

No Room for Secrets

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This book is for Jamie and Tessa,
Alice and Emily

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Prologue

I may have been in your life for many years, as a vaguely remembered name, or as a shadow on a flickering television screen in the background; or this may be the first time we've met. In any case I've been in your home – but through an appalling oversight I have never invited you into my house until now. You can't say you really know someone until you've seen where and how they live. My house is my home, where all my life is assembled; all thoughts and memories from my earliest days up to this very moment are here, and this book will be a tour of... well, to be frank, me.

Q. Can we ask questions?

A. Of course you can. I prefer to talk to people like this, one to one, heart to heart – and we can go at your speed because you are a welcome visitor.

Q. In that case, where is your husband?

A. I want you to know that my husband Stephen is not in the house at the moment. He is far away in Chicago, working on an opera, so we can get this show on the road and polk about without disturbing him. He's rather private, actually, and although I know he's very happy that you're touring my heart, my life, my home, he cannot be here. I thought we would start at the beginning of my life in the hall, and end up in the attic, which is as far as we can go without climbing on to the roof tiles. Just as rooms contain all sorts of different things, so this book will hop from memory to memory; in effect it will be in real time and because I speak rather fast, I think we can cram it all in during this one precious visit. But look! I'm talking like this and you haven't even got over the threshold. Please come in.

Hall

I was born under Taurus, on the evening of the 1st of May 1946, a year before the Partition of India and in one of the loveliest countries in the world: Kashmir. The nursing home in Gupkar Road, Srinagar, is still there, with its painted verandas and quiet garden shaded by tall plane trees. The old city sprawls comfortably among the Dal and Nagarnag lakes, criss-crossed with tree-lined canals and paddy fields; the colossal mountains of the Karakoram and Himalayan ranges roar away into the sky; kingfishers dip amongst the tethered wooden houseboats where small boats called *shikaras* sell their wares – vegetables, jewellery, cloth and chickens.

My parents had met and married in Kashmir; on both sides of my family India had been home for several generations. James Lumley, my father, had joined the Gurkhas almost as soon as he'd left Sandhurst; his having been born in Lahore – where his father, my grandfather, had been a banker – meant that India had got under his skin for ever. As a very little boy he had been sent back to boarding schools in England, as were his elder sisters. He was always called Jimmy; good at games, a fine horseman and polo player, he was quite slight in build, about 5 feet 10 inches tall, with a tremendously high, broad forehead: my sister and I used to call him the Educated Egg. My mother's parents had married in Rangoon: Leslie Weir, a Scot born in Ghazipur, and Thyra Sommers, a Danish girl born in New Zealand...

Q. Please get on with it.

A.... and my mother, Beatrice, only missed being born in Persia – as it was – by days, as her family moved from this to that diplomatic posting. We were all used to travelling all the time. England was 'home' even though they didn't live here: England was in fact 'school' and later on 'leave'. My mother was seven years younger than her sister Joan Marjorie, which meant she was brought up mostly as an only child, at boarding school when the family was travelling in Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet, and then returning when she was 17 to the country she loved and felt most at home in, India. Look at this huge map: it's almost the first thing you see as you come in through the front door, 'Kashmir and Jammu and the Gilgit Region, 1940', traced with little red pencil lines where my mother had trekked, being a passionate hillwalker. The hall is covered with pictures, photographs and drawings. The floor is uncarpeted – the house was built in 1847, and the Victorian fashion was for these tiny tessellated tiles set in a pretty pattern.

Q. Are they meant to clink like that when you walk on them? Some of them are loose.

A. No, of course not, and thank you for asking. They get a lot of wear and tear and I've tried to glue them down and cement them in but it's fairly hopeless. I like the idea of bare floors, and I like the slip-slap of a foot on an uncarpeted ground. Some of this comes from the enjoyment of a cool floor in a hot country, from my earliest memories. Anyway, my father met my mother in the hill station Gulmarg when he was on leave: she, rather

tomboy by nature, was doing a headstand on the grass, and when she turned the right way up with all her black hair tumbled round her face he thought, 'I must marry that girl.' My sister, Ælene, was born in what is now Pakistan, in Abbottabad, two years before my story started. So I had the luckiest of all beginnings: an excellent ready-made family, a May Day birth, a Himalayan background and what I thought was a 'Monday's child fair of face' gift. I swear my mother said I was born on a Monday – but I have just now discovered it was really a Wednesday, which has absolutely shaken me. All my life I have thought of myself as a painted clown and an optimist whose duty is always to be cheerful and suddenly I am 'Wednesday full of woe' and it has set me back. (I have only known this for the past six months.)

We left India for ever a year after I was born when the Partition of India took place. Those days are now so remote from the way life is lived today that it's very hard to believe they're within living memory. Journeys were made by ship, taking many weeks and it wasn't uncommon when children were sent back to school in England for them not to see their parents for several years. It didn't mean that families were any less loving or concerned – it was simply the custom, rather like sons' unquestioningly following their fathers into the coalmines. It was expected. But when my parents married and we were born, they decided they didn't want us to have the same fractured upbringing they had endured. We all packed up and followed the flag, or bugle, or in fact marching orders and travelled like so many service families to wherever we were sent. As soon as we arrived, my mother would make our nursery or bedroom familiar: a Kay Nixon print of red squirrels, Beatrix Potter pictures, and books, a Chinese rug and the toy-basket. I can't remember ever feeling sad at leaving a house – the future and the unknown always eclipsed any regrets. Even now, the moment you're at the departure gate, or when the train pulls out of the station, you turn your face and mind to the journey ahead while the immediate past streaks away like smoke in the wind.

These suitcases stacked up here like a hall table have labels hanging off them and glued to their sides: BOAC, ancient hotels in Cairo, triangular stickers saying 'Biarritz'. They give me a thrill and a sense of security, of certainty that 'travel' will soon be here again, even if it's not for good. The idea of stopping travelling fills me with an immeasurable dread; but Stephen has grown heartily sick of the protracted torture of air travel, where cramped seats, delays and jet-lag rather smash you flat before you set foot in the new destination. Here's a picture of him when he was at the Choir School, and lots of old family pictures, and a huge Maltese clock which I can't remember to wind up; it strikes in code, in clusters of three and four, and gains about half an hour a day, so it has limited practical use – but it's very beautiful, with its pictures of Valletta harbour and hand-painted flowers. The troop-ships always stopped at Malta on their way to and from the Far East: Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Port Saïd, Colombo, Singapore, Hong Kong. Five weeks. Please put your coat on this rush-seated hall chair and follow me.

Study

This is my study. It used to be Stephen's music room, fantastically crammed with the Steinway B grand piano, the harpsichord, all his sheet music, records, CDs, tapes, old 78 rpm gramophone records, music boxes and so on. Now it still looks completely crammed but with books, and pictures leaning against the walls, and boxes of photographs, and paintings all hugger-mugger almost up to the ceiling. I know where everything is. I have the mind of a filing clerk and can retrieve almost anything in about two minutes. I keep old scripts now; I used to throw them all away. I keep letters and bills and stationery in this cupboard, which used to hold Jamie's clothes when he was little. I've painted the exterior lichen-green, with an orange interior. I've just noticed that all my preceding sentences start with 'I'. This is something to be careful about. In letters of support or commendation, which I write very often nowadays, I make sure the sentences don't start with 'I'. But I'm in a whirl of me, an ego-trip like a runaway train, I, me, my, mine, ego, *me, mei, mihi, me*. I started learning Latin at St Mary's in the Michaelmas term in 1957, my first term, as a new girl yet again, thrilled to the core by the vast winding corridors, the smell of incense, gas lights and chapel bells. I can't remember much Latin now, but I still love it.

Q. Where did Stephen go with his music? And why are we calling him Stephen all of a sudden? Don't you call him Stevie?

A. Yes, yes I do; but for strangers reading this book who don't know him – or me, come to that – it seems a bit familiar. I've always known him as Stevie, but most of his music colleagues know him as Stephen. Or Maestro. What happened was this: by the side of our long thin garden runs a garden wall, behind which – attached to which – was a little printing works. You could hear the machines starting up, and the flump and whirr of a thousand pamphlets or invitations or whatever it was being printed. One day it came up for sale, and we and three neighbouring households clubbed together, bought it and divided it up. We got the part that was behind our garden wall. We put in a huge steel and glass door, a wooden floor, a kitchen, lavatory and a spacious study; and in went all Stevie's music things, the instruments and all his paraphernalia.

Now he can play the piano with the lid open, singers can sing out, coffee and tea can be made, and it's changed our lives. It's a great big airy space with sandblasted brick walls and skylights, and the glass door opens on to the garden, which in turn lies beside all the other gardens, making a leafy flowery oasis, full of birds, squirrels and foxes. Standing at my study window I can see the path leading down past the fishponds and the pear tree, down to the new music room. We couldn't be luckier. When he's composing he can't bear to hear another sound. London is never completely quiet, but the music room is remarkably silent.

Q. All these volumes of Pushkin... have you read them?

- A. No, only two so far. It was the first time all his work had been translated into English so I bought the set. Marvellous! I can't wait to have enough time to catch up on all the books I want to read – I'll never do it, there is so *much* to be known; I'll go to my grave with books in my coffin.
- Q. Some nice carved African guinea fowl, and a Bafta Award jammed into this shelf with a chess set and some Snow White playing cards.
- A. I can't tell you what it meant to me to win a Bafta. It was for playing Patsy in *Absolute Fabulous*; I can remember hearing my name called out and then going deaf and ice-cold and walking in a dream to collect it. Because I'd never been to drama school, had indeed started my career as a lowly model, I always felt as though I was an outsider, someone who didn't deserve to do well. In my heart, I'd always felt like an actor, right back to the days in the Army School ('she is very good at dramatic art'), through a special Honour Certificate for music and drama, and parts in all the school plays; I *felt* I was an actor, but what I did and looked and sounded like seemed to be completely different from what was going on in my head. It is hard to get away from self-consciousness and insecurity. I talked too fast, had poor projection and suffered from stage fright. But I loved it – no, I didn't love it, I just knew that it was all I wanted to do with my life.

Age 15; St Mary's, 20 May 1961. Letter to my parents:

I am in the school play this term, A Midsummer Night's Dream, the Pyramus and Thisbe scene. I am Pyramus viz i.e. e.g. Bottom and am prepared to make an utter chump of myself.

We have got our GCE O level timetables and I haven't got more than one exam on any day except for English Grammar I and II and French I and II which is rather marvellous.

I went to see Sister Barbara about the sixth form and she says I have got to stay 2 years in the VIth and take German, English, Italian, French and Latin at A level. It's a question about the last: I don't really want to take Latin. She said I couldn't possibly stay only one year as I am not clever enough to take English in one year. Then she went on to say that was quite brilliant and nowhere but university is good enough for me...

Q. It doesn't sound like the Sister Barbara I knew.

A. I think I was exaggerating – I do know that they wanted me to go to university but I realized that unless I *worked* at my subjects, in particular the set books in the three modern languages, I wouldn't have a chance. I was extremely lazy and had only managed to get this far by blagging (a good word I only learned from Neil Morrissey much later). My sister took English in one year and passed easily. I was incapable of studying and couldn't seem to force myself to concentrate.

St Mary's, 18 June 1961. Letter home:

Thank you very much for the 4 leaf clover; do you know I have never found ONE. I expect

will fly through all my exams now. I have done complete revision of Biology. Until the exams start I'll do Latin, History, Latin, History etc. These are by far my worst subjects. Mr Hortin-Smith says I will get English Lit and Language easily, so I am not revising much for those. French and German you can't do much for and that's the lot... I have decided what I want to do when I leave (I only want to stay on in the sixth form for one year) and I want to go to a dramatic school if they'll accept me. I truly don't want to go to university, no more than being a secretary. And acting though hard work is good fun. Longing to see you...

- Q.** Did you take your five subjects at A level?
- A.** No, I took three, with French at scholarship level, and only got one. I got Latin *again* at A level and passed French. German I failed utterly. This left me with eight O levels and one A level.
- Q.** Can't you see how boring it is to read this? Exam results which had no effect at all on your future life?
- A.** My point entirely. I cannot believe it's right to concentrate on exam results so much today; pages of national newspapers going on for days on end, league tables, UCAS forms, it's all an utter waste of time. A well-rounded education is what a child needs, not paper qualifications. If you spend like a kicking horse on early education, you won't need to send 50 per cent of our young ones to university to get degrees in subjects that are neither valued nor needed. Most of this country is run, owned, organized and operated by people who haven't been to university. University is for brainboxes, studying specialist subjects like... er... science and ancient history and music and engineering, languages, high mathematics... er...
- Q.** I can tell you didn't go. Didn't you get in? Those exam results are pretty indifferent.
- A.** Well, obviously I never even applied. I wasn't a fool but I didn't need or want to go to university at the age of 17 when I left school. I was burning to escape into being a grown-up; exams were something to be avoided for ever, if possible, and the dreams uppermost in my brain were of adventure, travelling, wearing nail varnish, trying to speak French like a Frenchwoman, driving a sports car, in fact anything that didn't involve working on my own in a study. London, a distant Camelot, flickered and beckoned: it seemed impossibly alluring and terrifying and therefore attractive beyond measure. Much as I loved being at school when I was young, the duties and regulations began to chafe as I grew older. Rereading my old school letters, I get the impression that I turned very quickly from a cheerful cheeky monkey of 11 into a lippy, aggressive, sneering teenage girl rude to people who were kind to me, shallow, bumptious and fairly repellent.

Excerpts from St Mary's school reports, 1954–1963:

Her manner of speech needs care.

Joanna must learn to speak politely when her requests are refused.

Fairly good: still rather aggressive.

We hope for better things next term.

Still rather noisy.

She should try to be more unobtrusive.

Joanna has shown too little work for any comment to be made.

Joanna has avoided work as much as possible.

Q. Ghastly. I expect you've edited out all the positive remarks for dramatic effect.

A. There were lots of lively, kind, encouraging comments: 'very good, excellent, has very good ability, extremely good, could be very good if she concentrated a little more, still very headstrong' – oh dear, we're going downhill again – 'has shown little interest, Joanna must take more trouble and not rely on ideas of the moment, good as they are...' At the same time, I've got to say, I was transparently happy; perhaps I was only as dreadful as I remember I was in my own mind. These are my school reports... they go right back to when I was four. My parents never threw anything like that away – or anything that I did or made or painted for them. There are two old suitcases full of our letters and homemade Mothering Sunday cards, poems, essays and paintings. When my father was in Malaya and we were at boarding school in England, we wrote two letters every Sunday, one to my mother here, and one to my father in Sungei Patani – on an aerogramme, I think they were called. He kept them all as well. It was incredibly touching to open the suitcases recently and find this treasure trove of one's young life.

At six, I was a clever child. Look at these results: 100 percent in all subjects except maths, first in class, reading age of four years ahead of my age, 'excellent', 'most intelligent', 'hard-working'... I was, at the ages of six and seven, a year younger than the form average and still came top. Even my maths was graded at 96 per cent. I've never been so clever again. When we sailed back to England in May 1954 I must have left something of my confidence behind in the Far East. We were sent to a little boarding school in Kent called Mickledene. There were about 70 children at the school, of whom only 15 were boarders. Some of the classrooms were in twin oast houses, the round kilns used for drying hops. I was eight; now the reports say, 'she finds it a little difficult to work or play with others', and 'Jo has not enough confidence in her own abilities', 'tends to be self absorbed', 'must learn to overcome difficulties on her own'. Here we are though – aged nine, summer term 1955, still a year younger than the others, 'Joanna acted extremely well in the school play'. That's encouraging.

Q. And here: 'found knitting rather difficult'. But look, you're still first in lots of subjects. English, French, dictation, good, excellent, very good indeed. I can't see what the problem is.

A. There wasn't a problem. Reports never really seemed to reflect the reality of life. Teachers only knew you as a pupil, they couldn't know what was going on in your mind. They had us in their pastoral care, though, and must have noticed when we were out of sorts or homesick.

Q. Were you homesick?

A. Of course. There's not a child who's been born who doesn't feel their world tear apart when they're sent away from home. I got over it; I can't remember how quickly, but I was gregarious and chirpy and it only came back in waves at the crucial times of saying goodbye to your parents at the beginning of term. The terrible ache, and sense of dread, I can almost feel them now.

Q. And yet 20 years later you sent your only child away to boarding school. Why?

A. Because I had got through it and had a happy life at both boarding schools, and because I was still considered a normal, even desirable thing to do, and because being a single mother who had to work I felt I couldn't provide a stimulating and secure home life when I was away filming... I don't know. I can't bear to think of it, taking Jamie off to school with the trunk in the back of the car, pretending to be cheerful and reassuring and stopping in a lay-by to sob my heart out, thinking of him. But the truth is this: somewhere in life, somewhere in the strange process of growing out of being a baby and into a grown-up person there will always be dreadful, frightening, even tragic events, and at some stage you have to learn how to cope with them on your own.

I suppose this thinking gets passed down from generation to generation – that you must try to become self-reliant and resilient as soon as possible. Don't forget both my parents had been sent back to England from their homes in India to go to boarding schools, and in those days such children often didn't see their parents for *years*, not just weeks. So our school lives were a great improvement on theirs. These were customs, that was the way it was done. It took so long to get to India or the Far East by ship, and children were expected to thrive in an English climate, where their health wouldn't be threatened by tropical diseases. Young children became stoical at a tender age. It may seem unthinkable now, but the world has changed beyond recognition since then. If you read Rudyard Kipling's autobiographical story 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' you will get a piercing insight into the life of two small children sent away ostensibly for their own good. We were very much loved by our parents, and the longest I was away from my father was a year and a half, and from my mother six months.

Look: I've just turned up the last report my headmistress at the Army School, Malaya, wrote in the section marked 'Notes on General Ability and Attainment and Special Aptitudes and Interests'. I wanted to include this because my parents didn't show it to me at the time – or ever, come to think of it. 'Joanna is helpful and very popular with her class, and care must be taken that she does not get spoilt by too much adoration. She has a great sense of fun, but she must realize that she cannot always be first. She is inclined to sulk if she cannot have her own way.' I never knew I was adored, never knew I sulked.

We had arrived in Malaya when I was just five, at the time of the Emergency. Communists from the North had been moving down the Malay peninsula and the British Army were there to prevent the terrorism that threatened the villages, or *kampongs*.

they are called. Movement around the country was restricted and we, the army children, were sent to a large school just outside Kuala Lumpur, the capital. It catered only for children of the army so there were no Malays, no Chinese as far as I can remember. It was rather like an equivalent of the Lycée or the American School in London. We could speak a little Malay, kitchen Malay I suppose. Our housekeeper, or *amah*, was called A Feng and she was Straits Chinese, but we could remember a bit of Hong Kong Mandarin and she could speak a little English. My father, of course, had fluent Gurkhali: I say 'of course' because you weren't allowed to become an officer in a Gurkha regiment unless you could speak the language. My mother had – still has – fluent Urdu: it was almost her first language, and she and my father would speak Urdu and Gurkhali when they didn't want us to understand. The school wasn't far from our bungalow, which was within an army settlement called HQ Malaya.

Every day we walked to school early in the morning. We were in assembly at 8 a.m. and lessons for the day finished by lunchtime, when it was too hot for anyone to work. Even though we studied for only half a day, we came back about a year ahead of our British contemporaries. We wore blue and white cotton dresses made up, from a choice of patterns, on my mother's Singer sewing machine. Our long hair was plaited; we wore just a cotton dress and cotton pants – but we'd be soaked through with sweat after walking home in the scorching tropical sun. Sometime about then, I think, was born my passion for views of baking blistering heat seen from a dark interior. Dark trees on verandas, shadowy cloisters and outside dusty white roads or white-hot pavements; you're lucky, a yellowish-black sky with a colossal storm brewing. That's the stuff of paradise.

Q. You don't have to write letters when you are at a day school, as you were then. Can you remember it all clearly? Without anything to remind you but photographs and the school reports?

A. I remember that we went swimming almost every day at the Selangor Golf Club. I've been back there; with hindsight, I think you should never go back. The top diving board, which seemed to me, at six, to be of an Olympian height, was lowish. The pool was small, the hibiscus hedge was modest. The flat empty countryside through which the long straight drive led to the clubhouse has quite naturally turned into part of the gigantic modern city that Kuala Lumpur has become. No one could remember where HQ Malaya had been, or identify the location of the school. It was as if it had never been. Every school I have ever been to has now disappeared: not a good thing or a bad thing; but a thing nevertheless.

The change – the difference between Malaya, where we had been for three years, and Kent, where my next school Mickledene was – couldn't have been greater. Everything in my life changed; most of all the country where I thought I belonged. You always think fairly simplistically as a child: if I like you, you're bound to like me; if I like eating it, it's good for me; if I like living here, wherever that is must like having me. One of the huge differences was the colour of everything. Malaya's palette was extreme and vivid – skies were hot blue, flowers boiling red, storms black, moons white. Monsoons were thunderous, lightning zigzags of tungsten brightness. I used to dream of Malaya, g

sudden flashes of a road turning uphill into a rubber plantation, or feel the fat wet heat of the monsoons. The stories of Somerset Maugham got it right on the button – the Malaya he knew, the civil servants, planters and traders were not my Malaya, but the place was the temptation to go back was irresistible. In 1989, Stevie and I packed and went.

I wrote it all down:

We used to arrive in Singapore on a troop-ship, either from Hong Kong, or, after a month at sea, from England. The ship, slowly nosing through the islands dotting the huge harbour, docked at the quayside, and after an eternity the great gangways would be wheeled up as we hung over the rails, fidgeting about in the sweltering heat until it was time to disembark.

Now, more than 30 years later, we flew in a Canadian 747 into Changi airport with its marble halls and air-conditioning, elaborate fountains and cool efficiency. In my pocket I had the fourth volume of Somerset Maugham's *Collected Short Stories*. In the preface he noted: *'They were written long before the Second World War and I should tell the reader that the sort of life with which they deal no longer exists.'* I had marked out some passages from *Casual Affair*, *The Letter*, *The Outstation* and *Neil MacAdam*, descriptions that coincided with my own memories. I would find out if distance had lent enchantment to the scenes and if my sort of life, as a small English girl during the Emergency in the early 1950s, had vanished entirely as well.

From the top of Mount Faber you can see over the harbour, out towards Sentosa Island where the cable car, swooping across from Singapore, joins a green monorail. I cannot think where our battered old troopship put in: there is mile after mile of container port island after island; tugs, cruise ships and oil tankers swarm in the docks.

'Outside the quay the sun beat fiercely. A stream of motors, lorries and buses, private cars and hirelings, sped up and down the crowded thoroughfare and every chauffeur blew his horn. There is no speeding now, no tooting of horns; you are liable to be fined on the spot for going too fast or for carrying fewer than three passengers in the rush hour.

'Rickshaws threaded their nimble path amid the throng... coolies, carrying heavy bales, sidled along with their quick jog-trot and shouted to the passers-by to make way.' I remember the coolies running, a smooth, bendy-kneed run, with their cone-shaped straw hats and bulky loads on a pole over their shoulders. All the coolies have gone, both in Singapore and (what is now) Malaysia; and the rickshaws have gone too, to be replaced by trishaws which are rather like the fiacres drawn up outside the Uffizi in Florence: overpriced and used only by tourists.

In Orchard Street, where the low stucco colonnades have been ousted by vaulting spotless emporia, young men accost the pink-skinned newcomers with slim, brown outstretched wrists brandishing counterfeit Rolex watches. As the sudden night fell, cool, dark veranda with a clinking glass beckoned like an oasis. We found it, the Tiger Tavern, after shouldering our way through the throng in the front part of the elegant Raffles Hotel, where scantily-clothed holiday-makers sweated over umbrella-laden drinks and jostled for a place in the Writers' Bar. (Here's to you, Maugham: you would

recognize the building, but not the people or their purpose; and many of them, in the beach shorts and with their burnt arms, would not know your name.)

Impatient to recognize something, anything, we engaged Keder Bakas, a Muslim taxi driver, to drive us about the city for a day. Little India still sells spices in Serangoon Road: cumin, chilli, turmeric, cardamoms and cloves, stacked in sacks up to the ceiling of the low houses.

Maugham was considered a menace in Singapore, and was dreaded at drinks parties where he would glean gossip and rewrite it, so thinly disguising it that the real-life characters were immediately recognizable. He knew the Victoria Memorial Hall, which stands unchanged, the cricket club, the post office – all now overshadowed by a tall hotel, the Western Stamford. And there, shabby and resolutely unpainted, the F.M.S. Railway Station that took us to and from the Federated Malay States, over the causeway to the Malay peninsula.

This time we drove by car, a Proton Saga made in Malaya ('Malaysia, Malaysia' snapped the official at the border; 'Malaya not used since 1957'). Johore Baharu is as unprepossessing as its customs men. We drove on to Malacca, now spelt Melaka. Bananas and oil palms line the dusty road, whose hard shoulders are made of orange laterite earth and are frequented by lorries overtaking on the inside. The driving has to be seen to be believed. On road signs, a motoring skeleton warns 'AWAS' – BEWARE.

Melaka has sprouted some tall, modern hotels. From the swimming pool on the ninth floor of the Ramada Renaissance, you can see the old town sprawling comfortably beside the Indian Ocean. The buildings, huddled in narrow streets and hanging over the torpid winding river, show Portuguese influence. At night the town comes alive.

'They came to bazaars, narrow streets with arcades where the teeming Chinese, working and eating, noisily talking as is their way, indefatigably strove with eternity.' The bright lights of the little shops lit the throngs of people shopping, eating and chattering like starlings in the evening. A pearl had fallen out of my engagement ring; in an open-sided shop, a Chinese jeweller found a matching pearl and fixed it in, price about one pound. Anything can be made or copied or mended in the Far East. In the West, our computer-tapping fingers have atrophied, and skills seep away for ever.

I had never been to Melaka before but this I remember from Kuala Lumpur: the night sounds of the tropics, the smells of open drains, sweet frangipani, joss-sticks and, in season, the durian, a fruit which has an aroma that could fell a donkey in its tracks at 500 yards. In the hotel there is a sign prohibiting the eating of durians in the bedroom with a penalty \$500. In each room, an arrow on the ceiling marks *Kiblah*, the direction of Mecca, north-west from Melaka. Islam is the official religion. In newspapers, anyone who is not Malaysian is called a foreigner. Foreigners are prohibited from buying land, but foreign investment in industry is encouraged, in a country where government policy states that the population must increase from its present 16.5 million to 70 million to create a home market for palm oil and rubber. Newspapers are refranchised every year. If a paper were to criticize the government, its franchise would not be renewed. As in Singapore, drug traffickers are executed, unlike Maugham's 'Jack Almond' who, rejected by Ladd

Kastellan in *A Casual Affair*, dies in drugged squalor, a victim of opium's own death sentence.

There are no bullock carts; no attar of roses; no moon-flowers, whose lemony scent was so prized; no satin Chinese slippers. The Heath Robinson tin mines on spindly legs trickling water and ore down their wooden chutes, have been bulldozed to make way for housing developments that would not look out of place in Hemel Hempstead.

The sky boils with black clouds as we approach Kuala Lumpur on the new motorway. Rubber plantations tremble in the torrential downpour. And now the greatest shock of all: I cannot recognize the town where I lived for three years. True, some old buildings remain in the modern city, but the old Central Market, once buzzing with fish and meat stalls, now has air-conditioning and sells gimcrack crafts to the tourists, while the elaborate and beautiful station, with its domes, arches and minarets, watches flying ring roads bringing traffic jams and chaos.

'If they lived where the climate was exhausting they sought the fresh air of some hill station not too far away.' Fraser's Hill, only an hour and a half's drive from Kuala Lumpur, is reached by a steep one-way road. The journey is spectacularly beautiful. We used to go to Fraser's Hill during the long summer holidays. We drove in our Wolseley 6/80, not stopping at the little *kampongs*, as bandits could be anywhere in those days. As the car climbed up the air became cool; each hairpin bend brought views over treetops, over the rocky riverbed to endless jungle-covered hills.

'At last they reached the primeval forest, huge trees swathed in luxuriant creepers, an inextricable tangle, and awe descended on them.' Monkeys whoop in the morning mist which nestle so closely that you have the impression of being on an island floating in a sea of clouds. The excitement of wearing cardigans in the evening, of wood fires burning in the fireplaces, and walking on the perfectly groomed golf course: it seemed to me ages ago that this must be like England.

Now more houses have been built, but most are shielded from the road by electric gates and long drives. They teeter over sheer drops, their windows turned to face the setting or the rising sun. Lush gardens surround them; they belong to rich industrialists and merchant banks. The small dispensary which I remember with dread is still there: bottles displaying bats' claws, snakes and a double-headed chicken have been joined by tin unborn babies in yellowing formaldehyde, lizards and toads suspended in eternal innocence.

Once, we stayed at the Lodge, the Governor's residence, magnificently positioned on the spur of a hill, stone-clad and magisterial with well-tended gardens of dahlias and roses. This time, it was the Merlin Hotel, which although charmless to look at served an excellent Malay/Indian curry for supper.

The Cameron Highlands are four hours to the north. I had never been there before, never seen the trim Boh Tea estates rippling their green fantastic patterns over the foothills. More mock-Tudor houses, with names like Fair Haven and Dunhelen, nestle down Camberley lanes. Market stalls sell strawberries and asparagus. It is hard to believe we are six degrees north of the equator.

In the panelled hotel bar, a log fire roars in front of deep armchairs, and blowpipes and masks hang on the wall next to faded photographs of my time, Maugham's time. We call for gin *pahits*: in the background the band tiptoes in, anxious to fill every moment with sound. 'You ain't nothin' but a hound dog', they sing at us, smiling hugely.

'The fireflies, sparkling dimly, flew with their slow and silvery flight' Where are the fireflies? And mosquitoes? And why so few geckos, and no tock-tock birds – is my memory made of that? That night I woke suddenly and there on the ceiling was just one firefly, shining its calm, small light in the blackness.

'Every morning Neil and Munro started out separately, collecting. The afternoons were devoted to pinning insects in boxes, placing butterflies between sheets of paper.' Up in the hills the butterfly farms have them ready-boxed for you: green, black, yellow, blue. The iridescent, shimmering creatures are pinned stiffly like little balsa-wood aeroplanes behind glass, rather as Maugham impaled his characters on their stories and displayed them for public examination as they squirmed and struggled to escape identification. Well, they are all safely gathered in now, Maugham too; and I am only slightly shocked to see that my childish ghost has joined them, skipping along in the fading twilight of the British Empire.

- Q. I hope it's not always going to be like this, a sort of sour regret about places changing with implications, for the worse.
- A. Well, I hope it's not always going to hurt so much. When I came through Customs from Singapore to Malaysia they were really horrid to me, when they heard that I'd been a child there during the Emergency. I burst into tears, which astonished me and them: I had longed to return to what I thought of as home and they had made it plain that the episode of the British in Malaya was shameful and to be forgotten or written out of their history.
- Q. Do you find that odd or unpredictable?
- A. No, not now, not upon reflection. People hate having foreigners in power in their own land, even if their presence is benevolent. It's just that it was my home and I loved it with all my heart, while all the time it was hating me. That was the shock. And yes, I do think it's better to have jungles and rainforests than a shaved country with only the short-lived palm tree to hold the laterite earth to the rocks. It's a terrible and thorny problem though: when I raised the subject of excessive logging and all the damage it did to the Ibans and Punans, and all the tribes living in the Sarawak forests – quite apart from the gradual extinction of their wildlife, especially orang-utans, the pollution of the rivers, loss of jungle medicine, loss of topsoil – they countered with the fact that we in Britain have cut down virtually all our forests; our wildlife – bears, wildcats, wolves – is gone: so how dare we preach to them? Aren't our rivers polluted by chemical waste, factory and farm effluent? Isn't our countryside turning towards the American prairie-style farming where the topsoil blows away into the sea?
- Q. Let's drop this now.

A. What I loved about going back were the sounds of temple bells, the friendliness of people in the streets; and muezzins calling, and the smells of spices and frangipani blossoms, the sounds and smells of the bazaars, earth after rain. A month on a troop-ship with its own unforgettable smell of Vaseline...

Q. Surely not Vaseline...

A. No, but ships' engines smell like that; and the oranges we ate each day, chucking the skins into the sea, watching for land... and then England in June, full of such soft sweet scenes of roses and wallflowers.

The smell of roses still takes me straight back to our little Kentish boarding school at Mickledene, with dark polished floorboards and the smell of box hedges and honeysuckle. It wasn't built as a school. The boarders lived in what had been a Georgian farmhouse with a tennis court, some wild land with lupins and buttercups, watercress growing in the stream, tall dark yew trees, small orchards with molehills and cowslips. Everything you had used to be able to say to your parents now had to be written down: every Sunday before we walked the mile to Rolvenden Church we sat at tables in the boarders' house with our fountain pens and Basildon Bond writing paper, trying to think of news – it had to go over the page, one side was not accepted. Our letters were checked to make sure they were well spelt and didn't say, 'I'm homesick, come and save me.' I got to like the school: I would make a good institution dweller. I made close friends, and our busy lives became the whole world, full of yearning for ponies, playing at houses, dancing, reading and mucking about.

17 May 1957 (I was just 11):

Darling Mummy,

Thank you very much for your letter. I hope you had a nice time in Bath. In literature we are reading about some people in Bath. Please, please, please will you let me go riding for the rest of the term if I don't take ballet when I go to St Mary's. If I can ride, will you send my hat. I don't want to ride because I think the people who run it are giving a gymkhana. It will be the first gymkhana I have ridden in. The fees come to about £3.15s. 6d. It is only 8/6d for a ride for just over an hour. I am terribly glad petrol rationing has stopped even though it has only gone down 1/1d. In Arithmetic we are doing Grafts [sic] they are awfully nice. A bat and ball attached to it by elastic is the craze this term. It is called Rat-a-tat-tat, Smash Hit or Jokari. My record is five-hundred-and-ninety-seven. My library book this week is called At the Back of the North Wind. In Rest, Miss Clark is reading a book called Silver Skates. It is jolly good. Please do you think you could send me some presents, for there are five birthdays this term. Send just little things please. In Nature, Nikki, Michaela and I are studying birds. It is very interesting as I found an old chaffinch's nest when I went to tea with Mary Steele. She is hoping to get a pony from the Blue Cross. In Current Affairs we are making book covers. Mine is of all different things which happen in the world, like studying astronomy, tossing the javelin, aeroplanes and steamships. This morning I brushed all the riders' hats until all the dust was taken off. Please don't forget about sending me my ballet tunic pattern. I am now 5ft and I weigh precisely

stone 4 lbs! Please do you think you could send me my Norwegian fancy dress. It will be very useful in the play. I have not got a letter from Daddy yet. I hope he writes soon. Patricia Cohen has just been demonstrating Hebrew. It is very queer but pretty. All this term we have had very decent breakfasts, cheese-on-toast, baked beans, scrambled egg, boiled egg and bacon. Nikki and I often play what you might call tennis, hitting the ball to-and-fro with intense strength. Vicki gave me a little plaster-of-Paris rose she made for my late birthday present. I wear it on my dressing-gown. It looks very pretty. I can play my piano piece quite well now but I cannot play the last bar with both hands. It sounds nice on the staff room piano but appalling [sic] on the Hall piano which is slightly out of tune. In our dormitory on the mantelpiece we have got a horseshoe for luck and a luminous beetle also a Scottish doll in a kilt. Nikki has a blue zebra dressing-gown. Oh by the way, my pink prayer book is very useful in church. I took it last Sunday. I must write to Daddy and Ælene now. Tons and tons of love from Jo.

Q. That's an extremely long letter.

A. All the rest are very short. There must have been a competition to see who could write the most. Every Monday morning like clockwork the post arrived bringing two letters for me – one from my father, one from my mother. You never think of your parents missing you. Daddy's letters were on the regimental paper, pale grey with crossed kukris and the address embossed in green.

Depot the Brigade of Gurkhas, Sungei Patani, Kedah

Sunday, June 23rd, 1952

Darling Jo,

I'm so happy to think of you riding and loving it so much. I think Beauty sounds a lovely pony. Piebald ones always look so fine. Who else goes riding with you? And have you got your riding hat, and crop? Do you wear jodhpurs or corduroy trousers? Don't forget to write and tell me all about it, because I am very interested. Also, how are the piano lessons going? I suppose you find it quite easy now to read all the notes. I have still got the lovely clock horse's head which you made for me. Do you remember? I use it as a paperweight because it is always so hot here that you have to have a fan blowing – and that blows all the paper away if you haven't got a paperweight. Unfortunately the tip of his ear has chipped off. Otherwise he's as good as new. I'm longing to hear all about Sports Day. Do you think you can remember to ask Mummy to take photographs to send to me? Thank you darling, for saying you are glad that Mummy and I are going to have a home in Malaya. You will come out to it for next year's Summer holidays and I promise you we won't leave you alone in England for very long. I am longing to see you. With very much love from Daddy.

Q. Where was Ælene?

A. She being two years older had already gone on to St Mary's. She wrote to me often. St Mary's sounded thrilling and very grown-up, with trips to Hastings to swim, a new chapel being built, and grapefruit for breakfast on Ascension Day. The school uniform included a black velour hat, navy knickers, a gabardine raincoat, a panama hat for summer and

gloves, preferably white. We had to have two pinafores for domestic use, a school ti three table napkins and a lacrosse stick. These things were obtainable from Daniel Ne and Sons, School Outfitters, in Portman Square in London.

Q. Sounds like something out of Enid Blyton: *Fifth Form at Malory Towers*.

A. It was. The main school building had been left to the religious community by August Hare, a Victorian writer, traveller and self-confessed snob. He filled the big grey stone house with treasures collected from Grand Tours of Europe – stained-glass windows, line fold wood panelling, collections of birds' eggs, stuffed owls and stoats; and outside on the wide stone terrace were leaden urns and statues of dogs. The original sandstone statue of Queen Anne stood in the grounds, a copy having been made and put in front of St Paul's Cathedral, where it still stands. The grounds were beautiful: huge sloping lawns and pine trees, massed rhododendrons, soft tennis courts, vegetable gardens, ponds, fields and woods. In the distance you could see the sea.

The house had been added on to again and again: long corridors with small dormitories, rambling annexes with wooden floors upstairs and down, a tiny chapel where what had been a stable, a big new chapel – the nuns' side, which was strictly out of bounds, containing their little cell-like bedrooms and religious libraries. The corridors were gaslit. Windows were opened wide at night no matter what the weather was like, sometimes you'd wake to a room full of leaves, or flannels frozen on the washstand. You had half a small chest of drawers to put your clothes in and bells started ringing early in the morning to summon you to lessons, chapel or food. My first letter:

I have got masses to tell you... we have our lights out at a quarter to nine and we get up at seven fifteen. We have two preps each night and five at the weekends. There are forty of us in 4B so we have to be divided into 4B and 4B Parallel. I am a waitress on my table and I have washed up the supper mugs... the lessons are jolly easy but I hope I'm not speaking too soon... Mary Steele was jolly homesick but she is better now...

This is the same Mary Steele who nearly got a Blue Cross pony when I was at Mickledene.

Q. Do you still see her? Do you keep up with people?

A. I can honestly say she is one of my oldest friends. All my letters home contain news of my closest gang, Anthea, Sarah and Mary; and when Mary got married to David Spry, my little Jamie was her page boy; and I am godmother to her youngest son, Oliver. After lessons had finished and the day-girls had gone home, the boarders changed into home clothes and mucked about – we put on plays, swapped things, raced about in the garden, listened to gramophone records and read books. You *never* telephoned home, unless something was seriously wrong; in fact I think there were only two telephones in the entire school, one in the headmistress Sister Barbara's study and one in the nuns' side.

We saw our parents for two Saturdays a term and for a short half-term holiday. W

were completely contained within the school walls. On special occasions we would be taken down to Hastings to listen to a concert or watch a play, but otherwise our lives ended at the stone wall under the gloomy laurel bushes, where a streetlight shone dimly on to the waxy leaves. The outside world ceased to exist, and all our energies were focused on the strangely intimate community existence of 70 girls aged between 11 and 18 living in close proximity – that is to say, sometimes sleeping with seven others in a not very big room for three months at a time. *Big Brother* would hold no fears or attractions for a boarding-school girl.

The Sisters of the Community of the Holy Family were extremely tolerant of our wayward behaviour, but if I remember rightly we were in any case, by today's standards, paragons of courtesy and virtue. We always stood up when a nun or lay teacher came into the room, always stood still and flattened ourselves against the wall when a senior girl passed by. We always wore our chapel veils to chapel three times a day: the bell would go, chapel veils were pulled hurriedly out of a pocket or desk, and tied over the hair as we raced up the winding path to the big glass doors, slowing to a reverent walk into a pew – the lovely smell of incense hanging in the air from the last time, or gusting from a newly-lit censer swinging vigorously from a nun's hand.

There were Quiet Days, and retreats and visiting missions, sung Eucharists and catechism classes, and the bells would ring the midday Angelus while we were sitting in our classrooms. We started each day of school with a lesson on religion, Old Testament or New Testament, and I got to know it all pretty well, off by heart, and all the services. I don't go to church services now because they've changed; all the language is different. I don't want the Church to change: I want the Church *not* to change – that's the whole point of religion, its changeless timelessness. Then you feel you're in a long line of people over the centuries all saying and singing the same things...

Q. In Latin? I don't think you sang in Latin.

A. The Book of Common Prayer, that's the one I knew. I know it was all originally in Latin or Greek or even Aramaic. (We heard the Lord's Prayer said in Aramaic in Syria, and now Mel Gibson uses Aramaic in his film *The Passion of the Christ*.) I just like to think that I'm at a service that the excellent Reverend Francis Kilvert would have recognized. I love reading his diaries of the 19th century. Anyway, in case this all sounds a bit priggish, I should add that we used to laugh till we cried in chapel, in lessons, at mealtimes anywhere. We were a very normal group of normal girls in what I see now as an exceptional educative system. We weren't stressed (wouldn't have ever considered suicide), we complained about the food, got bored, got on with it. It was an extremely happy time.

Later, the school gradually closed down: first there were no more boarders, then no day-girls; then the dwindling community of nuns moved out to an abbey in West Mallin and Augustus Hare's house and grounds were sold. The chapel has been demolished, the nuns' side too – but the house and school have been divided and converted, and new homes have been built in the gardens where our classrooms were, on top of the school

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