

Dazzle

When my Aunt Anne died she left me everything, even though she wasn't actually my aunt. My real aunts, sisters of my father named Catherine and Margaret, had emigrated to Canada before I was born. My mother was an only child. Aunt Anne was just the elderly lady who lived next door to us on Paramount Street. My mother used to leave me with her sometimes when she went shopping, or when she had to work an emergency shift at the hospital. I was meant to call her Auntie. My mother said it was a mark of respect. The day after my tenth birthday Aunt Anne told me to stop.

"I don't like being called Auntie," she said. "The proper word is Aunt." I didn't mind that; saying 'Aunt' made me feel more grown up. I liked the idea of having an aunt, and never thought to remind her that we weren't even related. Aunt Anne had no children of her own. The closest thing to a niece she had was me.

When I was fourteen we moved from Paramount Street to Richmond. I sent Aunt Anne letters on our new headed notepaper, and once a fortnight I took the bus back down to Paramount Street to visit her. My mother didn't seem to mind. She called it looking out for the old.

Some of my friends had aunts, soft, wide women in pink button-up cardigans who took them to the pictures or the zoo. If Aunt Anne took me anywhere it was to one of the city museums, or the enormous municipal library on Agincourt Road.

"You can take a book out on my ticket, Susannah," she said. "I know you won't lose it." My name in her mouth had a foreign sound; its final 'h' became somehow

significant, like the 'h' in 'rhythmic' or 'whirlpool.' She never called me Susie, like everyone else. I didn't like to tell her that there was no need for me to borrow her ticket, that I had a ticket of my own for the library in Richmond. In any case, the library on Agincourt Road had a better selection of books than the one at home. Aunt Anne preferred biographies or histories, cumbersome, heavy volumes with black and white photographs on the dust jackets. The books I liked best were all written by women explorers: Dervla Murphy, Freya Stark, Clarissa Browne. When I told Aunt Anne that it was my ambition to visit five countries on every continent she did not smile at me, or laugh, like my father's new wife Lucinda. She seemed to accept it as something decided, a notion that was permanently fixed.

"When you go to those countries, Susannah, make sure you bring something back," she said. "I don't mean things, you can buy things anywhere and they don't change anything." When I asked her what she did mean she said I should make something of what I had learned.

"You mean I should become a teacher, or a doctor, like my mother?"

"Only if that's what you want." I didn't like the idea of becoming a doctor. I wanted to have adventures and write about them like Dervla Murphy and Clarissa Browne. I also wanted to buy things, Turkish carpets and soapstone antelopes like those I had seen in Liberty's on Regent Street, but I didn't say that to Aunt Anne. I thought she might be disappointed in me.

Aunt Anne's home was full of things. Our house on Paramount Street had been stripped clean and painted white like one of my mother's operating theatres. Aunt Anne's house was warm and dark. She lived mainly on the ground floor, dividing her time between the kitchen overlooking the garden and the front room overlooking the street. Her bedroom was on the first floor but she only went up there to sleep and

always kept the curtains drawn. Sometimes when I went upstairs to the bathroom I would go into Aunt Anne's bedroom afterwards and sit down, hiding myself in the half-light. The room glowed the same dull purple as the curtains. When I peeped into the tall oval mirror on the dressing table the face peering back at me had a purple cast to it, too.

The bed was huge with a carved wooden headboard in the shape of a swan. There was a vast dark wardrobe that Aunt Anne told me was called an armoire. Inside the armoire was a large quantity of clothes. Some of the clothes I recognised: the neat cord trousers, the plain cotton shirts and herringbone blazers that Aunt Anne wore every day. The other things reminded me of the kind of clothes you normally only see at jumble sales or in the windows of charity shops: backless silver evening dresses, shiny low-cut blouses, boxy velvet jackets with diamante buttons. There was a crimson cashmere shawl sprinkled with moth holes. I found it strange that it belonged to Aunt Anne. I had never seen any part of her body unclothed except her face and hands and feet. I tried to imagine her wrapped in the shawl, bare-shouldered, like Greta Garbo in *Anna Karenina*, but it was impossible. I longed to try on the dresses but did not dare. Instead I would ask Aunt Anne to show me her jewel box. It stood on a white lace doily at the centre of the dressing table. The outside of the box was black and shiny. The inside was lined with red velvet. There was a ring bar and a chain roll, and three shallow pull-out trays that stacked neatly one on top of the other. Set into the lid of the box was a small round mirror. Perched on tiptoe in front of the mirror was a ballerina. When you turned a key in the side the box played 'My Darling Clementine.' As the music played the ballerina turned. She was made of glass, a smooth, green glass the colour of wine bottles, so shiny it reminded me of ice.

“That’s Murano glass,” said Aunt Anne. “It comes from a little island just north of Venice.” Later on she took down an atlas and showed me where Murano was on the map. Sometimes when she had time Aunt Anne would take things out of the jewellery box and tell me about them. There was a ruby ring that had belonged to her grandmother, and a strange grey pendant that was supposed to be made out of rhinoceros hide. There was a pair of gold cufflinks, and a silver and diamante brooch in the shape of a spider. The thing I liked best was a pink crystal heart. The crystal was faceted like a diamond. When I held it up to my eye it made everything look broken. The sight of the fractured world dazzled me, like staring straight into the sun.

“It’s made of rose quartz,” said Aunt Anne. “My best friend gave it to me when we were both fifteen. Her name was Agnes Meltham. She hated the name Agnes, so everyone called her Tam.”

“Is Tam still alive?” I said. I was still quite young then, eleven or maybe twelve. My mother had always encouraged me to ask questions. She said that questions were a good thing, even if they got you into trouble. I was always asking Aunt Anne things. The questions never seemed to catch her off guard until I asked about Tam.

“I don’t really know, Susannah,” she said. “We fell out of touch.” She was sitting close beside me, a gold watch chain twisted between her fingers. After a moment she put the watch chain back in the box. I wondered if she was angry. She had never been angry with me before but I was afraid the question might have changed things. I kept my eyes on her hands as she lifted the second tray out of the jewel box and laid it aside on the bed. In the bottom tray was a matchbox full of farthings, a Maltese costume doll wrapped in old tissue paper, and a long leather wallet containing a gold-nibbed Parker pen. The pen was made of onyx. The doll had a red and white striped

dress and a broad-brimmed yellow straw sunhat trimmed with flowers. When Aunt Anne unwrapped the doll the tissue paper crackled like dead leaves.

“She was never mine, you know,” said Aunt Anne. “I don’t even know where she came from.” It was what Aunt Anne always said when she was talking about the doll. She had a story for everything that was in the box, and the story for the doll was that nobody knew who it had originally belonged to. I had heard all the stories many times but I never got tired of them. Aunt Anne leaned over to put the doll into my hands. Her fingers brushed against mine and I knew then that she was not angry, not about my question, not about anything. I looked down at the doll. She was tiny, about four inches tall, and her wide striped dress was twice the length of her body. She had wavy black hair that Aunt Anne said was real. Beneath the dress she wore white cotton underwear edged with lace. If you laid her on her back her tiny blue eyes fell shut. When I asked what her name was Aunt Anne would always say she didn’t have one.

“You can choose her a name, if you like.”

I suggested some that I had come across in my travel books, Spanish-sounding names like Maria and Conchita and Ines. I never chose one because it would have spoiled the game. I wanted the stories to always stay the same. I held onto the doll for a few minutes and then gave her back to Aunt Anne. As I watched her disappear once more inside her shroud of crumpled tissue paper I asked Aunt Anne once again how she knew the doll was Maltese. She smiled then, and pointed to the tiny gold Maltese cross around her neck.

As a young child I loved to visit Aunt Anne’s bedroom but as I grew older I grew less and less fond of it. At some point in my early teens the rooms upstairs began to feel stagnant and stale to me, the mementos and keepsakes abandoned, the purple-

tinged light too still. The old evening dresses in the black armoire lost their glamour for me; they seemed outmoded and somehow desolate, like the clothing of a woman who had died. By the time I went to live in Richmond I was reluctant to go into the bedroom at all. I would go up to use the bathroom and then return quickly downstairs. Like Aunt Anne I had come to prefer the rooms on the ground floor: the crowded galley kitchen crammed with blue and white china, the sitting room at the front where we read our library books and drank our tea. The sitting room had a large bay window and was flooded with sunlight in summer. There was a velvet Chesterfield sofa, a glass-fronted cabinet full of porcelain figurines, and a carved wooden footstool in the shape of an elephant. Aunt Anne said it had come from old friends of hers who had spent time in Kenya. The wood was warm and smooth, sealed tight by the curious passage of many hands. I never put my feet on it; I liked instead to hold it in my lap and think of Africa. Aunt Anne had photographs of the friends, a tight-lipped but rather handsome man in the uniform of the Royal Artillery, a smiling Fifties housewife with permed hair and a flowery short-sleeved dress. I looked at the picture for quite a while, wondering what these people had been like and how Aunt Anne had come to know them. Then I asked her if she had a photograph of Tam.

“I don’t think so, Susannah,” she said. “People didn’t take photographs much, not then. I’ll have a look though, for next time you come.”

The next time I came there was no photograph but something had changed all the same. She talked to me differently, as if I were older. She told me things about Tam.

“Her parents ran a guest house in Bexhill-on-Sea,” she said. “I was a day girl at school, but Tam was a boarder. I stayed with her sometimes during the holidays. I liked the sea and the beach, but not as much as she did. I was always glad to get back to London.”

Aunt Anne had planned never to marry. “I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, only that I didn’t want to give up my life for some man. Tam wanted to be a famous children’s author, like Edith Nesbit or Enid Blyton. She was always making up stories. She drew pictures too, and I liked those best of all. I remember someone once asking her if she wanted to have children of her own. She went very quiet, then said she didn’t know. After that the bell rang and we went inside for our maths class. Tam hated maths. She said it made her head spin. She usually copied her answers down from me.”

“Did Tam want to get married?” I said.

“She couldn’t get married because she got ill.” Aunt Anne breathed in quickly through her mouth as though something had surprised her. I thought she was about to say something else but she didn’t, at least not at first. She looked down into her empty cup like one of those fairground gipsies reading the tealeaves. Then she told me that Tam’s parents had taken her out of boarding school in London and sent her to a day school in Bexhill-on-Sea.

“I never saw her again,” she said. “Her parents thought that would be best.”

When Aunt Anne died I had little idea of how old she was. I had always known her birthday, but never her age. I myself was twenty-three. I had not seen Aunt Anne for six months although I still wrote to her often. Her letters to me were mainly about the books she was reading or planned to read, exhibitions she had been to, or documentaries she had seen on BBC2. I don’t know what she died of. She never even mentioned feeling unwell.

Her body was cremated. There were a lot of people at the funeral. My mother was there, and Stefan Peplowski, who had been Aunt Anne’s next door neighbour in Paramount Street. Apart from them I knew no-one. I was surprised by the numbers. I

felt jealous that she'd had so many friends. I suddenly realised how much I would miss her. I wondered who had chosen the hymns.

When the service was over I hurried outside. Someone named Sandra Robinson had organised a reception but I wasn't in any mood to attend. I had a dread of sharing Aunt Anne, of dividing her memory between us, of pushing her into the past. It was the first week in May, but still quite cold. Raked gravel shifted beneath my feet. A footpath made of black asphalt looped across the garden towards the gate.

There were flowers laid out on the tarmac. Most of them were white: alpine roses and lilies, perfumed white hyacinth. One of the wreaths was May blossom, hawthorn, like a crown of thorns in bloom. The card said 'From Edward and Chloe.' I found myself wondering if Edward and Chloe were the couple that had gone to Kenya and brought back the footstool. I remembered the woman's bobbed hair, set all of a piece the way a lot of women liked it then. They would both be old now, perhaps older than Aunt Anne herself. It seemed strange to me that most of the flowers were white; it was as if we had just buried a child. My bouquet was made up of red roses. It stood out against the others like a stain.

The swing doors flapped open and people began to emerge. I kept my head bent low over the flowers, hoping they would ignore me. I caught the tag ends of whispered words: 'so lovely,' 'remembered,' and 'she might.' On the other side of the gate car doors slammed and motors ignited. I found I was kneeling at the edge of the path, that the gravel was grazing my knees. There was a card pinned to my flowers, the script a shiny facsimile of my own. I had promised to send her postcards, pictures of the places she had read about in the biographies of Richard Leakey and Albert Schweitzer. The photographs that accompanied the biographies had been

monochrome and shadowy like stills from the old Tarzan films I had watched in the holidays. I had wanted her to see everything in colour. I had wanted to show her it all.

“You’ll go when you’re ready,” Aunt Anne had said. I felt I had let her down. I got back on my feet and turned round. There was a woman on the path who had not been there before. I nodded at her briefly and made to go. She stood very still and stared at me. I supposed that she had seen me on my knees, crouching in the dirt trying to cry.

“Did you know Aunt Anne?” I said. I regretted the question immediately. I wanted to get away before the woman came up with any questions of her own. She must have known Aunt Anne in any case or she wouldn’t have been there. I felt foolish then, as well as defeated, and somehow naked before this stranger. I didn’t want to talk about my aunt.

“I used to call her Dazzle,” said the woman. “It suited her better than Anne.” The woman had no coat on. She leaned forward ever so slightly, her shoulders hunched to her body as if she were cold. The skin of her fragile face looked dry and her grey hair hung loose down her back. Her fringe was kept long and swept to the side, secured with a tortoiseshell slide. It was a young girl’s style, and yet the woman was old. She wore a navy rayon dress with fake pearl buttons that looked as if it might have come from Oxfam. There was something pitiful about her. She seemed so helpless and frail.

“Are you cold?” I said. “Would you like to go back inside?” I started forward in spite of myself and laid a hand on her arm. The cloth of her dress was thin. When I touched her she trembled, and I thought of the green fern called a Sensitive Plant that somebody had once given us for the living room on Paramount Street. When you touched the plant’s leaves, the fronds folded together like the plumes of a fan. Our Sensitive Plant had died in the end, because my mother gave it too much water.

“Anne is such a sensible name,” said the woman. “And she would never let you call her Annie. Anne was sensible, most of the time. But she wore such lovely things, and that made her seem less sensible sometimes. Bobby-dazzler was the word people used to use, but I liked to call her just Dazzle. She didn’t mind it though, because it was me.”

Her eyes were the most incredible blue. Most blue eyes are closer to grey; hers were a pure, true blue, as lapis lazuli is blue, or the outspread wings of the Adonis butterfly. I thought of Aunt Anne’s eyes and realised quite suddenly that I couldn’t remember what colour they were.

“Did you know Aunt Anne well?” I said. I kept my hand on the woman’s arm; I could feel her shivering beneath her dress. All at once I needed to hear her. I longed for new knowledge, as if knowledge might stimulate life. I wanted my aunt to be returned to me if only for just a moment. I held onto the woman in the cheap blue nylon, afraid that she might not answer, that she might not have known my aunt that well after all.

“She was very upset when I told her,” said the woman. “She wouldn’t stop crying. She said the baby would change things. I told her I still loved her but perhaps she didn’t believe me. I’d never seen her cry before. I wasn’t even sure that she could.”

Her eyes were like sapphires. “You must be cold,” I said. I started to unbutton my jacket. I struggled with the buttons; my fingers felt thick and clumsy as if I were wearing gloves.

“I don’t feel the cold,” she said. “Sometimes I forget all about it. It’s easy to forget things like that.” She smiled at me. One of her front teeth was missing. Despite the grey hair and the paper-fine cheeks the woman had the face of a child. It was a moon’s face, blameless and without shadows, an intransigent idiot white. I wondered

what she was thinking, or if she was thinking at all. Her eyes wandered away from me and back in the direction of the crematorium. Her long hair moved as she turned. A raised white scar ran diagonally from the base of her jaw to the fine arc of her collarbone. It formed a sort of ridge there, a landscape of miniature hills. The disfigurement was somehow shocking, a solidified echo of violence. It looked as if, long ago, someone had tried to strike the head from her body.

The door of the crematorium swung open and a middle-aged man trotted out. He held a long coat open in front of him. The coat flapped back and forth as he moved like the extended wings of a bat.

“There you are, Agnes,” he said as he approached. “I thought you’d disappeared.” He came right up to the woman and started threading her arms into the coat. The coat was dark grey with a synthetic fur collar. It was hard to tell from the man’s brisk demeanour whether he was related to the woman in some way or whether he had been paid to look after her. The woman stood perfectly still as he wrapped the coat around her and fastened the buttons. Once the coat was done up he dusted it down, knocking the front panel straight with the flat of one hand. He touched the woman casually, almost thoughtlessly, as if she were an object or a child. He started to lead her away, nodding to me quickly as he went.

“She wanted to come, you see, but it’s not always a good idea, is it, giving them what they want?” He grinned, showing teeth so uniform they had to be dentures. I found myself unable to reply. The woman had fallen silent. She appeared to be asleep on her feet. The man gripped her firmly by the arm and steered her towards one of the cars. As the car edged its way cautiously into the slow-moving line of departing traffic my mother appeared. She had already changed out of her black suit. It lay folded over one arm, wrapped in transparent plastic as if it were new.

“My ward round begins at two,” she said. “Can you get yourself back on the bus?”

She must have been well over eighty but I had never really thought about her dying. I had thought even less about what she might leave behind. I suppose there might have been people who thought I had been clever about Aunt Anne’s will, that I had cultivated her intentionally just for the money, but if there was gossip of that kind I didn’t hear it because I no longer knew anyone in Paramount Street. My mother said very little about it; I had the feeling she disapproved of unearned gain. In fact there was little money, but of course there was the house, which was worth a lot. I decided almost immediately to sell it. The idea of living there myself was terrifying somehow, like trying to recapture the past. When I told my mother of my decision she told me I must do as I liked. I could tell that she thought I was mad.

“You know what London prices are like,” she said. “They’re still going up.”

I didn’t know, because I had never wanted to think of buying a house. Although I had never been further than Folkestone I had found it impossible to give up the idea of Africa entirely. Finding somewhere permanent to live would have seemed like the ultimate failure, greater by far than the various, less dramatic failures I had already undergone. That was how I explained the bedsit in Balham and the residential caravan on the outskirts of Cardiff, at least when I was talking to myself. Neither my mother nor Aunt Anne had ever said anything about my living arrangements although I suspected their reasons for not commenting were different.

I didn’t want to go to the house but in the end I had to. It was still full of Aunt Anne’s things. I looked in the Yellow Pages and contacted a house clearance firm. I told them they could take everything. I left a key with Mr Peplowski so that they

could look round without my having to be there. Later the same evening I received a telephone call from a Mr Arundel.

“The dresser in the kitchen’s nice,” he said. “And then there’ll be the wardrobe and the bed. Most of it’s worthless though. I’ll have a job just moving it on.”

He offered me five hundred pounds. I told him he could come the next day.

I went to Paramount Street early. I wanted one last look round before the movers came to take everything away. The power was still on in the house. When I flicked down the switch in the hallway yellow light dazzled my eyes. I wondered who was paying for it and supposed it was probably me. The downstairs rooms smelled of old newspapers, overlaid with the odour of damp. There was a dustsheet on the stairs that I guessed had been left there by Mr Arundel. I didn’t see the point in it, given that the carpets were so old.

The bedroom was still purple. The armoire had been left open and a gold satin evening dress was spread out across the bed. I supposed that Mr Arundel might already have taken the jewel box; I hadn’t made him sign an inventory after all. I prepared myself to find it gone and was therefore almost surprised when I found it on the dressing table exactly where Aunt Anne had always kept it. I glanced back over my shoulder then went slowly forward into the gloom. I became aware of the beat of my heart. It occurred to me then that I had not been in the bedroom for years.

I could have turned on a lamp but instead I pulled open the curtains. Pale blue light drifted in, mingling with the purple and making mauve. I fingered the things in the jewel box, the marcasite spider, the watch chain, the scrap of dried rhino hide set in Indian silver. I picked up the crystal heart, closing my fingers round it, making a fist. I felt no desire to keep it. In the bottom tray the matchbox with the farthings had somehow split open. The coins were all badly tarnished, a welter of blackened wrens.

I lifted the roll of tissue paper from among the scattered farthings and unwrapped the Maltese doll. Her black hair had turned quite grey. I blew on it gently, meaning to cleanse it of dust. Some of the strands wafted upwards, but the change in colour appeared to be permanent. Beneath the hair the doll's right cheek was smashed. The onyx Parker pen had disappeared.

I went back downstairs. Things had been moved around in the living room and finding the African footstool took some time. In the end I caught sight of it under the sofa. Aunt Anne had once told me that the elephant had been carved in less than a day. On the way home I stopped off at the precinct and went into the travel agents to enquire about the price of aeroplane tickets to Nairobi. It wasn't until I was half way along Mortlake Road that I realised I had left the footstool behind on the bus.