

Archibald and Patricia

Eugenia Kononenko

It was the most dreadful day of my life. We were abandoning our family home and becoming refugees. We were amongst the last to flee from our little town. For a long time, Mother had been hoping that things would improve, but they were only getting worse. A shell struck the neighboring apartment block, one just like our own. My brother gave me a lengthy explanation about how the detonator worked, but I paid no attention; I had other things on my mind.

Uncle Neil of the local civil defense force told us: “Get in the truck and I’ll drop you off at the station. The train will be leaving at six—you don’t need tickets. It will get you out of range of the fighting. I’m driving people over today, but tomorrow you’ll have to make it to the station on foot. And by tomorrow ‘they’ may turn up.”

That “they would turn up” was the most terrible prospect of all. It was impossible to delay our departure any longer. We had long since gathered all the things we would take with us. But... but we were leaving behind those we couldn’t take, and this was the most terrible thing, too. That’s why that day really was the most dreadful day of my life.

The three of us—my mother, my brother and I, with our backpacks—sat huddled close together in the back of the truck, which was piled high with junk. We were speeding towards the station. And our Archie was racing after us. I would never have imagined he could run so fast. He was racing more like a pedigree hound than a posh pooch. He could not understand why everyone was going away and not taking him.

The truck sped towards the station at high speed, but Archie managed to keep up. I was crying, calling out to him:

“Archie, we can’t take you with us! I’m so sorry, they won’t let us on the train with you.”

For once, my brother didn’t tell me I was a silly girl for crying like a sissy. After all, he too, a grown lad, was on the verge of tears, and he said nothing when I called out to our dog:

“Archie, my love, we’ll be back soon! All this will be over soon! Archie, love!”

My brother sat in silence. He looked away, as he could not bear to watch Archie. He was holding our Patricia. Our furry black white and ginger Patsy. But Patsy did not want to go anywhere. She was struggling and squealing – my brother was trying to comfort our furry beauty, the tiny kitten given to me as a present when I first started school.

Our Archie and Patsy were protesting desperately about what was going on in this world. But no-one was taking any notice of their canine-feline protestations. Uncle Neil drove the truck at full speed. Mother recited the Lord's Prayer aloud, above the noise of the air rushing past the truck. I was crying and shouting to Archie. My brother was fighting back tears and struggling with Patsy, who was doing her utmost to get free. Then shooting broke out again in the distance. From the opposite direction came the welcoming din of the railway station.

Archie was lagging behind now. Our white, blue-eyed dog with reddish-brown ears was exhausted. He had been running for ages and could no longer keep up. Mother crossed herself, and I realized that this meant it would have been unbearable to keep Archie from getting on the train with us. Suddenly, Patsy deliberately scratched my brother, causing him to cry out from the shock, and jumped off the truck as it negotiated a bend. She disappeared in the bushes by the roadside, swishing her fluffy three-coloured tail in a parting gesture. My brother started anxiously searching for a damp cloth and a bandage to cover the scratches Patsy had left on his cheek.

We caught that train, and we found one lower bunk for all three of us. Above us was a girl of about eighteen with a tiny puppy that whimpered softly all the way and allowed itself to be stroked. My brother and I got up to pet him from time to time, but could not bring ourselves to ask the girl the name of her little companion. We could not talk to anyone about Archie and Patsy. Not even that friendly girl.

We safely reached a place where there was no fighting. We spent the winter in a beautiful big city, much nicer than our village. We were lucky enough to find decent accommodation. My brother and I went to school, and my mother found a temporary job. Our father even came to visit us twice, wearing a camouflage uniform and tall boots. He and my brother had man-talk about various types of explosives and drones while my mother and I set the table.

Later, my brother and I found our own source of income too. Three times a week we spent several hours looking after a cat and a dog that could not be left on their own while the owners were at work. While my brother was out walking the Rottweiler, I sat with the British shorthair cat and told him about Archie and Patsy. The owners liked the way we looked after their pets, and we earned a little money.

Then in the spring we returned home. Things did not seem all that bad. Our building had not been blown up. The windowpanes had been knocked out in our apartment, so "they" had apparently been here. But there had been nothing to steal, so they had gone away empty-handed.

"It's a good thing we hadn't installed new plumbing," said my mother, "because next door they ripped it out, while ours is still here."

In our village a truck was driving round with window-panes—installed on the spot. It was the same truck and the same Uncle Neil who had taken us to the station that day.

We did not find Patsy. She probably hadn't survived. She was a domestic cat that never went out into the street. The place where she jumped from the truck was quite a long way from our home ... If we had left her at home, she would have been unlikely to wait for us to return.

I try not to think about the last hours of my fluffy Patsy, who had slept so many nights lying across my feet. But I can't help thinking of her. I imagine myself sitting in the prickly bushes by the roadside, wondering what has happened to my chair in the living room, my saucer in the kitchen, and my cozy place in the bedroom.

But Archie survived. Who fed him that winter? Maybe “they” gave him their leftovers.

But Archie did not forgive us, and he did not return to our home. He became a stray, occasionally visiting our yard, then going on to another. He wanders around our street, wanders around the school and past the silver soldier with a machine gun, the hero of the earlier, now totally unreal war. Mother tells us not to approach him. Because Archie's white tail, which always welcomed us so happily, now droops between his hind legs. My mother said this meant Archie had caught rabies. It would be very bad if he bit you.

But Archie does not come near us anyway. My brother and I leave him food in a tin by the garbage bins. If he happens to be around, he comes and starts eating. But when we try to get near him, he runs away without finishing his meal.

I believe he will forgive us, although that is probably unlikely. I believe one day he will come and jump up to rest his forepaws on my shoulders, as he used to do. And I will look into his blue eyes—yes, our Archie's eyes really are blue! I will sit down on the grass behind our home, and he will rest his head on my knee, telling me what he went through that winter. “And I'll understand your canine language, Archie!”

Translated by Patrick John Corness

Original publication: Ievheniia Kononeko, “Archybal'd i Patrytsiia,” *Praz'ka khymera*, Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Anetty Antonenko, 2019 pp. 220–23.