

Passage A:

Aunt Pegg

Our parents were over-indulgent towards us, and we were happy but not particularly well-behaved children. Maybe they felt guilty because, on one occasion, they had to leave home for two weeks on business and invited our Aunt Pegg to look after us. She accepted the challenge eagerly.

Vile Aunt Pegg! Leering, sneering, peering Aunt Pegg! We would be enjoying a friendly fight or just sitting doing nothing when she would pounce on us like a cat, and savage retribution would follow. As we stood in the corner of the room with hands on heads, she would snarl, 'How dare you! Making my tidy room messy, wasting your time. I saw you!'

Aunt Pegg had eyes on sticks. How she saw us we never knew: one moment she wasn't there, the next she was on top of us. She was a wizened, tiny woman of great muscular strength and energy, and her mouth was like an upside-down new moon without the hint of a smile.

She constantly spoke of her 'philosophy of life' but we only experienced the superficial features of it. She kept us occupied at all times, sweeping the yard, tidying the house and learning to cook tasteless, crumbling cakes. On the first day she blew a whistle to order us downstairs to a breakfast of chewy, sugarless oat cereal. The sugary, salty foods we loved were locked away, and eating our morning bowlful was a lonely marathon. If we didn't eat it all up, we were given extra cleaning to do.

By day two we were very mournful children. Nostalgia set in as we remembered our happier past. We went about our daily tasks like little zombies. We became uncommunicative and even forgot (to our Aunt's extreme pleasure) to insult each other. Both of us longed for the day when our dear parents would return and unlock the barred doors of our prison.

On day three we were introduced to our educational programme. She set us impossible mental arithmetic sums at tremendous speed and always finished with 'And twenty-nine, add 'em all together and take away the number I first said'. Then there was 'Reading Improvement', which consisted of moral tales from the nineteenth century, and 'Practical Farmwork', which mostly involved the identification and eradication of weeds. We were not allowed to re-enter the house until we had successfully whispered the name of the plant into Aunt Pegg's good ear. If we did not use the official Latin name she would snap at us. 'You wicked child! It is certainly not Hairy Stinkweed. I'll not have swearing in my house!'

Of course we attempted to break free. It happened on a visit to town, while we were carrying the heavy bags with Aunt Pegg marching behind, tapping her walking stick like an officer in the army. At a mutual sign we dropped the bags and ran for it. Our Aunt seemed prepared for this. She blew her whistle and shouted 'Stop thief!' and we were painfully restrained by several burly members of the public.

When we reached home we were given a stern lecture on 'philosophy' and 'morals' and sent to bed with just a slice of bread, some cheese and a lettuce leaf. We hated lettuce. Apparently much of Aunt Pegg's philosophy was connected with diet.

She must have thought that we were lazy, naughty children who needed strong routine and discipline to prevent the rot from setting in. How we cried with joy when our smiling parents returned, bearing presents and hugging us tight.



