STARK RAVING BONKERS!

More Confessions of a Dog-Sitter
by Jane Mosse

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For Richard

"Everyone thinks they have the best dog.
And none of them are wrong."

W R Purche

PRELUDE

'So where are you two off to this time?' asks my brother one evening during one of our increasingly rare phone-calls.

'I'm not sure. I'm still waiting for confirmation but possibly Finland,' I reply calmly.

I can sense his eyes rolling even though it isn't a video call.

'Finland? Why on earth does anyone want to go to Finland Chris?' he splutters. 'It's riddled with midges and ticks. You'll get bitten alive and probably catch Lyme disease. Besides which it'll be bitterly cold. It isn't even as though you and Rob like skiing.'

'Oh stop overreacting! The insect population will be fast asleep in January.'

'So what are you looking after this time? A herd of reindeer?'

'No, a couple of forest cats and a Norrbotten,' I reply wearily.

'A Gnawbottom? What on earth's a Gnawbottom?' comes the exasperated response.

'It's a breed of dog native to Finland. Anyhow, we may not get selected so you can calm down. The sit's proving very popular, there are lots of people applying.'

'I can't imagine why. I find it hard to believe that there are even more people like you who are willing to travel halfway across Europe at their own expense and look after someone else's animals for free. You're stark raving bonkers, the pair of you.'



CLOUD CUCKOO LAND

It's January and it's raining. In fact it's been raining for the last ten days. A thick blanket of mist has wrapped itself around the island and the fog-horn can be heard baying in the distance, its rhythmic blasts serving as a depressing reminder that we are all rock-bound here in Guernsey. No ferries or flights have been able to leave for the last three days as both rough seas and high winds have proved too challenging. Not even the supply boat has managed to get in, so the supermarket shelves are devoid of yoghurt and fresh veg is becoming a rarity.

'It's no good Chris. I'm going to go stir-crazy if it carries on like this,' announces Rob one afternoon. 'It's hardly surprising that so many people suffer from depression in January. I mean, look at it out there. There's a veritable moat round the front door and the garden's sodden. There's no point going for a drive or a walk because you can't see anything. Even if we did we'd risk being blown off a cliff.'

'Well read your book or write a poem or something,' I reply unsympathetically. 'Or you could make a start on decorating the spare room. You've been talking about it for months.'

'I've already read three books and it's only the 12th of January and I've run out of inspiration for writing. You know that the smell of paint gives me a migraine so there's no way I'm going to start any decorating if I can't even open the windows.'

It was never our intention to be at home for January but sadly a carefully-planned house-sit in Finland had had to be cancelled at the last minute due to the owners suffering a sudden family bereavement. So, instead of us luxuriating in 'a well-appointed lake-side house complete with sauna, two forest cats and a Finnish Norrbotten,' we found ourselves stuck at home suffering the worst weather we'd witnessed for months.

'Well, get on line and find us another house-sit,' I suggest encouragingly. 'It's a good time to do a search because lots of people will be going skiing or heading for the sun. And here, it's about time you did some of the donkey-work,' I say, passing Rob the iPad. 'Hopefully the weather will pick up in the next few days, it can't go on like this for much longer.'

'Where do you fancy going then?' asks Rob, settling down on the sofa. 'I'd rather avoid taking the car across the Channel. It's so expensive and you know I turn green just looking at the sea.'

I have to agree as Rob tends to spend most of any sailing trip throwing up in the loos.

'Well it's unlikely the ferries will be sailing and we really can't take the risk of being unreliable sitters. Why don't we try to be a bit more adventurous and fly somewhere? I know we've done a lot of sits since we signed up with the agency, but we haven't really ventured very far.'

'Mmm, I suppose you're right. I'll have a browse.'

As I settle down in my favourite armchair to read my novel there are various mutterings coming from Rob who, in his systematic way, is sitting with a pen and paper taking notes as he scrolls through the hundreds of requests for sitters on the web-site. With over a hundred and thirty countries to choose from I guess it could take him some time.

'Maybe we should go to America?' I suggest tentatively, already anticipating the reaction. 'I've always wanted to explore some of the National Parks. Or even better, we could go to New York.'

'No way. We might get mugged,' comes the immediate response.

'Oh Rob, don't be ridiculous, you think the whole of the US is full of crazy people. There are lots of safe areas and some really wonderful places to see.'

'No way am I going to the States. Anyhow, it's too far. I don't

fancy doing any long-haul flights.'

'So I guess that rules out Australia or India then?'

'India? Why would I want to go to India? You know I hate Indian food and yes, of course it's too far.'

'But darling, you've only ever had an Indian take-away or an M&S meal deal. I'm sure that proper Indian cuisine would be really exciting.'

'I don't need food to be exciting Chris and I certainly don't want to spend my entire time eating curry. No, it's too far and I'd need to have all manner of injections. I'd probably get cholera or typhoid. Do you know Fred Trueman bowled his fastest overs ever when the England cricket team went to Delhi? He was desperate to get back to the loo.'

Two hours later we seem to have narrowed down our 'being more adventurous' to Europe.

'Well at least we'd be close enough to get home if anything awful happened,' muses Rob. 'But there is the language barrier.'

'Don't be silly. Everyone speaks English these days. I know it's lazy of us to expect everyone to speak our language but I can manage a bit of French and Italian and a smattering of German.'

'I didn't know you'd learned German,' replies Rob, peering at me over the top of his glasses and looking suitably impressed by my revelation.

'Well, I only did a year at school. It was because we'd got this new teacher, Mr Pugh. He looked just like that DJ with the floppy blonde hair, Simon Dee, and we all fancied him. He used to wear corduroy jackets and his wife used to make him matching ties and hankies out of flowery material.'

'Lucky you. My French teacher was a tiny shrew of a woman called Miss Willie. She was about four foot six and wore her hair scraped back in a bun. She looked about ninety. Needless to say she suffered horribly because of her name.'

'Poor woman. You're a bit of a dark horse yourself. I didn't realise you'd learned French.'

'Ha! It didn't do me much good. I gave up trying after I arrived in the centre of Paris and asked a nun where the war was.'

'The war? What war? Why on earth would you want to ask anyone where the war was?'

'I wasn't intending to, I got muddled that's all. I was trying to ask for the station but I got *gare* and *guerre* mixed up, and I called her Madame.'

'Oh Rob, you're impossible. Only you could manage a faux pas like that. Anyhow, have you found us anything interesting yet?'

'Well there's a sit in Holland that looks okay. Two pussy-cats and a rescue dog. Oh, and a bearded dragon. I missed that bit. No, I'll cross that one off the list. I'm not keen on reptiles. You have to feed them insects or dead mice don't you? Let's stick to mammals. Mmmm. Four sausage-dogs in Germany?'

'That's a lot of dogs. I think two is more than enough. Four sounds like hard work.'

'How about this one then? A dog and a tank of fish.'

'That sounds doable. Where is it? Anywhere exciting?'

'Switzerland.'

'Oh, that would be wonderful. It's such a beautiful country.' My imagination already has me wandering through beautifully manicured Alpine meadows with a back-drop of snow-clad mountains, bringing the goats home for milking and collecting the eggs each morning for breakfast. 'I don't know a thing about fish but you could manage those couldn't you?'

'Yes, I used to keep fish when I was younger so I could cope with that.'

'What sort of dog is it? A St Bernard?'

'No, it's a poodle.'

'A poodle? I thought it would be something big and hairy like a Bernese Mountain dog.'

'There's a photo of the dog here but it looks a bit odd. Come and have a look.'

'What's odd about it?' I ask, leaning over to get a closer look.

'Well it's got a silly sort of top-knot.'

'Ha, I see what you mean. What's its name?'

'Heidi.'

'Well that's original. But I agree, she does look a bit ridiculous with that silly pom-pom on her head but that's what people do with poodles. I know they're supposed to be very intelligent but it's hard to believe it when you see them looking like that. She reminds me of those loo-roll covers that my Nana used to knit. Mind you, she has got a pretty face. I'm game to give it a go. I imagine it would be fairly straightforward and there'll be snow at this time of year. But don't build your hopes up because it'll probably be a popular one with the skiing fraternity. They'll be inundated with applicants.'

Two weeks later, having successfully escaped the island, we're greeted by the distinctive sound of Alpen horns echoing through the valley and the rhythmic, dull clanging of cow-bells. The fact that we're still seated on the shuttle-train at Zurich airport makes us wonder what else the Swiss have dreamed up to welcome us. At the railway station we climb on board a spotlessly-clean train, its paintwork gleaming, for the short journey to our sit. Leaving the city behind precisely on time, we're soon travelling through the spectacular Swiss countryside. The lush, green fields in the valley look newly-mown, the foothills scattered with idyllic houses and chalets and behind them the snow-clad mountains make it all look every inch a picture-postcard.

Forty minutes later we arrive at our destination, tired after our journey but excited to see our new home. But this isn't one of the dream chalets on the slopes; it's an immaculate-looking dormer bungalow that sits in a rather smart, residential area just above the lake. The paintwork looks as though someone completed the final touches only yesterday, the lawn, which is surrounded by a well-tended shrubbery, sports regularly-mown

stripes even though it's still January, and the roof of the building carries a huge bank of solar panels that looks efficient enough to provide enough power for the entire neighbourhood. Before we have the chance to ring the door-bell our hosts are at the door to greet us.

'Christine! Robert! Welcome to Switzerland!' says a rather tall, elderly gentleman with a smart, trimmed, white beard, whom we assume to be Theo. 'Please, please, come in.'

As we enter, we're greeted by a very small, dumpy lady who claps her hands together in excitement, beaming at us from behind a pair of very thick glasses.

'This is Elsbeth, my wife. We are very happy that you are coming. But please come in.'

As we walk into the hallway I catch Elsbeth glancing down in horror at our heavy footwear and casting a swift and imploring look at her husband.

'Oh, and if it is good with you then please we take shoes off in the house,' he says quickly.

'Oh, of course. I'm so sorry. These are our walking shoes. We'll leave them here in the porch if that's okay?' I suggest, smiling reassuringly.

'Er, I think maybe is better if we keep your shoes in another room. I will take them.'

As Theo shuffles off to the back of the house Elsbeth takes our coats and suggests, in perfect English, that we take our things straight up to our room and leads us upstairs.

'This is our guest room, I hope you like it. There's a beautiful view of the mountains and the lake from the window and you can watch the sun rise from behind the ridge in the morning.'

Her English is so perfect that I'm beginning to wonder if she is English.

'It's a lovely room Elsbeth,' replies Rob. 'I'm sure we'll be very comfortable.'

'Well, if you want to hang some of your things up I'll go down and make us all a cup of coffee and then you must meet Heidi. She'll be very excited!'

When our hostess is safely out of ear-shot we can't help having a fit of the giggles.

'Crikey, it's all a bit 'just so' isn't it?' remarks Rob. 'It's going to be a challenge keeping the place clean and tidy. Anyhow, let's leave our stuff and go down and meet our new charge!'

We return to the sitting-room but stand around dithering, wondering where we should sit. It's frighteningly tidy and is furnished with two large armchairs and a two-seater settee, all in white leather. Strangely the two armchairs are enveloped by heavy, clear plastic covers, the sort that furniture stores use to protect items when they're newly delivered. I can only assume that they're a recent acquisition. Various tables and a large dresser in ornately-carved, dark wood display a series of plates depicting trains and just inside the door hangs a traditional Swiss cuckoo-clock. On a large, polished sideboard sits a spotlessly-clean aquarium filled with various aquatic plants and a sunken pirate-ship through which weave several gaily-coloured fish of various sizes. It's altogether rather unusual and horribly immaculate. We sit down side by side on the sofa assuming that the two armchairs must be out of bounds. Suddenly, what feels like a rather awkward silence is relieved by the entry of our new charge: a large, white, standard poodle, who prances excitedly across the tiled floor closely followed by Theo.

'So, this is Heidi,' he beams, clearly proud of this rather glamorous powder-puff of a dog. 'She is our baby, aren't you *meine Liebling*?'

'Oh, she's beautiful,' I respond encouragingly as Heidi nuzzles at my hand, her snowy-white pom-pom wobbling slightly. 'How old is she?' I ask, fondling her head, obviously much to her delight. She feels wonderfully silky.

'She is three years old and she is very special dog. She is winning prizes,' Theo says proudly. 'We are showing her, and very soon we have important show in Zurich and we hope that she is winning.'

Oh my, so this is no common or garden poodle; we've landed ourselves a show-dog.

'The show is two days after we are returning,' Theo continues, 'so our, how you say, dog hairdresser, is coming to the house before we are getting back. I hope that is not a problem for you?'

'No, of course not,' I reply. 'That's no problem at all. How often do you have to have her trimmed Theo?'

'She must have cut every four or five weeks, but she loves it. I think all you ladies are liking the beauty treatment,' he laughs, smiling in my direction, his eyes twinkling.

I'm quietly wondering how many Swiss francs that will cost.

'Christine, Elsbeth will need to show you how to brush Heidi. It is vey important that her coat does not become er, how do you say in English?'

'I think you mean matted Theo. Yes, I've been reading about it. Their coat is very soft isn't it? It must be a lot of work to keep her looking so beautiful.'

'Oh yes. We brush her every day and when she goes out she must wear her coat and her boots.'

I can see Rob's jaw drop and know we're both thinking the same thing. Boots? We've had lots of dogs wearing coats but not boots. This could be interesting.

'It's because of the snow,' calls Elsbeth from the kitchen. 'People tend to use anti-freeze and they also treat the roads. All of those things are very bad for dogs. If they come home and lick their feet they can get poisoned.'

'I'd never thought of that,' says Rob, 'but of course, it makes sense. Does she mind wearing them?'

'No, not at all,' replies Elsbeth. 'She began wearing them when she was just a puppy so she's used to them.'

'So, Robert,' says Theo, 'if you would please come with me I will show you where we keep her food and I can also show you some things in the garage and the garden that you will need to know. Oh, and I must also show you the heating system.'

Rob casts me a look of slight alarm as he dutifully follows Theo out towards the back of the house. I can't help smiling as it tends to be me who takes on all the technical information, Rob not really being the engineer in our household. I don't like to intervene but hope that he manages to take notes during the guided tour.

'And if you come with me Christine, I can show you how to groom our little lady,' smiles Elsbeth.

An hour later Rob is still under instruction in the garage and, having had my own tuition session, I find myself sitting in the lounge while Elsbeth prepares the coffee in the kitchen. The silence is made somehow more intense by the monotonous ticking of the cuckoo clock. However, at four o'clock precisely, the little wooden doors open and a brightly-painted cuckoo emerges with great exuberance and, with Swiss precision, Elsbeth appears with a tray, beautifully laid with four fine china cups. She carefully pours me a coffee, places it on a pretty crocheted mat on the table beside me, then seats herself on one of the armchairs causing the plastic to crackle. In an effort to make conversation I ask her where it is they're going while we look after Heidi.

'We're going to Germany,' she smiles. 'Theo and I are members of a folk dance group and every year we go on a small tour together.'

'Oh how wonderful, that sounds like fun,' I reply, trying to sound enthusiastic. Fortunately it's at that moment that I catch the sound of the men returning. I can't help but overhear Theo who seems to be informing Rob of something important.

'Yes, I know, but in 1972 the Swiss Federal Railway is introducing a timetable so that trains are arriving and leaving the station at the same minute past every hour and then, in 1977, the *Gesamtverkehrskommission* is making a new line and we are having the trains that can go at 200 kilometres fast. 200 kilometres Robert!'

Rob glances in my direction, eyes rolling and I have to control my urge to laugh. As he and Theo sit down to join us (Theo taking the remaining crackly armchair) Heidi reappears, trotting into the room and heads straight for Rob's pocket.

'Ha! She is already knowing that you are hiding biscuits,' laughs Theo.

'You'll need to watch her,' interrupts Elsbeth. 'She's a terrible thief, aren't you Heidi?'

Hearing her name called, Heidi turns, goes over to Elsbeth, and attempts to climb on her knee but is immediately pushed away.

'*Nein Heidi, komm her*!' commands Theo.

'Does she understand English or do I need to learn some German?' asks Rob.

'No worries, she's bilingual,' laughs Elsbeth, 'though she might try it on and pretend not to understand you.'

'And your English is perfect Elsbeth. Where did you learn to speak so beautifully?' I ask, unable to contain my curiosity.

'My mother was English but my father was Swiss so I grew up bilingual. I've always spoken English with Heidi but she barks in German,' she laughs, looking fondly at the dog. 'Now, if you will excuse us, we must go and finish our packing. Please make yourselves at home.'

It's later that night when we've managed to make our excuses and headed for bed that we have the chance to exchange our findings.

'So, apart from a history of the Swiss Railways, what else did

you find out?' I ask, curious to know the content of the garage discussions.

'Oh Chris, you're never going to believe it. It's going to take ages to explain everything. Talk about Swiss efficiency. That man is absolutely round the bend!'

'Why? What ever makes you say that?'

'Well, let's start with the rain gauge. The rain gauge, which hangs on the fence opposite the kitchen window, needs to be read at the end of each day and the reading recorded on the clipboard that hangs in the garage. It must then be emptied and replaced carefully. On Sunday the total rainfall for the week has to be entered into the logbook which is kept in the top drawer in the kitchen.'

'Well that all sounds fairly straightforward but why does he do it?'

'I have absolutely no idea.'

'Well at least it's not too taxing.'

'I haven't finished yet. Next is the electricity reading for the solar panels, both input and output. It's something to do with being paid for any energy that gets fed back into the national grid. The figures need to be recorded in the blue book which hangs next to the clipboard. Then, of course, we need to monitor the temperature on the fish-tank which should remain at a steady 25 to 27 degrees. Any huge deviation and the fish could die, oh and one of them's pregnant, so we need to keep an eye out in case the other fish eat the eggs. They need to have a sachet of frozen food which has to be defrosted and rinsed in a sieve before being put in the tank. Meanwhile Heidi needs to have a cupful of kibble morning and evening, once at 7am and the other at 7pm. When she goes out she has to wear her boots to protect her paws and her coat to keep her fur dry, especially with the show coming up. The orchids should be left alone but the other plants need watering once a week but there's a measure in the utility room for doing that.'

'Good grief. Have you finished or is there more?'

'Just the security system and the heating but I can show you that tomorrow.'

'Heavens, I'm exhausted just listening to it all. You've got your work cut out then Mr Baird!'

'What do you mean, *I've* got my work cut out? Those are shared responsibilities and you know I'm no good at technical things Chris. You'll have to help.'

'I'll think about it in the morning. *Gute Nacht mein Schatz.*'

After having waved goodbye to our hosts the following morning and given Heidi her breakfast we realise that we'd better get her out for her morning walk. It turns out that putting on our walking boots is a great deal easier than trying to put four boots on a poodle. Heidi clearly doesn't like the idea in spite of what we were told, and makes our task doubly awkward with her wild protest.

Having donned her coat and set the security system, we head off to the forest which borders the small estate. However, no sooner are we out of the door than we stand back in amazement as she trots along on her lead beside Rob looking more like a horse in a dressage competition. At each step she lifts her legs high off the ground as if she's walking on hot coals that are burning her paws.

'Good grief! Do you think we've put her boots on the wrong way?' puzzles Rob, watching as Heidi continues to prance along the road.

'I've no idea darling. It's quite bizarre. That's a good point though. Maybe we have.'

After a few adjustments we set off again but no, Heidi is still dancing along like a Lipizzaner, her head held high at a haughty angle.

'This is excruciatingly embarrassing Chris. Do you think

this is how she normally walks? I feel a right idiot. Here, you take her.'

'Why should I take her? You were the one who wanted to take the lead. Anyhow, I think I need to get this on video.'

'You dare! If it ends up on Twitter this could lead to divorce,' says Rob, scowling at me. 'I'm going to go round the block and then I'm taking her in.'

So while we sit over a welcome cup of coffee, poor Heidi is lying in her bed, chin on paws, looking pleadingly in my direction.

'Don't look at me like that, it was cruel Uncle Rob who brought you home,' I say, trying not to laugh. 'But seriously Rob, we have to take her for decent walks, she needs the exercise and after all, it's what we're here for.'

'Well you can take her out, or if I do it's going to be after nightfall. I felt like the laughing stock of the neighbourhood.'

'Maybe it's to do with being in the show ring? A lot of the dogs move in a rather exaggerated way.'

'Yes, and the owners,' replies Rob, 'but no way am I going to make an exhibition of myself.'

Rob proves to be really serious about refusing to walk poor Heidi so each day I set off, having kitted the pair of us out, for a good trot round the forest paths. It's beautiful to see the snow untouched by any footprints but quite hazardous in some areas where it's been compacted and turned into an icy skid-path. Heidi's boots prove more efficient than mine, especially when I attempt my best Crufts show-walk, with Heidi's lead held high and her running with extended legs. We get some bemused looks from other walkers, especially those with common or garden dogs, but she's actually quite beautiful in action.

Every day, on returning to the house, I set about grooming her, trying to recall the tutorial that Elsbeth gave me. I lay out the various brushes and combs and painstakingly tease out any small knots in her coat before brushing her, trying hard not to

scratch her skin. She's very laid back about the whole business and extremely cooperative but as her coat is getting quite long it's no easy job. Her long, bare muzzle gives way to a huge, furry pom-pom which has to be held back in two rubber bands and the huge ruff around her neck proves quite a challenge. I'm nervous of hurting her but she doesn't seem to be overly bothered.

It's one morning, having returned to the house and started to brush her, that Rob comes wandering in to observe.

'Good grief. What a palaver. Fancy having to go through this ritual every day.'

'Well apparently the fur can get matted very easily so it has to be done. It'll make the groomer's job easier when she comes.'

'But why do they have to have such ridiculous hair-dos?'

'According to Elsbeth they were once used for hunting and if they went into water their coat became very heavy, so a lot of it was cut back, but in order to keep their essential bits warm, they let the fur in those areas grow.'

'My, you have been doing your homework. That's actually very interesting and explains a lot. But it's this over-the-top pampering that I can't cope with. Some of them really do look ridiculous.'

'To change the subject darling, have you remembered to do your readings today? There was quite a lot of rain last night.'

'That's a point, I'd better go and do my duties. Still no sign of the fish eggs by the way, but I've checked the temperature and it's fine.'

It's only when he turns round that I notice that Rob is wearing a pair of jeans that I don't recognise.

'Are those new?' I ask, waiting for the creative explanation as to why my beloved needed to buy yet more clothes.

'Yes, reduced in the M&S sale, what do you think?' he replies, giving me a twirl.

'Very nice, but for heaven's sake, don't go sitting on the white

settee until they've been through the wash. New denim's terrible for marking things. In fact if you pop them off now and leave them on the floor in the utility room I'll give them a quick wash this evening.'

As darkness falls, just as I'm about to put my kit on to take Heidi out, a hesitant voice calls through from the kitchen.

'I'll take her Chris,' offers my husband gallantly. 'It's about time I did my share and at least no-one will see us.'

'Oh thank you. I'd really appreciate it and then I can get on with dinner. You only need to go round the block. But don't stay out long, it's bitterly cold and it's supposed to snow again this evening.'

It's about twenty minutes later when Rob returns with a dusting of snow on his hat.

'Gosh, it's cold out there! I didn't think we should stay outside any longer. Anyhow, she's had a good walk, or should I say prance? Those boots are actually quite effective. She manages to walk quite briskly doesn't she?'

'Yes, they do seem to help,' I reply. 'If you give me her coat I'll hang it up in the utility room to dry.'

'Oh crikey. I'm sorry Chris. I didn't put it on her. It was such a palaver getting her boots on that I totally forgot about it.'

'Well I hope her fur hasn't got too wet. I'd better go and get her dried or her coat'll get matted and you'll have undone all my hard work. Anyhow, where is she?'

'I left her in the utility room so that she could dry off a bit. I didn't think you'd want her in here.'

'Too right I don't! I'd better go and see what she's up to.'

Surprisingly Heidi isn't up to anything, but has already made herself comfy on the floor as the underfloor heating makes the tiles nice and warm.

'Here Heidi, let's get you dry,' I say encouragingly.

She dutifully gets up but, on beginning to pat her dry with a towel, I notice to my alarm that one side of her has turned a

delicate shade of blue. I realise immediately what's happened. Our precious show-dog, who is due in the ring in five days, has been dyed a fetching shade of denim blue.

'Rob!' I scream. 'Rob! I need you.'

'Are you alright darling?' he asks, rushing through from the kitchen.

'Well I am but Heidi isn't. Look!'

'Oh crikey! How on earth has that happened?'

'Well it's pretty obvious, isn't it? She came in wet and has lain down on your new jeans. How we're going to deal with this I don't know.'

'Can't we give her a bath?'

'No, of course we can't. That'll only make the colour transfer to the rest of her coat.'

'How's about a trim then?'

'Rob, grooming poodles is a highly skilled job. It's not something we can do. She's a big enough mess without us attacking her with a pair of shears.'

'Well the doggy hairdresser comes tomorrow, hopefully she can do something.'

'We've just got to hope it hasn't got to her undercoat or we really are in trouble. I'll give her a gentle blow-dry and then she'll to have to stay in here for the night, and for heaven's sake don't let her near the white settee.'

It's the following afternoon when the *Hundecoiffeurei* van turns into the drive and a stunningly beautiful blonde, probably in her late twenties, climbs down from the driver's cab, her skinny jeans and tight sweater leaving little to the imagination. When the doorbell rings Rob hurries eagerly to the door to welcome her while I go to get Heidi. As I lead our charge out to the garden I can't help but recognise the broad smile and besotted expression on Rob's face.

'*Guten Morgen*. Well here she is,' I say as I hand Heidi over to

the young woman. 'I'm afraid we had an accident. I do hope you can help,' I add, pointing to the large blue patch on Heidi's side.

'*Oh mein Gott. Sie ist ganz blau geworden!*' she laughs, covering her face with her hands in horror. 'Yes, I think it will be okay because here I am cutting the hair to her skin,' she replies, running her hand along Heidi's back.

'Oh, what a relief!' says Rob. 'And I'm sorry, I didn't ask your name.'

'I'm Heidi,' she announces, blushing. 'You have two of us!'

'And both of you very pretty,' says Rob, his eyes twinkling.

'Well, if you are liking to leave her with me, I will start. She must be very beautiful because of the show,' says Heidi, sounding business-like.

'How long will it take?' I ask.

'About one hour and a half,' she replies. 'I will call when she is finished.'

And so Rob and I return to the house to while away the time.

'I've been meaning to tell you Rob, I came across some interesting facts on the internet about Switzerland. Some of them are unbelievable.'

'Such as?' asks Rob.

'Well, you're not allowed to mow the lawn, hang out your washing or do the recycling on a Sunday.'

'Nothing wrong with that, it sounds eminently sensible to me.'

'And if you live in an apartment you shouldn't flush the loo after ten o'clock at night and you fellas are supposed to pee sitting down.'

'Good grief, that's going a bit far isn't it?'

'And this is the best one, it's against the law to keep a guinea pig, a parrot, a budgie or a goldfish on its own.'

'Against the law? You mean you can be fined or go to prison for having one guinea pig? What if you have two and one snuffs it?'

'Well I guess you go and find it a friend sharpish. But here, let me read you this, I say, reaching for my iPad. "Dog-owners have to go on a course that teaches them how to look after their dog, care for its needs and deal with a range of behavioural issues." I reckon that's a brilliant bit of legislation. It's a pity more countries don't adopt the ruling.'

At that moment the cuckoo emerges from the depths of the clock and makes us jump.

'It's a pity they haven't insisted that all cuckoo clocks should be silenced after nine o'clock at night,' moans Rob. 'That damned thing wakes me up every evening, just after I've managed to get off to sleep. Actually, looking at the time, I think I'll just go and see how Heidi's getting on.'

'And which of the two Heidis are you referring to I wonder?'

'The one with the blue eyes,' he replies provocatively and goes to investigate.

It's some twenty minutes later that I think I'd better go and check on progress. I climb up the steps of the van and open the door to be greeted by something akin to an alien. Heidi (the canine form) has been transformed into a series of large, white clouds and the bits in between shorn back to her skin. She looks like a piece of doggy topiary. Even I'm shocked by the metamorphosis. Rob is looking aghast at the apparition before him.

'Well, what do you think of our lady?' asks Heidi. 'Is she not beautiful?'

'She certainly is,' I reply, still looking in awe at the strange creature that has emerged from the grooming session and wondering how on earth we're going to keep her in such pristine condition before Theo and Elsbeth return the following afternoon.

We sit watching the cuckoo-clock, awaiting their arrival.

'Now are all the record books up to date?' I ask Rob, suddenly

panicking that we might have neglected some of our duties.

'Yes, I've entered all the figures so everything's in order but still no sign of the fish laying any eggs. She still looks a bit bloated so either she's still pregnant or she's eaten them,' he replies.

Having been too afraid to get Heidi dirty or dishevelled after her time with Heidi number two (which, I discovered cost a mere €115) we confine her to the house and garden so that, when her doting owners return, they're delighted with her appearance. As they arrive at the gate Heidi's tail, which now looks somewhat like an exotic bottle-brush, is wagging furiously and she leaps up excitedly to greet Theo as he walks up the path.

'Oh, my lovely, you are looking so beautiful,' he says, giving her a huge hug. 'Rob and Christine have made a wonderful job of looking after you.'

'Really, we can't thank you enough,' says Elsbeth, almost tearful with gratitude. 'She looks so glamorous. She's in tip-top condition. Let's hope we do well at the show.'

'You must let us know how she gets on,' I reply. 'We'll be keeping everything crossed for her.'

Two days later, having left the majesty of Switzerland behind and finding ourselves at Gatwick Airport awaiting our return flight to the island, I'm a little anxious when my phone shows that I have a message from Elsbeth. However, my anxiety quickly disappears when I see that it's a photo of a rather splendid-looking Heidi next to a red rosette and a large silver trophy. I can't help but well up with pride, especially when I see the look of absolute joy on Elsbeth and Theo's faces.

'Oh quick Rob, come and see! It's a photo of Heidi!'

My man drops his newspaper immediately and is soon peering over my shoulder to get a good look at the picture.

'Look! She won! She came first in class. Isn't that wonderful? They must be thrilled.'

'For a moment I thought you meant the glamorous one,' replies Rob with a hint of disappointment.

'This is the glamorous one Mr Baird. "Let's enjoy the beautiful things we can see, my dear, and not think about those we cannot."'

'Crikey, that's a bit poetic. Did you just make that up?'

'No, it's actually a quote from one of my favourite childhood books.'

'Oh, and which one was that?'

'Heidi,' I reply, heading off to the duty-free shop.