

Biography: Although Andra Neiburga (1957-2019) has only published two short story collections and one children's book, they have all become modern classics and an integral part of contemporary Latvian literature. Her literary debut, *Stuffed Birds, and Birds in Cages* (1988), was warmly received at the time due to its sharp, uncompromising prose and the depth of her characters. After Latvia declared independence, her acclaim was aided by a wildly popular movie based on her children's book, *The Story of Tille and the Dog Man* (1992). The publication of her second and most recent collection of short stories, *Push, Push* (2004), was called the cultural event of the year by the influential daily newspaper *Diena*.

Synopsis: This is a story about two lonely people who experience suffering and deep injustice. They persist, though, through friendship and mutual understanding, and by taking care of each other. Tille, the protagonist, is a 7-year-old girl. She ends up alone and neglected after her mother's death. The Dog Man, a drifter and recluse who goes to the tunnel to play his accordion every day, happens to be Tille's neighbor. He lives in a small, one-room basement apartment, in a building that was meant to be torn down ages ago. The Dog Man has pets—a cat, and two dogs with unusual names: Prince and Monk. In time, Tille and the Dog Man become best friends. The little girl makes sure everything in the Dog Man's house is neat and tidy, waits for him to come home every day, and tells the dogs stories. He, in turn, becomes a loving father-figure to Tille, and provides for her.

Excerpt

There was a city in which a strange man lived. That man did not have either a wife or children or friends or girlfriends. All he had was a small one-room apartment in the basement, two dogs, and a cat. The building where the man had his apartment was actually an old tumbledown shack, long since slated to be torn down, and most of its residents had moved to modern buildings in other parts of the city. In their abandoned apartments, only

the wind wandered in and out through the broken windows, and mice and rats gnawed on old books and newspapers. There are people who would probably not enjoy living in such an empty building where no voices or children's laughter can be heard, where no radio is playing loud on Saturday evenings, and on Sundays there is no aroma of roast or stewed sauerkraut wafting through the stairwell. But our man was, as I already said, a strange man and it seemed that the more residents abandoned the old building, the more happy he became. "Well, well," he used to say to his dogs and cat when yet another family moved out, "soon we will be the only ones who stay here and I don't think that there'll be anyone to bother us anytime soon." That's what he said because he knew very well that builders were plenty busy in other parts of the city and that the abandoned building which the locals called "the brown house," with its empty sockets for windows, can remain in these outskirts for years wordlessly reminding us of people's negligence and indifference.

Having had this thought, the man sat down in his only chair and began to play a melancholy song on an old, out-of-tune accordion, and the two dogs, their eyes half closed, sang along with the wordless song.

I must mention that the man from the old building did not work anywhere and the old accordion was his only source of income. When there was nothing to be found at the house but dried heels of bread and dogs' bellies had shrunk close to their backbones, the man picked up his accordion and went to the city. There, hat at his feet, he played in pedestrian underpasses, and hurried passersby, who didn't even stop to listen to the story told by the

melancholy melodies, threw silver and copper coins in his hat. Sometimes the man was lucky and returned home with food for a whole week. Then the dogs each got a crunchy veal bone, and the cat could enjoy a fish almost as big as himself. Yet, more often the man returned sad and almost empty-handed, for people had passed him with their eyes downcast, heads pulled into their collars, everyone overcome by their own thoughts and worries. Usually it happened on rainy, dreary days, and there was no lack of such days in the land where the man lived. The dogs had learned to tell how their master had fared even as he crossed the yard and opened the front door. At such times they did not run to the master making happy sounds, but waited for him lying there sadly, heads on paws, and looked at him with wistful, commiserating eyes.

- Not good today, darlings, not good, - the man said, and the dogs sighed compassionately.

These dogs were already middle-aged and had experienced much in their lives. They had met both good and bad people, they had partied and starved and the main conclusion they had reached in their dog lives was that the man, their master, was the best and most trustworthy person in the world and as long as they could all be together, it was fine the way it was.

The man had given his dogs beautiful and unusual names: they were called Prince and Monk, even though they had no kings or bishops, or even an award-winning pure blood ancestor in their lineages. Monk was a large, black dog with erect ears and a bowed tail. If

not for the tail, he might have passed as a German shepherd, since he had a powerful chest, massive paws and a wolf's snout. His fur was coal black, however—this is not the case with German shepherds—and his eyes were the color of amber, which strangely contrasted with the black coat. Perhaps it was because of their unusual color that it looked to some as if there was a lack of trust and cunning in his eyes, and sometimes even the unrestrained fierceness of wild animals. It may well be that that's how Monk was. He didn't trust anyone except his master and submitted even to him with a calm sense of self-worth. There was something grim and weighty in his character; he never was boisterous in expressing his joy or gratitude, and never had he begged his master to be petted or praised. He would spend hours lying motionless and quiet at his master's feet, his eyes closed and only his ears stirring lightly and sensitively—proof that Monk was not asleep. Monk did not sleep stupid and carefree like spoiled and well-fed pure breeds in fancy apartments, those who feel their master is there to protect them instead of the other way round. No, Monk protected his master, considering it the main task and mission in his life. If someone would come to the man's apartment (which happened extremely rarely), then Monk never turned his amber-hued gaze from the visitor and was alert to any movement they made, even any word they said. Monk seemed to understand human language; even better – he may have heard in the human voice even that which remained un verbalized. How else could it have happened that once he attacked a young man who claimed to be a plumber and spoke in such a smooth and ingratiating way and seemed to be so friendly – until the moment when Monk lunged at his hand, which the guy was putting in his pocket – and a teargas cannister fell out of it. At that time many such sluggards attempted to make some easy cash by getting into

apartments, stunning the owners with teargas and then robbing them. Moreover, there was rumor that beggars were really rich – naïve people threw money into their hats and at the end of the day there were a hundred rubles! I don't know, maybe there were in fact such beggars, but our man was not one of them, and the rosy-cheeked ne'er-do-well took the time to get to this little apartment in the outskirts and allow Monk to bite his hand.

That's what Monk was like.

Prince was not like that at all.

Prince was a large cream-colored dog with long, matted fur. There was so much fur that no eyes or ears could be seen; his head looked like a football covered in sheepskin, and he shuffled around the small room like a huge floor-polishing brush. When he lay down, it was difficult to tell where his front or backside was, especially if he had covered his black, shiny nose, which, at a distance, made him look like a polar bear.

-- When I am rich, -- the man used to say, -- I will buy you a wide, red collar with genuine crystals and then you really will be a prince... But I will never be so rich as to buy you a collar with diamonds, -- he added to himself.

The man had bought Prince from some drunk in an underpass five years earlier. He had been playing his accordion as usual, it was a chilly, rainy day, and there were just a few

crumpled rubles in his hat. Some little drunk had settled next to him, trying to sell a dirty white, matted puppy who was trembling from the cold and whining constantly.

-- A top class French poodle! – the drunk shouted, holding the poor creature and trying to shove it under the nose of every passerby. – A couch dog! Super! A real French poodle!

Between two songs, our man took a closer look at the dog. He understood right away that it was no French poodle who, even when grown, does not reach the size of a lady's fur collar. It was a puppy who still had his baby teeth, yet his big paws indicated that as an adult this dog would be the size of a rather substantial sheep.

The man returned to the accordion. He was not going to buy the dog, because he already had Monk, then less than two years old – six months earlier that dog had started following him as he was wandering through some provincial towns.

The man played, but the puppy's miserable yelping did not let him go about his business in peace. And then he started considering the fate that awaited the little creature if someone were to buy it as a poodle, and then the "poodle" would grow and grow, and grow, until one day the disappointed master would simply throw it out on the street or sell it to someone else. And then cussing at himself the man stopped playing in order to begin haggling with the seller. The drunk wanted a lot, the man didn't have as much but, as one side brought the price down and the other promised another ruble, they agreed on the money that was

in the hat and the hat as well. It was a perfectly good cap, which the man had got really attached to, and all the way home he reproached himself for being too soft-hearted and light-minded.

That's how Prince came into his life.

If we were to leaf through a book on dogs, we would find out that Prince looked a little like such rare and proud breeds as bobtails, Puli, or Komondors. Yet it was unthinkable that such a purebred wonder could have ended up in the hands of that shabby little drunk, so let us just assume that Prince was a lovely accident of nature. That's how he was born, and enough said.

As for his character, Prince showed much less composure but was sweeter than Monk. He trusted people more, was always ready to play like a puppy, and sometimes thrust himself on his master with, in Monk's opinion, undignified affection, trying to get onto his lap, licking his mouth and flirting in all kinds of other ways. At such times Monk would just turn away in disgust. He felt embarrassed by this unrestrained behavior but also a tiny bit of jealousy seemed to pinch his heart: could master really mistake such kissing and carrying on for really deep, genuine love, love unto death, the kind Monk felt?

Prince's character was probably influenced by the way he had been raised and his circumstances as a pup. If Monk came to his master as an adult dog who had already lived

through and experienced much in life to that point (and it could be said that Monk chose his master instead of the other way around), Prince could consider himself fortune's favorite from an early age. He had long since forgotten the time he had spent with the drunk, and with the new master he immediately became the little darling. As such, he got the softest bones, master played with him, even put him on his lap, and even Monk, albeit far from excited about the arrival of the little pipsqueak, felt responsible for Prince, did not do him any harm, and finally began to feel a kind of affection for him.

Let us not be unfair to Prince – he too adored his master and was ready to protect him; yet truth be told, there was a bit more selfishness and self-love in his heart than was called for. And his love for the master was different than Monk's. If Monk loved steadily, calmly, and solidly, without giving it much thought, Prince's feelings were much more romantic. "Oh my God! How! Much! !! Love! You!" – that's how Prince loved. At the same time, if he felt that Monk had got a larger bone or was praised undeservedly, he could lie down offended and turn away from the master as if thinking: "Oh you! Nasty man! I will never! Forgive! You!"

To be fair, Prince would forgive before as few as five minutes had passed. He had a kind heart.

Oh my! Getting carried away with Monk and Prince, we almost forgot that a cat also lived with the man: a she-cat, Marilyn. Of her, there is not much to tell. Marilyn was a grey striped, typical outdoor cat with a completely independent and proud character. She spent

most of her time outside the house, getting her own provisions in the form of mice and rats, and if she loved anyone, she kept it to herself. Of course, she liked to regularly come to the house for fish and milk, she liked to lie on her master's chest and purr, particularly if it was wet and dreary outside. If master was not home, she gladly nestled with Monk. Prince did not let Marilyn come near him, but Monk tolerated her, because Marilyn was his master's cat. And Monk simply was like that.

* * *

One day the man was standing at the window, hands in his pockets, whistling, and watched the last tenants move out of the building. It was an older married couple, quite advanced in age already, without children, querulous and loud. They had reproached the man more than once for his dogs messing up the yard and barking at night (even though they did neither) and for his cat stinking up the stairwell. That of course was also not true. Marilyn was very clean, which was hardly the case with the angry married couple—Kārlis and Vilma, whose clothes and apartment always stank of something foul and whose quarrels had awakened the rest of the tenants when they were still there. Now the couple was moving away. They loaded their few belongings – scratched up, rickety furniture, rusty tubs and clothing wrapped in grayish sheets.

The melody the man whistled was sad at the beginning, because he thought about how these people might have got so quarrelsome and nasty only because of their poor and

difficult life. There was a drizzle, and the man and the woman were hurrying, working in unusual harmony. Only at the very last minute did some disagreement arise between them, at least that's how it looked to our man standing by the window. After having thrown the last parcel onto the truck, the woman hesitated and looked like she was about to return to the house as if having forgotten something, but the husband yelled something at her angrily, she hesitated some more, but then got into the truck with a wave of her hand. The engine started, there was a cloud of blue smoke, and they were gone.

-- Now they are gone, -- our man said. -- Now no one will disturb us anymore.

He started whistling a more cheerful tune and Monk and Prince wagged their tails in approval.

That evening, a true celebration took place in their basement flat. The previous day the man had made good money in the underpass, so he had made a delicious lamb soup of which there was enough for everyone. For dessert both dogs got an orange, which Prince in particular liked, and the man had a shot of... well, it's not important of what. Then he played the accordion for the longest time and the dogs sang, and it was not at all necessary to be quiet in order not to disturb someone. Happy and satisfied, the man went to bed. Just before he fell asleep he heard rats running through the upper floors, the wind jingling the broken windows and rattling the doors that were left ajar. The man was not afraid, of course, for he did not scare easily. And he was protected by the dogs.

As he was falling asleep, the man thought that he heard another unusual sound – sniffing or sobbing.

-- How strangely the wind sings in the chimney, -- the man thought, and fell asleep.

The next morning dawned clear and sunny, and the man decided to go to work, as he called it, because in fine weather people were in good spirits; they were not tormented by thoughts about what the next day might bring and therefore they were more generous to beggars and buskers. Yes, on such a fine day he could hope for good earnings.

The man petted Prince, gave a friendly pat to Monk, let out Marilyn and, picking up his accordion, left without knowing that he had no hope of returning home that evening.

As usual, the man arrived in the underpass and took up his spot. On that day, he played only cheerful melodies – light and sonorous like a skylark's song, they seemed to herald spring, whose presence could be gleaned only from a light, indefinite fragrance that wafted into the shady, muddy and drafty tunnel – the fragrance of spring. But the man played and in his thoughts revisited the blue sky that he had watched on the way and the blooming pussy-willows that he hadn't seen in years but remembered from his childhood. He found playing so easy, pleasant as never before, and people must have felt it – as they passed the man their faces opened like spring flowers in the sun and their hands reached for their pockets to

reward the beautiful music and the moment of happiness. The man played losing any sense of time and when the day was sliding toward evening, a young guy with a wide moon-face entered the underpass. Walking by the accordionist, he happened to notice his hat, which was full of money – one-, three-, and even five-ruble pieces were heaped up there because the man, lost in his playing, had failed to empty his hat in his pocket as from time to time he normally did.

Moonface walked up to the man.

-- Give me your money, -- he uttered through clenched teeth, and from the side it might have looked like two acquaintances were having a conversation.

-- I will not, -- the man replied because he did not scare easily, as I already have said. The exchange became ever more heated and, sensing something wrong, people began to steer clear of them – for who wants to get mixed up in a quarrel on such a nice spring day? Finally the moonfaced one raised his arm and hit our man. He hit back and who knows how this fight would have ended if a policeman didn't show up. Moonface managed to run off and so the policeman arrested only our man. It didn't matter that he hadn't started the fight, the policeman didn't care about that at all. He had participated in the exchange of blows and that was enough. Moreover, the police have never looked kindly upon these tramps who don't know any better than to entertain simple-minded folk with their songs or music.

That's why the policeman who arrested our man applied the law with maximum severity.

That's how sadly the sunny day ended for the man, but we will now return home to Prince and Monk.