

# 1

*Describes how and why Poldi moves to Sicily and what her sisters-in-law think of it. Unable to function without her wig and a bottle of brandy, Poldi invites everyone to a roast pork lunch, makes her nephew an offer he can't refuse, and gets to know her neighbours in the Via Baronessa. One of them goes missing shortly afterwards.*

On her sixtieth birthday my Auntie Poldi moved to Sicily, intending to drink herself comfortably to death with a sea view. That, at least, was what we were all afraid of, but something always got in the way. Sicily is complicated—you can't simply die there; something always gets in the way. Then events speeded up, and someone was murdered, and nobody admitted to having seen or known a thing. It goes without saying that my Auntie Poldi, being the pig-headed Bavarian she was, had to take matters in hand herself and sort them out. And that was when problems arose.

My Auntie Poldi: a glamorous figure, always ready to make a dramatic entrance. She had put on a bit of weight in recent years, admittedly, and booze and depression had

ploughed a few furrows in her outward appearance, but she was still an attractive woman and mentally tip-top—most of the time, at least. Stylish, anyway. When Madonna's *Music* came out, Poldi was the first woman in Westermühlstrasse to wear a white Stetson. One of my earliest childhood memories is of her and Uncle Peppe sitting on my parents' patio in Neufahrn, Poldi in a bright orange trouser suit, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, and everyone joining in the laughter she seemed to generate with her entire body, which erupted from her in inexhaustible gusts of mirth—interspersed with the smutty jokes and expletives that made me the star attraction of the school playground when I passed them on the next day.

Isolde and Giuseppe had met at a Munich television studio, where Poldi worked as a costume designer and Peppe was a tailor, an occupation which, for want of any other talent or aspiration, he had inherited from his tyrannical and hypochondriacal father, in other words my grandfather, who had likewise lacked any talents or aspirations—quite unlike *his* father, my great-grandfather Barnaba, that is, who, without being able to speak a word of German, had emigrated in the 1920s to Munich, where he set up a lucrative wholesale fruit business and became a wealthy man. But I digress.

Poldi and my Uncle Peppe had shared a grand passion, but alas, a few things went badly wrong. Two miscarriages, booze, my uncle's womanizing, divorce from my uncle, my uncle's illness, my uncle's death, the whole issue of the plot of land in Tanzania and sundry other unpleasant twists and turns, setbacks and upheavals of life had stricken my aunt with depression. But she continued to laugh, love and drink

a lot, and she didn't simply take things lying down when they went against the grain. Which they always did.

Poldi had enjoyed being a costume designer, but in recent years she had more and more often lost jobs to younger colleagues. Television work had become scarcer, times harder, and Poldi had gradually fallen out of love with her profession. Stupidly enough, the disastrous venture in Tanzania had robbed her of almost all her savings. But then her parents died in quick succession and left her their little house on the outskirts of Augsburg. And because my Auntie Poldi had always hated the house and everything to do with it, nothing could have been more logical than to sell it and take herself off, together with the rest of her savings and her small pension, and fulfil one of her dearest wishes: to die with a sea view. And family for company.

The family in Sicily naturally suspected that Poldi meant to hasten her demise with a glass or two, given her depressive tendencies, and felt that this must be combated on every level and by all available means. When I say "family" I'm referring principally to my three aunts, Teresa, Caterina and Luisa, and my Uncle Martino, Teresa's husband. Aunt Teresa, who calls the shots in our family, tried to persuade Poldi to move in with them at Catania, if only for social reasons.

"Don't be daft, Poldi," Teresa lamented in her best Munich dialect. "Why would you want to live out there, all on your lonesome? Move in near us, then you'd always have someone to chew the fat and play cards with and you can do everything on foot. Theatre, cinemas, supermarket and hospital—everything's practically on the doorstep. We've even got a few good-looking policemen, too."

Not a chance, though. Poldi's private agreement with her melancholia stipulated a sea view, and a sea view was what she got, together with a breathtaking panorama from her roof terrace. The sea straight ahead and Etna behind—what more would anyone want? The only snag: with her bad knee, Poldi could hardly make it up the stairs to the roof.

A sleepy, friendly little town on the east coast of Sicily midway between Catania and Taormina, Torre Archirafi is unsuited to any form of tourist exploitation, gentrification or vandalism because of its coastline, which consists of massive, jagged volcanic cliffs. Or so one would think, anyway. This doesn't, in fact, deter the inhabitants from dumping their rubbish on the beach, making life as difficult for each other as possible, and, in the summer, shoehorning timber platforms and snack bars into the gaps between the cliffs. On weekends families and young people from Catania throng there to sunbathe, eat, read paperbacks, squabble, eat, listen to the radio, eat and flirt, forever bombarded by the thump of indeterminate bass rhythms and dazed by a miasma of coconut oil, frying fat and fatalism. And, in the midst of it all, my Auntie Poldi. She liked the place, I've never known why.

Winters in Torre, on the other hand, are dank. A sea the colour of lead snarls at the projecting breakwaters as if intent on swallowing the whole town, and its moist, salty breath adorns every ceiling with black efflorescences of mildew. Air conditioning and feeble central heating systems don't stand a chance. My Auntie Poldi had to have the whole house whitewashed the very first April after she moved into

the Via Baronessa, and again every year thereafter. Winters in Torre aren't much fun, but at least they're short.

For shopping one drives to nearby Riposto, or, better still, straight to the HiperSimply supermarket, where everything's on tap. All Torre itself has to offer is Signor Bussacca's little *tabacchi* for basic necessities, the Bar-Gelateria Cocuzza presided over by the sad signora, and a restaurant even the local cats steer clear of. Torre Archirafi does, however, boast a mineral-water spring, and although the bottling plant down by the harbour was closed in the seventies, *Acqua di Torre* still means something to my aunts. Protruding from the side of the old building is a row of brass taps from which the inhabitants of Torre can still draw their own mineral water free of charge.

"What does it taste like?" I asked politely, the first time Poldi enthused about the public mineral-water supply as though speaking of a chocolate fountain.

"Frightful, of course; what do you expect? Still, local patriotism makes folk thirsty."

My Uncle Martino, who used to be a sales representative for a firm supplying banks with safes and cash registers, and whose knowledge of Sicily is second to none, spent a whole month driving Poldi back and forth between Syracuse and Taormina in search of a suitable house. My aunts had at least managed to persuade her to restrict herself to no more than one hour's drive from Catania, but no house fulfilled Poldi's requirements. She always found something to criticize, find fault with or deride. Fundamentally, however, she had only one rather esoteric criterion.

“It’s quite simple, you know,” Poldi once confided to me in a hoarse whisper. “I can always sense it right away: there are good places with good vibes and bad places with bad vibes, and there’s nothing in between. It’s digital, so to speak. It’s the binary structure of happiness.”

“The *what?*”

“Stop interrupting me all the time. I can sense it at once if a place is good or bad. It may be a town, a house, an apartment—no matter, I sense it at once. The energy. The karma. Whether the ice is thick enough, know what I mean? I can simply sense it.”

But not in the case of any of the houses the aunts picked out for her. The ice was never thick enough, and even Uncle Martino became gradually demoralized by this—which is saying something, because he usually becomes perkier the longer he spends behind the steering wheel, spurning the air conditioning, never drinking a drop of water, even in August, and inhaling as much cigarette smoke as air.

I remember going on excursions with Uncle Martino when my first dose of sunburn prompted me to take a brief respite from the beach during the summer holidays. Excursions? Twelve-hour drives through a Dantean inferno, through air like molten glass, without water or air conditioning, in a Fiat Regata thick with smoke. If I wound down the passenger window the sirocco scorched and scoured my cheeks, so I preferred to go on inhaling tobacco fumes. Meanwhile, Uncle Martino talked at me without a break. He pontificated on Sicilian history, the source of the best pistachio nuts, Lord Nelson and the Brontë siblings, life in the Middle Ages, Frederick II, Palermo’s Vucciria market, tuna shoals, overfishing by Japanese trawlers and the mosa-

ics of Monreale. He commented on Radio Radicale's live broadcasts of debates in the Italian parliament. He lectured me on the Cyclops, the Greeks, the Normans, General Patton, Lucky Luciano and yellow silk scarves. On the only acceptable way of making a granita. On angels, demons, the *trinacria*, the truth about Kafka and communism and the relationship between physical stature and criminality in the male population of Sicily. His rule of thumb: the shorter the man, the more threatening and the more likely to be a Mafioso. That I scarcely understood a word didn't bother him. My Italian was appalling—in fact it was practically nonexistent apart from one or two helpful swear words and *che schifo*, *allucinante*, *birra*, *con panna*, *boh*, *beh* and *mah*, which constituted an adolescent's vocabulary on the beach. My Uncle Martino couldn't have cared less, even when I no longer had the energy to show any sign of life. He simply drove on, smoking, holding forth and becoming younger and more chipper by the hour, like a kind of Sicilian Dorian Gray. Between times, in the rare moments when he briefly fell silent in order to light another cigarette, he would whisper his wife's name.

“Teresa.”

Just like that, quite suddenly, as if she were somewhere nearby, possibly in the boot or under the back seat, and he had something important to tell her.

“Teresa.”

There was no need to respond to this strange, affectionate invocation, and Aunt Teresa once assured me that she heard him call her every time, no matter how far away he was.

From time to time we used to pull up outside a bank in

some shabby provincial town. There I would at last get a Coke while Uncle Martino drank a *caffè* with the bank manager, clinched a deal, or laid his expert hand on a safe door that had got stuck, whereupon it would miraculously spring open. He was full of professional tricks, was my Uncle Martino. One of them was looking for mushrooms, but he also showed me occult Templar frescoes in octagonal Romanesque churches, cool secret passages in Arabo-Norman castles and obscene stucco reliefs in baroque palaces—all of them discoveries made on his trips across Sicily.

No one knows the island better than my Uncle Martino, but finding a suitable house for Poldi was a task that severely tested his fund of experience and local knowledge—indeed, his entire *savoir faire*.

“My tactic for the first few days,” he admitted to me, “was to wear Poldi down and soften her up so she’d make her mind up quickly and buy a house in the neighbourhood. Driving around for hours, heat exhaustion, frustration—a war of attrition, in fact. But your Auntie Poldi is simply indestructible, a human tank. She cursed and groaned, the sweat streamed down her face from under her wig like beer from a leaky barrel, but she wouldn’t give up. She’s tough, that woman. Madonna, I tried everything.”

“So how did you find the house in the end?”

“Pure chance.”

He puffed at his cigarette in silence. I waited, saying nothing. Another form of attrition—one that never fails with Martino because he *wants* to speak, can’t help unbosoming himself.

“*Beh*. All right, listen. Last day, late afternoon, we’ve already viewed five houses. I’m at the end of my tether and in

urgent need of a *caffè*, so I take the next turning off the Provinciale.”

“To Torre Archirafi.”

“I told you, pure chance. We didn’t have any house there on our list. We simply have a *caffè* in the little bar—you know, the one with the sad signora behind the counter—and I get chatting with some man about this and that. And Poldi? She’s getting itchy feet again, wants to drive on, but I refuse to be bullied, need a break, order another *caffè* and go on chatting with the nice man. Poldi can’t stand it any longer, storms out of the bar—and vanishes.”

“Poldi vanishes? How do you mean?”

“Madonna, that’s a figure of speech, of course. She just doesn’t come back. After a while I get worried and go looking for her.”

Cigarette stubbed out, another shaken out of the packet and ignited.

“But you can’t find her,” I prompted, trying to get him back on track.

“It’s like the place has simply swallowed her up. So I accost a priest who’s just coming my way and give him a description of Poldi. The reverend father promptly beams at me—he’s already in the picture. Ah yes, the charming Signora Poldina from Munich. He also knows my name and all our family relationships, knows we’re house-hunting and points out a former fisherman’s house halfway along the street in which we’re standing. And what do I see? A ruin, I tell you. Totally dilapidated—nothing but cats and lizards, ivy and ghosts—but when I go nearer I see Poldi already striding around inside the old volcanic stone walls and stamping her feet in high delight. ‘The ice is thick

enough,' she calls out when she sees me. 'This is it. This is a good place. Did you see the name of the street? Great vibes, really pure, positive energy.' Her exact words. 'This is my house,' she kept saying. It was no use arguing—you know what she's like."

"But was the house for sale?"

"Are you joking? Haven't you been listening?" Uncle Martino clasped his hands together as if in prayer and shook them vigorously. "A *ruin*. Needless to say, there was an old *Vendesi* notice stuck to the wall complete with phone number. The owner couldn't believe his luck when Poldi called him. The rest you know. She paid too much for that ruin, if you ask me. She'd have done better to invest in a better bathroom for you on the top floor."

I don't know if my Auntie Poldi paid too much for the house in the Via Baronessa, nor do I care in the least. Generous people can't be conned, and Poldi is the most generous person I know. She has never expected something for nothing or tried to beat someone down. Everyone who helped her got well paid, including the builders, the dustman and Valentino, and she always left a decent tip in the restaurant. It wasn't that she had money to throw around—she wasn't that well off—but it simply wasn't that important to her.

Anyway, the fact is, she scored a bull's-eye in buying that house. This was confirmed by my cousin Ciro, who's an architect and ought to know. In the course of the next year he restored the Via Baronessa house exactly in accordance with Poldi's wishes and her modest financial means. It was a narrow but genuinely handsome house situated one row back from the sea. Neither too small nor too big, it had three floors, a baroque balcony, a small inner courtyard and

the aforesaid roof terrace with spectacular views of the sea and the volcano. Wedged into a shady side street behind the esplanade, it was painted bright violet and sunny yellow, with green shutters and a big brass plate announcing the name of the person who resided at No. 29 Via Baronessa: Isolde Oberreiter, my Auntie Poldi—plus, up in the attic every few weeks, her nephew from Germany. Like her ebony African idols and her pair of life-sized china poodles, I kind of belonged to the decor from the outset.

A year later the house was ready to move into, the Munich apartment empty save for a few wraiths of memories and the removals van bound for the Alps, the Apennines and Etna. In the meantime, Poldi's old Alfa Romeo was parked on Westermühlstrasse, tanked up and fully laden, waiting to set off on its last long trip. Waiting for me, too. Poldi was scared stiff of flying and couldn't be expected to drive that far on her own while sober, so the aunts had browbeaten me into chauffeuring her from Munich to Torre Archirafi.

“Your time will be your own,” I was told on the phone by my Aunt Caterina, the voice of reason in our family. “You'll be independent, and you can write just as well down here with us, maybe even better.”

Her subtext: since you're unemployed and work-shy anyway, and you don't even have a girlfriend although other men your age have long since acquired a wife and kids, you might just as well loaf around here. Who knows, maybe something will come of it.

Which it eventually did.