RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

By George

Wesley Stace

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About the Author

Born in Hastings in 1965, Wesley Stace writes and performs music under the name John Wesley Harding. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and daughter, and is currently at work on his sixteenth album and third novel.

ALSO BY WESLEY STACE

Misfortune

For Abbey

WESLEY STACE

By George

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Imaginations, fantasies, illusions,
In which the things that cannot be take shape,
And seem to be, and for the moment are.

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, FROM *MICHAEL ANGELO*

rnie Wise: But I can see your lips moving!
ric Morecambe: Well, of course you can, you fool. Because it's *me* who's doing it for *him*. He can't do it on his own: he's wood! That's my hand in there, you know!
rnie: You're not supposed to move your lips. Ventriloquists don't move their lips. When the dummy talks, you keep your mouth shut.
ric: Hello, Charlie. How are you? *(Dummy's mouth moves, but nothing emerges.)*
rnie: He's not saying anything.
ric: You told me to keep my mouth shut!
rnie: You keep your mouth shut, but you still talk!
ric: *(in disbelief)* How can you do that? *(to the audience)* He lives in a little dream world of his own!

1ORECAMBE AND WISE, FROM THEIR STAGE SHOW

Prologue

Ad Lib Till Ready

Half an hour later, George was on his knees in his bedroom, the door locked.

In front of him lay his second victim of the day, facedown, naked but for his trousers. The rest of the uniform— cap, white shirt, striped tie, forest green blazer— was scattered across the floor.

George had found him in the attic wrapped in a tartan blanket, just as Queenie had said, hidden in a turquoise valise beneath a tower of forgotten suitcases. Despite the pungent smell of camphor, frail silken threads clung to his blazer, the cuffs and the lapel of which were partly eaten away.

This boy weighed less than the other. George turned him over.

"Speak to me."

The tattooed date was where he expected, and there were tiny silver welts around the boy's heart: on closer inspection, pieces of embedded shot. George pulled the trousers down slowly. Whereas the other boy's legs had been entirely wood, elegantly hinged, these were different. Beneath each knee, a metal tube was attached with wire to the wooden thigh above and the shoe below.

"Sorry," George said as he took his pliers to the wire beneath the right knee. A leather shoe dangled from the bottom of the newly amputated metal shin. He put the tube to his eye, telescope-style, but found his view blocked by something he couldn't shake from its hiding place. He coaxed the contents towards the opening with his little finger until he was able to pinch their top edge and pull them out. It was a rolled document, tied with string.

George performed the same surgery on the left leg to find a matching manuscript, rolled tighter.

At first, he simply stared. Then he undid the string on the first, expecting the pages to spring forth in celebration of their new freedom, but the brittle paper had been too long in confinement.

He unrolled the scroll from the right leg. On the first page was written "The Memoirs of George Fisher."

Discovered On

Finally, our number is up.

“Starting places, please! Number eighteen. Joe Fisher and George!”

The orchestra’s crescendo becomes a climactic round of adoring applause as the Can Can Cadets high-kick past us into the wings. Their accompaniment drowned out, they stage-whisper through clenched smiles, “And a one, and a *two!* And a three…” Though long out of the sight lines, still they high-kick, the dopes, and I duck beneath a trailing leg, narrowly avoiding a splintered chin as I pretend to peek up a Cadet’s skirt: no one notices.

The curtains sweep together; the stage is safe and the Can Can Cadets a distant memory, already walloping their way across town, sequined storm troopers bound for a late turn at the Alhambra.

We walk centre stage, as businesslike as it is possible for a man and his dummy to be. Props runs by with a chair; he positions the legs precisely upon the chalk crosses.

Our mark.

I love it when our number is up and the curtain is down. The stage is our world then, and everything works in harmony towards the beginning of the act. Hands scurry about, snatching up cardboard Tour Eiffel and Arc de Triomphe, gathering a stray ostrich feather here, a spangled jewel there, until all that lingers of the Cadets is the faint whiff of cheap perfume. A broom whisks away tinsel, sawdust, and the sweeper’s own fag ash.

Then there is no scenery at all. The stage has never been emptier: just the two of us and, close by, a table with

decanter, glass and ashtray.

Am I ready? A cigarette! There isn't time.

Last-minute adjustments— the smoothing of my fringe, the primping of his bow tie, a moment's look of mutual admiration— as I hear, from the other side of the curtain, the chairman's introduction. We've sat here ten minutes in the past and listened to him stall, bullying the punters into ordering more, but tonight— and thank God, for I am in no mood for delay— there is the almost immediate bang of his gavel and whoosh of satin runners: "You want them! You deserve them! Joe Fisher and Gorgeous, Garrulous Geeeeeeeeee-orge!"

The curtains part. We are discovered on.

There is a hush in the stalls.

The moment is here. The moment when I come alive.

An audience knows that there is nothing better than a good ventriloquist show. To see a man and his dummy working in perfect synchronicity … yes, sir, that really is something. It makes adults of children and children of adults. That ventriloquist is not just an entertainer. He is breathing life into an inanimate object. He is making that inanimate object think and breathe and feel, and he is making people believe that the figure lives. The great ventriloquist is more than an illusionist; he is a creator, a dream maker, a kind of god.

And I should know: I'm his dummy.

Part One

Ventriloquism for Dummies

1

I Am Built

I shall now do a little ventriloquism of my own.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was built (as I have been informed and believe) at Romando Theatrical Properties of Henley on Friday, the fifth of September, 1930.

That, at least, is the date tattooed on the inside of my chest in the specific form V/IX/30. I was made over a period of time: what was so special about the fifth of September? Was it when I was ordered, when the great artiste first conceived me, or when his minions started to mix my papier-mâché? Was it perhaps the moment I was taken from the mould, or even the date of the final stroke of his paintbrush on my flushed cheek? I don't precisely know.

One thing is certain: there was always something special about me. Whereas many of my Romando brothers were bought off the peg (for example, from Henridge's Magic Emporium on the Strand), I was different: I was *bespoke*. Ever since negotiations had commenced, I had been marked out, for I was commissioned by a star as great as

my father was an artiste: the most famous ventriloquiste of the Golden Age— your own, your *very* own, Echo Endor.

Echo Endor and Narcissus— names to conjure with! Echo, whose famous scena "The Ocean Deep— A Vaudeville Fantasy" played all over the Continent, and Narcissus, Naughty Narcissus, the boy who captured the hearts of all: "Do you love me? You *know* you do!" No one had seen a boy partnered by a *woman:* only men had dared say such cheeky things.

Yet when Echo first swept into Romando Theatrical Properties, there was no Narcissus to place her. In person, she looked somewhat smaller and older than her public might have imagined. She never made any reference to her age, nor had since her thirty-ninth birthday, but she was fifty-one and had never been busier. If well prepared, she could pass, through opera glasses (which is how she was often seen), for twenty-five. (She readily gave Narcissus's age as thirteen, although he was thirty if he was a day, and shabby to prove it.)

Despite dramatic eyes, always emphasized by garish makeup, she was in many respects an average-looking woman: her voice alone announced the presence of a true star. She spoke with astonishing vigour and clarity of tone, a lip-reader's dream, sidling up to C's, attacking T's, caressing S's, rolling R's, and exploding P's. The clear voice was a family trait. Her father, Vox Knight, the beloved polyphonist, had employed the same ringing tone: the louder and more clearly *you* spoke, the more your voice was differentiated from the *other* voice, the voice that came from elsewhere, from up on the roof, from your boy's mouth. The greater the distinction, the better the illusion.

"I have come…," she proclaimed, "for a Romando boy." She set about his name with an aggressive purr, a cat toying with a defeated mouse.

Even from the depths of his workshop, the great artiste recognized her voice immediately. Drying his hands on a

towel, he untied his apron and, to the great surprise of his business manager (and lady wife), Nellie, popped his head into the reception room. Nothing ever distracted him from his work, but here he was, drawn by that siren sound.

"Miss Endor," he said. She was pleased to be recognized, but hardly surprised. "Romando, Joseph, at your service."

I was the boy she had come for— better call me *boy* than *doll* (a little girlish), *figure* (too formal), or *dummy* (for obvious reasons); *mannequin*, though preferable for its manliness, is archaic— so you can understand why perhaps I do not flatter myself in the assumption that especial care was taken in my creation. Deposit down— Nellie hardly thought one necessary, but Echo insisted— I was built.

The prime architect, the great artiste, was my father, the legendary Joseph Romando. There were great craftsmen before and many will follow, but to be a Romando boy is something special. Compare the dull and emotionless faces of my predecessors, Narcissus and his acned ilk, with mine, my fine soft skin tones, my stylish side parting, not to mention the flexible chamois leather that I call lips— tell me I wasn't sired by a kinder, cleverer man. My father made superior sons in every way. He sent his boys to the best schools— witness the splendid crests and mottoes on our forest green blazers— and gave us the most magnificent mops of hair, often worn beneath impishly tipped school caps. His brushes were more delicate, his sculpture more sensitive, and his mechanisms more innovative. But greater than any of this: he gave us each a personality. It was as though we had character before we met our partners: in some cases, sadly, more.

An account of my manufacture, however interesting, would unfortunately prove rather too technical: my genesis in paper regressed to its primordial state of pulp and ooze, my moulding and drying, my subsequent attachment to my

spine (or “control stick”), and so forth. Much of this labour was entrusted to subordinates, but it was the maestro himself who, with his improbably skeletal and impossibly expressive fingers, pressed the papier-mâché mix (his own recipe) into the plaster mould, persuading it patiently into every nook and cranny, and then (fortified by one of Nellie’s enormous breakfasts) prepared me in makeup. Given his painstaking methods, I wasn’t able to leave the chair for the entire working day. Or the next day. But on the third, I was ready for my close-up.

Brandished by my spine, I was scrutinized in natural and institutional light. My kindly maker knew when to leave well enough alone, and as I sat drying in what I can only describe as a flowerpot, he gazed at me with an unearthly love. His eyes seemed to say: you are my perfect creation.

The day of my delivery was upon us.

I was placed on the ottoman that the great artiste regularly used to display his boys on first presentation. Only rarely did a customer feel the need to make any changes to the natural design. “His socks don’t match,” someone once said, pointing out what he considered an oversight. “No,” replied the great artiste. “He has another pair just like it at home.”

So there I sat, with my clashing socks and my beautiful mouth, lifeless yet brimming with potential. My father wrung his cap like a sponge; mine perched proudly atop my newly combed hair.

Nellie walked in behind Echo, who, barely a moment later, proclaimed: “Yes. Yes. Yes! I knew it.” There was silence. “I knew it. The great Romando! A miracle child!” She loomed over me. “May I?”

“Miss Endor, of course,” said my father. “Consider him yours now.”

She picked me up, letting her finger fall across my lips, slipping her hand quickly into my back, feeling her way in

the darkness. I was about to speak for the very first time.

And now…

And now…

But nothing.

She laid me back on the ottoman without particular care.

“The very boy I was looking for! Mr. Romando, to you I say,” and she rather intoned, “many, many thanks.” My father picked me up again, patting the back of my head. He was saying goodbye.

All three went back to the office, me in the arms of my maker, to sighs of mutual appreciation and nervous coughs that presaged the exchange of money.

“A delight!” said Echo. “Can you…?” She waved her hands about.

“Of course, madam,” said Nellie. “Romando prides itself on the best presentation box at no extra cost to the customer.”

From behind the counter, my father lifted a plain but durable black box, with simple metal handle and engraved brass plate, an extra granted only to ventriloquial royalty. Upon it was written, *For Echo Endor*. And beneath this in the most florid of all scripts, *Romando Theatrical Properties of Henley*.

“I see,” sang Echo. “How thoughtful.”

“We can put the name you intend for him, but we weren’t sure…,” said Nellie.

“No, quite, quite.” Echo drummed her fingers next to the banknotes she had unfolded on the glass counter. “I’m afraid it’s not for me at all….”

“Not for you?” Disappointment sighed over Nellie’s question. She had pictured an official endorsement on their new print advertisements: *Makers for Echo Endor*, the ventriloquial equivalent of *By Royal Appointment*. “We thought…”

Echo regarded her blankly. “For me? But I have Narcissus. You surely didn’t think…” She laughed politely, more at the thought itself than at any presumption of Nellie’s. “Our public wouldn’t stand for it. For Echo Endor, there can be only one boy, for all time.”

My father looked down at me, full of pride, as he massaged his beard. I was my own reward. He busied himself with the box, which didn’t look big enough. He undid the two catches and lifted the hinged lid back, revealing the abyss within. *Don’t put me in the box*, I thought, not for the last time.

“No, no,” Echo continued. “This is a birthday present. For my son.”

My father scooped my legs up beneath me and, bending me double, put them level with my ears, one foot on each shoulder.

Then, taking me by the middle, he placed me carefully in the opulently lined case, so that my hips were on the bottom of the box and the soles of my black leather shoes faced up. He swivelled my head to the left to avoid any damage to my nose and closed the lid. A key turned in the lock. Their voices were muffled.

“Your son?” said my father. “Does he dream of following in the magnificent footsteps of his grandfather and mother?”

“He will,” said the ventriloquiste, “if I say so.”

“Well, *this* boy has a name,” said my father, handing her the key. “We name all our creations.”

“Oh,” said Echo without curiosity.

“Yes, they’re all very much part of the family. This one we call…” I heard him quite clearly as he turned around to christen me. “George.”

George. What a name! How manly! How noble! How *royal!* How easy to say without moving one’s lips!

“Oh, no no no no, I think not,” said Echo, to whom disagreement came easily. “We’ll need something cheekier,

something more suited to little children. I rather like…”

Whatever she said remained a mystery, for she spoke as my presentation box, hoisted by the handle, lurched upwards with a seasickening heave. Presently, I began to swing to and fro more agreeably. A small bright light shone in on me, illuminating a precise green keyhole on my blazer.

I was outside Romando’s Theatrical Properties for the first time.

My journey had begun.

Fisher Goes to School

When he was eleven, George Fisher was sent away to school. It was September 1973.

The Fishers had not previously been great believers in a general education. The unusual step was forced upon them by the death of George's stepfather, Desmond Mitchell.

George had attended classes before, often with other backstage children, when itinerant teachers visited the theatre; there had been a casual relationship with a local day school, and two happy summer terms spent at a village school outside Bournemouth, where one of the two schoolmistresses taxied him into town for the evening performance. But he had never actually felt like a schoolboy, just a guest.

His mother, Frankie, was in constant work, and George could no longer tag along as he had when he was younger. He wasn't old enough to join the chorus, let alone to work on the piers, or young enough to play soldiers in the dressing room. With no Des around to ferry him to and from the lodgings, and since he could no longer live with Queenie and his great-grandma (who had taken a turn for the worse), there was nothing else for it: Upside School for Boys.

* * *

His mother, who had also to take the train to open three weeks as Peter Pan in Brighton, deposited him with his trunk at Charing Cross on a wet Tuesday morning. She was beside herself with happiness.

“All boys together— how exciting!” She was only slightly taller than he, and their bodies had roughly the same proportions. She surveyed the platforms for any sign of his travelling companions, who were identified, on the forecourt outside the station pub, by the forest green blazers that matched George’s. “There they are! I know it’ll be strange at first, Georgie, but soon it’ll be midnight feasts with the first eleven and you won’t even remember to write home at all!”

George was unconvinced by this rosy image.

“All on your own?” she asked briskly of the five matching boys, introducing herself, insisting they call her Frankie. It was the same voice she used when she asked the audience volunteers what they’d got for Christmas, and the boys were able to rustle up more than the mumbles with which they greeted the tired conversational gambits of other people’s parents. Her blonde hair was cropped short like theirs, as if to school regulation, and she shared the same toothy smile and freckles.

“Mr. Potter will be back any moment,” said the tallest politely, indicating the pub over his shoulder where the Latin master was anaesthetising himself against the coming term. George stood in the background, watching the train arrivals board click over, and wondered about the location of the announcer whose voice rattled through the station. He pictured a drab office and a grey employee who leaned forward at his desk to broadcast throughout his kingdom, cleared his throat before he turned on the microphone, and regretted to inform his subjects of the late running of the 11:42 to Orpington.

A bedraggled Mr. Potter emerged, sucking froth from the corners of a ginger moustache. He counted his charges with a cocked little finger. “Ah, you must be George Fisher and…,” as though she couldn’t possibly be mature enough for motherhood, “*Mrs*. Fisher?” She was thirty-seven.

“Frankie Fisher, sir,” she said, saluting confidently, *schoolboy* with a dash of *bonny lad at sea*.

“I say…,” said Mr. Potter, wondering whether the name rang a bell. “Well, we certainly hope to see a lot of you at Upside.” Frankie secretly squeezed George’s hand, to let him know that she was doing her utmost on his behalf. It was as if George could hear her thinking out loud, broadcasting like the station announcer: *I know it’s going to be a success, I just know it!*

“Be brave, Georgie,” she said, and then, turning to the assembled company: “You all be nice to him, mind, especially you, Mr. Potter. I’m holding you responsible.”

“Keith,” he said with an intimate smile, and then, waking from his dream, “Oh, my lord, look at the time! Campbell, get a porter. Come along, George.” As he was shepherded to the train, George was determined not to look over his shoulder. Goodbyes were best dealt with swiftly. “She’s waving, Fisher!” said Mr. Potter as they boarded. George didn’t turn around, thinking it better for both of them, particularly for her, that he didn’t know— though he might have guessed— that she was singing softly, “Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye.” They could have swapped places quite happily.

“Wave, boy!” said Mr. Potter, amused at George’s reticence, assuming it was stiff upper lip that kept him from turning back, and expecting tears when he did. There were none. “That’s better.”

As the train sped from the station, George stared through the rain-streaked window. The dirty backs of the houses reminded him of the back of his teeth, never quite as well cleaned as the front, and he traced his tongue along his gums. With the flicker of film, these houses washed into drab towns and then rolling countryside. He knew the name of every station, every one en route to somewhere Frankie had played.

George had liked the idea of school ever since it had first been mooted. By the time of its initial tentative dangling, however, and unbeknownst to him, it was a fait accompli, so his enthusiasm had merely made things easier for his family. He had imagined that, an unknown new boy at school, he could become whoever he wanted, in the same way that Dick Whittington became mayor of London. Just like Frankie, he would take a trip to wardrobe, emerge with something fantastic in green, and charm his way to the top. His chosen costume box had been John Lewis; his chosen outfit, schoolboy. Unlike Dick Whittington, however, he was leaving London behind.

The other boys paraded new acquisitions. They more or less ignored the stranger, and George was quite content to look at the patterns of the rain on the window, twiddle his thumbs, and explore the inside of his mouth. The atmosphere changed only when Mr. Potter disappeared to the restaurant car with a telling "Well, I think I might…," as though he had to excuse himself. Campbell, who had been left in charge, sniggered and made a mime of drinking, while his friend supplied the sound effect, before they burst out laughing. George looked up, and they stopped.

"George Fisher?" asked Campbell, the tallest, before checking pointedly: "*George?*" It was rather an old-fashioned name, attached only to the occasional grandfather or the author of an unread volume on a family bookshelf. A few footballers still flew the flag— Best, Armstrong— but these meant nothing to George. At Upside, he would find democratic Jonathans (Jontys), Nicks, Richards and Edwards, but no other Hanoverian Georges.

"How old are you?" asked the smallest through his upturned nose.

"Eleven." He had to break his silence at some time.

"Where were you before?" asked Campbell.

"I wasn't."

"You weren't? You have to go to school," said a third.

“Yes, it’s against the law not to!” said the piggy one officiously.

“I had teachers,” said George defensively.

“Home-schooled!” scorned Campbell.

“What does your father do?” demanded George’s other interrogator.

“Probably does the teaching,” sniggered Campbell.

“I don’t have a father.”

This bizarre answer brought the cross-examination to a shuddering standstill, as though George had pulled the emergency cord. Finally, without alternative and in apology, Campbell was decent enough to enquire, “Is he dead?”

“Yes.” George declined to say more. Sometimes he’d lie, claiming his father was alive, an astronaut, a politician, an explorer, whatever suited. But on this occasion, he just wanted to shut them up. They wanted to know how his father had died but couldn’t ask.

“Well, your mum’s all right,” said Campbell, by way of conciliation, but the death had been an icy slap in the face of their fun, and they left the fatherless child alone for the rest of the journey.

This suited George. A tunnel squeezed the air against the train like the roar of applause.

“Say your prayers,” the matron said unaffectionately as she switched off the light. The Fishers had never been keen Jesusists. They distrusted men generally, finding them unreliable and accident-prone: by and large, a weak lot. Jesus and His Father were no exceptions.

The dormitory felt like a hospital ward— the only place George had come across a matron before— and the association made him queasy. As he lay between rough sheets in that dark, thin dungeon of whining bedsprings, grumbling mattresses, foreign creaks, coughs and groans, there was no hope of sleep. Gradually, Pope dormitory

became contentedly quiet, a peace punctuated only by the rasp of floorboards in the corridor.

He tested himself with thoughts of home.

Des's death had left George the only male. There were plenty of women, however: his mother, Frankie, of course, as busy as she ever had been, and grandma, Queenie, always in charge. Even George's great-grandmother lingered on, though, at ninety-four, for how much longer nobody knew.

Evie, they all called her: she couldn't bear to be called *Great*, except in praise, and wasn't fond of *Grand*. She could no longer leave her bed, but despite her dilapidation, there was no doubt who was in control of the household. The strictness of her schedule was legendary. George knew exactly what she'd be doing at any given moment: when napping, when playing patience, when organizing her scrapbooks, when doing crosswords (always general knowledge), when playing a cantankerous game of Scrabble with Queenie, and when watching television. She didn't like *Coronation Street*, complained about it constantly, and never missed an episode.

Evie was inordinately proud of her first great-grandchild, allowing George, from the moment he had first twanged up and down in the baby bouncer set in her door frame, an inordinate amount of time in her bedroom. When he was old enough, she paid him the tribute of teaching him games as she had been taught: without mercy. If he put cards down and then changed his mind, it was too late— they stayed. If he had only one card, forgot to knock, and then won, the game was declared invalid: "There you are, then; that'll teach you, Georgie, losing to an old woman!"

Her hands had never been big enough to shuffle the two packs required for canasta, although she claimed to have been master of all the magical shuffles for one pack, numbering (according to her) seventeen. "It helps to be

slight of hand," she had said many times. Such dexterity was now a memory— crippled by arthritis, she could barely hold the cards at all, although she was too vain to admit it. For her so-called silent shuffle, she used a specific table with a raised edge, called "the card table" (though this was the one thing it was specifically designed not to be), on which she spread the entire pack face down. Then she simply muddled the cards with a flamboyant stirring before gathering them once more and strenuously battering them back into a pack. "The most honest shuffle of all," she proclaimed. "You can tell I'm not cheating." Who had mentioned cheating? And who would, unless they were considering it? He followed one card suspiciously as she spread the deck across the tabletop, and he saw the many opportunities. "Look, it's raining!" she remarked, but he didn't.

He lost to her at everything, not only canasta: pelmanism, Scrabble (she used outlandish words like *xu* and *qat*), and even, on one memorable occasion, darts. How had that happened? It had been his idea to set the board up at the bottom of the bed, and hers to play competitively. His only chance was Monopoly, a game she declared to be based entirely on luck and of no interest at all.

"I can't beat you at anything," he moaned.

"You'll beat me at life," she said, once more spreading the cards thinly over the oval mahogany table.

And as he lay in bed, he realized that his moment of victory might be upon him before too long. Perhaps that was why he was away at school. At half-term— a concept he already cherished— he would listen closer when she complained about *Coronation Street*.

In truth, George had inherited his love of Evie from his mother, for, although it was never mentioned in the family, between Queenie and her mother-in-law there was a simmering discontent. The matriarch ruled from her bed— there was still a Victorian bellpull, which rang imperiously

to the kitchen— and Queenie fetched and carried with good grace, taking in trays, filling in crosswords, and changing the channel. Appreciation, however, was not given as freely as it might have been (dependence caused resentment), and though no unkind words were ever spoken, the strain sometimes showed. Frankie laughed it off with typical lack of concern— “Those two!”— but George worried that Evie would one day scratch too deep. He had seen Queenie in tears of frustration, tears she blamed on her blessed hay fever.

But this was a rare moment of vulnerability. Queenie (or “Mum,” as almost everyone called her — as though they were addressing the Queen Mum herself) was solid. She had married into the Fisher family, survived her husband (who had died in his thirties in the last year of the war), and brought up their two daughters, Frankie and Sylvia, on her own. She was a large jolly woman, as unlike the female Fishers as a human could be engineered, with a plentiful bust (always entirely covered) and a stack of unmanageable chins. “They broke the mould when they made that one,” said Evie, never short of a joke at anyone’s expense. “Or *she* broke it trying to get out.”

Whereas her mother-in-law and her daughters had dedicated their entire professional lives to show business, Queenie was no more than a talented amateur who found herself most comfortable entertaining at children’s parties. She carried on the modest family business she had started with her husband in their corner of London. Children loved their Auntie Queenie. There was something daunting and matronly about her appearance and manner, but this made their joy even greater when the silliness began. She didn’t need a script: she’d simply ask a child what he had for breakfast and she was off and running.

“Always in work, that one,” Evie admitted with grudging admiration. The old woman paid for the big expenses, but it was these parties (including some rather poor magic tricks,

no better than they needed to be) and the war pension that kept Queenie in pin money.

It was she who had taken George to John Lewis to buy the Upside uniform. This kind of errand always fell to her, for of all the Fisher women, she alone could be considered capable. On this expedition, George had the honour of brandishing the official checklist: one black overcoat *compulsory*, two *optional*.

“You already have a dark blue overcoat, Georgie. That will be good enough, I’m sure.”

“I thought *compulsory* meant…”

“How many hankies?”

“Fifteen.”

“Eh? Fifteen?” she asked in the tone of someone who is being overcharged for a pint of beer. “What does fifteen mean?”

“Fifteen means fifteen,” interrupted a shop attendant, who peered down his nose through half glasses and brandished his tape measure. “Upside, is it? They’re *notorious*. When they say fifteen, he’d better have fifteen. Nor am I sure that dark blue will be quite *good enough* at all.”

Like all the Fisher women, Queenie had little sympathy for males over the age of eleven, and from time to time even George had started to wonder whether his grace period was drawing to a close. She could show terrific forbearance to the birthday boy who spilt ice cream on her lap, but not to a supercilious busybody masquerading as a haberdasher (her words).

“Madam!” said the John Lewis employee as he retreated behind the safety of his counter.

The new black trunk, on which George’s name was emblazoned in black on sloping gold parallelograms, gradually filled to bursting. He closed it with some satisfaction and sat on it.

Completing the collection of Fisher females were George's mother and aunt. Evie's great favourite was Frankie: she treated her more as daughter than granddaughter, assuming rights that might have been presumed Queenie's, and because she could no longer support Frankie in person, she demanded firsthand news of every show— the size of the house, its reaction, Frankie's appraisal of her own performance— and these details she filed away with the reviews in her scrapbooks. Frankie was the family's great hope, and George had always been taught that nothing was to get in the way of his mother's career, including himself.

George was born to Frankie Fisher on November 6, 1961. Despite their surname, she had given him the middle name Jeremy, which reminded her of her father's voice, reading her to sleep. She idolized him, this man who, though a civilian, had died a war hero. He was gone when she was eight, and even then she hadn't seen him since she was five. She remembered his face only from photographs, but she could summon his voice whenever she wanted: "Once upon a time there was a frog called Mr. Jeremy Fisher; he lived in a little damp house amongst the buttercups at the edge of a pond…."

Frankie never revealed the identity of George's real father. Queenie honoured her daughter's silence, partly because his identity was no great secret (and speaking his name aloud wasn't going to change anything) and partly because she felt the pregnancy her own fault. It was she who had introduced Frankie to the charming theatrical entrepreneur when he had taken such a special interest in her career. And then he was long gone, the damage done, and Frankie too proud to say anything. Frankie received the subsequent news of his death (a car-racing accident at Silverstone that made the front page of the *Express*) with indifference and never mentioned his name from that moment on. There was no criticism of her in the Fisher family, for such behaviour was hardly considered