

The Aunts

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p 9-17

I.

The wedding dinner was drawing to a close. A few men had already lit their cigarettes, and the weightless blue smoke curled past their reddened faces, sometimes lingering around the women's coiffures like a filmy veil.

The hazy grey light of the November day was slowly fading, and the far corners of the large dining room were filling with shadow. The young newlyweds, who stood side by side with their backs to one of the windows, were becoming dark silhouettes outlined against the bright pane.

Dessert was finished; the glasses remained half-drunk and were no longer emptied or refilled. They were all growing tired, all sated. A few conversations were still lively and enthusiastic, but most of the guests sat stiff and silent, waiting to see who would give the sign to leave the stuffy room.

Marie slowly rose to her feet, and right away Max followed suit. Sudden silence fell over the long tables. They quietly threaded their way around the chairs to where Mr. Dufour was seated.

Max leaned in to whisper, "Papa, time for us to go."

Mr. Dufour, still engrossed in conversation with the woman next to him, looked up in surprise. "Already!"

"Yes, Papa, it's four o'clock and the carriage is waiting," Marie replied.

Mr. Dufour stood up, the sign for everyone to stand; in a flurry of discarded napkins and shifted chairs, they prepared to say farewell to the bride and groom.

"*Allons, bon voyage!*" said Mr. Dufour, and his voice, though gruff as ever, betrayed a quiver of emotion.

He reached out his arms and embraced first his son and then his daughter-in-law. His eyes were wet, and his lower lip was propped firmly beneath the upper one with its bristly mustache. He could not recall having embraced any of his children in years.

"*Bon voyage!... et heureux retour!*" he repeated, with a slight catch in his voice. His hands trembled slightly.

"You go ahead and sit down again, Papa. Stay with your guests," Max said sedately.

Mr. Dufour, stifling his emotion, obeyed mechanically.

The young couple shuffled down the long row of chairs. Max was smiling. His triumphant eyes beamed with happiness, lighting up his regular features and full, dark beard. His whole being glowed with self-confident energy, as if he'd been entrusted with a treasure that he meant to defend with all his might. Marie, beside him, moved through the room with a silent modesty, a kind of submissiveness. The guests sensed that she had bid a final farewell to her independence. She

seemed very slender, even a little gaunt, in her long, white wedding dress embellished with orange blossom. Her delicate veil, tucked back over her shoulders, formed a sweet, mild, decorative frame around the perfect oval of her face, her dark hair, and her dark, mild eyes. She was not especially pretty, but she was graceful.

She reached the Aunts. There were three Aunts, Mr. Dufour's sisters: Aunt Clemence, Aunt Estelle, and Aunt Victoire. Aunt Clemence's gentle name was undeserved. She had a hard, dour face with sharp features, the womanly counterpart of her brother's. Her straight, blond hair did nothing to soften that harshness, and neither did her light blue eyes, as cold as steel and usually full of stern disapproval.

Aunt Estelle, on the other hand, appeared and was the very model of goodness and gentleness. Her smile was always so friendly, and her hair, which had gone a silvery gray at an early age, reinforced the impression that this was a good-natured woman – affectionate, amiable, and mild. Was that her nature, or the result of the tragic love affair that had left her whole life a colorless, sorrowful wreck?

For a while, the three sisters had been at war with one another. The eldest, a ferocious man-hater, as well as the youngest, who had never received so much as a glance from any man, had categorically disapproved of Estelle's choice and would not be reconciled with her until she had given up her marriage plans once and for all.

Then Aunt Estelle had fallen ill, and ever since then she'd been weak, without any will of her own, completely under the thumb of her older, stronger sister. She was often even ordered around by her difficult younger sibling, Aunt Victoire – who oddly, even though she was the youngest, appeared to be the eldest of the three. Victoire had a pale, ugly face with wrinkles along her nose and bags under her peevish eyes, and her large mouth full of false teeth always seemed to be grumbling and hissing behind her grim, pursed lips, as if in a constant, internal upwelling of wrath and resentment that nature had bestowed her with so little grace. Disliking young people and amusement, she sought refuge in church, where she and her sisters were among the most faithful members of the flock.

"Aunt Clemence—" Max began, making a deep bow to the old spinster before departing. Whenever he faced the Aunts – who were certain never to marry, and whose entire fortune he and sisters expected to inherit – all his robust self-confidence fell away and he once again felt like a very small boy, as he always had in their presence. He would never have taken Marie as his bride if the choice had in any way offended the Aunts' sensibilities. Fortunately, they had all shown mercy on him and given their blessing, and yet... to them, his marriage seemed something like an unexpected extravagance on his part, which they could agree to overlook as long as it remained absolutely virtuous and respectable and *comme il faut*, without a single stain or blot.

"Max..." Aunt Clemence responded, looking her nephew straight in the eyes as she held out her hand. "Will you take every sort of care, Max... and see to it that your marriage is never anything but a comfort, an honor, and a pleasure to us?"

Although Max was uncertain exactly what Aunt Clemence meant by this question, he was quick to say yes, shaking her hand with vigor as if sealing a solemn promise with a vow.

"And you, Marie? Can I expect the same of you?" Clemence asked the bride in turn, turning toward her with a stern expression.

"Oh, yes, Aunt! Oh, yes!" Marie confirmed in a shaky voice. Her cheeks were suddenly burning under the thin bridal veil; she had lost all sense of what to do or say. A feeling of guilt overwhelmed her as she stood in her wedding dress before that dour old spinster, and in her bewilderment, she leaned forward and gave her a soft, trembling kiss on one cheek, then the other.

It was like kissing leather. At first, Aunt Clemence made as if to flinch backwards, but instead she put up with it, though without reciprocating.

After that, saying farewell to dear Aunt Estelle was like a soothing balm to Marie's soul. Estelle, of course, was nothing but good and kind, and her warm wishes for them could not have been more

sincere. Aunt Victoire, however, was anything but friendly or approachable. One of her dark moods had come over her, and averting her eyes, she abruptly asked the newlyweds, "You do realize marriage is a very serious business?"

"Why yes, Aunt! Of course, Aunt!" came their humble reply.

"You know it's no foolish diversion or laughing matter?" Aunt Victoire continued crossly. And she huffed inside her mouth, behind tight, scowling lips.

"Of course, Aunt, of course."

"I hope your marriage will be a *fine* thing, a *pure* thing, and not some silly game."

"It will be, Aunt, we promise."

Disconcerted, Max shook her hand and Marie kissed her on the cheeks, as she had Aunt Clemence and Aunt Estelle. And like Aunt Clemence, Aunt Victoire let herself be kissed but did not kiss back. All she did was make a strange internal noise in her closed mouth.

The young couple, now in a hurry, went from table to table shaking hands. Max exchanged a quick double handshake with his bosom friend Raymond, and last of all they came to Clara, Adrienne, and Edmée, Max's three sisters, who accompanied them to the front door.

All three of the young women had tears in their eyes. They were laughing and crying at once. They were happy, and they were sad. That was to be expected, under the circumstances. Unlike their father and the Aunts, they imagined themselves in Marie's place. They had grown to appreciate her during the few months of the engagement, and they felt a kind of tender pity for her, since she'd never known her parents, who had both died when she was small, one soon after the other. She had spent her childhood and youth in the care of an old, ailing aunt, who had not left her bed in years now. That is why the wedding ceremony had taken place, by necessity, not in the aunt's home but in Mr. Dufour's. This was another reason the sisters pitied her. They might have lost their mother, but at least they still had their father and a house of their own. It was their heartfelt wish and expectation that Max would always take very good care of Marie; they hoped he'd be everything to her and give her what she'd lacked for so many years: a happy home.

The time had come to part. Adrienne, the second sister, went upstairs with Marie to help her change before leaving, while Clara and Edmée returned to the dining hall.

At the insistence of Mr. Dufour, who had soon overcome his brief spasm of sentiment, the guests had returned to their seats. Mr. Dufour ordered a few lamps lit, and the cluttered table soon became a festive scene once more. The conversation was loud and cheerful, and the glasses were refilled. Mr. Dufour proposed that everyone remain seated for coffee and liqueur, and this prospect added to the merriment, as all around the table, cigars fumed.

Another emotional moment followed, when a carriage drove up, drawn by two horses, and stopped by the open front gate. The coachman wore a top hat and had a white bow around his whip.

"They're leaving! There they go!" a voice cried. The family members and a few friends leapt to their feet and rushed to the windows.

In the falling twilight outside, they could see the suitcases being loaded. A crowd of curious onlookers had gathered in front of the houses across the street; a farmer, passing in his wagon, pulled up his horses.

Marie came through the gate and hurried towards the carriage. She turned and smiled, waving at the people in the windows. She wore a dark brown suit and a stylish black bonnet, which suited her. She was no longer a girl, no longer a young lady. Max and Adrienne followed, Max looking very handsome in his fashionable new winter coat, Adrienne wearing a fur stole. Max, too, waved towards the windows, self-confident and distinguished, and the couple entered the carriage. The coachman lashed the horses, and they rattled away. Taking a quick look back through the window, they gave one final wave. They were off! The eyes of the curious crowd followed the departing vehicle.