

'What's on your mind?' Aunt Augusta said.

'It was so stupid of me. I left my lawn-mower out, on the lawn, uncovered.'

My aunt showed me no sympathy. She said, 'Forget your lawn-mower. It's odd how we seem to meet only at religious ceremonies. The last time I saw you was at your baptism. I was not asked but I came.' She gave a croak of a laugh. 'Like the wicked fairy.'

'Why didn't they ask you?'

'I knew too much. About both of them. I remember you were far too quiet. You didn't yell the devil out. I wonder if he is still there?' She called to the driver, 'Don't confuse the Place with the Square, the Crescent or the Gardens. I am the Place.'

'I didn't know there was any breach. Your photograph was there in the family album.'

'For appearances only.' She gave a little sigh which drove out a puff of scented powder. 'Your mother was a very saintly woman. She should by rights have had a white funeral. La Pucelle,' she added again.

'I don't quite see . . . La Pucelle means—well, to put it, bluntly, I am here, Aunt Augusta.'

'Yes. But you were your father's child. Not your mother's.'

That morning I had been very excited, even exhilarated, by the thought of the funeral. Indeed, if it had not been my mother's, I would have found it a wholly desirable break in the daily routine of retirement, and I was pleasurably reminded of the old banking days, when I had paid the final adieu to so many admirable clients. But I had never contemplated such a break as this one which my aunt announced so casually. Hiccups are said to be cured by a sudden shock and they can equally be caused by one. I hiccuped an incoherent question.

'I have said that your official mother was a saint. The girl, you see, refused to marry your father, who was anxious—if you can use such an energetic term in his case—to do the right thing. So my sister covered up for her by marrying him. (He was not very strong-willed.) Afterwards, she padded herself for months with progressive cushions. No one ever suspected. She even wore the cushions in bed, and she was so deeply

shocked when your father tried once to make love to her—after the marriage but before your birth—that, even when you had been safely delivered, she refused him what the Church calls his rights. He was never a man in any case to stand on them.'

I leant back hiccuping in the taxi. I couldn't have spoken if I had tried. I remembered all those pursuits up the scaffolding. Had they been caused then by my mother's jealousy or was it the apprehension that she might be required to pass again so many more months padded with cushions of assorted sizes?

Graham Greene, *Travels with My Aunt* (1969)