

The Aunt

The way the places were laid out did nothing to encourage conversation: the niece was at the head of the table in a tucked away corner of the room and the other women sat in a row with their backs to the wall.

Aunt Victoria was silent, busy swallowing her tortellini. Her niece Alma was talking, her high pitched voice above all the others. The niece's friend, Serena, nodded agreement to her version of the facts. The fourth woman, a visitor, didn't know what to say. The situation bordered on the embarrassing.

The niece, being seated a little away from the others, might have thought that she couldn't be heard and that she had an excuse for her monotonous, unexpressive and overpowering voice.

The visitor was of sensitive hearing and didn't know which was worse: the grating sound of the niece, so unemotional, or the unfitting presence of the aunt, or indeed her own. She tried to understand why the situation was so unpleasant. Without doubt she felt trapped, even though she had accepted Serena's invitation with pleasure.

The aunt continued her silence while the wrinkles of her face multiplied as the muscles of her jaw contracted and relaxed. Her jaw at work, the aunt did all she could to keep alive, with indestructible tenacity, for as long as she was able.

The noise of the jaw sounded, to the visitor, like a click clack, slow and mechanical, in rhythm with her determination. Then the sound was suffocated by the piercing voice of the niece.

"I even have to see to my aunt's dentures. She looks half dead but she isn't. She's eighty-five" she said elongating and stressing the vowels. "And what's more, she's alone". At this point the niece allowed a short pause to underline the loneliness of old age. She wanted to make sure that she came over as the responsible and capable caretaker, the heroic, disinterested example of virtue.

"No one wants her" she went on "the other nieces and nephews don't want to have anything to do with her. She has lost her memory. She asks a question, you answer and then she asks you again, the same as before. You answer and she forgets. . . until you decide to stop answering: or, if you do, you lose your temper and shout that you've had enough. She drives you mad. She has worsened since mother died,

that's for sure. I'm not that young anymore and I too am alone. I'm sixty and none of my cousins gives a damn. For three years now I've spent my holidays with Aunty."

Serena, her voice less strident than the niece's, but still loud enough to be heard by the aunt, said "It's a real bore: she calls from Palermo three times a day to say she's alone. And now she wants a room, a small apartment near her niece, while I, yes me, I have to sleep alone!"

Still silent, the aunt finished her tortellini.

The visitor writhed. Just because the aunt didn't remember the answers to her questions didn't mean that she didn't suffer at hearing her private matters being exposed to everyone present. She wanted to find a way to let the aunt know that she was neutral, that she was deeply sorry to have heard the intimate details that only family members should know, facts which, on the contrary, had been thrown to all and sundry without any hint of delicacy, to satisfy the niece's provocative desire to break down the reserve that surrounds family tragedies. The niece saw it as a social problem to be denounced whenever, wherever possible because she was fed up with carrying the burden by herself.

The visitor was so disgusted by what had been said that she lost her appetite. She decided to turn to the aunt so that she could defend herself, give her version of the facts.

"Do you like it at Chianciano?" she started

"Yes," replied the aunt, adding staunchly "But I'm not from Chianciano, I'm from Palermo, I wasn't born here."

Right that moment, while the visitor was saying to the aunt that it wasn't necessary to underline her origins, thanks to her obvious Sicilian accent, the strident voice of the niece interrupted their conversation.

"I'm going to write a book" said the niece. "I've taken notes. I will write to newspapers. I'll talk to important politicians. My study will be useful to lots of experts, gerontologists even. No one takes care of these old people. You have no idea how much a private nurse costs or the cost of a decent old people's home. My aunt has a pension but she cannot afford a personal nurse."

The visitor was the direct target of the plea, guilty of not being the right age to understand the problem. Looking around she noticed that were mostly women at the other tables, older women with daughters or with an elderly couple. Then she was attracted by the face of a man in his fifties with a salt and pepper beard, tanned skin and a lean silhouette; you could see his hunger in the speed with which he ate. She didn't particularly like the stranger but she was unable to take her eyes off him. She was fascinated by that patch of sunshine, of sea, of healthy swims in that musty room. A symbol of a different life, the sort she longed for, that she wanted to grab hold of like the lone survivor of a lost world.

The room smelt like a home for old people, a parking place away from the noise and chaos of the world. A place where the only occupation was killing time. The only interesting topics of conversation, to those who were in the ultimate waiting room, were illness and disease, those who had passed away and memories of the past. Even they were not really present, just ghosts in a dream that no longer regarded them.

"Who is afraid of dying?" she asked herself. Those who do not accept the harder aspects of life, who close the door to novelty, who don't change through suffering, accepting loss, including that of one's own body. She repeated the same words to herself: the death-carriers on one side and the life-lovers on the other, beyond one's physical age, beyond grey or dyed hair. The will to live can give way at any moment. We must always find the strength to start from scratch and believe that life will lead us to unexpected paths enabling us to live out the secret plan designed for us . . . Serena's voice brought her back to the present, it seemed to connect to her train of thought: "My dear, how many have we seen buried?" The niece gave an updated list of the dear deceased, worried she might omit someone of whom she had no news.

"My father died this year" intervened Serena, insinuating that since then her life had changed. She had lived under her father's protection until she was sixty-five.

Now the niece was pointing to an old lady wearing white sandals with a large low heel, no longer in fashion. "You see that woman?" she said to the visitor, "she used to come here with her husband. She was widowed earlier this year. I've been watching her since this morning. She sits browsing through a newspaper, then she suddenly gets up as though she wanted to leave the hotel, go somewhere. She picks up her purse and shawl, goes towards the stairs, then she comes back and flops into an armchair for a few minutes. She gets up again, reaches the bar, looks hazily at

the barman, orders nothing and then heads for the verandah in search of something. She knows not what, nor where to go . . . like a stray dog who has lost his way home.”

As if struck by sudden amazement Serena spoke again “there is a massive presence of widows here. It is women who survive. How come men always die first?”

The visitor tried to explain statistics on female longevity, hoping that the widow and all the others present couldn't hear. She hoped that deafness was the one aged related problem widely distributed in the room so as to defend the ladies like a shield from the vulgar and impertinent voices. She at last decided to wait for the next pause in conversation to announce that she was leaving.