a heroine to the girl: 'I see her in the vanguard, leading the women in her dance of triumph.'[14]

That 'dance of triumph' typifies the joyful victory of Muriel's fictional heroines over their oppressors, men and women alike. Adelaide was a mystery, a fabulist, a valkyrie. Almost nothing is known of her background. No birth record can be traced. She told Muriel that her father was a quack doctor; on her death certificate he is cited as Philip Hyams, shoemaker. He was, she said, Jewish, her mother Gentile. Within the family she 'boasted of her Jewish blood because it made her so clever'.[15] But, having known poverty and discrimination, she was pragmatic where money was concerned and said nothing of her Jewish heritage to

her customers. Apparently, she laid the foundation stone of the local Methodist church (now demolished) and attended it regularly. When Muriel asked her about her religion, the old lady described herself as a 'Gentile Jewess', and the phrase struck home. It was also, Muriel felt, an apt description of her mother and of herself. Adelaide had fallen in love with Tom, six years her junior, hunted him down and won him. It was a story repeated by Barney and Cissy – and Muriel admired this passion, snapping its fingers at convention. Two generations along the line, she was intrigued by her Jewish roots. The experience of growing up in a family of diverse origins was integral to her vision of the world.

Adelaide appears to have been raised in Bethnal Green, then an impoverished quarter of East London, and was possibly the child of immigrant parents. They were a poor but respectable family who seem to have followed the Jewish observances of the father. The Tom who had courted her was an affable fellow, six feet two inches, handsome and bearded in the style of the young Joseph Conrad. A Watford man with the local drawl, he came from a line of grim churchgoers mostly holed up in Vicarage Road. They were displeased by the match. She was a rough diamond from a 'mixed marriage', and had a sister in Edinburgh who had married the son of a Jewish minister. Tom's father, John Uezzell, was a prosperous master baker with impeccable Anglican credentials. Nevertheless, there was an urgent matter to be resolved, for Adelaide was several months' pregnant when Tom married her at St Bartholomew's Parish Church, Bethnal Green, on 3 January 1886. He was twenty-five, she thirty-one.

His own family, it seems, Tom found unendurably tedious. Piety had never been his strong suit. Sacked from the Metropolitan Police for drunkenness, he spent the remainder of his days comfortably idling between the pub and his garden. 'He doesn't work,' Adelaide growled. 'I keep him.' Tom would accept the obloquy, shrug his shoulders and amble off to tend his chickens. On her death certificate he is described as a 'gardener', on Cissy's as a 'baker'. He was neither, except in an amateur capacity. He did nothing and did it perfectly. Each morning he would rise early and bring his guests tea in bed. Most children adored

him and feared his wife. To Muriel and Philip, both were 'characters', amusingly at odds with the mundane. A no-nonsense exotic, Adelaide dressed in severe Victorian black: ankle-length skirts with multiple petticoats. Occasionally she would hoik up her dress for the children to display a bag, heavy with coins, suspended from a tape round her waist. This was her 'purse', the symbol of her independence. She ran the shop, ruled the roost, was effectively head of that branch of the family. She also preferred the Cambergs to the Uezzells and made no secret of it. It was Tom who used to slip bars of chocolate into the pockets of Roger and Phyllis. Adelaide did the same for Muriel.

Inevitably this favouritism bred small resentments among the Uezzell children. The shop was tiny. One walked straight off the pavement into it, and through the back to a parlour and kitchen. A rickety staircase led to two bedrooms. It was a tight fit for six people. So when Uncle Phil and his brood moved to their larger house a couple of miles away, Philip stayed with them while Muriel remained with her parents at the shop. Philip contentedly mucked in with his cousins (and was still visiting them in Watford during the 1990s); Muriel was kept at a distance. 'He [Philip] really enjoyed himself,' Phyllis recalled. 'The girl was never allowed to play or do anything. It was holding daddy's hand and "Pet, no. No, Pet." He'd got her hand and would never let her go. I never remember her dressed in anything but kilt and oatmeal jumper. We had to do what *they* said, according to grandmother. Grandfather was different. He was like we were. He was for us. But grandmother, no.' There was, Phyllis felt, a class difference between the Edinburgh and the Watford children. 'Aunt Ciss [. . .] she was always a lady. [. . .] She had *two* children, if you understand me. My mother had six and had to look after six.' This, however, was a reflection on Adelaide rather than on her daughter. Everyone loved Aunt Ciss. Roger was devoted to her. It was Barney, Phyllis felt, who was aloof.

Adelaide never welcomed Uncle Phil's children. She was an appalling cook and there was always the danger that she might offer food. Hilda and Phyllis were sent to visit during the Christmas of 1926. It was a long, cold walk. No buses were running. Hilda was twelve years old, Phyllis

nearly fourteen. They didn't want to go. Adelaide's consistent spitefulness towards their mother and her unfavourable comparisons between them and 'little Philly and little Muriel' were deterrents enough. But Tom was ill. 'Hello grandmother,' said Phyllis on the doorstep. 'Dad's asked us to come and ask, "How is grandfather?"' 'You can go back and tell him,' Adelaide snapped, 'if he was dying I wouldn't send for him.' Then she softened. 'I suppose you'd better come in.' Thick slices of indigestible Christmas pudding, clotted with flour-and-water paste, were cut: 'There you are. Eat it.'

Unfortunately, Tom *was* dying and lasted only until 28 December. Adelaide took in a young couple as lodgers, quarrelled with them, then fell down the stairs, fracturing her shoulder. When she came out of hospital, Uncle Phil offered her a home, the shop was boarded up, and that concluded the Cambergs' Watford holidays. Adelaide's sharpness towards the Uezzells was temporarily blunted by dependency. She gave Alice one of her gold sovereigns, modified her behaviour towards the children. Before long, however, she had registered her discontent strongly enough for Barney and Cissy to come down, take the old lady back to Edinburgh, and install her in Muriel's bedroom. Muriel was then about nine. She didn't mind in the least. It never occurred to her to mind. The Cambergs' duty, they all agreed, was to close ranks and to make Adelaide's last years as comfortable as possible. Cissy was a devoted daughter and, from Muriel's point of view, this addition to their household was a positive benefit. At last she had this delightful eccentric at close quarters. On many evenings Muriel would sit at a small table in the back bedroom while her parents were out dancing or at the cinema, completing her homework, writing poems or letters, listening to the radio and making desultory conversation with her grandmother. Everything about this rebarbative septuagenarian fascinated her: clothes, jewellery, sovereigns, tricks of speech, even her slow death.

Adelaide's removal generated some heat on the Edinburgh / Watford axis. There was the complex and largely unarticulated issue of how well or ill Uncle Phil's clan had cared for her. The Cambergs' assumption of this responsibility was welcomed; the implicit accusation of neglect was

not. The shop's effects were probably distributed at this point. According to Phyllis, Barney angered his brother-in-law by briskly staking claims: '"I want this. I'd like that." And my grandfather's gold watch and chain, he took it as well. Everything of any value, he wanted. So my father said, "Oh well, all right Barney. If you want it all, you can have it."' On the piano stood a pair of hideous pink Victorian vases with crystal tears which tinkled when brushed. Barney added them to his list and left Phil to see to the packing and carriage. Phil, never one to start an argument, agreed to everything and satisfied himself with the quiet revenge of dispatching it all cash-on-delivery.

This was the Uezzell version. But Barney, of course, would have been under instructions from Adelaide to ensure that all her valuables went with her. They were her only resource beyond the coins swinging among her petticoats. When she died, she would will everything (as Muriel herself did) to those who took best care of her. Adelaide was a caustic, practical woman, not in the least fearful of causing offence, and she must have known that Cissy and Phil were far too close to permit open warfare in the holy citadel of The Family.

There had been a regular traffic of relations from Watford to Edinburgh for decades and, despite the debacle, it continued. In the early days, Adelaide and Tom would come to stay, separately, it seems, so that someone could mind the shop. Tom would shamble up from the Caledonian Station like Dick Whittington, his few possessions tied in a piece of cloth on a stick across his shoulder. His wife's visits were more regal. She probably came to help Cissy immediately after the birth of the children. (On one famous occasion, baby Muriel's screaming had become intolerable. Her grandmother had pleaded for someone to shut that child up. Five-year-old Philip, eager to help, had pressed a fur muff[16] over Muriel's face and Adelaide had arrived only just in time to save the girl for literature.) Uncle Phil would often be at 160 Bruntsfield Place for New Year. From the 1940s until Cissy's death, his children came up regularly for Scottish holidays. Muriel, however, felt that something had irrevocably changed since Adelaide had moved in. The event represented a stage in her developing self-consciousness, as her father's death did

later, from which there was no retreat. After that, if her parents or brother travelled to Watford, she stayed at home. Insofar as she had ever shared interests with the Uezzell children, those interests were now dead – and, anyway, she actively preferred the company of her grandmother. This quiet but determined separation, and the gravitation towards those much older than herself, became a feature of Muriel's existence. For this shyly self-possessed young woman already had literary ambitions. Dreamily in love with the idea of the artistic life, and scenting her vocation, she craved mentors: not only those who could provide formal education but also, and more importantly, vivid figures who could teach her to 'know the worst' and to laugh in its face.

Adelaide was just such a figure. When she arrived she was about seventy-three: shaky but still active and mentally alert. For the last three years of her stay she was mostly bedridden, crippled by two strokes a year apart. Muriel helped Cissy to nurse her, learning the techniques of feeding and heavy lifting. Adelaide was paralysed down one side, her speech scrambled by aphasia. Many children would have found this distressing or tedious. Not Muriel.

> Before her stroke I had noticed how her memory worked. It came in snatches, vignettes. I was beginning to practise memories myself. When my grandmother talked of her sister, Kitty, gloating over her because she had finer clothes, I would egg on my grandmother: 'And then what did you say?' 'I just walked out of the room and I said, "Goodbye, Rotten Row".'[17]

The phrase amused Muriel. Its light-hearted contempt well describes her own reaction to insult. Adelaide somehow empowered her – and could make her laugh. The two things were connected.

When poleaxed by cerebral haemorrhage Adelaide was in one sense diminished. Muriel recalled a terrible day when the old lady had panicked, misunderstanding the family's preparations to take her to the seaside for an attempt to place her in a home. 'We were all full of consternation that [she] should imagine that we could treat her so badly. It made me realise how vulnerable the aged are.'[18] Nevertheless, for

Muriel, the phenomenon of aphasia and the imminence of death were fascinating. Adelaide called Philip the 'dressing-table' and Gillespie's School 'laryngitis'. Muriel conducted elementary verbal experiments and discovered that there were no symbolic connections. That sense of the gap between words and meaning also became fundamental to her as an artist – as did this first brush with mortality: 'I think my experiences in minding and watching my grandmother formed a starting-point for my future novel, *Memento Mori* [1959], in which the characters are all elderly people.'[19] She might also have mentioned a string of affectionate portraits of eccentric old ladies, abused by the fools who surround them and loved by the heroine: Louisa Jepp in *The Comforters* (1957), Charmian Piper in *Memento Mori*, Lady Edwina in *Loitering with Intent* (1981). Grandmother Uezzell (she was always 'grandmother', never 'granny') became for Muriel an abstract image of the female artist: isolated, considered by the 'sane', male-dominated world to be dangerously unhinged, yet simultaneously released from Mr Asquith's liberal nonsense into a new, infinitely flexible, discourse between the imagination and the material world. That world would always try to silence women. Adelaide taught Muriel to speak out, to walk out, to savour the delicious swerve of the non sequitur, verbal and mental. It was strength. Like Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent*, she believed that 'weakness of character [. . .] is no more to be despised than is physical weakness. We are not all born heroes and athletes. At the same time it is elementary wisdom always to fear weaknesses, including one's own; the reactions of the weak, when touched off, can be horrible and sudden.'[20] Grandmother Uezzell, wife of a charming but weak man, taught her this, too.

When Adelaide was dying, on 10 August 1933, Muriel was called in:

> It was about 9 p.m. The doctor had just left. I had put my hair in curlers. For some reason I felt that this would be unseemly at a death-bed, so I took out the curlers and combed my hair before I went in. My grandmother was unconscious. There was a strange sound. My father said softly, 'It's the death rattle.' Something was happening in my grand-

> mother's throat. Her eyes were closed. The rattle stopped. She gave a great sigh and died.[21]

That is all: no maundering eulogy. The facts of death are baldly stated. When Muriel remembered her, she remembered her spirited defiance, 'above all her sardonic, humorous and robust remarks when privately discussing certain of her neighbours with my mother',[22] and her fabulous 'blue silk brocade going-away dress'.[23]

Muriel had dubbed this garment 'Bluebell' because Adelaide, in a brief moment of escape, had worn it to a fancy-dress party at Watford Church Union. She had gone as 'A Bluebell', hat and basket decked with fabric flowers, and for once in her life had won a prize.

> Of course, I tried it on, and although it was far too big, I swept around in it, thinking of all the parts I could take in period plays. Alas, after the death of my grandmother [. . .] I succumbed to the current fashion and, with my mother's approval, cut up the bluebell gown to make cushion covers. They looked wonderful, but the dress itself should never have been touched. It glowed with its deep and heavy brocaded blueness. It was sewn by hand, with a minutely stitched lining.[24]

Although no interpretation is offered, this apparently innocuous passage is pregnant with association when one knows of the importance of this woman and of the word 'Bluebell' in Muriel's life. These are Proustian touchstones of memory. The dress is presented as a work of art whose intricate structure she was too young to appreciate. Yet she is obliquely sensible of its aesthetic force. It shimmers darkly in a dark world, gathering meaning in retrospect as an image of the power of art, attached in Muriel's mind to the power of untrammelled womanhood, both of which are threatened by conventional femininity. One might even see her mother as implicated in this destruction. She *should* have known better. Instead, cushion covers were allowed to triumph over the single, coherent, artistic object. Simultaneously, there is also pathos here: the image of the dress as a talisman in Adelaide's otherwise mundane existence, a symbol of what might have been, of her rare entries into the

fantastic. The dress is the non sequitur of Adelaide's life.

The word 'Bluebell' held magic for Muriel. Years later, when she was struggling to bring her first novel into being, she gave her precious half-Persian cat this name and wrote a poem, 'Bluebell among the Sables'. In this, 'Bluebell, my beautiful', a green-eyed sprite, attacks the furs of an elegant but dull lady visitor, 'Shaking their kindly tails between her teeth.' The visitor is horrified, Muriel amused: 'No need for alarm; / Those dead pelts can't cause Bluebell any harm.'[25] The poem renders a moment of vision: the live cat invigorating the inert furs. But there is more to it than this. Bluebell, surely, represents the artistic spirit, the feline spark confronting the mundane, the merely fashionable. The cat is Muriel. Muriel is the cat, smiling with sardonic joy.

None of these interpretations, of course, is exclusively 'right'. Many more would be possible. Muriel always wrote like this: leaving voids for the reader to fill. But there is a recurrent strand in the pattern of her life and work: that the energy of creation was her oxygen rather than the desire to be liked or even to be 'happy'. 'I preferred to be interested as I was', Fleur Talbot remarks, 'than happy as I might be.'

> I wasn't sure that I so much wanted to be happy, but I knew I had to follow my nature. [...] What is truth? [...] When people say that nothing happens in their lives I believe them. But you must understand that everything happens to an artist; time is always redeemed, nothing is lost and wonders never cease.[26]

The penalty of this joy, and its source, was alienation. Somewhere, clouded among the trophies of her girlhood in Edinburgh, lay the roots of that rootlessness which she finally came to ponder as her father lay dying in 1962.