

**BETTER ALONE THAN IN BAD COMPANY**  
**My Capricious Aunt**

by Adriana Altaras

Sample translation by Deborah Langton

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MY AUNT IS STUCK. She can't leave and I can't go. I'm not allowed to travel to Mantua, I'm not allowed to visit her in the care home because Mantua is in the 'red zone', one hundred and twenty kilometres from Bergamo, the epicentre. Everything is closed, sealed off, locked down. I'd have to cross the Alps by stealth, like a partisan. But without the Hollywood soundtrack. I'm not up for that.

It's April and the Japanese flowering cherry tree in the circular bed outside my home is more beautiful than ever. Unlike in previous years, nobody's sitting under the canopy of pink, there's not a soul on the the street, and it's ghostly quiet. A fat rat nibbles at a casually discarded sandwich. Or is it a piece of cake? Hard to tell from the fourth floor. One thing's for sure: he's one well-stuffed Berlin rat.

*'Casa di cura, Villa Paradiso. Sono Daniela.'* I hear the voice at the other end of the phone.

*'Buongiorno, Daniela. Sono Adriana, la nipote della signora Jelka Motta-Fuhrmann.'*

*'Ah sì, Adriana, the niece.'*

I got to know Daniela during the time when visits to my aunt in the care home were still permitted. She's tall, has dyed red curly hair and a sweet tooth. Her office is actually located by the entrance but she regularly calls in on my aunt because the kitchenette is near her room, and Daniela's always peckish. I used to bring Lübeck marzipan for the pair of them, Christmas stollen and domino bakes, and together they'd consume their daily dose. What with my aunt being a dog-owner and Daniela having three cats, they were never short of something to talk about.

'How's my aunt getting on?'

'She's an absolute angel, she's our lucky charm! But she says we've stolen her Cashmere twin-sets, although we ... '

'Don't worry, Daniela, I know you're doing everything you possibly can. I'll have a word with her, *grazie per tutto*.'

'*Bene, ve le passo, salve.*'

Daniela picks up the internal phone and I hear her calling out:

'*Signora Fuhrmann, Signora Fuhrmann! Sua nipote! Can you hear me? Sua nipote!*'

'*Ah, grazie! Pronto, pronto?*'

‘Signora Fuhrmann! Hold the handset the other way round! Signora Jelka Fuhrmann, like this!’

It’s clear that Daniela is having to shout at the top of her voice. You need good nerves to get anywhere in geriatrics.

‘Auntie, *zia*, it’s me, how’re you?’

‘At last! I’ve been so worried. How d’you expect me to be? I’m living in a house of the dead here. Silent and completely empty. Eerie! There has to be an end to it.’

‘To what? Your life?’

‘No, my child, not to life, I want to live a good bit longer.’

‘Aunt, you know it’s soon your 100th.’

‘Yes, incredible, isn’t it? Who’d have thought I’d live so long? I’m already very...very old.’

‘You’re right there. And auntie, you’re beautiful with it.’

‘Age and beauty are not related.’

‘I know. But in your case they are.’

‘Are you alright? Are you really alright?’

'Yes.'

'And the children?'

'Fine too. Everything's fine.'

'But are you alright with the money? There are still a few bills to pay. The tax increases are a disgrace. Ruinous. And the government are a bunch of criminals, don't you think?'

'I don't know. Berlusconi was no hero.'

'He was, actually. But you don't want to hear that, do you? Just like your mother.'

'I'll deal with your bills. Don't worry.'

'When it comes to money, I don't worry. *I soldi ci saranno, ma noi non ci saremo piu.*'

*Money will go on, but we won't.* One of my aunt's favourite sayings.

'Do you need anything, dearest *zietta*?'

'What could I possibly need?'

'Your favourite Shiseido face cream?'

'Good idea. Could you get me some? It's pricey.'

'No problem. Happy to help. Anything else?'

'They've stolen my jumper. My best, most expensive jumper.'

'I know.'

'How d'you know that?'

'Daniela and the nurses have told me, but it wasn't them and they've reported it to the police.'

'So what? You believe them? The Carabinieri won't solve it.'

'That may be so but it's sharp of her to involve them.'

'I don't know. I'm glad you've called. I've been worried.'

'No need. The last time I called, you didn't listen. You just kept shrieking

"I can't hear you".'

'Oh yes, that was quite funny.'

'Even if I don't phone you, aunt, I'm always thinking of you and am here for you.'

'I know that, sweetheart. I know that. Same here. Look after yourself. And thank you for calling me. It's a relief to hear your voice. I worry about you all the time.'

'Why? I'm an adult. Listen – don't laugh. I'm sixty tomorrow, *zia*.'

'I loved being sixty. I was so young. You've still got plenty ahead of you.'

'If that's what you think. But stop worrying. It's gets on my nerves. You worry if I ride a bike, if I go out in the dark...it's absurd!'

'It's normal to worry. Worry first, the reasons come next. Can't hear you now. Hallo? HALLO? I'm putting the phone down...'

Wait, *zia*! Hang on!

'What else?'

'Shall we talk tomorrow?'

'Again?'

'It's my birthday. I can't come to you but we can talk on the phone!'

'Good, my little one...'

As I finish the call, I notice the rat has devoured the entire sandwich and curled up in the sunshine, the picture of contentment.





THEY WHEEL ME to the big window. I can see the park. The trees, and even a glimpse of the lake. The slender poplars stir agitatedly in the wind. Maybe I'm just imagining it. My eyesight's bad. Far worse than I admit. The last few years I've been cooking on a wing and a prayer. Filling the espresso machine with coffee, feeling for the match, holding my hand above the flame to know it's lit. You hear when the coffee's ready. And smell it. Nothing bad happened, so why all the fuss? It was fine for a few years. The blind are outstanding at living alone, are they not?

I love nature but don't like being in front of this window. The other oldies are being propelled in this direction too. They talk and talk. I can't understand what they're saying but their mutterings bother me. I can still hear plenty but less than before and only on some days. They're all looking at me and it's as if they're shouting. I can see inside their toothless mouths. What is it they want to tell me and why? I want to get lost in my thoughts. Even though nothing happens all day, I never stop thinking.

I don't think in chronological order. That would be so boring. In my head everything happens at the same time. Anything from the distant past,

from yesterday, today. It's all in one. Like in restaurants offering 'international cuisine'. Schnitzel, tzatziki and pizza. All mixed up.

I think about my niece. About how we bathed in Lake Garda last summer. In the most elegant swimwear, of course.

I made sure she could swim superbly at the age of four. With no silly water-wings. Sometimes she'd go under, just for a split second, and I'd swiftly pull her up, she'd cough and swim on. Swimming is one of life's survival disciplines. I love the water and believed she should too. Last year, however, she swam like a mad woman to the middle of the lake and I was so glad when she was back on shore. Here in the basement there's a sports hall where they do exercises with us oldies. Absurd stretches. If there were a swimming pool here, I'd have been back on form long ago and out of here.

And then I recall how I used to bath Adriana when she was little. She would squeal with delight, the dogs bouncing around near the tub, barking and wanting to jump in, thinking it was a game. Everything got soaked, the bathroom, the animals, my dress, the lot.

My sister said on the phone the little one should move to Germany soon. Outside children were laughing and the roses were in bloom. It was May, just before my forty-fourth birthday. For a while I took it as a joke. But my sister, Thea, was serious. That summer I was to take the little girl to Germany.

In the meantime I'm given a shower. They lift me like a baby and sit me down on a seat beneath the shower-head. The water is luke-warm, afterwards I feel nice but while it's happening all I want to do is scratch them. They wash my hair and comb it for ages with extreme thoroughness. Being washed by strangers is exhausting. Shame is tiring.

MY BIRTHDAY WASN'T as I'd imagined. It was meant to be very, very different. I'd planned a huge party for 150 guests. My sons had come up with a 'drag queen' theme. I'm no fan of themed events. Primary school stuff - princesses and cowboys. And yet their idea really took my fancy this time: my friends all done up to the nines, beyond recognition. Leather, nail varnish, rhinestones and big false lashes. The invite was cool, the acceptances plentiful.

My 'to do' list – and I love 'to do' lists – was deliciously long. Crémant and cocktails. Snacks, sweet and savoury. Heaps of food. Judges for the best outfit. Karaoke machine ready. Dancing, drinking, and then dainty canapés to encourage more drinking and more dancing. And singing a bit off-key.

Then it all changed. I put the guests on hold at first but ended up calling the whole thing off. My lovely 'to do' list wound up in the waste paper basket. This was no time to plan in detail. We had to live for the moment. Reality punished anyone making plans.

I would simply stay fifty-nine until permitted to make up for having missed this fabulous event.

*'Auguri tesoro! Am I first?'*

It's half seven in the morning, I'm sleep befuddled and struggle to hold the phone.

It's my auntie. She has driven the whole ward to distraction in her determination not to forget my birthday.

*'Many happy returns! You're going to live until you're a hundred and twenty, Nanuschka!'*

*'Thanks a lot, aunt! I've just hit sixty. Same again and I'll be there! God, I'm old. Sixty, zia, sixty.'* I repeat it in disbelief.

*'Sei ancora una fanciulla, questa è la faccenda,'* says my aunt with such charm. *'You're still a girl. You're young and lovely, my little one. I'm so lucky to be here to congratulate you in person. Every single one of those years spent with you has been a bonus, and I'm so proud of you. The entire ward knows it's your birthday. And has done since six o'clock!'*

*'I'm sure they were delighted. Did you ever really think I'd get to sixty?'*

*'Of course I did! Why ever not? Are you alright? You sound like a troubled child when you say that.'*

*'No, everything's fine. I feel about fourteen, think I look twenty but fear that can't be right. D'you know, it's really quite funny, getting old...'*

‘So just who d’you think you’re talking to? Never forget: *Buon sangue non mente.*’

‘What? Oh, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. When you get to a hundred, aunt, I’ll be there. That’s a promise!’

But auntie has already hung up. *Buon sangue non mente* – the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree...

The party’s off but my birthday’s still there. I briefly consider sleeping through the twenty-four hours. Instead I buy twelve bottles of Crémant and put them to chill. You never know.

As a kid I thought anyone of sixty was as good as dead. Demented and foul-smelling.

Now I’ve become one of those creatures. Almost overnight. What major events have I lived through? Compared with my aunt, none. Absolutely none. Auntie has experienced two epidemics: Spanish flu, and now this latest disaster. One world war, the Shoah, complete with concentration camp, and a northern Italian for a step-mother.

Me, I was Steiner educated and only once caught shoplifting at Ahrens, the department store in Marburg. I stole a Rotring pen for my friend

Florian. He did in fact become an artist even though the Rotring got clogged up after a week and not a drop of ink would flow. What a banal course my life has taken.

Imagine growing old with nothing special to show for it and then not even being allowed to throw a party.

My birthday has flown, unspectacularly so and yet far lovelier than expected. My two sons paraded into the living room, both beaming broadly, bearing sixty sushi before cracking open the first Crémant. Have I ever complained about them? How could I? I giggled, felt fourteen again and looked twenty even in the selfies of the three of us. Beauty really does come from within...

Friends came by at hourly intervals and I raised a glass with each and every one, precisely that care making it so special, chinking against the melancholy that lay in wait for us but all done within the rules, on the communal stairs, on the pavement, in the park. By sunset every bottle was empty. The *Weltschmerz* remained. I was officially sixty, middle age behind me, no question, and it was time to examine my every movement. Now I wanted to accomplish only useful things. No more truck with the superfluous. Life was too short.

‘Now then, no gloom and doom,’ said auntie the following morning as I broached with her my lofty ideas. ‘*Altro giro, altro regalo.*’ Next round, next gift. Or new year, new luck.

My aunt is a treasure chest of sayings.

From my balcony I watch the bees as they assiduously work their way through the cherry tree. I bet they don’t have any birthdays or anniversaries to deal with. Pink petals float by like snowflakes. A toast to me! And the bees! And to my aunt, who’ll be one hundred years old seven weeks from now in this year of strange and lonely anniversaries. Who needs anniversaries, anyway? People can revel in their memories, when everything was more fun, more wild and even the weather better.

In the circumstances cleaning seems the most useful thing to do. An orderly exterior can influence the interior. I throw myself into the spring clean as if my life depends on it, finding things I was sure I’d thrown out. Or maybe I hadn’t.

My aunt hasn’t thrown anything away for seventy-five years. She’s kept everything. Empty cosmetic jars, old dolls. Twin sets and Castagnoli



shoes. She assumes I'll take it all over. Anyone who throws things away is a Fascist. That's her maxim.

Who will tidy up after me, when I'm no longer here?

My sons won't, that's for sure. They moved out a fortnight or so ago. First one. Then the other. That's how it goes. Left behind everything they'd made as kids, two lots of five years at primary school amounts to ten years of clay pots, paintings and more besides.

On top of that there's everything they don't need right now but don't want to throw out. Eighteen different balls, for hockey, basket-, volley- and football. Twenty-two football shirts from Pelé to Maradona, from Zidane to Messi and Ronaldo. It's all here.

I am the custodian of their childhood in one hundred and sixty-six square metres.

As soon as I get it cleaned, two refugee families could move in.

My vacuum cleaner makes a terrible racket. A 1997 Playmobil man has got trapped inside and will go neither forward nor back. If I take the vacuum cleaner apart now, I'll never get it back together again. I'm sixty, I'm sitting alone on the floor of this big mansion flat with an old Miele

vacuum cleaner and can't hold back the tears. According to the commercials these Miele appliances are indestructible.

My husband has been my ex-husband for a year now. This is no Degeto film production gloss. This is the reality. This is my life. There's truly no saving the vacuum and I.

He made off and left me alone with the kids' toys, the domestic appliances and a voltage tester. I'm not crazy about cooking, know little about electricity and used to strive for a companionable old age amid a tribe of grandchildren.

But now I'm surrounded instead by dilapidated kitchen appliances, broken electrical parts and am slowly growing old. I'm greeted like an old friend at my local recycling place here in Berlin. I could always throw myself off the Eiffel Tower but Paris is in lockdown. In any case, the Berlin radio tower's closer. Then I gloomily recall a safety net hanging from its apex. Unthinkable: you make the jump but then spend hours thrashing around in the net like a fish, with half of Berlin staring up and making sarcastic remarks: 'Isn't she a bit old for antics like that? You'd think she'd have had a more mature approach.'

Now I must progress this cleaning or I won't get myself into a good mood today. And I'm allergic to dust.

Aunt believes no flat is ever too big and that being alone is heaven. Whenever for the umpteenth time I embark on my usual lamentation about being lonely, she says: '*Meglio soli, che mal accompagnati.*'

*Better alone than in bad company.* Another of those sayings of hers.

I don't go along with that. Some bad company can be most entertaining.

Last week on the phone I asked aunt if she wanted life to carry on. Her reply was a resounding yes. She's an old lady, she's in a care home, hears little and sees even less but isn't tired of life. And yet I am. That's weird.

I often used to ask her: 'Living – how does it work?' And she would think for a moment, smile and, wise woman that she is, give no answer. At the time she had little to smile about.

What do you still hope for, auntie? I've never asked her that, of course. But I ask myself that. Is she still waiting for something? An apology? An explanation? Who from?

Up to a year ago she lived alone. Always with a dog. Over time the dogs became smaller, as did she. Every morning she would drink her cappuccino then go for a walk and rejoice in life. Pure and simple. On

my visits I marvelled at her calm way of going about things. She would feel her way from one item of furniture to another, like a sleepwalker. For a long time I'd been wondering how much she could still see and had organised an eye operation for her. Afterwards Aunt vowed it was much, much better and collided with the dining table.

There's something special about no longer seeing so well. The cleaning is done more quickly, that's for sure. Everything comes up fresh in no time and the dust bunnies carry on partying under the bed. Cleaning is probably overrated, and I'd do better to take to my couch and hope for the healing benefits of sleep, at least as far as my mood is concerned.

When I telephoned my aunt early this morning, she was smiling. You can hear it, the smiling, particularly on the phone. She immediately asked why I was so depressed. She enjoyed hearing my report on my birthday and said I should be pleased. She went on to say that life was wonderful, full of surprises and that I was a lucky devil. As I am reliably informed there is no such concept as an unlucky devil, I decided not to disagree. I'd have loved to.

'We're both lucky devils,' she went on. 'You even more so.'

What kind of competition is this?

'Why are you so dejected? What's up?' she persisted.

'I don't know,' I lied. I didn't want to start anything on matters of the heart and all the usual lamentations.

'It's the way of the world for good things and bad to pass us by. You'll see how all of a sudden the worries are gone and you're on a new page.'

'Is that the calendar's homily of the day, *zietta*?'

Had she not been my beloved aunt, I'd have swiftly despatched this one. Instead I let it work on me for two, maybe even three, minutes and then pushed it thoughtfully aside.

I'M BORED BEYOND BELIEF. The walls of my room are painted a yellow so pallid that I want to yawn the whole time. The lamps are old and feeble and the outside light insufficient. On her last visit Adriana said it was in fact perfectly bright in here and that my eyes are the problem. Sheer nonsense, of course.

I ask the nurses to switch on the main light but all they do is open the window to air the room. This obsession with airing is abnormal, I'm freezing cold, and I hate a draught. The moment they leave the room, I propel myself over to the window and close it. They laugh if they catch me doing it and say I'm their lucky charm, the oldest resident.

A couple of weeks before all this they'd have given me a kiss on the forehead and a goodnight hug. All of a sudden touching is forbidden and we're told it brings illness and death. So now we're supposed to live without touching one another? That'll get us nowhere; that much is certain.

A few days later they're all going around in masks as if about to perform an operation. Since then I've not been able to see who's who. They expect me to put a cover over my mouth, too, but that doesn't work. The thing keeps slipping down, hangs off one ear or goes under my chin.

After the room airing, it's time for my exercises but the physiotherapist is so slow that I have to pull her along behind me. I want to walk good and fast again to get out of here, go home and find myself a new dog. After the exercises the physio is exhausted but I'm the one put in the wheelchair.

There used to be frequent visitors. How long ago was that?

Gino is caretaker of the building where my flat is. He's such a good soul, red-cheeked and always cheerful. He used to call in every day for an espresso. Since I came here, his wife, Marisa, has been keeping an eye on my post. She's a bit of a know-all but helps where she can. When it was still allowed, she'd bring me medicines and chocolate. And from the Jewish Community there was Miriam. That's how I always knew when the festivals were, when I needed to fast and when the New Year began. Even our Chair, Dr Norsa, looked in occasionally. 'It's a nice 'mizwah' for me, looking in on you,' he'd always say. Mizwah, good deed, whatever you want to call it, he was just glad he wasn't stuck here inside like I was. That's why he came. Then on his way home he'd thank God and stop off somewhere to eat sbrisolana cake. But at least there were visitors. Adriana came sometimes as well, reducing the nurses to laughter and the doctors to despair.

Now it's like a tomb, dull and deserted.

It could reduce you to tears. Only Death dares come close. He sits easily on the edge of my bed. After ninety-nine one adapts to his turning up unannounced.

I can't run, I'm locked up here. At home I'd have got up, done some dusting or set about looking for something. I've been looking for things for years. I'm looking for a key to the cupboard where my purse is. After months the key turns up but the purse has vanished.

Here it's clean and tidy to the point of being sterile. In my metal locker there remains only my dressing gown, in my drawer two folded T-shirts, while the rest has been stolen.

My stuff's been being stolen for a long time. But still I search for the items. Maybe it's because everyone tells me they can't have been stolen and that I'm imagining it. Sometimes I really do find something again. Rarely, though. And always something I wasn't looking for.

I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to become sick and then endlessly waste away in this 'Villa Paradiso'. A romantic name. The villa's even on a lake. But the lakes around Mantua are pathetic, ponds



more like, and from the inside it's more hospital than villa. The romance remains hidden within the name.

I felt so cross with myself about my fall. I was at Lake Garda, walking my dog, Lilly, on one particularly glorious day. The surface of the lake glittered in multiple blue tones of a heart-breaking beauty. They say the dog was pulling at the leash because he wanted to romp around with another dog and that I was too weak to hold him and eventually tripped over this leash. Leaving me alone with a dog was seen as a gross error. Rubbish! I came over dizzy and that's why I fell over. The dog played no part in it. They begrudge an old lady her beloved companion. That's how it goes.

According to Adriana I should have been back home in Mantua long before this, complete with round-the-clock care, but I didn't want to leave the lake. Day after day I found ways of stalling. Until I fell. Adriana has been disproportionately worked up about the whole thing and says I'm dreadfully stubborn. She's one to talk.

I fell and broke my hip. Why the femur neck isn't better made, I don't know. Masses of old people break precisely that.

'That's the beginning of the end,' said Dr Norsa, Chair of our Community. He who knows better than anyone else. The beginning of which end? Of hell? What we're living through now, this lockdown with all the tiptoeing about and swerving around one other so as not to touch, now that really is the beginning of the end. Real hell, if it actually exists, would be paradise compared to this. The first few weeks were particularly hard. The operation took a long time, the pain severe, and sitting in a wheelchair isn't for me. I'm now walking a bit and want to be off and out into the world. Adriana says the world that I knew before my fall is no longer there. What's that supposed to mean?

There he is again, sitting on the edge of the bed, my friend. He's smiling quietly to himself. Rascal. I'm not scared of you, Beelzebub. One day I'll just be dozing. And then fall asleep. That's how it'll be.

I didn't go looking for the war and there was no dozing then, that's for sure. I had four years of the war, we lost everything. I was starving and couldn't rest. After the war it wasn't really any better but I never tired of life. As long as you can buy yourself that nice linen dress you've saved up for and a pair of elegant Castagnoli shoes....nothing can undo those events but at least there are things to take comfort in and prove you're still alive.

It's lunchtime now. Every evening a nurse comes to sit with me and reads out the menu for the following day and I select what I'd like to eat. The choices are minestrone, pastina or pasta followed by meat, fish or vegetables.

I normally start with pasta, then have the meat, chopped up small with creamed potato, and ice-cream for dessert. I eat with gusto. Like a toad, says my niece. I don't know how a toad eats, but I like the food here a lot. Then Adriana starts on about how I should go to Germany. I dare to question whether I'd enjoy an old people's home in Germany. I've no objection to potatoes, but every day? My sister, Thea, loves potatoes. No wonder she migrated to Germany. She died there too. I'm not saying the potatoes did her any harm, but you definitely live longer on pasta.

The mere thought of being surrounded by elderly Germans actually turns my stomach. Won't they all be old Nazis? And who could I find out from? They'd all say 'No' if I asked them. What if they're lying?

Ever pragmatic, Thea died before too long and spared herself the old people's home.

I don't want to leave my niece alone. I'd like to be there for her a bit longer, then she, too, will cope on her own.

*'Signora Jelka! Il pranzo!'*

*'Grazie, Daniela.'*

Daniela's mostly in her office at the front of the building but sometimes comes by for a chat. She brings pralines that we savour together before she vanishes again. Daniela has three cats: Berlinguer, Berlusconi and Bardot. Berlinguer is ginger, Berlusconi black and Mademoiselle Bardot is white. She talks about her cats more than her family. Bardot is pregnant but whether by Berlinguer or Berlusconi we don't know.

The food smells good. Today it's pumpkin tortelli, a speciality of Mantua. Only when they know how to make that in Germany will I give thought to moving over there. And not before.

MANY PEOPLE HAVE A WEEKEND HOUSE. Me, I have a circus caravan on Lake Tegel. My aunt sees this is fitting for even as a child I'd always wanted to travel around and live in a trailer. She said I was a Nomad and that's why, unlike her, I wouldn't ever know anything about real estate.

The circus caravan is beneath her dignity. *Noblesse oblige* - when you need somewhere to lay your head, let it be in a grand hotel.

Around the circus caravan is a bit of garden where I can let myself go. Nature is calming. In the autumn I dibble away with tulip bulbs. Ten incredibly expensive samples. Then I buy a hundred others for the same price. And now they're all in bloom and I'm standing looking at them, I can't tell which was which. They all look like tulips; big and full of colour. Soon I'll dibble them all up again so the wild pigs can't. That's how it goes round.

'Aunt, I'm a Zen monk,' I tell her on the phone. I'm living at one with nature.'

She giggles. 'If your allotment's nature, then I'm the Dalai Lama.'

Perhaps she really is the Dalai Lama. And the other one's a copy?

Everyone's dying off except my aunt. God's just forgotten about her. Fine by me. Even if we don't exactly debate the hot topics of the day, we do at least always have plenty to say to each other.

I mostly have to shout. Thank goodness four years at drama school taught me to project. So I just shout:

'Are you missing the dog?'

In Italy we always had dogs. Geese, too, and a donkey. My uncle, Cika Giorgio to me, just like I called my aunt Teta Jele, was a surveyor, a land surveyor to be precise. Cika Giorgio did surveys for insurance purposes to assess the damage done by hail to the rice fields. The Po Valley is one huge paddy. The farmers thanked him if he was generous in his assessments. That's how the geese ended up living in the house as did the donkey, Francesco. He moved temporarily into the garage, drank water from the neighbour's guest toilet and, after a year, solemnly burst because he simply couldn't stop eating. He didn't burst with a big bang but lay quietly in the front garden, his guts in the grass. Geese gathered round him, cackling and distressed. Aunt recited the Kaddish, and we buried him in the nearby gravel pit.

There was also a Giant Poodle, black, called Miško. In Croatian Miš means mouse. He didn't look anything like a mouse. He was a big

animal, haughty but rather splendid, and quite funny. Aunt had received him as a gift from the vet, a secret admirer. My aunt and Miško were alike in that they didn't mix with the run-of-the-mill doggie people. On Piazza Virgiliana, where auntie would take Miško for a walk and me for a play, they would both observe proceedings from a discreet distance. I would let off steam with a gang of other kids, shrieking in all the races, ending up with grazed knees. Aunt would sit on the park bench, smiling, unmoved, Miško at her feet.

My aunt's flat is in the heart of Mantova's old town, in Palazzo Bonacolsi directly beneath the medieval tower. At the entrance to the building a marble tablet bears an inscription as follows:

*'Qui giace il piccolissimo Corsetto di Capriccio ebbe il nome et ebbe il vanot d'aver di bella dama in morte il pianto.'*

'Here lies dear little Corsetto, who came by his name on the whim of a beautiful and aristocratic lady who wept for him upon his death.'

The Giant Poodle, Miško, died of natural causes at an advanced age and he, too, was mourned by the most beautiful woman in Mantua – my aunt. Her own animals diminished in stature as the years went by. Miniature poodles, several Yorkshire terriers, and in more recent years two gorgeous white Bolognese females, first one then the other. They

looked like little clouds or cotton wool balls on legs. Aunt always had them on a tight leash, both in the park and by the lake, but then she let one off at a crossroads of all places. The silly creature ran into the road and was run over by a car. The same thing happened with its successor. My aunt had let it off the lead at the same crossroads...

She was inconsolable, terribly lonely and insisted on getting a new dog. Ninety-nine's no age at all. When it comes to dog ownership, she's a real pro. However, no breeder was willing to sell any canine to a ninety-nine year old and even the animal rescue didn't want to entrust an old woman with one of theirs. We weren't allowed to home a big old tom cat either. My aunt slid into a depression.

While doing her rounds in a rural spot a kindly lady doctor happened upon a stray dog and brought him home for my aunt. For medicinal purposes: the treatment of depression. A mongrel puppy. Very sweet, very lively and very hard to train. My aunt recovered instantly, was cheerful and contented although clearly stretched. The spare room in her holiday flat at Lake Garda was soon full of dog poo. The dog was ill-bred but clever and only ever did his business in the flat. Hence the dog training classes in my diary last summer. After three weeks at Lake Garda I'd got the dog cleaned up, the spare room too. I departed.



Barely two weeks later my aunt had fallen over, or fallen with, the dog and ended up first in hospital and then in a rehabilitation unit attached to the care home in which she was now stuck.

‘So, *zietta*, are you missing the dog?’ I repeat the question as I stand looking at my tulips, worthy of a national garden show.

‘Lilly is radiant. She’s ended up with that lonely friend of mine and both of them are doing one another so much good!’

‘There you are! That’s how it is with dogs. Despite everything. No, I’m not missing her,’ came the reply.

‘That’s so surprising, *zia*. Before you wanted to slap anyone trying to remove your dog. You know when I wanted to take Lilly to Berlin with me? ‘Cos I was afraid of you having a fall? You shrieked at me and said it would leave you incapacitated. And now I feel guilty.’

‘No need. It’s my fault. Lilly kept me such good company. I fell over because I’d gone dizzy. Every hundred years it’s okay to go dizzy, surely?’

‘How come you’re not missing her?’

‘I don’t know. It was suddenly too much. Having to go out all the time. I really wanted to have her around me, I wanted to manage. At the same

time I felt so pushed, up and down the stairs several times a day, suddenly feeling old and weak. I'd never have thought it possible. Dogs are the best company. People aren't. Not as good as dogs, in any case. Why don't you get a dog?

'I'm away too much, auntie. What's the poor animal to do on an inter-city train?'

'Pity. A dog would do you good, he'd show you the meaning of life. You can drive your car quite happily, the dog in the back, stop from time to time to take him walkies, you both get some fresh air and you can otherwise carry on working like a madwoman. What d'you think?'

My aunt was the first woman in Zagreb to get a driving licence. She was in the privileged position of driving her father's limousine around the city, from coffee house to boutique and back. As soon as I got my own licence she had me drive it too, while she sat next to me, quite relaxed, after all, a woman needs a car, jewellery, exquisite clothes and a dog. A husband didn't feature on her list.

How many cars will I have had by the time I die? How many dogs?

My own dogs were called Lassie and Fiamma. I was given Lassie when I was four and got myself Fiamma when I was twenty-four. They were my friends in tough times.

The cars were nameless.

My first car as drama student in Berlin was a sturdy Lada with doors fit for a bank safe. In tears I would manoeuvre my way along Kantstrasse as the car responded with a clumsy obedience. In Berlin you learn fast. Crying achieves nothing, honking achieves a little, putting your foot down and indulging in reciprocal disregard of all priorities achieves the most. After the boxy Lada came my aunt's cast-off Austin Allegro, curvy and sporty, it didn't like Alpine climbs. On the Brenner Pass I frequently had to call the breakdown service. Then came the French one, a Renault Rapid, ideal for 'Jonteff', my touring one-woman show, as it accommodated me, husband, dog. By the time the one-woman show was all played out, so was the van. The superior Mercedes I inherited on my father's death guzzled thirteen, fourteen litres in no time but the heating was better than in my flat. When my mother died three years later, the Mercedes was let go in favour of her Renault Clio, sport version, racing driver gloves included. Now I drive my aunt's Opel Agila, a space miracle. She drove this city car until she was ninety-four, when

necessary minus spectacles if she'd left them at home. She had transported herself and her dogs in this vehicle on countless occasions from Mantua to Lake Garda and back, together with furniture and piles of food. I have no emotional attachment to cars, seeing them as a means of carrying stuff and getting about but they belong to certain stages of my life, with their strong and weak points alike.

When I moved to my aunt in Italy as a four year old, I was lost. Back then I wouldn't have described it that way but that's what it was. My father had fled to Switzerland after his beloved Communist Party had expelled him in the wake of a sham trial and ensured that he lost his job as head of the military hospital. My aunt and uncle arrived and smuggled me over the border into Italy as I lay under a blanket on the floor of their Fiat 850. They feared further antisemitic sanctions.

I was still very young but remember vividly how tense the grownups were. We had crossed the border at Trieste overnight and the landscape was now flat and dry. I understood nothing of this new language, had seen Cika Giorgio and Teta Jele a couple of times in Zagreb but for me they were not familiar figures. My father was now a doctor in Zurich, my mother had had her passport taken away. In return she had to remain in Zagreb. It was unclear how, or even whether, she'd be allowed to leave.

It was confusing.

At least my aunt spoke 'naše', meaning 'our', a short way of saying 'our language, Croatian'. It was very hot and other children would play outside aunt and uncle's garden. I'd look at them while they chattered at me incessantly, laughing kindly as they did so. I would laugh back and show them my dolls that we'd later spend hours dressing and undressing in silence.

**[END OF SAMPLE]**