

Great Aunts

by Margaret Atwood

In the early part of my childhood, I did not know any of my relatives, because they lived in Nova Scotia, two thousand miles (3200 km) away. My parents had left Nova Scotia during the Depression because there were no jobs there; by the time I was born, the Second World War had begun, and nobody traveled great distances without official reasons and gas coupons. But although my two aunts were not present in the flesh, they were very much present in the spirit. The three sisters wrote one another every week, and my mother read these letters out loud, to my father but by extension to me and my brother, after dinner. They were called "letters from home." "Home," for my mother, was always Nova Scotia, never wherever we might be living at the time; which gave me the vague idea that I was misplaced. Wherever I actually was living myself, "home" was not there.

So I was kept up on the doings of my aunts, and also of my great-aunts, my uncles, my cousins, my second cousins, and many other people who fitted in somewhere but were more distantly related. In Nova Scotia, it's not what you do or even who you know that is the most important thing about you. It's which town you're from and who you're related to. Any conversation between two Nova Scotians who've never met before will begin this way, and go on until both parties discover that they are in fact related to each other. So I grew up in a huge extended family of invisible people.

But it was not my invisible aunts in their present-day incarnation who made the impression on me. It was my aunts in the past. There they were as children, in the impossible starched and frilled dresses and the floppy stain hair bows of the first decades of the century, or as shingle-haired teenagers, in black and white in the photograph album, wearing strange clothing—cloche hats, flapper coats up over the knee—standing beside antique motorcars, or posed in front of rocks or the sea in striped bathing suits that came halfway down their legs. Sometimes their arms would be around one another. They had been given captions, by my mother, in white pencil on the black album pages: "We Three," "Bathing Bells." Aunt J. was thin as a child, dark-eyed, intense. Aunt K., the middle sister, looked tailored and brisk, in a Dutch cut. My mother, with huge Pre-Raphaelite eyes and wavy hair and model's cheekbones, was the beauty, an assessment she made light of: she was, and remained, notorious for her bad taste in clothes, a notion she cultivated so she wouldn't have to go shopping alone. But all three sisters had the same high-bridged noses; Roman noses, my mother said. I pored over these pictures, intrigued by the idea of the triplicate, identical noses. I did not have a sister myself, then, and the mystique of sisterhood was potent for me.

The photo album was one mode of existence for my invisible aunts. They were even more alive in my mother's stories, for, although she was no poet, my mother was a raconteur and deadly mimic. The characters in her stories about "home" became as familiar to me as characters in books; and since we lived in isolated places and moved a lot, they were more familiar than most of the people I actually encountered.

The cast was constant. First came my strict, awe-inspiring but lovable grandfather, a country doctor who drove around the dirt roads in a horse and sleigh, through blizzards, delivering babies in the dead of night, or cutting off arms and legs, or stitching up gaping wounds made by objects unfamiliar to me—buzz saws, threshing machines. Under his reign, you had to eat everything on your plate, or sit at the dinner table until you did. You had to go to church, every Sunday. You had to sit up straight. ("Father laid down the law," said my mother. And I could picture him laying it down, on the dining-room table, in the form of two great slabs, like those toted around by Moses; only his were of wood.)

This larger-than-life figure, who resembled in my mind the woodcut of Captain Ahab in our copy of *Moby Dick*, once threatened to horsewhip my mother for "making moon eyes at the boys." ("Did you?" I said. "I don't know," said my mother.) Although he never actually did any horsewhipping, the word made a vast impression on me. I didn't know what a horsewhip was, and such a punishment had the added attraction of the bizarre.

Then came my distracted, fun-loving, bridge-playing grandmother, and my Aunt K., a year younger than my mother but much more intellectual and firm of will, according to my mother. Then Aunt J., sentimental and apt to be left out. These three were "the girls." Then, somewhat later, my two uncles, "the boys," one of whom was an investor and blew the stove lids off the country schoolhouse with some homemade explosive hidden in a log, the other a laconic ironist who frequently had everyone "in stitches." And the peripheral figures: hired girls who were driven away by the machinations of my mother and Aunt K., who did not like having them around; hired men who squirted them while milking the cows; the cows themselves; the yearly pig; the horses.

The horses were not really peripheral characters; although they had no lines, they had names and personalities and histories, and they were my mother's partners in exciting and, it seemed to me, life-threatening escapades. Dick and Nell were their names. Dick was my favorite; he had been given to my mother as a broken-down, ill-treated hack, and she had restored him to health and glossy beauty. This was the kind of happy ending I found satisfactory.

The stories about these people had everything that could be asked for: plot, action, suspense—although I know how they would turn out, having heard them before—and fear, because there was always the danger of my grandfather's finding out.

What would he find out? Almost anything. There were many things he was not supposed to know, many things the girls were not supposed to know, but did. And what if he were to find out that they knew? A great deal turned, in these stories and in that family, on concealment; on what you did or did not tell; on what was said as distinct from what was meant. "If you can't say anything good, don't say anything at all," said my mother, saying a great deal. My mother's stories were my first lesson in reading between the lines.

My mother featured in these stories as physically brave, a walker of fences and also of barn ridgepoles, a sin of horsewhipping proportions—but shy. She was so shy that she would hide from visitors behind the barn, and she could not go to school until Aunt K. was old enough to take her. In addition to the bravery and shyness, however, she sometimes lost her temper. This was improbable to me, since I could not remember any examples. My mother losing her temper would have been a sight to behold, like the Queen standing on her head. But I accepted the idea on faith, along with the rest of her mythology.

Aunt K. was not shy. Although she was younger than my mother, you would never know it: "We were more like twins." She was a child of steely nerves, according to my mother. She was a ringleader, and thought up plots and plans, which she carried out with ruthless efficiency. My mother would be drawn into these, willy-nilly; she claimed she was too weak of will to resist.

"The girls" had to do household chores, more of them after they had driven away the hired girls, and Aunt K. was a hard worker and an exacting critic of the housework of others. Later on in the story, Aunt K. and my mother had a double wedding; the night before this event they read their adolescent diaries out loud to one another and then burned them. "We cleaned the kitchen," said Aunt K.'s diary. "The others did not do an A-1 job." My mother and Aunt J. would always laugh when repeating this. It was, as Matthew Arnold would have had it, a touchstone line for them, about Aunt K.

But there was even more to Aunt K. She was a brilliant student, and had received her M.A. in history from the University of Toronto at the age of nineteen. My grandfather thought my mother was a flighty, pleasure-bent flibbertigibbet until she saved her own money from schoolteaching and sent herself to college; but he was all set to finance Aunt K. for an advanced degree at Oxford. However, she turned this down in favor of marrying a local Annapolis Valley doctor and having six children. The reason, my mother implied, had something to do with Great-aunt Winnie, who also had an M.A., the first woman to receive one from Dalhousie, but who had never married. Aunt

Winnie was condemned—it was thought of as a condemnation—to teach school forever. She would turn up at family Christmases, looking wistful. In those days, said my mother, if you did not get married by a certain age, it was unlikely that you ever would. “You didn’t think about not marrying,” said Aunt J. to me, much later. “There wasn’t any *choice* about it. It was just what you did.”

Meanwhile, there was my Aunt K. in the album, in a stain wedding gown and a veil and a cascade of lilies identical to my mother’s, and later, with all six children, dressed up as the Old Women Who Lived in a Shoe in the Apple Blossom Festival Parade. Unlike the stories in books, my mother’s stories did not have clear morals, and the moral of this one was less clear than most. Which was better? To be brilliant and go to Oxford, or to have six children? Why couldn’t it be both?

When I was six or seven and my brother was eight or nine and the war was over, we began to visit Nova Scotia, every summer or every second summer. We had to: my grandfather had had something called a coronary, more than one of them, in fact, and he could die at any moment. Despite his strictness and, to me, his fearfulness, he was loved and respected. Everyone agreed on that.

These visits were a strain. We reached Nova Scotia from Ontario by driving at breakneck speed and for a great many hours at a time over the postwar highways of Quebec and Vermont and New Brunswick, so that we would arrive cranky and frazzled, usually in the middle of the night. During the visits we would have to be in whispering good behavior in my grandfather’s large white house, and meet and be met by a great many relatives we hardly knew.

But the worst strain of all was fitting these people—so much smaller and older and less vivid than they ought to have been—into the mythology in my possession. My grandfather was not galloping around the countryside saving babies and sawing off limbs; he was not presiding over the large dining-room table, laying down the law. Instead he carved little wooden figures, chess pieces and apple-blossom pins, and had to have a nap every afternoon, and his greatest exertion was a stroll around the orchard or a game of chess with my brother. My grandmother was not the harried although comical mother of five. There were no cows anymore, and where were the beautiful horses?

I felt defrauded. I did not want Aunt J. and Aunt K. to be the grown-up mothers of my cousins, snapping beans in the kitchen. I wanted them back the way they were supposed to be, in the bobbed haircuts and short skirts of the photo album, playing tricks on the hired girls, being squirted by the hired man, keeping dire secrets, failing to do an A-1 job.

Much later, when I thought I had grown up, Aunt J. took me to my first writers’ conference. That was in Montreal, in 1958; I was eighteen, and bent on

being a writer. I had already produced several impressive poems; at least I was impressed by them. They had decaying leaves, garbage cans, cigarette butts, and cups of coffee in them: I had been ambushed by T.S. Eliot several months previously, and had wrestled him to a standstill. I did not yet know that it was the done thing, by now, to refer to him as T.S. Idiot.

I had not shown my seedy poems to my mother, who was the oldest of the three sisters and therefore pragmatic, since it was she who'd had to tend the others. She was not particularly literary; she preferred dancing and ice-skating, or any other form of rapid motion that offered escapes from domestic duties. My mother had only written one poem in her life, when she was eight or nine; it began: "I had some wings,/They were lovely things," and went on, typically for her, to describe the speed of the subsequent flight. The beauty of this was that whatever I came out with in the way of artistic production, my mother would say, more or less truthfully, that it was much better than she could do herself. But by this time I wanted professional advice. I knew that if I forced her to read my butt-and-coffee-grounds free verses, she would say they were very nice, this being her standard response to other puzzlements, such as my increasingly dour experiments with wardrobe. Clothing was not a priority of hers either.

But Aunt J. had written reams, according to my mother. She was a romantic figure, as she had once had pleurisy and had been in a "san," where she had made flowery shellwork brooches; I had received several of these treasures for Christmas, as a child, in tiny magical boxes with cotton wool in them. Tiny boxes, cotton wool: these were not my mother's style.

Aunt J. had to be careful of her health, an infirmity which seemed to go along with writing, from what I knew. She cried at the sad places in movies, as I did, and, as a child, had been known for impractical flights of fantasy. Her middle name was Carmen, and to punish what they thought to be her inordinate pride over this, her two older sisters had named the pig Carmen.

By now, Aunt J. was no longer lanky. She was rounded in outline, myopic (as I was), and depicted herself as a sentimental pushover, though this was merely a convenient fiction, part of the self-deprecating camouflage adopted by women then for various useful purposes. Underneath her façade of lavender-colored flutter she was tough-minded, like all three of those sisters. It was this blend of soft and hard that appealed to me.

So I'd shown my poems to Aunt J. She read them and did not laugh, or not in my presence; though on consideration I doubt that she laughed at all. She knew what it was to have ambitions as a writer, though hers had been delayed by Uncle M., who was a bank manager, and by their two children. Much later, she herself would be speaking at conferences, sitting on panels, appearing nervously on talk shows, having authored five books of her own. Meanwhile she wrote children's stories for the weekly Sunday school papers, and bided her time.

She sent my gloomy poems to second cousin Lindsay, who was an English professor at Dalhousie University. He said I had promise. Aunt J. showed me his letter, beaming with pleasure. This was my first official encouragement.

The writer's conference Aunt J. took me to was put on by the Canadian Authors' Association, which at that time was the only writer's organization in Canada. I knew its reputation—it was the same tea-party outfit about which F.R. Scott had written: "Expansive puppets percolate self-unction/Beneath a portrait of the Prince of Wales." It was rumored to be full of elderly amateurs; I was unlikely to see anyone there sprouting a three-day beard or clad in a black turtleneck pullover, or looking anything like Samuel Beckett or Eugene Ionesco, who were more or less my idea of real writers. But Aunt J. and I were both so desperate for contact with anything that smacked of the world of letters that we were willing to take our chances with the CAA.

Once at the conference, we opted for a paper to be given by an expert on Fanny Burney. I goggled around the room: there were a lot of what I thought were middle-aged women, in flowered dresses—not unlike Aunt J.'s own dress—and little suits, though there was no one who looked like my idea of a writer: pallid, unkempt, red-eyed, poised for the existential jump. But this was Canada and not France, so what could I expect?

Up to this time I had seen only one Canadian writer in the flesh. His name was Wilson MacDonald and he'd turned up in our high school auditorium, old and wispy and white-haired, where he'd recited several healthy-minded poems about skiing, from memory, and had imitated a crow. I had a fair idea of what Jean-Paul Sartre would have thought of him, and was worried that I might end up that way myself: wheeled out for a bunch of spitball-throwing teenaged thugs, doing birdcalls. You could not be a real writer and a Canadian too, that much was clear. As soon as I could, I was going to hit Paris and become incomprehensible.

Meanwhile, there I was in Montreal, waiting for the Fanny Burney expert with Aunt J. We were both nervous. We felt like spies of a sort, infiltrators; and so, like infiltrators, we began to eavesdrop. Right behind us was sitting a woman whose name we recognized because she frequently had poems about snow-covered spruce trees published in the daily Montreal newspaper. She was not discussing spruce trees now, but a hanging that had taken place the day before, at the prison. "It was so dreadful for him," she was saying. "He was so upset."

Our ears were flapping: had she known the condemned man personally? If so, how creepy. But as we listened on, we gathered that the upset man was not the hanged one; it was her husband, who was the prison chaplain.

Several gaps opened at my feet: the gap between the sentimentality of this woman's poems and the realities of her life, between the hangers and the hanged, and the consolers of the hanged, and the consolers of the hangers. This

was one of my first intimations that, beneath its façade of teacups and outdoor pursuits and various kinds of trees, Canada—even this literary genteel segment of Canada, for which I had such youthful contempt—was a good deal more problematic than I had thought.

Years later, I went on a literary outing with both of my aunts.

This took place in the early seventies, when I was over thirty and had published several books. Aunt J.'s husband had died, and she'd moved from Montreal back to Nova Scotia to take care of my aging grandmother. I was visiting, and the aunts and I decided to drive over to nearby Bridgetown, to pay a call on a writer named Ernest Buckler

Twenty years before, Ernest Buckler had written a novel called *The Mountain and the Valley*, the Mountain being the North Mountain, the Valley being the Annapolis Valley. He'd had some success with it in the States, at that time, in Canada, a surefire ticket to hatred and envy—though because he was an eccentric recluse, the hatred and envy quotient was modified. However, his success in the States had not been duplicated in Canada, because his Toronto publishers were United Church teetotalers, known for throwing launch parties at which they served fruit juice. (Modernization came finally with the addition of a bottle of dreadful sherry, doled out in a separate room, into which those who craved it could slink furtively for their hit while the fruit-juice drinkers pretended not to notice.) These publishers had discovered that there were what my mother referred to as “goings-on” in Buckler's book, and had hidden it in the stockroom.

(My grandmother, before word of its depraved nature had spread, had bought this book as a birthday present for my grandfather, but had taken the precaution of reading it first. She took it out behind the barn and burned it. “It was not fit for him to read,” she had remarked, which cast as much light on her opinion of my grandfather—veteran of dissecting room and childbed—as on her opinion of the book.)

I had read this book at the age of thirteen because somebody had given it to my parents, thinking they would like it because it was about Nova Scotia. My mother's comment was that it was not what things were like when she was growing up. This said a lot. I snuck this book up onto the garage roof, which was flat, where I swiftly located the goings-on and then read the rest of the book. It was probably the first novel for adults that I ever did read, with the exception of *Moby Dick*.

I remembered Ernest Buckler's book with fondness; and by the seventies I'd become involved in a correspondence with him. So over we went to see him in the flesh. My Aunt J. was all agog, because Ernest Buckler was a real writer. My Aunt K. drove. (My Aunt J. never drove, having scraped the door handles off the car on one of her few attempts, according to her.)

Aunt K. knew the vicinity well, and pointed out the places of interest as we went by. She had a good memory. It was she who had told me something everyone else had forgotten, including myself: that I had announced, at the age of five, that I was going to be a writer.

During this drive, however, her mind was on other historical matters. "That's the tree where the man who lived in the white house hanged himself," she said. "That's where the barn got burned down. They know who did it but they can't prove a thing. The man in there blew his head off with a shotgun." These events may have taken place years, decades before, but they were still current in the area. It appeared that the Valley was more like The Mountain and the Valley than I had suspected.

Ernest Buckler lived in a house that could not have been changed for fifty years. It still had a horsehair sofa, antimacassars, a wood stove in the living room. Ernest himself was enormously likable and highly nervous, and anxious that we be pleased. He hopped around a lot, talking a mile a minute, and kept popping out to the kitchen, then popping in again. We talked mostly about books, and about his plans to scandalize the neighborhood by phoning me up at my grandmother's house, on the party line, and pretending we were having an affair. "That would give the old biddies something to talk about," he said. Everyone listened in on the party line, of course, whenever he had a call, but not just because he was a local celebrity. They listened in on everyone.

After we left, my Aunt J. said, "That was something! He said you had a teeming brain!" (He had said this.) My Aunt K.'s comment was: "That man was oiled." Of the three of us, she was the only one who had figured out why Mr. Buckler had made such frequent trips to the kitchen. But it was understandable that he should have been secretive about it: in the Valley, there were those who drank, and there were were decent people.

Also: there were those who wrote, and then there were decent people.

A certain amount of writing was tolerated, but only within limits. Newspaper columns about children and the changing seasons were fine. Sex, swearing, and drinking were beyond pale.

I myself, in certain Valley circles, was increasingly beyond the pale. As I became better known, I also became more widely read there, not because my writing was thought of as having any particular merit but because I was Related. Aunt J. told me, with relish, how she'd hidden behind the parlor door during a neighbor's scandalized visit with my grandmother. The scandal was one of my own books; how, asked the outraged neighbor, could my grandmother have permitted her granddaughter to publish such immoral trash?

But blood is thicker than water in the Valley. My grandmother gazed serenely out the window and commented on the beautiful fall weather they were having, while my Aunt J. gasped with suppressed giggles behind the hall

door. My aunts and my mother always found the spectacle of my grandmother preserving her dignity irresistible, probably because there was so much of it to be preserved.

This was the neighbor, the very same one, who as a child had led my aunts astray, sometime during the First World War, inducing them to slide down a red clay bank in their little white lace-edged pantaloons. She had then pressed her nose up against the glass of the window to watch them getting spanked, not just for sliding but for lying about it. My grandmother had gone over and yanked the blind down then, and she was doing it now. Whatever her own thoughts about the goings-on in my fiction, she was keeping them to herself. Nor did she ever mention them to me.

For that I silently thanked her. I supposed any person, but especially any woman, who takes up writing has felt, especially at first, that she was doing it against an enormous, largely unspoken pressure, the pressure of expectation and decorum. This pressure is most strongly felt, by women, from within the family, and should not be said. Don't tell. If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. Was that counterbalanced adequately by that other saying of my mother's: "Do what you think is right, no matter what other people say"? And did those other people whose opinion did not matter include the members of one's own family?

With the publication of my first book, I was dreading disapproval. I didn't worry much about my father and mother, who had gracefully survived several other eccentricities of mine—the skirts hand-printed with trilobites and newts, the experiments with beer parlors, the beatnik boyfriends—although they had probably bitten their tongues a few times in the process. Anyway, they lived in Toronto, where goings-on of various kinds had now become more common; not in Nova Scotia, where, it was not quite said, things were a bit more narrow. Instead I worried about my aunts. I thought they might be scandalized, even Aunt J. Although she had been subjected to some of my early poems, coffee cups and rotting leaves were one thing, but there was more than dirty crockery and mulch in this book. As for Aunt K., so critical of the shoddy housework and drinking habits of others, what would she think?

To my surprise, my aunts came through with flying colors. Aunt J. thought it was wonderful—a real book! She said she was bursting with pride. Aunt K. said that there were certain things that were not said and done in her generation, but they could be said and done by mine, and more power to me for doing them.

This kind of acceptance meant more to me than it should have, to my single-minded all-for-art twenty-six-year-old self. (Surely any true artist ought to be impervious to aunts.) However, like the morals of my mother's stories, what exactly it meant is far from clear to me. Perhaps it was a laying-on of hands, a

passing of something from one generation to another. What was being passed on was the story itself: what was known, and what could be told. What was between the lines. The permission to tell the story, wherever that might lead.

Or perhaps it was that I too was being allowed into the magical, static but ever-continuing saga of the photo album. Instead of three different-looking young women with archaic clothes and identical Roman noses, standing with their arms around each other, there would now be four. I was being allowed into "home."