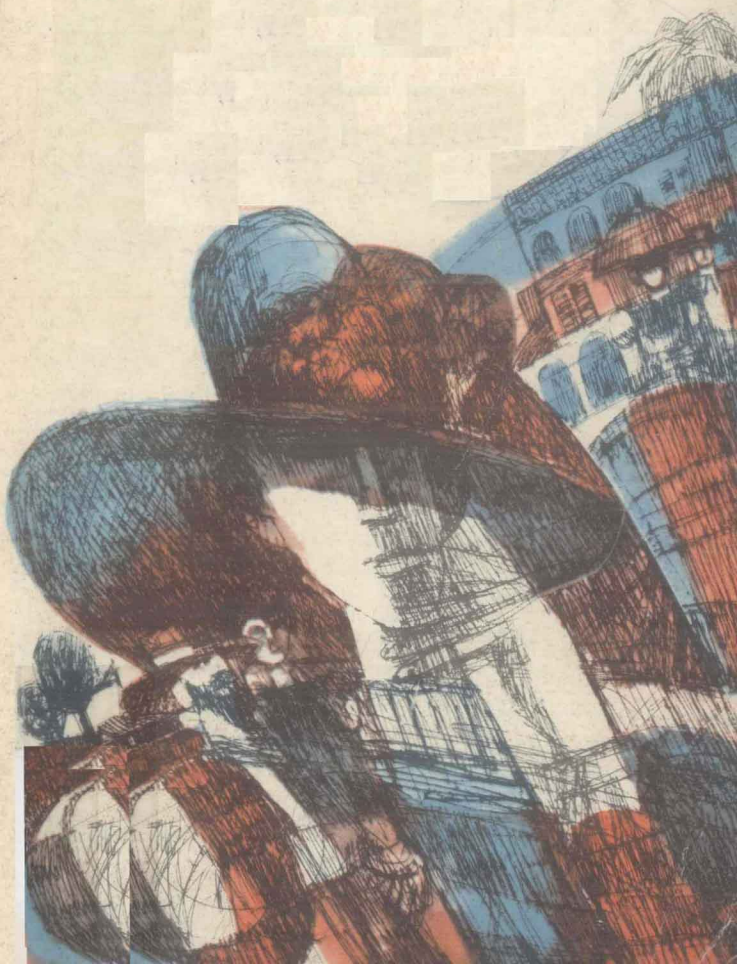




Patrick White

The Aunt's Story



THE AUNT'S STORY

The author was born in England in 1912, when his parents were in Europe for two years; at six months he was taken back to Australia where his father owned a sheep station. When he was thirteen Patrick White was sent to school in England, to Cheltenham, 'where, it was understood, the climate would be temperate and a colonial acceptable'. Neither proved true, and after four rather miserable years there he went to King's College, Cambridge, where he specialized in languages. After leaving the university he settled in London, determined to become a writer. His novel *Happy Valley* was published in 1939; *The Living and the Dead* in 1941. During the war he was an R.A.F. Intelligence Officer in the Middle East and Greece.

His other novels are *The Tree of Man* (1956), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970), *The Eye of the Storm* (1973) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). In addition he has published two collections of short stories, *The Burnt Ones* (1964) and *The Cockatoos* (1974), which incorporates several short novels. In 1973 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

PATRICK WHITE

THE AUNT'S STORY



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For

BETTY WITHYCOMBE

*All the characters in this story are wholly
imaginary and have no reference whatever
to actual people*

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Part One MEROË

She thought of the narrowness of the limits within which a human soul may speak and be understood by its nearest of mental kin, of how soon it reaches that solitary land of the individual experience, in which no fellow footfall is ever heard.

OLIVE SCHREINER

I

BUT old Mrs Goodman did die at last.

Theodora went into the room where the coffin lay. She moved one hairbrush three inches to the left, and smoothed the anti-macassar on a little Empire prie-dieu that her mother had brought from Europe. She did all this with some surprise, as if divorced from her own hands, as if they were related to the objects beneath them only in the way that two flies, blowing and blundering in space, are related to a china and mahogany world. It was all very surprising, the accomplished as opposed to the contemplated fact. It had altered the silence of the house. It had altered the room. This was no longer the bedroom of her mother. It was a waiting room, which housed the shiny box that contained a waxwork.

Theodora had told them to close the box before the arrival of Fanny and Frank, who were not expected till the afternoon. So the box was closed, even at the expense of what Fanny would say. She would talk about Last Glimpses, and cry. She had not lived with Mrs Goodman in her latter years. From her own house she wrote and spoke of Dear Mother, making her an idea, just as people will talk of Democracy or Religion, at a moral distance. But Theodora was the spinster. She had lived with her mother, and helped her into her clothes. She came when the voice called.

At moments she still heard this in the relinquished room. Her own name spilt stiff and hollow out of the dusty horn of an old phonograph, into the breathless house. So that her mouth trembled, and her hand, rigid as protesting wood, on the coffin's yellow lid.

From the church across the bay a sound of bells groped through a coppery afternoon, snoozed in the smooth leaves of the Moreton Bay fig, and touched the cheek. The blood began to flow. I am free now, said Theodora Goodman. She had said this many times since the moment she had suspected her mother's

silence and realized that old Mrs Goodman had died in her sleep. If she left the prospect of freedom unexplored, it was less from a sense of remorse than from not knowing what to do. It was a state that she had never learned to enjoy. Anything more concrete she would have wrapped in paper and laid in a drawer, knowing at the back of her mind it was hers, it was there, something to possess for life. But now freedom, the antithesis of stuff or glass, possessed Theodora Goodman to the detriment of grief. She could not mourn like Fanny, who would cry for the dead until she had appeased the world and exhausted what she understood to be sorrow. Fanny understood most things. The emotions were either black or white. For Theodora, who was less certain, the white of love was sometimes smudged by hate. So she could not mourn. Her feelings were knotted tight.

Now waiting for Fanny in the yellow afternoon, the thick light prepared a greater state of uncertainty. The chair backs loomed. The back of the little, ordinarily graceful prie-dieu was solid as a tombstone. If gestures were completed, it was according to a law of motion, which takes over from the will, and which now guided Theodora Goodman's black. Black had yellowed her skin. She was dry, and leathery, and yellow. A woman of fifty, or not yet, whose eyes burned still, under the black hair, which she still frizzed above the forehead in little puffs. You could not have noticed Theodora Goodman. Her expression did not tell. Nor did she love her own face. Her eyes were shy of mirrors. Her eyes fell, except in moments of necessity, frizzing out the little puffs of hair, when she outstared, with a somewhat forced detachment, her own reflection. This thing a spinster, she sometimes mused, considering her set mouth; this thing a spinster which, at best, becomes that institution an aunt.

Viewed this way the situation was more tolerable. There were times when the morning sang with bulbuls encaged in palms, their throats throbbing from behind green slats, and yes, it was very tolerable. She became lighter now, too. Her arrested black flowed through the afternoon. Even a mahogany tombstone dissolved. She was at most, but also at least, an aunt. She swam down the passage, out of her mother's room, away from the influence of the coffin, and in the suave silence she saw across the bay the pepper trees tossed into green balls by a wind starting,

that raked the sea until all the little white boats jumped and fretted and pulled at their moorings to be away.

Oh yes, in other circumstances, this could have been an afternoon on which children came, when they would run and pull at her, their hot laughter, and their chocolate hands, after they had been stuffed with tea. Then it was something to be an aunt, of importance, dashing, almost rakish. Tell us something, Aunt Theo, they cried. Yes, yes, she said; but first I must find my breath. Where; they said; is it under the bunya-bunya tree? Because it was a joke. It was huge. Let us stroke Aunt Theo, said the boys; we shall stroke her moustache.

That was no longer so very terrible when the boys said it. Affection can blunt words, and with affection she responded to their hands. But it was not so much the boys she loved. They were round and hard and fierce as furry animals. It was Lou, whose eyes could read a silence, and whose thin, yellow face was sometimes quick as conscience, and as clear as mirrors. Theodora loved Lou. *My niece*. It was too intimate, physical, to express. Lou had no obvious connection either with Frank or Fanny. She was like some dark and secret place in one's own body. And quite suddenly Theodora longed for them to bring the children, but more especially Lou, when they came to town for the funeral. Since her mother's death, she could not say with conviction: I am I. But the touch of hands restores the lost identity. The children would ratify her freedom.

When the doorbell rang the whole house shook and recovered.

This must be Fanny and Frank, said Theodora, but she waited for them to be brought in and decently arranged in the drawing-room.

She would have waited longer, if the silence had not begun to gape open. So she went down. And it was really down. Certain encounters took her to the depths.

She opened the door and found the uneasy group, Fanny and Frank, not only, yes also, the two boys and Lou. But how, felt Theodora, it is unlike Fanny to consider simple requests, let alone answer unmade prayers.

There was no time to investigate.

'Theo, Theo,' cried Fanny in rising gusts, 'how terrible it is! And for you, Theo, on your own.'

Her kiss was wet and spasmodic on Theodora's cheek.

'Poor dear Mother,' Fanny cried.

'It was not very terrible,' said Theodora. 'She died in her sleep. I went in. It was like any morning. After the man had pushed the paper under the door. It was like that.'

But Theodora was insensitive.

Fanny cried. Once she had been plump and pretty. Now she was red and fat. She cried because it was expected, and because her clothes were tight, and because it was easier to cry, and because she increased in importance by crying for the dead. She also remembered vaguely a piece of pink coconut ice offered by her mother's hand. So Fanny cried.

Frank mumbled. It was not so much in sympathy as protest. Here was something to be held off. But there were also greetings to be made. Never very articulate, except in talking sheep, he now damped his few words as a measure of respect. Theodora touched his hand, which was rough and hard. The backs of his hands were covered with red hairs.

'Sit down, Frank,' said Theodora. 'And how is everyone else?'

To thaw the children, who sat stiff with solemnity round their parents, where they had been placed. Now they murmured. They hung their heads. They were still strangers. But they began to fight the situation and come alive.

'It is not the sort of occasion,' Fanny said, blowing her nose. 'But I took the opportunity. The boys must have overcoats. They grow so . . . FAST.'

Her last word slipped out quite shockingly, beyond control, and she put her face inside her handkerchief and cried. But now it was not so much her mother's death as the tragedy of domesticity, that avalanche of overcoats and boots.

'Steady on, Fanny,' said Frank, who had not experienced the exaltation of grief.

He looked sideways, at no one, and tapped with his yellow boot.

'George got a cinder in his eye,' said young Frank.

'Shut up, Frank,' said George, and blushed.

'You did! You did! He put out his head near Mittagong, and it flew in. Mum made a thing with a handkerchief and fished it out.'

'Shut up,' cried George. 'You dope! I'll kick you in the stomach if you don't shut up.'

'Boys!' said Fanny, only just. 'You've no idea, Theo, what I endure.'

But it was good. Theodora looked at the boys, their hard knees, on which the cuts had healed. The bodies of the boys denied the myth of putrefaction. So that she drew breath quickly, severely, through her nose, as if her contempt and disgust for a tasteless practical joke had been finally justified. She was whole. She was free. And Lou came and sat beside her. Lou did not speak, but she could feel very positively the thin bone of an arm pressed close against her waist.

'May one go up?' asked Fanny, her eyebrows sewn together by pain.

'Yes,' said Theodora, 'if you want. Only there is nothing to see. Only the coffin, that is.'

'Poor dear Mother,' said Fanny. 'I would have given so much for a last glimpse.'

Her husband sucked his teeth. It was not regret, but a vastly irritating fragment of ham from a sandwich eaten in the train.

'I said to Frank,' said Fanny, 'as soon as we got your wire, I said, I cannot believe that Mother has passed over without saying good-bye. Didn't I, Frank?' she said, because he needed drawing in.

Frank Parrott sat. He was watching his wife prepare to perform some act. His mind lumbered to the club, to the talk of wool clips and stud rams. Now he sat glassily among the women. His hands were heavy on his thighs. The mature Frank Parrott often reminded Theodora of a stuffed ram, once functional within his limits, now fixed and glassy for the rest of time. He was what they call a practical man, a success, but he had not survived.

'Hold hard, Fanny,' said Frank, 'I'm coming too.'

He got himself heavily out of his chair, manipulating his heavy thighs. He would go, not to patronize a coffin, but to pass time in the lavatory. Besides, Theodora made him sidle. To sit with her alone in the same room. Her ugly mug, that was always about to ask something that you could not answer.

So Frank Parrott followed his wife out.

Now the drawing-room was smooth. Bells swam on its surface from across the bay, and the voices of the boys, their shall-and-shan't, passing and repassing, jostling like wooden boats on summer water.

'May we play with the brass ball?' asked Lou.

The brass ball was unfailing.

'Yes, yes. Please!' cried young Frank.

So they took the filigree ball and rolled it over the carpet. It was something that Grandmother Goodman had brought from India once, and which, she said, the Indians fill with fire and roll downhill. And although its hollow sphere was now distorted and its metal green, when rolled across the drawing-room carpet the filigree ball still filled with a subtle fire.

'What do the Indians do it for,' said young Frank.

'Yes, why?' asked George. 'Aunt Theo, why do they fill the ball with fire?'

But Lou did not ask. She patted the ball.

'I have no idea,' said Theodora. 'I have forgotten. Or perhaps I never knew.'

'It's silly,' said George. Suddenly he wanted to kick it.

'It's not,' said Lou.

Her hands protected not only the Indian ball, but many secret moments of reflected fire. Above her the legs of the boys sprang straight and menacing as concrete towers. George would be a farmer like his father, and young Frank said that he would build bridges. But Lou, who continued to roll the filigree ball, flowed, in which direction you could not tell, and for this Theodora trembled. The boys you could have piled into two heaps of stones. But Lou was as unpredictable as water. Theodora sensed this. The shape of her own life had not been fixed.

Then Fanny had begun to impose herself again. She was already steaming in the passage. Fanny came.

'Lou,' she said through her swollen nose, 'you have torn your pants. Oh dear, oh dear. And crawling about on the carpet. You'll dirty your knees. Theo,' she said, 'where is Frank? I am exhausted. It is the air. The air of Sydney makes blotting paper of me.'

'But it will improve now. There is a breeze,' said Theodora, as she had heard other people say.