

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

Marnock House

Miriam Pattison heaved the trunk into the boot of her car and took one last look at the crumbling pile of *Marnock House*. The large stone villa had been the home of her Aunt Myrtle through her long spinster life. It had also been Miriam's own home until she had married Norman Pattison, whom she had met at *Paisley Harriers*. Norman was the son of the local plumber, a simple but well-respected father and son business. Aunt Myrtle, however, had considered the young man to be 'quite unsuitable' for her niece and godchild and, in her disappointment, had refused to attend their wedding.

After a blizzard of confusing legal paperwork, meetings with estate agents, property developers and local planning officials, the development plans for *Marnock House* had eventually been allowed. With fees and taxes paid, the monies from Aunt Myrtle's estate had been finally coalesced and dispensed. Most of the money had come to Miriam, the rest to a scattering of charities Myrtle had supported for years, the principal benefactors being *The Dogs Trust*, *The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust* and *Glasgow City Mission*.

For Miriam Pattison, nee Fergusson, the last decade had been consumed by caring for Myrtle Strang QC. This had meant driving each day from her terraced house in Knightswood to Kilmacolm to give moral support to her aunt and help her carers. Myrtle's long, slow decline into dementia, incontinence and paranoia had been heart-breaking. Her end, thanks to the nursing support provided under the revised *Liverpool Care Pathway* approach, had been peaceful, mainly the result of morphine administered as required. When she died from her untreatable brain tumour, it had been a relief for everyone. Miriam's ancient Clio had all but expired too.

With Power of Attorney, Miriam had been responsible for managing everything during Myrtle's final years, never resenting the time and effort gladly given to an aunt she had adored. It had been a duty which had dominated Miriam's life since taking early retirement, aged fifty-three. Her children had complained, saying repeatedly the commitment had 'stolen' her best years when she could have been free to enjoy life. Miriam had countered by reminding them:

"Your Great Aunt Myrtle sacrificed years of her own retirement to care for your great-grandparents and for her close friend, your Great Aunt Sarah. I, for one, am indebted to her for such generosity of spirit. You should be too. Just remember all her gifts to you down through the years and to your children."

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

While living at *Marnock House* until the age of twenty-two, Miriam had witnessed some of her aunt's saint-like behaviour, especially the loving and patient way Myrtle had cared for her sister Barbara, Miriam's mother. As a child, Miriam had heard the whispers but, it was not until her mother's death she had learned of Barbara's long periods spent in a sanatorium prior to Miriam's birth, this stigma of mental illness concealed by her family.

Later, married with four children in quick succession then tragically widowed, Miriam could now marvel at how Aunt Myrtle had coped with these demands while juggling her busy career as a QC and breeding generations of 'Best in Show' Jack Russell Terriers, her 'children', as she had called them.

Miriam's reminiscence veered back to the day Norman had died and her recurring prayer down through the years which followed:

'Dear God, thank you for sending Duncan and Peggy.'

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

A Gift from God

On that fateful day, Norman had been competing in a hill race up Ben Lomond. Miriam had just returned home with the children from a swimming gala, the big old car noisy and steamy. Duncan and Peggy had been waiting on her doorstep, both in uniform; Duncan a Police Sergeant, Peggy a Staff Nurse. At that stage, Miriam knew them only vaguely; the handsome, childless couple from across the street who were also members at *Knightswood Church of Scotland*. While Peggy settled the children in the living room to watch television, Duncan had delivered the sad news of Norman's collapse and subsequent death in the ambulance as it raced to hospital. When the news had reached the police, Duncan had insisted he make the bereavement visit and had promised Miriam he and Peggy would help her in any way they could.

During the years which followed, Duncan and Peggy had been true to his word. A gift from God. Without them, Miriam knew she would have surely floundered.

She was jerked back to the present by her pup's impatient yelp. Before turning away from the house, she mouthed under her breath:

'Thank you, Aunt Myrtle. Thank you for caring for me when Mummy was so ill for so long. Thank you for my new Mini Clubman. Thank you for my new penthouse home and thank you for my forthcoming round the world cruise with Duncan. And especially, thank you for making it possible to help my children and grandchildren. I only wish my poor dear Norman had lived to enjoy this time too.'

The dog gave another whiney yelp.

'Well, Rooty, the end of an era. Aunt Myrtle would have been so sad to see the demise of *Marnock House*. Oh, look at me, Rooty, tearing up.' Miriam blew her nose and wiped her eyes dry before continuing, 'Rooty, you would have loved it up there too. In a sense, you did of course, because you, young man, are a grand-something-son of the original Rooty.'

The dog cocked his head, attentively.

'Well, who's a *good, good boy?*'

At the familiar prompt, the dog yapped and jumped up to catch the expected treat.

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

Tragedy in Tenerife

Later that evening, sitting on the sofa in her lounge, as the sun's rays melted from fiery red to purple blue then inky black, the retired PE teacher pulled the trunk to her side and laid out the pile of diaries in date order on the coffee table. She had two hours before Duncan was due in from his bridge tournament, his team 'Away' to Newton Mearns.

Thinking of him, she glanced over at the picture of the three of them, Peggy, Duncan and herself, taken on their winter-sun break holiday in Tenerife, five years earlier. The sadness welled up again, still tinged with guilt but its memory less potent than during the immediate aftermath. Her mind could still recall every detail of that dreadful January day.

They had swum together in the sea, doing their usual five laps around the little bay. It had been bright, sunny, breezy with just a little chop. When Miriam and Duncan had left to go back to towel themselves dry and read their Kindles, Peggy, never a reader, had decided to stay to do another few laps.

From the grassy bank, they heard a great shout then another, followed by a kerfuffle near the middle of the bay. Abandoning their Kindles, they sat up and watched as several swimmers pulled something long and solid toward the shore. As the rescuers reached the water's edge, the first sounds of competing, wailing sirens were heard approaching. A look of disbelief and denial contorting his face, Duncan grabbed Miriam's wrist. Unable to make themselves move towards the unfolding tragedy, they stood and watched in horror as the paramedics worked on the body until, at last, acknowledging defeat.

Several hours later, shocked to the core and clinging to each other for support, Duncan and Miriam listened in silence as the medical team told them Peggy probably drowned as a result of cramp, induced by the coldness of the sea. Other swimmers in the area had told the paramedics they had thought she was snorkelling. No one had realised she had drowned until another snorkeler had noticed she was unnaturally still. There would be a Post Mortem to confirm their findings but foul play was not suspected.

Inevitably, there had been intrusive media attention, the frustrations and excruciatingly slow process of repatriating the body which took nearly three weeks to achieve.

On the night after the funeral, the closest family members had gathered at Miriam's house in Knightswood. As planned, Duncan was with her to wave the others away, the

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

last of them leaving just before midnight. Alone at last, they had stood in the hallway hugging, her head in the crook of his neck, her eyes damp, sobbing, grief and guilt causing her body to vibrate in an odd way, as if she was coming down with a fever.

It had been Duncan who had broken the silence:

'Miriam, I'm certain sure Peggy never suspected. Honestly, if we had not discovered you and the kids after Norman died, our marriage would not have survived. After our second miscarriage, Peggy was changed, not the girl I married. You know that, she told you herself, didn't she?'

'Yes, she said she couldn't face another pregnancy and the risks involved.'

'Miriam, dear, we've been over this before. You know when Norman died, Peggy and I had been living in a sham marriage for over three years. Counselling seemed to make matters worse, not better. She would barely let me hold her. We never got back to where we had been. But, dear, you know all this, don't you?'

'Oh, but Duncan, what if she . . .?'

'No, Miriam, no. I'm sure Peggy didn't know about us or if she did, she gave no hint. She was happy. Please, please, dear, don't punish yourself. Don't let this alter what we feel for each other. Please, I couldn't bear it.'

'But Duncan, are you sure she didn't know about us? I loved Peggy, you know that, she was like the sister I longed for but never had.'

'Yes, I'm sure, certain sure. It was the kids who saved us, wasn't it? When you let us into your lives, Peggy was happy, wasn't she? The three of us made a great team, didn't we?'

'Oh, Duncan, God knows how much I want that to be true.'

'Miriam, please, you know how being with the kids transformed her. How, for the first time in years, she was happy again. But she still would not have me. Miriam, you do know all this, don't you? Please, darling, we've been over it so many times. You know I had thought being with the kids would, well, make her want to try again but, well, she told me quite bluntly the sex part of our marriage was over, never to come back. But she was happy. You saw that too, didn't you?'

'Yes, she was happy. Oh Duncan, I miss her so much.'

'And you, Miriam, you've been happy, haven't you? If only we had met sooner.'

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

Crushing her to him, seeking her lips, he found her neck then, as she lifted her face to him, he kissed her hard on the lips, his hands on her back, pressing her into him. They had not made love since the drowning but now, at last, their passion stirred.

'Duncan, do you remember that first time we kissed? I was so nervous, I thought it would never happen. I'd been hoping for months you would make a move, filled with guilt but wanting it to happen. Do you remember? It was the night of your fortieth birthday party, after Peggy went off on her shift and the kids were asleep.'

'Yes, I remember it well. One of the best nights of my life. Like a sort of homecoming, if that makes sense. I was about to leave and go across to ours. I realised later what happened between us was inevitable, natural. Wasn't it? And I was happy, truly happy for the first time in years.'

'Are you sure Peggy never suspected? She was such a good swimmer, she couldn't have. . . .?'

'No. Never. The sea was cold that day, wasn't it? She stayed in far too long, doing those circuits. It was an accident, nothing else. Shush now and come to bed. Tomorrow we'll start over, begin our new lives without her. Take one day at a time. And remember, you must be over at Marnock House by nine o'clock for Aunt Myrtle's podiatrist's visit.'

'Oh, dear, yes. It's so odd, her latest phobia, her feet.'

Miriam dropped into a perfect rendering of her aunt's rather pompous voice: 'MIRIAM! No one must be allowed to touch my feet unless you are there to oversee them, my dear, dear child. Else they might cut off my toes for my sins. My manifest sins!'

The Jack Russell yelped, attacked his tennis ball, tossed it then growled as it rolled out of reach under the sofa.

'Well, Rooty, let's see what Aunt Myrtle was up to in her life. Now, where shall we begin? Ah, how about 1953, the year I was born?'

The young dog took this as an invitation to leap onto her lap, squirm into a coil then close his eyes.

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

The Diaries

The first diary she sought out had not been a random choice; Norman had been convinced all was not as it had seemed at *Marnock House*, insisting there were secrets to be uncovered. Miriam had always scolded him to silence when he started out on this tack. It had only been later, with the perspective of a widow and her own clandestine experience with Duncan she had realised there may be substance in Norman's suspicions.

Miriam eased the sleeping pup down onto his cushion, wiped the cover of the diary with a damp sponge, curled her legs under herself and settled back, intending to read snippets. It was slightly larger than A5 size, ornate, leather-bound, artistically inscribed with the year '1953' and with aunt's name, imprinted in gold leaf, beneath. When she opened the solid cover, the closely-lined pages were arranged to provide two per day which she thought an excellent layout for anyone who kept a daily journal. Miriam began by scanning the entry for the first day of January, written in her aunt's familiar long hand.

The usual crowd to bring in the New Year. Poor Barbara did not even make it to supper and went off to bed early with another migraine. Edwin stayed with us. We danced until almost two in the morning, changing partners for every dance which meant I had to share him. What a wonderful dancer he is. Why, oh why did I ever refuse his offer and let Barbara take him. Poor Barbara, forever in and out of the sanatorium. And poor Edwin, having to put up with her tantrums and ailments. Still, her absences give us such leeway.

After we had waved the others off, I sent Mama and Papa up to bed, out of the way. Edwin helped with the clearing up. When we were sure the others were all sound asleep, we played the radiogram softly and danced again for a while. Then, as planned, we slipped up to my room and enjoyed it all over again. As usual, it was truly WONDERFUL!

*At late breakfast, we played *I Spy* and it took me back to our beach holidays at *Grange-over-Sands*, with us three Strangs one of a large group of families from *Kilmacolm* who invaded the place for six long weeks each summer. Our fathers visited when they could but otherwise*

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

enjoyed their gentlemen's pleasures back home while our mothers drank gin and played endless whist.

As we continued with our game of I Spy, I glanced up, saw Edwin's surreptitious, slow wink and, at once, we were back together in our special place in the dunes, in August 1933, where it all began.

Isn't it WONDERFUL! to have such exhilarating secrets to share with someone sitting across the room from you when all around are oblivious?

'Well, Rooty, let's find out what 'it' was that was so "WONDERFUL", as if I cannot guess. What a minx she must have been.'

Miriam picked out the diary for 1933, the year when Myrtle would have become fourteen in mid-May. This diary was slightly larger with plain, cheap cardboard covers, unpretentious, perhaps an extra Christmas gift. It had a flap with a simple lock but there was no key. Using a kitchen knife, Miriam eased the flap open then moved to her reclining chair and invited Rooty onto her lap.

The entry for Friday 18th August supplied the information she was searching for. The style of words was different, more youthful, gushing but written in the same hand, neatly scribed and disciplined.

Sorry diary, catching up at last because we have been so busy. And I have SUCH news!

Here we are, our holiday almost over. Sarah Semple has been a dragon! For some reason, she appointed herself as our chaperone but HURRAY! She was collected by her father on Saturday last and taken home to study for a resit. She had failed Human Reproductive Biology, so her sister Evelyn told us. Good riddance I say!

At last I got my chance with Edwin. He is nearly sixteen now. This year his voice is deeper and he has the beginnings of a moustache. He is so, so HANDSOME! And he has been giving me the eye for weeks!

A few days after Sarah left, the weather improved. The rain stopped, the clouds blew away on a strong breeze and the sun came out. Tired

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

of being cooped up indoors, it was decided we, the 'young people', should go to the beach.

Edwin and I were in our swimming things, traipsing over the dunes to the sea, our towels over our shoulders. I was deliberately lagging behind the others, talking to Edwin about his stamp collection. We both knew I was not in the least interested in stamps but it gave me the opportunity to tease him, push him and get pushed back in return. It was so, so DELICIOUS!

We found the deep narrow cleft I had seen before and took shelter out of the cooling wind to sunbathe. Lying side by side, we rolled into each other and his hand touched my tiny boobs. It was like ELECTRICITY! I jerked down my front and pulled his head onto my nipples and he SUCKED them. He pushed my hand down inside his swimming shorts and as soon as I touched it, it began to SQUIRT! He began to moan and when he slipped his finger inside me, EVERYTHING was jumping and rushing and my head was spinning.

My first ever SEX! WONDERFUL!

Afterwards, I remembered how delicious it was to have such power over him. Until then I had been sure he had always wanted Barbara. She was a year older than him and had much bigger boobs than me.

'Well, well, well Rooty, hardly what I would have expected from a staid Church of Scotland minister and a respected Queen's Council. I think this revelation calls for a small whisky with water. Up you get, laddie.'

Settled with her drink to hand and the dog back on her lap, Miriam returned to the 1953 diary and scanned through the rest of January. Most of what she saw was unsurprising, detailing Myrtle's preparations for the Bar exam and plans to move to Edinburgh where she had an offer to join a Stable, a syndicate of like-minded female barristers to launch her career in earnest.

As Miriam well knew from many dinner table conversations, Aunt Myrtle's main interest throughout her career had been Property Law which had surprised those who knew her and thought she would have made an excellent criminal lawyer, with her sharp tongue and feisty nature.

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

The entry for Thursday 28th January 1953 shed light on this.

I am at The North British, overnight in Edinburgh. After dinner with Annalise Fraser QC, I put to her my plan of pursuing Criminal Defence work as my chosen career path. She looked at me over her half-moon spectacles in amused astonishment. These are her exact words.

“Dear, dearest, Myrtle, do not waste your obvious talents dealing with the sordid world of crime. Please, please do not succumb to the allure of fame and notoriety. No, no, dear, leave that for the men. Let them polish their egos in the glare of publicity and bathe in the glow of the inarticulate ramblings of the gutter press. At Birnham & Birnham, we make a handsome living by avoiding such puerile nonsense.

Come, come, dear Myrtle, work with me and I will teach you all about land and property, where the big fees are, free of the dead hand of doddery old Judges’ notions of what you should be paid by way of legal aid to defend the poor unfortunates who cannot afford to defend themselves. I am soon to retire and, if you play your hand cleverly, there is no reason you should not dovetail into my wake.

Myrtle, you are exactly the right sort and so far, mercifully, single. As you will find, this is a man’s world but that can be to our advantage, especially for single women like us. It brings out the Don Juan in most male opponents.

Come, come and learn the game. I am convinced you will excel and have fun along the way, as have I.”

It was agreed I would start in March, giving me time to complete my remaining bits and pieces with McLays.

Miriam scanned through the next few days of her Aunt Myrtle’s plans to set up a home in Edinburgh. The enthusiasm of her entries was tempered with words of concern about the failing health of her parents.

On 31st January 1953, her diary entry read:

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

Double, nae, triple disaster. I am pregnant. I thought it was impossible!! I often skip a month but never before have I skipped three. Even though we took the greatest care, Edwin with his Johnnies and me with my spermicidal cream, what we dreaded has happened.

No one knows yet, except my dear Sarah, now Dr Semple and my closest confidante who is sworn to secrecy. Woe is me. I fear my chance at Birnham's will not survive this! But I'll wait and see. There may be a way, I think.

To cap my situation, poor Papa has suffered a third and massive stroke. He is in Paisley Infirmary under his golfing partner, Dr Ronald Hibberd. Uncle Ronnie says Papa will not last out the week. Mama has taken to her room with a gin bottle and refuses to visit him, not that he realises.

Barbara is back in the sanatorium and this time. Edwin says it looks like long term. Pray God it is as this might solve my problem.

The entry on 4th February 1953 read:

This is a catch up. Papa is dead and will be buried with full military honours at Glasgow Cathedral tomorrow. They have kindly agreed Edwin may participate in the service and act as lead at the interment. He got dressed up for me tonight before WONDERFUL. He looked amazing in his Major's uniform and they are happy to allow him to wear his dog collar, even though he was never an actual Padre during the War, only a Civilian Administrator in Ordnance Supplies at Bishopton. Because of his fallen arches, he was not taken, even though he volunteered. He is now an Honorary Padre in the Territorials. I suppose that would have influenced them.

Mama has roused herself and is almost sober but I'm not sure we should allow her to attend. Sarah says 'no' and Uncle Ronnie says 'yes'. Typical medics! I'll wait and see how she is tomorrow.

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

Barbara has declined to attend, although the people at the Glennifer Sanatorium say she is "improved".

Since Papa died, Edwin has forsaken his cold, draughty, lonely manse and has been staying here with us. Guilty pleasures. WONDERFUL! Every night. Sometimes twice WONDERFUL!!

I had heard being pregnant would make me needy and it's true! "WONDERFUL!" is now in Technicolour! Amazing!

Edwin does not know yet about our child but I plan to tell him soon, maybe tomorrow.

The entry for 6th February 1953 read:

With Mama tucked in for the night, I broke the news to Edwin.

As expected, his immediate concern was for his own situation. Recently installed in one of the best and most affluent churches in Gourock, he is afraid of losing it and being de-frocked.

After a long forensic rerun of how WE got me pregnant, I waited to hear what he might propose. As expected, nothing. Dear Edwin, bless him, is not a creative thinker. I put my proposal to him which he met with silence then withdrew to his room to PRAY! about it! I waited until midnight but he did not return. While waiting, I had a few goes at drafting a letter to Annalise but could not find the right words.

The entry for 7th February 1953 read:

During the small hours, Edwin slipped in beside me. He has accepted my plan. WONDERFUL! WONDERFUL! WONDERFUL!

The entry for 10th February 1953 read:

Sarah says she has had a long chat with Ronald Hibberd and they fear Mama is becoming gaga. This was NOT a revelation. We have known for years Mama has been 'slipping'.

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

The entry for 11th February 1953 read:

Edwin has done the deed and explained to his Parish Board about Barbara's mental and physical condition. As I had predicted, they have proved very understanding. Fortunately, they do not know anything of Kilmacolm which Edwin says is, to them, like a far-flung country. It has been agreed he will split his time between us here at Marnock House and his manse. He has also hinted to them that, if and when Barbara is allowed home, she will come back here with 'her' baby to be with Mama and me.

Sarah has carried out a full check on me and together we have worked out baby is due in late June or early July. If we have a girl, we shall name her Miriam after Mama; if a boy, Robert, after Edwin's father.

Just before this diary entry, I re-drafted the letter to Annalise Fraser explaining my awful family predicament with Papa dead, Mama grieving and 'slipping' and my sister in hospital with mental problems arising from her pregnancy. I laid it on as thickly as I dared and after the third draft, it was ready. The final paragraph was a stoic plea, explaining I was needed to hold things together and asking that Birnham & Birnham consider extending me a one-year deferment, promising I would commit to start with them in Edinburgh in March next year, no matter what.

'Well, Rooty, do I have the proof here, in her own hand?'

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

Proof Positive

Miriam skipped the pages to 29th June 1953.

Miriam arrived today. My dear, dear child. Although the pain was excruciating, it was worth it.

She is so beautiful, with Edwin's fair hair and my EARS!

We Christened her privately, just me, Edwin and my dearest Sarah as her Godmother.

The entry for Friday 17th July 1953 read:

Barbara came home today. The sanitorium people have told Edwin she has been cured. Sarah doubts it. Barbara also confided she has signed a pledge to give up cigarettes and says she has cut down to only thirty a day. At least her complexion is fresher and the pong of tobacco from her has lessened. I don't know how Edwin could bear to sleep with her for all those years before they split to separate bedrooms.

We washed her face and hands, changed her into fresh night clothes then gave her Miriam to hold and her face lit up. We have started the process of convincing Barbara the child is hers. Sarah says she has a chum in Brighton whose daughter is a child nurse and is willing to come and live-in here, at Marnock House, to help care for baby.

Her name is Verity Longstone and she sounds ideal. She has had full training in General and Maternity Nursing with an additional Diploma in Child Care. Her letter states she has taken the children of three families through to higher school level. She included glowing references. Hopefully she will not prove too set in her ways or expect perfection of us!

I have already moved Miriam from breast to bottle. What a relief! Like her father, she is a ferocious sucker!

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

We will soldier on with Mama here for the present but she may have to move to a nursing home when I start with Birnham & Birnham.

Miriam laid down the diary and closed her eyes, smiling at the memory of the small, slim, bustling spinster who had cared for her with stern kindness. Her mind drifted back to her teenage years:

How many times did we find Mummy drunk in a smoke-filled bedroom, bedclothes smouldering? Maybe hundreds? How many times did Mummy promise she would stop drinking and smoking? Thousands? Auntie Sarah always said Mummy's alcoholism was caused by her depression and would not accept it was the other way around. Poor Mummy. Or rather, not Mummy at all but 'Aunt Barbara'. What a tortured, lonely life. Did she know about Daddy and Aunt Myrtle? She must have done. Verity too. I was the only one out of the loop.

After Miriam's marriage to Norman, Verity had remained at Marnock House, becoming Aunt Myrtle's friend and confidante, living out her remaining years in charge of Myrtle's dogs, treating them too with stern kindness, preparing them for the shows and displaying them with pride.

'Well Rooty, there it is at last. Norman was right; I am a love child. But why did they not tell me the truth, when I was older? I suppose, if they had, it would have made me a bastard, despite what my birth certificate says. No Rooty, they did the right thing. Let's keep this as our little secret.'

The carriage clock struck eleven-thirty.

'Right, young man, time for widdle walkies before Duncan gets home.'

The puppy leapt down, his tail wagging in anticipation, eager to be outside.

'Let's put these incriminating tomes out of sight first, shall we?'

When Miriam began returning the diaries to the trunk, Rooty jumped onto the coffee table to investigate, knocking several diaries to the floor. An envelope skittered across the room. Inside, Miriam found a photograph she recognised as Grange-over-Sands, almost certainly taken by Auntie Sarah, who had always holidayed with them in those far-off days.

Throughout her adult life, Sarah Semple had been a keen amateur photographer, an early adopter of colour photography and the self-appointed chronicler of family holidays, birthdays and special occasions.

Aunt Myrtle's Diaries

The faded photograph showed two tall, auburn-haired women standing on either side of a shorter, fair-haired man with a neat, military moustache. The Reverend Major Edwin Fergusson (TA) was dressed in a grey shirt with a white dog collar, khaki-coloured military shorts, long grey stockings and white tennis shoes.

Miriam smiled at this caricature of her normally dapper father beaming at the camera. Standing in front of him was her five-year-old self, smiling shyly at the lens. She was dressed in a white and lemon beach frock, fair hair in long pigtails with yellow ribbons, large ears sticking out under a floppy sun hat, bucket in one hand, spade in the other. His right hand was resting on his daughter's shoulder as she leaned back against him. On his left stood a vibrant Aunt Myrtle, a large toothy grin, her right arm tightly wrapped around her brother-in-law's waist, pulling him to her, her other hand resting on the child's left shoulder, proprietarily.

Knowing now Aunt Myrtle was her mother, Miriam studied her face and stance intently. It was clear she and Daddy were most definitely a couple.

On his right, standing half-a-pace away, was Aunt Barbara, the person who until a few minutes ago she had thought of as Mummy. She looked alone, hunched into herself, abandoned, eyes downcast, sallow face vacant, hands at waist level, bony, long, heavily nicotine-stained fingers. From between two fingers of her right hand drooped a half-smoked cigarette.

On the reverse, in Aunt Myrtle's hand, was written:

The Happy Trio, August 1958.

'Well, Rooty, let's keep this family secret between ourselves too, shall we? No need to tell anyone, not even Duncan. And you would never tell on me, would you Rooty?'

The dog ran to the door, turned and sat, looked up at her, barked once, waited then barked a second time before leaping up to catch the expected treat.

'Now, Rooty, let's get your warm coat on. We don't want you to have the sniffles when you go out to Kirsty's in Strathblane for your nice long holidays with Tooty and Frooty, do we? Pity they don't allow nice doggies on cruise ships.'