
Opening Extract from...

The Girl from Station X

Written by Elisa Seagrave

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The Girl from Station X

My Mother's Unknown Life

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Union Books

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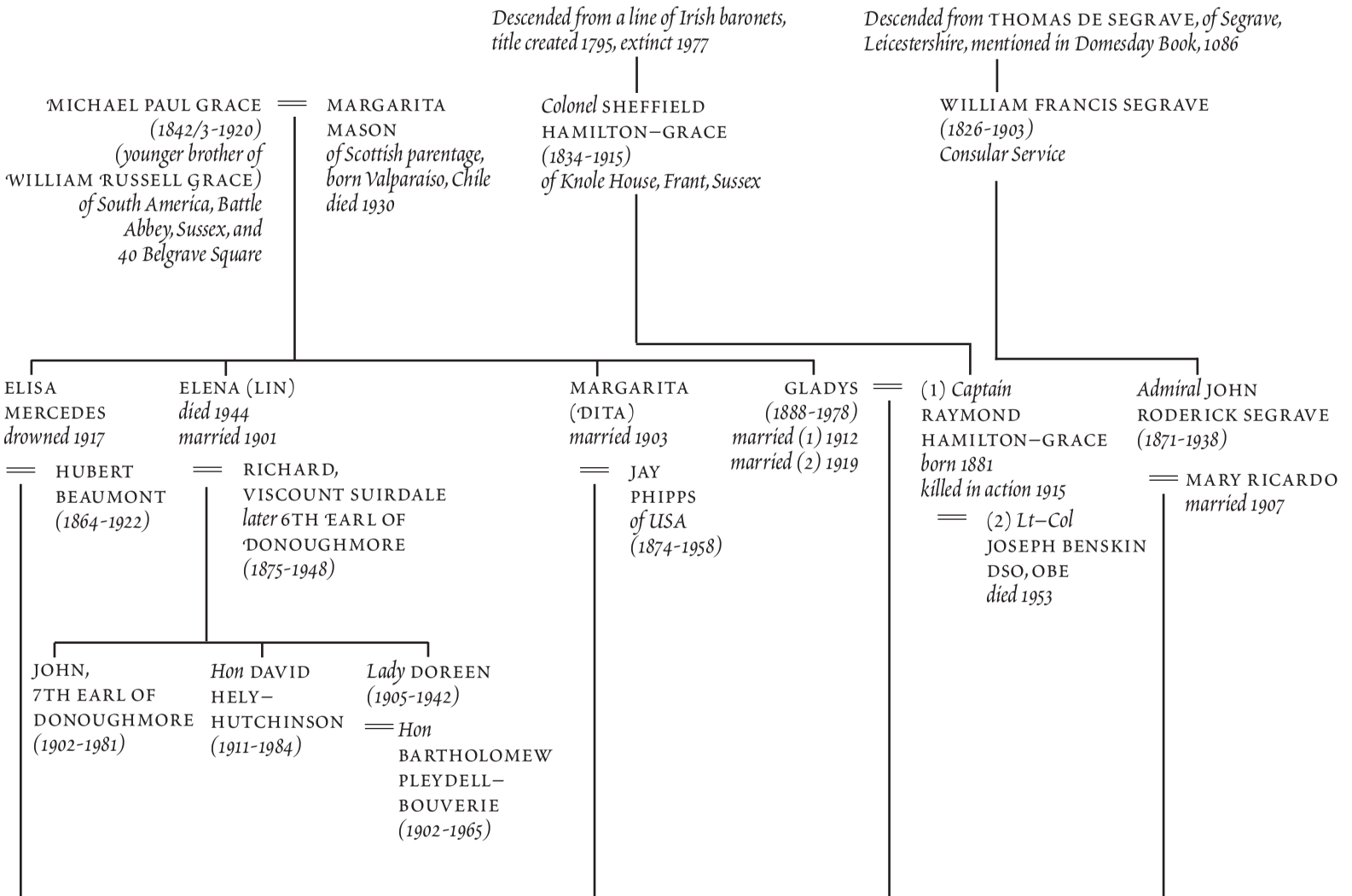
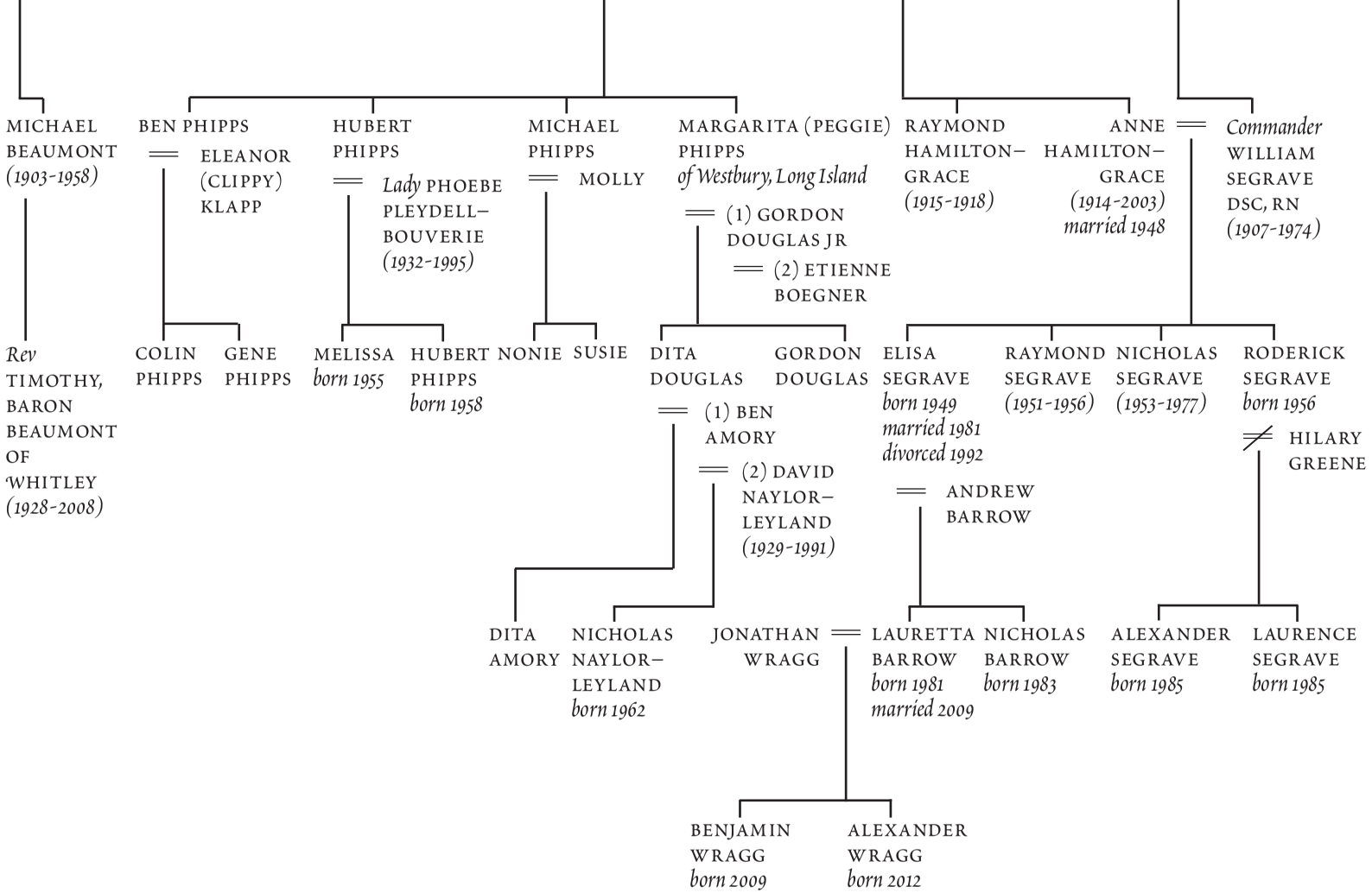
To my mother's four grandchildren


Descended from a line of Irish baronets, title created 1795, extinct 1977
Descended from THOMAS DE SEGRAVE, of Segrave, Leicestershire, mentioned in Domesday Book, 1086
MICHAEL PAUL GRACE (1842/3-1920) (younger brother of WILLIAM RUSSELL GRACE) of South America, Battle Abbey, Sussex, and 40 Belgrave Square
MARGARITA MASON of Scottish parentage, born Valparaiso, Chile died 1930
Colonel SHEFFIELD HAMILTON–GRACE (1834-1915) of Knole House, Frant, Sussex
WILLIAM FRANCIS SEGRAVE (1826-1903) Consular Service
ELISA MERCEDES drowned 1917
HUBERT BEAUMONT (1864-1922)
ELENA (LIN) died 1944 married 1901
RICHARD, VISCOUNT SUIRDALE later 6TH EARL OF DONOUGHMORE (1875-1948)
MARGARITA ('DITA) married 1903
JAY PHIPPS of USA (1874-1958)
GLADYS (1888-1978) married (1) 1912 married (2) 1919
(1) Captain RAYMOND HAMILTON–GRACE born 1881 killed in action 1915
(2) Lt–Col JOSEPH BENSKIN DSO, OBE died 1953
Admiral JOHN RODERICK SEGRAVE (1871-1938)
MARY RICARDO married 1907
JOHN, 7TH EARL OF DONOUGHMORE (1902-1981)
Hon DAVID HELY–HUTCHINSON (1911-1984)
Lady DOREEN (1905-1942)
Hon BARTHOLOMEW PLEYDELL–BOUVERIE (1902-1965)


MICHAEL BEAUMONT (1903-1958)
BEN PHIPPS
ELEANOR (CLIPPY) KLAPP
HUBERT PHIPPS
Lady PHOEBE PLEYDELL–BOUVERIE (1932-1995)
MICHAEL PHIPPS
MOLLY
MARGARITA (PEGGIE) PHIPPS of Westbury, Long Island
(1) GORDON DOUGLAS JR
(2) ETIENNE BOEGNER
RAYMOND HAMILTON–GRACE (1915-1918)
ANNE HAMILTON–GRACE (1914-2003) married 1948
Commander WILLIAM SEGRAVE DSC, RN (1907-1974)
Rev TIMOTHY, BARON BEAUMONT OF WHITLEY (1928-2008)
COLIN PHIPPS
GENE PHIPPS
MELISSA born 1955
HUBERT PHIPPS born 1958
NONIE
SUSIE
DITA DOUGLAS
GORDON DOUGLAS
(1) BEN AMORY
(2) DAVID NAYLOR–LEYLAND (1929-1991)
ELISA SEGRAVE born 1949 married 1981 divorced 1992
RAYMOND SEGRAVE (1951-1956)
NICHOLAS SEGRAVE (1953-1977)
RODERICK SEGRAVE born 1956
HILARY GREENE
ANDREW BARROW
DITA AMORY
NICHOLAS NAYLOR–LEYLAND born 1962
JONATHAN WRAGG
LAURETTA BARROW born 1981 married 2009
NICHOLAS BARROW born 1983
ALEXANDER SEGRAVE born 1985
LAURENCE SEGRAVE born 1985
BENJAMIN WRAGG born 2009
ALEXANDER WRAGG born 2012

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Preface

In the early 1990s, my mother, Anne, began to show the symptoms of Alzheimer's, painful for any family. There were other problems. Despite her background of social and financial privilege, my mother had led a life marked by loss, including the premature death of her father and little brother, and the early deaths of two of her four children. She had also been widowed at sixty. For a long time, she had been dependent on alcohol – so much so that it was not always easy to differentiate between the deterioration caused by her Alzheimer's and the accidents and confusion caused by her drinking. She had also, for many years, been dependent on others and her lack of resilience was a cause of emotional distance between us – this came to a head in 1991 when, with two small children and just separated from my husband, I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Even before she started losing her mind, I was used to seeing my mother as vulnerable and needy – and, indeed, had lost sight of her having been any other way. Sometimes I felt I hated her for the disruption she caused. But I also knew her story was not as simple; she had not always been like this.

In the mid-1990s, there was an unexpected development. Her house in Sussex, where I mainly grew up, was sold and she was moved to somewhere smaller. She was a hoarder and it took ages to sort out her belongings. But in her attic – in what subsequently felt like a miracle to me – a whole box of her diaries was discovered. They began in the 1930s when she was fifteen and continued into the early 1950s. I became gripped by these closely filled-in exercise books, with details of her upbringing, her family, the upheavals and adventures of the Second World War, her romances,

the early part of her life as a wife and mother and her enthusiastic travels. But most of all, they told me about my mother's feelings – the part of her that had, for so long, remained obscure to me.

I too am a committed diarist, and I felt that she was reaching out to me through her diaries. As I read on, and thought about her writing more and more deeply – including attending sessions with a therapist who, when I read out to her passages from the diaries, sensitively cast light on some of my mother's behaviour – I began to build up a different picture of her. I talked to my mother's oldest and most loyal friends, and tried to get their slants on her; and discussed her with my children, who each saw her in a different way from me, and from each other.

Many facts about her life, of course, I already knew. She was born on 1 July 1914, the daughter of a cavalry officer of Irish origin and of an heiress whose Irish father had made a fortune in South America through guano and shipping; and the early diaries show the world of an upper-class young woman with all its pleasures and luxuries, from finishing schools to tennis parties and balls. I knew also that she had worked in intelligence during the war, having enlisted early in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. But I had no idea of the roles that she had played during her various posts, which included spells at Bletchley Park, Bomber Command and in post-war Germany, nor of the ability and commitment that she displayed throughout much of the war. Nor was I prepared to read in such depth about the intense emotional attachments that she formed – unsurprisingly, of course, given the upheavals of the times.

I decided to write about my mother – at first, as an attempt to understand her further. This book is based around extracts from her diaries that, I hope, capture both her and a profoundly unsettled period in British history when a country at war also underwent rapid social change. But I have also tried to convey the singular and often moving experience of gradually uncovering a woman whom I never expected to know so well.

I have changed a very few names for reasons of privacy. My brother Roddy is hardly mentioned, as he has his own story to tell. He was given the opportunity to see the advance text of the book. However, its story and its perspective are mine.

Part 1

The Merry Meadow

I am very reserved and <u>never</u> show my feelings so that <u>very</u> few people know what I am like inside . . . I <u>long</u> for romance, I should like to be truly in love with a man and have one in love with me, the real true love, nothing else would do. I'm afraid I shall never have the pleasure of marrying anyone as I don't like men.

Diary of Anne aged sixteen, 16 October 1930, Rome.

Chapter 1

In my mother's garden is a mulberry tree. My mother walks towards me, her hands, drenched with mulberry juice, reaching at my throat. She's going to strangle me . . . 'Elisa, I'm *getting up* at you!'

My mother shows me a newspaper. A girl called Elisa, nine like me, was murdered. Her body was found in a cornfield. There was blood on her sock.

My mother sits on my bed at night and talks in an odd, slurry way. I call it 'preaching' – she isn't really talking *to* me but *at* me. She calls me 'lovey', but although I often long for her to hug me, this way of talking makes me want to hide under the bedclothes. She sits very close and turns her right hand awkwardly this way and that, a habit that my father imitates when she gets like this, as he does when she declares: 'I'm Irish!' Her fingertips are orange, from cigarettes, and a sour smell comes off her.

Often she does not come to say good night to me, so I go up to bed alone to my room at the top of the house. Later I creep down both staircases to listen for my parents; I hear my father's voice telling her: '*Go to bed! For God's sake, go to bed!*'

I feel the whole house rocking beneath me.

I imagine that I see my mother mounting the last few steps to my landing in her white dressing gown, her eyes screwed up with rage – or is it madness?

I remember a beach in Spain, I must be two or three. My mother wades into the sea, leaving me alone on the sand. I cannot see her out there in the waves. Will she ever come back to me?

Spain is where I sometimes have my mother to myself. She is taking me to a children's party. It starts at my usual bedtime; the family is not English like we are. I go alone with my mother, clinging to her skirts as I remember so often doing then. The party is in a flat and we have to go up in a lift. Getting out, I trip, and start bawling. Inside, the other children are dancing in a circle. I am the youngest. Some of them come towards me and stretch out their hands, inviting me to dance. But I refuse to leave my mother and she is happy to have me with her. Later there is a film show. I am induced to sit on a little chair in a row with the other children. As soon as the lights go out, I yell. Very quickly, I am reunited with my mother. I spend the rest of the evening holding on to her.

I am the firstborn, I am my parents' darling. My father calls me Button Nose. He holds me high on his shoulders and pushes me very fast in my pram up and down Madrid's wide avenue, the Castellana. My father, who works in the Embassy, is proud of me and of my first sentences: 'Button Nose has buns for tea' and '*I* can do it!'

In the summer, my mother takes me and my younger brother Raymond – born in May 1951 – to the seaside in the north of Spain. At the entrance to the beach sits a poor woman, selling apples. My mother buys her apples each day. Her children – ten or more of them – have no toys. Sometimes they steal our buckets and spades and the little boats we bring to the beach.

My mother takes snaps of me and Raymond. Here we are, at Comillas, just the two us, in our sun hats, digging in the sand with our spades.

How sweet my mother is then. She calls me, her eldest, 'my old love' and Raymond, born in Spain, 'my Spanish love'. I want to be with my mother all the time.

My mother is always happy and smiling. When she narrows her blue eyes against the sun I try to copy her. When we are in an aeroplane flying back to England to visit our grandmother, it is I who sit with my mother, and Raymond who's with our young nanny, Doreen. I announce very loudly: 'I've got fleas!' I don't understand why all the adults around us laugh.

CHAPTER 1

When we leave Spain for good, my mother hoards many objects from there: in our house in Sussex are black and white mantillas, castanets, green and yellow cups and saucers with little deer running round them, fans like lace, a big orange bull and, on either side of the dining-room fireplace, two pictures of Spanish gypsies, a man and his wife, their skin the colour of purple grapes. At Christmas, she puts out a Spanish crib. The Moor – one of the Three Wise Men – rides a camel and wears a turban.

When I was seven, my mother took me back to Spain, to a village near Seville, on holiday. She dragged me through streets full of naked children to a shop where she had ordered a donkey harness. I stood outside, staring at a pale canary in a tiny cage. Later, as we walked back, I became worried by the thin mules and dogs, the naked hungry children and the imprisoned canary, and remarked how poor the village was.

'Why can't you notice the *nice* things?' she said.

My mother showed the first signs of Alzheimer's in 1991, when she was seventy-seven, the year I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Perhaps the shock of that finally did for her – the possibility that yet another of her four children might predecease her.

Over the next few years friends, usually hers, would often ask: 'How's your mother?'

I would reply, with apparent nonchalance: 'Oh, she's completely crackers.'

She had planned to take me and my children to the Russian Circus one afternoon in that August of 1991. But we had to go without her. Instead, she was being operated on – again. She had fallen, drunk, the night before. I never actively fought with my mother, but after she broke her leg or hip, for the second or even third time, I began to get anxiety pains in my chest.

Six weeks later, I was in hospital myself. Soon after my mother's fall, I had a lump removed from my breast. Ten days later my lymph glands were taken out, to see if the cancer had spread; it had. In hospital, I was getting persistent calls about my mother's drinking. One of my friends

insisted that I must not see her during my impending eight months of radiotherapy and chemotherapy; I should concentrate on my two children and on getting well.

I stuck to this arrangement for a while but I did see my mother that Christmas – she stayed with me, my ex-husband and our two children at our house in Sussex near hers. She brought me a present of a silver ship which she had just taken out of storage – I wonder now if it had belonged to her maternal grandmother, born in Chile. I saw my mother on other occasions during that period, out of duty. I rang her once after chemotherapy, thinking that she might drive over and see me – a fifteen-minute car journey. But she did not, and she did not come to the telephone either. I was told by the person who'd answered her phone that she'd said she was too tired.

When I had come out of hospital the previous autumn my Aunt Rosemary, my father's sister, in her eighties and nervous of travelling alone, had come on a coach to see me from her home over two hours away.

I did not really expect emotional support from my mother during my breast cancer treatment. Nevertheless, I remember complaining to a close friend who'd visited me in hospital just before my second operation that my mother was never there when I needed her. It was *her* mother that I longed for, and that night, after my friend left, I dreamed that my grandmother, now dead, was waiting for me outside her house, Knowle.

My mother had a better relationship with my daughter than she did with me. My daughter was not angry with her as I was, and, indeed, did not have so much reason to be. My mother, though not in England for her birth, subsequently seemed genuinely delighted by the baby. I have a photograph of her standing in her garden looking down shyly at the child in her arms, as though she can hardly believe her luck. And whenever I later criticised my mother, my daughter would defend her, saying: 'She never did anything nasty to me!' At seven, after her first night alone with her grandmother, she declared: 'I love Granny, I really love her!'

My mother on that occasion taught my daughter Snakes and Ladders. When I went to collect her, we all three played Cluedo and my mother, who loved board games, surprisingly didn't remember that she was Miss Scarlett. It was 1989. Later I interpreted this as a sign of her encroaching Alzheimer's. I also remember her bobbing up and down in front of her drinks tray that day, as though doing knee exercises, talking incomprehensibly about 'The Blue Lady'. After several minutes, during which I speculated that the Blue Lady might even be a ghost, I realised that she was imitating the audience in the Albert Hall at the Last Night of the Proms, which had just been on TV. The soprano had worn a bright blue dress.

Despite these flashes of empathy – no one else understood what she had meant by the Blue Lady – my anger against her had increased, as a result of her many drunken falls. After my separation from my husband, a friend had sent me to a therapist who by chance specialised in alcoholism, and, over the next few years, I was encouraged to acknowledge for the first time that my childlike parent had frequently been the centre of attention when I desperately needed help myself. My marriage was over and my son, Nicholas, at six, had had to go to a special needs school. The day that my mother imitated the Blue Lady he had waved a carving knife at me and threatened to jump out of our kitchen window in front of a car.

Although slipping further into madness, my mother still sometimes made sensible remarks. During all those years, as she grew worse, I visited her regularly. My diary of April 1994 describes her being brought downstairs, a bright blue cardigan over her nightdress, dark green trousers underneath. Every so often, she tried to go back up. She asked me about her American cousin Peggie, and whether I thought that Peggie still wanted her to come and stay in America, where she used to go often. I rang America, but unfortunately Peggie was out.

I asked Mr Mainwaring, who worked for my mother, to ring Peggie again after we'd gone, but he said that my mother might be too tired by then.

Mr Mainwaring was kind, but uncouth compared to my grandmother's

butler at Knowle, Mr Tash, whom I had loved as a child. He would let me help make an Old-fashioned for my grandmother, placing in it a cherry on a stick. Then he would give me my own cherry to eat from their jar full of syrup. Mr Tash would wear a butler's black cutaway jacket with a starched white shirt and would call my grandmother 'Madam', in his soft, gentlemanly voice. Mr Mainwaring, in an anorak, hung around in the room with us, even lighting a cigarette for my mother from his own mouth. My mother seemed to like him being there and once she took his arm and coyly teased him about a group holiday they had been on.

That day, as I rose to leave, my mother plucked at my sleeve and begged me: 'Don't leave me too much alone!'

When I look back at her remark now – she must have realised that she was slowly losing her mind – I feel sad, even a little guilty. While I was embarking on a new life – having just divorced and having, I hoped, got over cancer – my mother, for one of the few times I can remember, had spoken to me directly. Also, she had conveyed what I had so often longed to hear, that I, her only daughter, meant more to her than those who looked after her daily with such devotion.

But although I wrote down her plea in my diary, I didn't take it in. I couldn't afford to. I was still terrified that I would never be rid of her; that she would always cripple me. Indeed, I see with a shock that a few days after that I wrote in my diary: ***I wish with all my heart my mother would die.***

I had just received a letter from my literary agent saying that my first book, a black comic diary about the time I had cancer, would be published the following year. At last, my life might belong to me.

In autumn 1992, my mother decided to go to Madrid. She was hoping to see some of the friends that she and my father made there when I was a baby. ('Prehistoric peeps!' he had pronounced disparagingly, when she had first suggested a visit. Now, nearly twenty years after he'd died, she was attempting, without him, to fulfil her wish.) But most of those friends were dead.

Some were from old Spanish families, and had appealed to my mother's romantic side. There were Marquesas, Duques, Condesas. There was Margarita Taylor, a lady of Irish origin who ran the tea room by the British Embassy. During the war, it had been a conduit for getting refugees from the Nazis, mainly Jews, British officers and Poles, across the Pyrenees and out of Spain through Gibraltar and Galicia. Margarita Taylor had dressed the refugees as British customers while they waited to be told their escape plans. I even remembered being taken there by my mother as a little girl to eat cakes. Then there was Russian Natasha, who, my father said, had once resembled a gazelle but by middle age had turned into 'a hideous old buffalo' (she had offended him by complaining that his dog Raven murmured in his sleep, demanding: 'Stop him groaning!'). Natasha's maiden name, Bagration, was an aristocratic Georgian name, like that of General Bagration in *War and Peace*. My father teased my mother, referring to Natasha as 'Buggeration', but remained fond of her English husband Charlie, who, years after he retired from the Foreign Office, did a superb translation into English verse of Pushkin's long poem *Eugene Onegin*.

Another friend from 'the old days' in Madrid – my mother's pet phrase – was the Marques de Santo Domingo, or Paco. Paco's life had been saved during the Spanish Civil War by his English governess, Miss Ettie, who had hung a Union Jack out of the window, declaring to 'the Reds' that only British lived there. My mother loved that story.

On a holiday to Spain when I was seven, my mother had taken me to stay with Paco and Miss Ettie near the old walled town of Avila. I had been unable to chat to the friendly local children, who kept asking in Spanish: 'Have you made your first Communion?' Instead, I wandered in Paco's garden, floating the heads of huge overblown red roses in his fishpond. Paco and I named the stately blooms 'The Princesses'.

My mother took me to the market below the walls and told me of Santa Teresa, so badly treated by the people of her town that she left Avila forever, shaking its dust from her shoes.

On that visit of autumn 1992, my mother had chosen the Ritz, because

it was where she and my father and their friends of forty years ago would congregate for their midday drink. She seemed pleased to be back there and said that she recognised the manager, a tall dark man who looked aristocratic.

Her first wish was to glimpse our old house, and we took a taxi there. Doreen, who had looked after me and Raymond as children in Spain, and Nicholas, now eight, were with us. On the way, my mother told me that there was an apricot tree in our garden, where I used to run about. But, today, although we searched the street, there was no sign of our old home, and my mother, back in the town after so many years away, seemed deflated. She decided to return to the hotel with Doreen, and I began walking with my son in the place where I spent the first years of my life.

I half-remembered our house and I certainly remembered our young Spanish maid Julia – 'Hoolia' – with her quick movements and long thick black hair down her back, and Nanny Benny, the Scottish nanny who came before Doreen. I recalled my mother, on one of Nanny's days off, trying to button my light blue 'cherry dress', fumbling with its red cherry buttons and laughing happily at her incompetence.

I remembered our drives to the mountains outside Madrid on Sundays and how the car invariably broke down, leaving us waiting in the parched landscape. My visiting grandmother was furious when I refused to walk on 'the prickies' – my word for the coarse Spanish grass. 'What a town-bred child!' she'd declared.

Then a village *fiesta* – how happy my mother looked! Older Spanish girls in scarlet skirts invited me to ride with them in a donkey cart, but I was too shy. Doreen came out from England after my brother Raymond was born and fed him out of a silver porringer, his christening present. I remember the smell of blackberries cooking in a house by the sea.

Now my grandmother, my father and Raymond were dead. Doreen was seventy-four and my mother seventy-eight. Doreen appeared to be in good health but my mother had become vague. Sometimes I wondered if she was pretending to be more confused than she was, to avoid

responsibility. She had always been an escapist, and now surely this new forgetfulness was the perfect excuse.

That evening, we met in the Ritz drawing room, which had a ceiling as tall as a church's, high-backed chairs covered in pink and huge vases of flowers placed near oval mirrors, so there seemed to be double the number of blossoms in the room. Molly, who did part-time secretarial work for my mother in Sussex, was also with us. It was she who had helped organise the trip. I did not expect attention to be given to me or to my son; all, I knew, would be given to my mother.

My mother's younger English friend Maria, who lived part of the year in Spain, had left a plant for her, with a note saying that she would return tomorrow. My mother kept referring to Maria as 'Carmen' – Carmen was Maria's Spanish mother-in-law and a friend of my parents from 'the old days'. She kept repeating: 'Carmen's coming tomorrow.'

But Carmen, like Paco and Miss Ettie, was dead.

My mother was wearing a smart black-and-white suit, half-hidden by a navy-blue jacket. On leaving Sussex that morning she had put on an old brown anorak covered with cigarette burns and dogs' hairs, but was persuaded to take it off. Her hair had been washed, but her teeth needed attention and often she had a distracted air, as though her mind really was wandering.

In 'the old days' in Madrid, she was glamorous. For as long as I can remember, I have owned a silver-framed photograph of her and my father at Raymond's christening there in 1951. My father, in his white naval attaché's uniform, cradles his baby son and my mother, in a spotted dress and white hat, stands beside her husband. She looks animated and pretty; more than pretty – radiant.

Now, if she wasn't careful, she could appear just as an old bag lady.

When Maria came the next morning, she offered to drive my mother to the Escorial – the royal palace that was the historical residence of the kings of Spain. Doreen whispered to me that there was only room in Maria's car for four and we were five. Why didn't we let Molly go, as

she had never seen the Escorial, and Doreen would stay with me and my son and go to the Thyssen collection?

My mother just sat there looking vague. Why on earth couldn't she ask me and my son to go with her? I'd never seen the Escorial either and Maria was the mother of one of my oldest school friends. But I said nothing. I was used to my mother having an entourage who indulged her every whim. I could not imagine my aunt, who was close to *her* only daughter, being in this situation. But there were always others between me and my mother, and she allowed it.

After four days in Madrid, Molly and Nicholas and I left for home. My mother and Doreen were staying on. Our taxi driver, who beside his driving mirror had a picture of Jesus and his Sacred Heart, took us to the airport on a route that went past our old house. This time we did see it. It *was* on the corner after all, as Doreen and my mother had thought, but it was no longer 117 – the street numbers had changed. I even thought I recognised it. The apricot tree could still be there, inside its walls.