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‘Soho isn’t a place, it’s a state of mind.’
(Anonymous, 1959)

DECEMBER 1959

SATURDAY
26 DECEMBER

11 A.M.

I write this sitting in the kitchen sink. Or, rather, I tried to, but the sink is perilously small and slippery, the ceramic draining board is horribly cold, and I was just wondering whether or not to run the hot water lest I get chilblains when my mother walked in. She said at eighteen it was high time I grew out of all that 'Cassandra Mortmain nonsense' and in any case she needed it for scrubbing potatoes as Aunt Barbara (ambitious, bunions) and Uncle Roy (obsessed with war and golf) are coming for lunch, so please go and do whatever it is I was doing in somewhere more suitable, i.e. the dining room. I was about to point out that I am barred from the dining room (for reasons I cannot be bothered to explain here but suffice to say I vehemently disagree with) but I could tell she was in no mood to brook argument (her lips go inexplicably thin) so I have come upstairs to my bedroom and she has gone back to doing something inventive with mince.

So, in actuality, I write this sitting on lavender candlewick, whilst wishing, yet again, that my life were more novel-like.

I shouldn't even mind if it wasn't *I Capture the Castle*, however attractive moving to a dilapidated mansion in East Anglia might be; I'd settle for anything disaffected and preferably French – like Cécile in *Bonjour Tristesse*, perhaps. Sadly there is no chance of torrid poolside affairs in Surbiton, where private swimming pools and disaffection are regarded with the same suspicion as are exotic pets and ambitious hair. Instead I am constrained by complete mediocrity. Even my name – Margaret – is average (Princess Margaret notwithstanding, as she is a goddess amongst women). Why can I not be a Calypso? A Viola? A Genevieve?

It could be worse, I suppose. I could be a civil servant (John, my brother) or a dentist (Daddy) or be engaged to Trevor Phelps (Felicity Higgins, my best friend). Not that I wouldn't mind a boyfriend of some sort. But that sort of thing is difficult when one is a) plain b) prone to mishap and c) under my mother's jurisdiction. Also there isn't a single boy in all of Surrey with whom I would deign to hold hands, let alone engage. Felicity insists Trevor's friend Colin is a 'catch', but I told her there was nothing 'catching' about clerking for a solicitor and keeping bees. Besides, settling for the boy-next-door (even if he does live three streets away) is so very Surbiton. Even my parents met in more interesting circumstances, i.e. on a train to St Austell – she on a day trip; he on the annual Arbuthnot holiday – which is practically romantic.

Perhaps I shall meet someone when I get to university.

If I get to university. Cambridge entrance is a month away and I am woefully ill-prepared. If I was to get Freudian about it, I should say that it's because I am avoiding what I know will, at best, only lead to more tedium and, at worst, abject failure. But Freud is barred in this house along with all forms of fortune telling (Mummy says horoscopes are for the 'mentally weak') and Cliff Richard (Daddy is averse to his hair) so I shall just surmise that I am not an Oxbridge sort. It is just a shame Mummy doesn't agree. Though I suspect it is only because she regrets never being able to go to university at all on account of being poor and from Cornwall. Daddy effectively rescued her from a life of butchery (the family business, not murder) in Bodmin so I suppose Surbiton, for her, is almost Hollywood.

The upshot of which is that I should be revising this very minute, i.e. trying (for the umpteenth time) to finish *Mrs Dalloway*. But, I ask you, who wants to read about the elderly and their depressing dinner parties? I get enough of that at 43 Magnolia Road when Mummy and Daddy have the Tredegars (two doors down, amateur dramatics) round. Although Mummy doesn't worry about fetching flowers as they are an 'unnecessary extravagance', especially where the Tredegars are concerned. I'd rather read about Virginia Woolf herself, who led a far more thrilling existence. Anyway, my point is (which I admit I struggle to stick to, and which again does not bode well for university interview) that instead of studying I am writing this journal, which is number one in my New Year's

Eve resolutions. And yes, I know it is far too early, being a week away, but John gave me the notebook (which is a dear thing – emerald leather with my initials embossed on the cover) for my Christmas present yesterday along with the pen from Mummy and Daddy (the most gorgeous Osmiroid – a dark marbled navy), and my Cassandra Mortmain dreams were instantly renewed, much to Mummy's chagrin.

Oh, heavens! The doorbell has just gone so I suppose I shall have to put aside the rest of the resolutions until later, put on my out-to-please face, and brace myself for Aunt Barbara and Uncle Roy. One can only hope they have not brought Julian (ten, knows too many facts) with them. He makes Mrs Dalloway seem a welcome guest.

7 P.M.

It is a miracle I have survived lunch unscathed, if not exactly scot-free. And though I do not entirely blame Julian, his presence did not help in the slightest. I concede it started off well enough – all seated at the table listed yesterday's presents, and there was much 'Oh, lovely!'ing etc. etc., although what one would want with a pair of bellows (Aunt Barbara) or an icon of the Virgin Mary (Julian) remains to be proven. But conversation swiftly turned, as seemed inevitable, to my 'Future', a word I always imagine spoken with a menacing capital 'F', as if it is something one must regard with the same trepidation as one does bears or

the clergy. Aunt Barbara asked if I had given any more thought to Hull University, which is her alma mater, and where she met Daddy's brother Uncle Roy. At this my mother's lips thinned again – I believe she regards anywhere north of Watford as some sort of No Man's Land, marked on the map with 'here be dragons'. On top of which, she does not consider Uncle Roy in any way a good match, given his weak knees. I said I had indeed given thought to Hull, but did not add that the thought was an enormous 'no, thank you'. Julian then began to list facts about Hull (the fishing industry there was started by monks; something about phone boxes) none of which were in any way encouraging, at which point Mummy, who was quite red-faced by that point, snapped, 'She'll be going to Cambridge, like . . . like Charles Darwin, so all this fish talk is moot!' I did not dare dissuade her from this conviction. Nor did Daddy, who seemed inordinately interested in his Brussels sprouts throughout this exchange (he only mustered the gumption to speak when the conversation turned, as was inevitable, to the state of the eighteenth hole at Sandown).

Julian, however, was decidedly vocal. 'Vladimir Nabokov went to Cambridge,' he said. 'Also Lord Byron.'

This risked a further outburst as my mother regards them both with the same air of suspicion as she does Freud, so by way of a distraction I said I really should get back to my revision, as Mrs Dalloway wouldn't read herself (though I heartily wish she would). However, Aunt Barbara then seized on the

opportunity to grill me in the form of a quiz, i.e. Who fought in the battle of the Boyne? Why is a horse measured in hands? How many ounces in a gill? I had to admit I did not know the answers to any of these (unlike Julian) but said I did not think any interview at Girton, if I got one, would consist of a general knowledge competition. Aunt Barbara said it pays to be prepared for anything and I should brush up on my capital cities, heraldry and semaphore as well. I did not answer that one for fear of being sent to my room, appealing though that was. Thankfully they left soon after dessert (yesterday's pudding heated up with custard, and the stilton that Daddy insists on buying every Christmas and then no one eats and so it will be thrown out looking even bluer come Easter) citing perilous weather conditions on the Richmond Road (it is drizzling).

It is unfair that my brother no longer has to suffer through these affairs, which I said, and which earned me another black look from Mummy even though I waited until everyone had left. It is because John's wife, Gloria, is pregnant, which is usually a useful distraction for everyone, but she is currently afflicted with piles, which means she has to sit on a rubber ring, which John insists is the wrong sort of distraction, and so they are excused from social events (bar immediate family) until the 'situation below stairs' improves.

On the bright side, I am back on the lavender candlewick, having refused Mummy's offer of a turkey sandwich for supper (she will be trying to palm these off on us for weeks; it is the same

every year. It is a wonder we had hot lunch in the circumstances) and am attending to my resolutions. So far I have:

1. Finish *Mrs Dalloway*.
2. Do something with hair. I am never going to get anywhere in life with mousy brown hanks that lurk around my face like curtains. Even Felicity has started using curlers. Though the overall effect is less Jackie Kennedy and more Mrs Weedon from the Post Office, but at least it is an improvement on looking about twelve.
3. Pass Cambridge entrance.

Though, the more I stare at it, the more unappealing number 3 seems. I don't want to go to university; I want to LIVE (with capitals!). I want a life more like the fictional ones I keep reading about and less like the actual one I seem destined for – the dull suburbs, the safety of university in a honey-bricked city, then back to the suburbs to marry a Clive or a Colin and waste said education by having children who will repeat the process all over again. The question, though, is *what*? What does the alternative look like? I can hardly run away to join a circus in the depths of January. Besides, I feel sorry for the poor lions, and acrobatics are not my forte. I have still not recovered from the week we did box vaults in PE, though the less said about that the better. It will be a miracle if I'm even able to have children.

Perhaps God (or Allah or Mohammed – I am trying to be open about these things. Mummy says hedging my bets will not stand me a better chance of getting into heaven, but I say why not try?) will give me a sign. Yes, that is it. I will scratch the Cambridge thing and change it to:

3. Live, to wit: look out for a sign from 'God'.
4. If no sign by Friday, then buck up and revise.

That looks much better. Oh, I feel ready for a turkey sandwich after all! Though I shall continue to eschew the stilton. I feel only bad things can come from eating blue cheese. Not even God would stoop to that as a sign.

10 P.M.

I have had a thought: what if God (or Allah etc.) has been sending me signs all along and I have been too head-in-my-book to notice? What if now, he, or she (like I said, I am hedging all bets) is sitting back on their comfy chair with a cup of tea, saying, 'Well, my girl, I gave you umpteen opportunities and you refused all of them. Didn't even blink'?

I blame Mummy. She has always said I should stop looking for intrigue where there is none, e.g. the time I thought Daddy was a spy. I asked him outright and he said no. Only, being clever, I said, 'That is precisely what a spy would say,' and

then went to investigate his study while he was playing nine holes with Mr Tredegar. Only, the golf got rained off and he reappeared just as I was dismantling a scale model of a navy frigate in a bid to find a secret transmitter and bellowed, 'For heaven's sake, I'm not a bloody spy! I wish I was.' And Daddy never swears unless he is mortally injured, or Surrey have lost at cricket, so now I just feel a bit sorry for him being a dentist. Perhaps that is why he understands me – he probably had bigger dreams than Surbiton, unlike Mummy, for whom it is the peak of achievement.

There is no alternative: I shall have to take matters into my own hands and just alter the course of my own existence. Be my own fate! I shall start saying 'yes' to things. Mummy says no to everything – or, rather, 'No, I don't think so' – and look where that has got her. Admittedly she no longer has to wee in an outside lav or use the public baths once a week but still, that was because of the 'yes' she said to Daddy all those years ago, so I think, in a roundabout way, I have just proved my own point. Thus:

1. Say 'yes' to everything.

That should do it. Yes (that word again!), by the end of this week, the course of my very existence may well have changed. I could have married a prince, or become a spy myself, or joined the circus after all (this one very much depending on there