

# AUNTIE DODO, THE DINOSAUR AND THE DRAGON TEAPOT

## BY FRANCESCA AMENDOLIA

### CHAPTER ONE

I was eating an apple as angrily as I could. It's not easy, but it's not as hard as, say, eating a banana angrily. Bananas are too soft and basically silly-looking. You can't put a whole lot of feeling into biting a banana. For one, the bite is over before you start, and your teeth smash together. Then your mouth is full of banana, and it's almost impossible to be mad with a mouth full of banana. Bananas are for eating sadly. Sadness is like a banana. Slow and sticky and it clogs up your mouth so full and strange you can't talk. I wasn't sad. I was angry.

I bet a raw carrot would be a really good anger-eating food. They're kinda stabby already and you could wave them around between bites. Like a dagger. But I don't really like carrots. At least apples crunch. You can pretend you're biting into someone's head, though maybe not since that's disgusting. Although I bet the inside of someone's head is more like banana. So you'd bite the skull, all angry and egg-shelly and crunchy, but by the time you got to the brains, you'd have to be sad, and who eats brains when they're sad?

I took a really huge, cracking bite of apple, and chewed it with my mouth open, so that the crunching would be even louder. It spritzed too. Good. We weren't allowed to eat in the living room, but Mom wasn't saying anything. Like somehow that would make me forgive her.

"Why do we have to have all her stuff?" I watched Mom unwrap yet another

china figurine, this one in a yellow dress and a lace hat. “It’s not like she’s coming to live here.” I swallowed my mouthful of apple, which was no longer loud, and touched the china lace. It was cold and sharp. I didn’t like thinking about the chalky scraping feeling you’d get if you bit into a china hat, but that was what I was thinking about. It made my brain ache like it had a cavity, but at least it meant I wasn’t thinking about Auntie Dodo. Or my china-hearted mother.

“I told you. We don’t have the space, Di.” Mom reached up and gently set the little figure on the shelf next to half a dozen others. If I flicked it with a finger, they’d all go down like shattering china dominoes. They smiled at me like they knew I wouldn’t. It made my finger twitch.

“And I told you,” I said, glaring at the back of my mother’s head, “that she could share my room.”

“Dinosaur--”

“Don’t call me that. That’s Auntie Dodo’s name for me. Not yours.”

“All right.” Mom let out a long breath and repeated the same lie she told me every five minutes. “Auntie Dodo is much better off where there are people who can look after her properly.” She raked her hands through the layers of old tissue paper and crumbling packing peanuts to see if she’d missed anything. The crumpled paper rustled like the day after Christmas. Then she pushed the box away, and reached for the next.

“Auntie Dodo is not better off. She broke her leg, not her head, and she doesn’t want to be in some old-age home eating pudding. You’re just wrong. Wrong and stupid.” I sucked my lips back into my mouth. I almost wished I hadn’t said stupid.

“Diana,” Mom paused, waiting, I guess, for me to say sorry. I took a bite of apple

instead, because I wasn't. Sorry I mean. Not even a little.

Auntie Dodo lived – *used* to live, I growled at myself – in a crammed little house in Connecticut with roses growing all around the front door, pink curtains and a woodpile with snakes hiding in it. You could eat blackberries in the back yard and then wander around to the front to hunt for wild strawberries. Inside there were books everywhere. A few sat politely on the shelves next to the china shepherdesses and puzzle boxes, but mostly they were stacked up like blocks into tall wobbling towers. Auntie Dodo's cupboards and dressers didn't just have mugs, piles of spoons and old blankets. They had treasure. Like weird coins, huge keys and broken jewelry. Once I'd found a tiny bird skull, light and fragile, and a massive dog collar with a tag that read "Penny," which was my grandmother's name.

I asked Auntie Dodo if the dog had been named after my grandmother, or my grandmother had been named after the dog and she just looked at me. "Were you named after me," she asked, "or was I named after you?"

"I was named after you of course," I said. "I'm only eleven and you're..." I hesitated because I didn't know how old Auntie Dodo was. I looked closely at her face, and for a second, she looked about five years old. Then I blinked, and she looked older than the oldest thing that ever was. Older than mountains. Older than sand. I blinked again and she looked like herself. Sort of old. Sort of not. Then, like it always happened if I stared at Auntie Dodo too long, she started to shimmer and flicker, as if she wasn't there at all. She said it was my eyes trying to tell me what to believe and that I shouldn't listen. I looked away. "Well, you're older than me, anyway."

Auntie Dodo nodded. "You're probably right. But time is a very strange,

uncooperative thing. Like a circle. You never know which end is which.”

“Circles don’t have ends,” I said, but not loudly, because my head was beginning to spin like it had fallen off and was bouncing down a rocky hill. If circles don’t have ends, they don’t have beginnings and so how can there be circles at all? Auntie Dodo handed me a strawberry. It tasted like things about to begin.

That was the way it always was around Auntie Dodo. And still my mother had sent her away. How stupid can you get.

Mom said I just didn’t understand, which was fine with me, because I didn’t want to understand. I was supposed to be spending the whole summer with Auntie Dodo, all by myself, just like Mom had done when she was a kid. After her mother had died. Penny, the dog-collar grandmother. That one. She died when my mother was little, like five or six, so even my mother hardly remembered her and I sure didn’t. It was fine not to feel sad about her being dead because when you don’t remember a person, it’s like they weren’t ever really real, and you can’t miss something that never existed. And since only things that exist can die, then they’re not dead and you don’t have to cry about them, even to be polite.

After I found the collar, that was how I always thought of her. Penny, the dog-collar grandmother. I never thought of Penny as just “grandmother,” although I guess she was. Technically. Biologically. My mother showed me pictures of her once or twice. She was thin and pale and had short hair and glasses. She looked like the sort of person who whispered all the time, and who never ate marshmallows because there’s no way to eat a marshmallow so you don’t get sugar powder on your face and fingers. That face had never been sugar powder-sticky.

My real grandmother was Auntie Dodo. It didn't matter that she wasn't even related to us. She had been Penny's (the dog-collar grandmother's) best friend, and after Penny died, she was just there. Ready. Like a substitute teacher I guess, only for mothers. And nicer. My mom had lived with her dad all school year and with Auntie Dodo every summer. For years. Years of strawberries and stacks of books and treasures at the back of the cupboard. And I wasn't even going to get one summer of my own. Not even one.

Because Auntie Dodo somehow broke her leg and no one had known about it for days, not until my mom finally got worried enough to drive all the way to Connecticut. She found Auntie Dodo lying on the kitchen floor, her leg broken in three places. She had called an ambulance and then started calling nursing homes before she even heard the sirens. "She couldn't even tell me how it happened, Di. She could have starved to death, lying there. And it would have been my fault. Please understand. It's better if she's someplace they can look after her." I didn't believe her the first time she said it, and I believed her even less now.

I took another bite of apple skull and crunched it at Mom as loudly as I could.

She cleared her throat a bit. "Auntie Dodo said that you could have something, something to keep." Mom looked at me over her shoulder and smiled hopefully.

"No thanks." I didn't even glance at her. Instead I examined the shelf crowded with Auntie Dodo's stuff. China figurines, carved wooden boxes and old photographs in dirty frames. Tiny colored perfume bottles with gold edges and tea cups so thin the afternoon sunlight shone through them. They looked wrong, all shoved up together like that. They looked jumbled and lost and miserable.

"Oh, look." Mom's voice was hushed and low. I looked down to see her pulling

away layers of paper to reveal an enormous black teapot in the shape of a dragon.

The dragon's body, fat and round and scaly, was the big bit of the teapot. Its neck was the spout, and tea would pour out of the open, roaring mouth. Its long, spindly tail flipped up over its back and that was the handle. The dragon glared at me fiercely, its neck strong and proud, as if it knew I was admiring it. I thought I knew everything, every last little tiny microscopic thing in Auntie Dodo's house, but I had never seen this before. How had I missed it?

"I remember this." Mom laughed softly. "It sat on that high shelf in the kitchen, way too far up for me to reach, even with the stepladder. I used to beg and beg Auntie Dodo to use this teapot, but she always used the old green one. Every single time. I never understood why."

Mom knew this teapot. And of course Auntie Dodo knew it. But not me. I felt like I had been locked out of the house on a winter night, hands too frozen to even knock.

"This used to be in Auntie Dodo's kitchen?" Mom nodded. "On that shelf where she kept the copper molds. You had to back up to see it." "I know the copper molds." There was a fish, a pineapple, a lobster and a rooster.

I knew them as well as I knew every inch of Auntie Dodo's house. "I never saw this teapot before now."

Mom looked thoughtful. "Maybe Auntie Dodo put it away. She never used it, after all. Maybe it was just taking up space."

"Huh. If I had a teapot like this, I'd use it every day."

"Me too," Mom grinned at me. I almost smiled back before I remembered what she had done to Auntie Dodo. And to me.

After a moment, Mom held out the teapot, still nestled in its wrappings like it was squatting on a cloud. “Auntie Dodo said you should choose something. Would you like this?”

I did want it. At the base of the teapot, the dragon’s claws were surrounded by ripples of what? Water? Flames? I leaned forward to see and felt almost dizzy, like I did at the top of a ladder or a tree. I felt like I was about to fall and never stop falling.

I stuck my apple in my mouth, wiped my fingers on my shorts and took it.

It felt warmer and heavier than I expected. I turned it over in my hands, carefully, gently, feeling the carvings like a code under my fingers. It was solid, but somehow soft as well. The pottery felt as smooth and slippery as butter. I half expected it to melt in my hands.

“Auntie Dodo would like to know you had something of hers.” Mom’s voice was soft and I knew I should say thank you and take it, and that everything would be all right between me and Mom again and I wanted to. I wanted to so badly it was like too much lemonade in my throat.

I shoved the teapot back at her and Mom only just caught it.

“No. What Auntie Dodo would like is to be at home. And what I would like is to be packing my stuff, not unpacking hers.”

I turned and walked away.