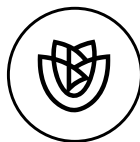




Chiara Carminati

**Un pinguino  
a Trieste**



BOMPIANI



CHIARA CARMINATI  
A PENGUIN IN TRIESTE

translated from the Italian  
by Alice Kilgariff

**SAMPLE COPY**

BOMPIANI

If I were born a girl, I wouldn't have had to go out on the ships. There aren't any girls in the crew. There are generally very few women on board, just a few maids. They say that having women on board brings bad luck, but I don't know if this is the reason. My grandfather would take us fishing on his boat when I lived in Lussino, and he said that my cousin Anita was much better at it than me. He was right. She always seemed so at ease on board, whereas I was often struggling, not least because I suffered from sea sickness. Once, I nearly managed to capsize the boat, and if it weren't for my cousin taking the line from me in order to let out the sail, we would have all ended up in the water, along with the snappers we had caught.

And, thinking about it, it was thanks to a woman that Piero Piccini's boat didn't explode when we left Lussino. So, I'm not sure whether having women on

board bring others bad luck, but it doesn't for me. This sea sickness business isn't easy to hide. I'm unbeatable in the water when it comes to swimming, but when I climb aboard a boat, I soon feel like I have a live eel in my stomach. I've never told anyone. In fact, when I had the medical examination for my embarkation papers, I lied without hesitation. I needed to get on that ship, I needed to leave.

"Any phobias? Allergies? Naupathy?", the official tasked with carrying out the medical examination asked me. I shook my head.

"Naupathy...sea sickness?", he asked again.

He thought it was strange I would know the meaning of that word, but I knew it well. I had read it in a newspaper, in the advert of a medicine to combat it. And I had put it on like a tailor-made shirt, giving a name to the eel that was writhing around in my stomach.

"No, sir. No sea sickness," I answered with absolute calm.

"Good. How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

He checked my documents.

"Nicolò D'Este," he read. "Are you from Trieste?"

"I'm from Lussino, sir. But I live in Trieste."

He sat back in his chair.

“Lussino!” He smiled with a satisfied air.

“Very good. The land of seafarers.”

My grandfather was a fisherman, my father worked on a steamship, and my cousin Anita felt at home on anything that could float. Land of seafarers. I would have been better off keeping my feet on dry land rather than stepping onto a boat. Not to mention a ship. And yet, that is how it went. It was early March in 1953 and I soon found myself with a place on the Europa motor vessel, eleven thousand tonnes, a speed of twenty knots, thanks to Lloyd Triestino. Destination: South Africa.

There is a place on the shore where I always go when I need to be alone. It is a small jetty next to the building that contains the Fishery and the Marine Aquarium, nothing like the long straight arm of the Molo Audace. Here, the fishermen lay out their nets to dry, the beacon obscures the view and the sea doesn't occupy the entire horizon. I sat down on the edge and brushed my feet against the water. The mussels attached to the jetty shone with every wave, new each time. I rested the photo of my father on the ground alongside the other papers it was tied up with: a newspaper cutting and a

telegram. I had taken them without saying anything to uncle Franco, because somewhere deep inside I sensed that my uncle hadn't told me the whole story. Every time I had asked him to show me the photos of my father, he had found an excuse. He had never made any attempt to find that box. There had to have been a reason, and perhaps deep in my heart, I had always known what it was.

I quickly looked over the article, then I picked up the telegram. I knew what it contained. And I knew that if uncle Franco had never read it to me it was because he wanted me to remain a child for as long as possible. He wanted me to believe in the tooth fairy, in Saint Nicholas bringing the presents, in the *Befana*, in shooting stars, that my father was alive somewhere in Africa. I looked towards the open sea. The waves shivered. I opened the telegram. Just a few words, simple and decisive. That paper message communicated that "Alfredo D'Este is lost at sea, presumed drowned, following the sinking of the steamship, the Nova Scotia".

I breathed deeply. A small crab had climbed onto the jetty, taken a few crooked steps in the sun, and then huddled into a saltwater puddle and raised his pincers towards me. Fine, I give up, I wanted to say. I give up.

The telegram was dated January 1943. The paper was so light that if there had been even the slightest

breeze, it would have been snatched from my hands and plunged into the water, where it would have melted, dissolved, as if it had never existed. But there was no wind that day in Trieste, not even a whisper to help me. There was only the heat, the jetty, a small crab with its pincers up. And a fifteen-year-old bundle of bones, wearing clothes that were too big, staring at the sea. “Are you playing with prayer cards?” I jumped. She had caught me unawares. She sat down next to me and took the photo from my hands.

“What a lovely photo!” said Irma. “When did you have it taken?”

She turned it over and only then read what was written on the back.

“Oh” is all she said, then she fell silent. Her lipstick seemed to fade. I handed her the telegram. Irma read that too and then embraced me. I think it was the first time she had ever embraced me, and I let myself sink without resistance into the soft fabric of her blouse and her perfume of lavender and powdered sugar.

“Where did you get them?” she asked.

“They were in a box that had fallen behind the wardrobe in the back room. There was this article too. It’s from the *Piccolo* newspaper, December 5<sup>th</sup> 1942. It says that the *Nova Scotia* was a British ship transporting troops, and that a few days earlier it had

been sunk by a German submarine, losing a thousand men to the sea, including crew and soldiers who were going on leave.”

“But your father wasn’t a soldier on leave. The British were our enemies during the war. What was he doing on that ship?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t know, not that it changed anything. In any case, the little pieces of my mosaic fitted together to form an image that left no room for doubt: ten years earlier, my father had died at sea, and for ten years he had lived only in my imagination.

At that moment, a metal door in the dark depths of the enormous room, between a pile of boards and a work table. A wardrobe door came in, held by two hands.

“Giovanni! Here’s the kid looking for an Alfredo D’Este. Have you ever heard of him?”

A man’s head appeared from behind the wardrobe door. He rested the door on the wall and stepped out of the shadows.

“Who?”

“Alfredo D’Este,” said the man with the beard.



“Alfredo D’Este,” I murmured. “Father.”

My voice was trembling, my legs were trembling, my bones were trembling as if they were about to fall out of their joints. I had done it, I had done it, I had done it. I had found him. Father.

“Nope, never heard of him,” he said, distractedly.

Never heard of him?

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The man with the beard had started hammering again. My heart, however, had not. I had the sensation that it had decided to give him beating altogether. That it was about to perhaps slide out between my ribs, reduced to mush.

Never heard of him?

He turned around, he took the wardrobe door into his arms, walked right past me with the most relaxed air in the world, and went to lean the door against the opposite wall. I placed my hand in my haversack. And slowly, like someone taking out a pistol that they know will transform them into a murderer, I pulled out the wooden penguin. I held it out before me as if it were burning my fingers. He turned around, he saw it, and he stopped in his tracks. I had also heard it said that if you are looking for a needle in a haystack, you’ll need a magnet. Well, I had found my magnet. I don’t know how long he stood there staring at the penguin.

To me, it felt like forever, but perhaps it was no more than a few seconds. Enough time to suggest to the man with the beard that in all that silence, something was happening.

“Is everything ok?” he asked him. He nodded, his face pale. Then he said:

“I’m going to get some air, Bruno. I’ll see you in a while.”

Only then did he decide to lift his gaze from the penguin to look at me.

Looking me right in the eye, he moved closer and said:

“Let’s go outside.”

I followed him. We turned the corner and he leaned against the wall. He asked:

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” His forehead was beaded with sweat.

“I’m Nicolò. Your son, Nicolò,” I said, articulating my words carefully. At this point, I was beginning to stop believing it myself. Despite the fact we looked so very alike, it seemed his name was not Alfredo and that he had no idea what his son’s name was, nor that he had one. I felt a wave of anger mounting deep inside. A storm in which I was the only lightening rod. The pain, the hope, the sadness, the lack, the abandonment, the hope, the disappointment...it was all concentrating

into a violent force that was running through my body like an electric shock.

“I’m your son!”, I repeated. “And I’ve been your son for fifteen years! What about you? Where have you been all this time? I’ve been waiting for you my whole life. First alive, then dead. Then alive again. Where were you? What are you doing here, on the other side of the world? And why? Why? Why, why, why?”

I wanted to beat him. I held my fists so tight that my nails were digging into the flesh. But I wasn’t able to stop the fury that was growing inside me, so I started to hit the wall, once, twice, three times. I hit and I cried. I didn’t understand, I hit and I cried. He didn’t react. He waited for me to get it out of my system, as if the matter didn’t concern him or there was nothing he could do to stop it. When I’d finished ripping the skin off my fists with the wall, I sank to the floor, and he finally spoke.

“Who am I?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I asked you, who am I? Are you my son? So, what about me? Who am I?”

He wasn’t messing about. His question was filled with angst. I was so shocked that I felt myself go limp, like a flag without wind.

“You...you are my father,” I answered through my teeth.

He took me by the shoulders and pulled me to my feet, right in front of him.

“What’s my name?” he asked.

“Alfredo D’Este.”

“Alfredo?”

I nodded. He closed his eyes.

“I remember nothing. Nothing before that damn day,” he whispered. “And where am I from? Where are you from?”

“From Lussino. From Trieste.”

“Trieste,”

He shook his head, like you do with a box to check whether there is anything inside. Then, he reopened his eyes and took a closer look at me. In fact, it was perhaps then that he looked at me for the first time.

“My God,” he whispered. In that moment I think he saw it. He saw that we were identical.

“I have a son! For all this time...If you’re my son, then...But I don’t know anything about you, I don’t know anything about me. It’s been wiped out, all of it, wiped clean”

“What are you doing here? Why are you using another name? Were you really aboard the Nova Scotia? Who are you really? Why didn’t you come home?”

# Chiara Carminati A Penguin In Trieste

UN PINGUINO A TRIESTE

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*A boy looking for his father gone missing during the war. A small South African penguin. The story that links them.*

Nicolò is a boy in the 1950s when he leaves Istria and his grandfather to go to Trieste and live with his uncle. There he will be able to attend an Italian school, find a job and try to gather some news about his father, a missing sailor, who never came back from Africa after the war. When he discovers his father might be alive he finds a job on a cruise ship in order to get to South Africa and look for him.

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**CHIARA CARMINATI** was born and lives in Udine. She is one of Italian most important and prolific children's book authors. She was awarded the Premio Andersen-Il mondo dell'infanzia as best author in 2012. For Bompiani she published *Fuori fuoco* and *Viaggia Verso*.

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