

CHAPTER 1

I MET my Aunt Augusta for the first time in more than half a century at my mother's funeral. My mother was approaching eighty-six when she died, and my aunt was some eleven or twelve years younger. I had retired from the bank two years before with an adequate pension and a silver handshake. There had been a take-over by the Westminster and my branch was considered redundant. Everyone thought me lucky, but I found it difficult to occupy my time. I have never married, I have always lived quietly, and, apart from my interest in dahlias, I have no hobby. For those reasons I found myself agreeably excited by my mother's funeral.

My father had been dead for more than forty years. He was a building contractor of a lethargic disposition who used to take afternoon naps in all sorts of curious places. This irritated my mother, who was an energetic woman, and she used to seek him out to disturb him. As a child I remember going to the bathroom – we lived in Highgate then – and finding my father asleep in the bath in his clothes. I am rather shortsighted and I thought that my mother had been cleaning an overcoat, until I heard my father whisper, 'Bolt the door on the inside when you go out.' He was too lazy to get out of the bath and too sleepy, I suppose, to realize that his order was quite impossible to carry out. At another time, when he was responsible for a new block of flats in Lewisham, he would take his catnap in the cabin of the giant crane, and construction would be halted until he woke. My mother, who had a good head for heights, would climb ladders to the highest scaffolding in the hope of discovering him, when as like as not he would have found a corner in what was to be the underground garage. I had always thought of them as reasonably happy together: their twin roles of the hunter and the hunted probably suited them, for my mother by the time I first remembered her had developed an alert poise of the head and a wary trotting

pace which reminded me of a gun-dog. I must be forgiven these memories of the past: at a funeral they are apt to come unbidden, there is so much waiting about.

Not many people attended the service, which took place at a famous crematorium, but there was that slight stirring of excited expectation which is never experienced at a graveside. Will the oven doors open? Will the coffin stick on the way to the flames? I heard a voice behind me saying in very clear cold accents, 'I was present once at a premature cremation.'

It was, as I recognized with some difficulty from a photograph in the family album, my Aunt Augusta, who had arrived late, dressed rather as the late Queen Mary of beloved memory might have dressed if she had still been with us and had adapted herself a little bit towards the present mode. I was surprised by her brilliant red hair, monumentally piled, and her two big front teeth which gave her a vital Neanderthal air. Somebody said, 'Hush,' and a clergyman began a prayer which I believe he must have composed himself. I had never heard it at any other funeral service, and I have attended a great number in my time. A bank manager is expected to pay his last respects to every old client who is not as we say 'in the red', and in any case I have a weakness for funerals. People are generally seen at their best on these occasions, serious and sober, and optimistic on the subject of personal immortality.

Graham Greene, *Travels with my Aunt* (1969)