

Concerning The Kindness of Aunts

For Emma

Until I was seventeen I lived with my four aunts in a tall grey house by the sea. Each of my aunts was as fat and round as a barrel but I was as thin as my mother, who had died before I was born. My father was a sea captain and my mother had come from far away across the sea. He had brought her home in his ship and his sisters had looked at her and sighed. They had fed her with soup and apples but the air was too cold and the sea too wild. My birth was due the day after Martinmas, but on All Hallows Eve, as my father lit a candle for the pumpkin, my mother gave a small cry and threw her hands up to her face. She slipped to the floor and died. My father took the knife he had used for the pumpkin face and he sliced open my mother so I came tumbling out. He scooped me into his arms and I wailed in the cold air and he wept for my mother. With all this noise my three eldest aunts entered the room and stood watching my father and me.

All this I know because when I was old enough my aunts told me. They buried my mother beside the house and her headstone looked out across the sea. My father came home each October with gifts for my birthday, and each time he laid his head on my mother's grave and wept. I never knew my mother. She was a stranger to my aunts and so she was to me. But my father grew familiar as the years passed by and my aunts, little by little, told me the tales of his childhood. He was the fourth child, born long before my youngest aunt. She was so young sometimes it seemed we were sisters. My father brought her strange and fantastic gifts as if she was always a child. She wore red silk dresses and painted her nails to match. Her hair was as dark as my own and in the evening light in summer red light sparkled from her dress onto her hair. She'd take me down on the rocks by the sea and tell me stories of places I could only dream of.

The eldest of my four aunts lived by herself near the top of the house. She had one large room with two sets of windows, one overlooking the sea and one overlooking the garden and my mother's grave. Her walls were lined with books which she arranged, not in any order of content, but in order of the coloured spines of the books. When I was very little I believed my aunt was trying to make a rainbow fly between her windows. The floor was covered in a patchwork of worn rugs and at the windows hung heavy curtains. Across one corner of the room my aunt had hung another curtain which hid a basin, and a table on which she kept a gas ring and a tin of biscuits. We sat at the sea window and drank hot sweet tea the days we waited for my father's ship to come home.

My eldest aunt was called Harriet and she called my father Harry, though his name was Henry. She'd been four when he was born and her sisters Alma and Jane, my two middle aunts, were still only babies. He was different, being a boy, and she'd kept her anxious eye on him all his childhood, believing somehow in the inherent weakness of the male. My grandfather had been a sea traveller, like my father, but he came home each year with an illness from abroad, not gifts. I barely remembered him, only a narrow yellowed face bending over me and his foetid breath whispering in my ear. I never got used to him and then he was dead, quite suddenly, but quite expected, of some fever. The shock of it killed my grandmother immediately. At the time my youngest aunt was only nineteen and had been away at boarding school for six years. I was four and each time she came home I'd forgotten who she was. But now she came back for good and filled the house up with her noisy weeping. She slammed doors and screamed at her sisters, who were shocked by her grief, and put aside their own mourning to care for her. After the double funeral, she wept more quietly, but I saw the tears make spots in her red silk dress even at breakfast. By the time I was five my youngest aunt never spoke of her parents. That last time she'd come back, she'd brought a new name with her and we all learnt it and learnt not to use the old name. Her new name was "Stevie" and it suited her, despite it being a boy's name. She embroidered it on her night dress case and wrote it inside her wellington boots in ink.

My two middle aunts, Alma and Jane, lived on the floor below my aunt Harriet. They were very alike, neither old and serious as Harriet, nor young and wild as Stevie. They shared two rooms, one a bedroom with high twin beds, and one a sitting room. In the sitting room, either side of the fireplace were two armchairs in skirted covers and embroidered antimacassars. Here each evening Alma and Jane would wedge down amongst the cushions and pick up their knitting and knit vests for the poor. Alma's vests were always small and tightly woven and had a ribbon at the neck. But Jane's vests were loose and baggy and she laughed as she knitted. Between them, with a mug of cocoa, I would sit on a low stool whose legs twisted like barley sugar sticks. I would stare at their fire and listen to their chat above my head and above it all, Aunt Harriet's heavy step as she paced in her room from window to window. Sometimes Aunt Harriet did not walk about, and then Jane and Alma would grow quiet and serious. Harriet had an illness that came and went, which was all I knew about it, and when it came she would lie in her bed in the centre of her room, and shut her eyes and go to sleep early. Those evenings I missed her because although she was old and serious she knew exactly how I liked to go to bed. Jane and Alma could never remember what to do. Even in October when my father was home, aunt Harriet would put me to bed. My room was up above hers, right in the attic, and my window looked out only into the sky. I had a small bed and a chest of drawers which had belonged to my mother. It was made of some dark heavy wood and pressed into it all over was a swirling pattern made of pieces of mother of pearl. The walls of my room were white and the bed spread was white and on the floor was a white rug which aunt

Alma had made for me the year before my grandparents died. I kept all my clothes and all my toys in my mother's chest and each evening, aunt Harriet helped me to pick up anything which had been left out. Then she'd wash me carefully with a bowl of hot water brought up from the basin in her room, and I would put on my nightdress. Except sometimes in the hottest summer nights, when I'd sleep bare. Aunt Harriet said it was to let the air freshen my skin. Then I would jump into bed, under the covers and move over quickly for Harriet who warmed the bed as she lay beside me with her great arms around me. I would grow sleepy and relaxed as she told me, each night, long stories about the whole of the world, till by the time I was twelve I thought I knew everything.

At about that time there was a crisis in our house. It involved Aunt Stevie who began to scream and cry again as she had done eight years before when my grandparents died. I had no idea what had happened and took to hiding in corners to listen to my other aunts discussing it. Stevie's room was in the basement of our house and her moans drifted up to the rest of us. After a fortnight of all this noise growing louder and more upsetting, it was October and my father came home. My routine of watching and waiting with aunt Harriet had been interrupted, and father arrived unexpectedly, his bed un-aired and un-made up, his room still shrouded in dust sheets. He sat in Jane and Alma's room and they and Harriet whispered to him about Stevie's upset. His face grew serious and he even forgot to give us our presents which stayed in trunks in the hall till I became impatient and asked for them. From all my listening in corners I understood that Stevie had been in love with a man who had been living in the town and who had promised he would marry her when they had saved up enough money for a small house. After many months of saving money and of meeting the man for walks out, my aunt Stevie had discovered that he was already married. I heard her angry wailing to my father as she told him that her heart was broken. Somehow, my other aunts and my father managed to comfort Stevie and she quietened down, though for a month the corners of her eyes were as red as her dress. Then Stevie found out somehow that the man's wife had divorced him and this news, which I'd overheard Harriet conveying to my father just before he left again, sparked Stevie back to life. Her misery had seemed to shrink her for a while but soon her red silk dresses were covering the roundness of her body as tight as ever. My other aunts relaxed again and the pattern of our life resumed, except that aunt Harriet seemed tired somehow. That Christmas, Harriet had to rest a lot, and the gaiety of our celebrations wore her out. Her hair, which had been the colour of walnut shells, began to turn silvery grey until I forgot the brown underneath. She stopped putting me to bed in the same old way, and instead, when I was ready for sleep I would go and say goodnight to her and she would hold me for a moment in her arms and kiss me. In the mornings I would knock on her door and go in to say hallo, and one day, when I knocked, I found her sitting quite naked at her dressing table, staring at herself in the mirror. Her hair hung down to the cleft in her buttocks, half way silver, half way brown and the folds of her body lay one on the other. I

could see in the mirror her breasts, and they too, like her hair, had changed and grown old. In her hands she was holding her hairpins and comb. When she saw me watching her in the mirror she started, as if she had been dreaming. It was only then that I knew my aunt was growing old. I began to fear her death, remembering the time of my grandparents death, and feeling the death of my own mother always in the background of my life. But it was the first time I'd experienced the natural slowing down of age and as the years went on I grew used to it. After a while Jane and Alma too began to grow old. They stopped flirting with men who came to the house and I saw their hair also begin to grey. But my aunt Stevie was years younger and it seemed to me she'd never grow old. She'd taken to going out dancing every Saturday night and the sound that now drifted up from the basement was the sound of Stevie singing as she brushed her hair till it stood out around her face like shiny black petals. I rarely went into Stevie's part of the house, preferring to be higher up. She had three little rooms, each one with a small window near the ceiling, looking out to the edges of our garden.

The October I was seventeen, my father came home as usual for my birthday with gifts for me and for my aunts, and this time he was carrying a small bundle wrapped in sackcloth. He carefully unrolled it while we silently watched, not knowing what to expect. Inside was a bundle of twigs and earth. He carried it outside as gently as if it were a baby and, kneeling down on my mother's grave, he scooped out a shallow hole with his hands and pressed it in. It looked to me as if it were nothing but a dead plant, but when the spring came, I saw tiny pale buds on each twig. I took to going out each morning very early, before my breakfast, to see them swell and spread. By the time April came, my mother's grave was covered with pale green leaves, and small waxen flowers which smelt as sweet as honey. My aunts did not know what it was and my aunt Alma said it must be from another country. Aunt Jane said it was a miracle to see it grow and blossom here, so cold, and so near the sea.

Since my father's last visit, I had been filled with an unfamiliar dissatisfaction. I felt as if my blood was itching at me from inside. I began to wonder if I would spend my whole life living in the grey house with my aunts and if I did, what should become of me when they had all grown old and died. I had rarely left the house in my seventeen years, only to visit the town occasionally with one of them for soap or other necessities. They had taught me at home everything I needed to know. I could cook and sew and raise vegetables. I knew how to mend my shoes and get milk from a goat. I knew the pattern and movement of the stars and the shape of the world. But now my own world seemed to be shrinking and becoming tighter and tighter till I felt as if I was wearing one of aunt Alma's little vests. At night I could no longer sleep and sometimes I had to creep out of my room and around the house and hear my aunts snoring lightly before I felt the day was truly over.

Some time in July, I saw my aunt Harriet open a letter and immediately I knew it was something to do with myself. I had recognised my father's neat thick handwriting on the envelope. I looked at Harriet reading my father's letter and saw in her eyes the brightness of tears. She looked at me and told me that my father had decided that I had grown enough to leave my aunt's house and go to the city. He would send money which would pay for me to find a place to live and then I was to go to the college in the city where I would meet friends of my own age and learn what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. As Harriet spoke to me I suddenly felt quite sure that I did not want to do any of this, that I was quite happy and content being at home and that I should stay with my aunts forever and look after them as they had looked after me. But it seemed that my father had made the decision for me and that when he came back in October for my eighteenth birthday I should no longer be living at home with my aunts, but instead I would be living in the city, and he would visit me there.

So now a new part of my life began. Sometimes it felt as if it was a beginning, and sometimes it felt as if it was an ending. Aunts Jane and Alma took me to town and we bought a large trunk, made of some kind of stiff board covered in green material. The trunk sat in Jane and Alma's sitting room and each day we filled it up a bit more. Aunt Harriet helped me to mend and clean all my clothes and we made a list of things I would need. Jane gave me a writing case and a new pen so that I could write to them as often as I had time, and Alma stopped knitting vests long enough to make me a matching set of gloves and scarf and hat. We had chosen the wool together and I was pleased with the result, knowing the bright colour suited me and went well with my coat.

All the time these preparations were going on, aunt Stevie sat in her basement and clattered away on an ancient sewing machine, humming loudly to herself. I looked in on her once and saw her mouth clamped tight on a row of pins. Something shiny lay in the sewing machine. At the sound of my step, Stevie looked up and frowned. She open her mouth to shoo me away and the pins fell out. I laughed and ran up the stairs to where Harriet and Alma were arguing about whether I should need more new underwear.

One week later the trunk was ready and Jane and Alma sat down on each end of the lid, and Harriet and I fastened it down. Now I was ready to face the world. My father had sent money for my journey and instructions for travelling. An old friend of his was to meet me in the city. My journey would take all day. My aunts took great care to make my last moments with them special. They told me I was to be good, and strong, and to remember to write. I was to keep cool in the sun, and wear a vest in the winter, and not to speak to strange men. As I left the house with my trunk, aunt Stevie pressed a parcel into my hands and kissed me goodbye. I kissed my other aunts and waved to them all. The journey was long and tiring and I sat still, holding Stevie's parcel on my lap. Hours later, I arrived in the city and was met as arranged by my father's oldest friend, who took me first to his own house to stay the night with

his family. I was tearful and exhausted by bedtime, worn out by the journey and by the many new faces I'd seen. In my room I opened a window but all I could see were a thousand little lights crowding in on me. I thought of my aunts and wondered how I would ever manage without them.

Then I remembered the parcel and knelt down on the floor to open it. Carefully, I unknotted the string and wound it into a ball. Then I unfolded the brown paper. Inside was something wrapped in tissue. I lifted it out and it unravelled in my hands. Then I saw what my aunt Stevie had been making. A beautiful red silk dancing dress. I stood up and held it against me and looked at myself in the long mirror on the wall. I saw a young girl with black curls and white skin, and a red silk dress lighting up her eyes and hair. I felt my feet begin to dance and my arms wrapped the dress about me. I shut my eyes and spun around and around and listened to the sound the city made. That night I slept so peaceful and dreamless and when I awoke in the pale early morning, there, at the end of my bed waiting for me, lay my red silk dress.