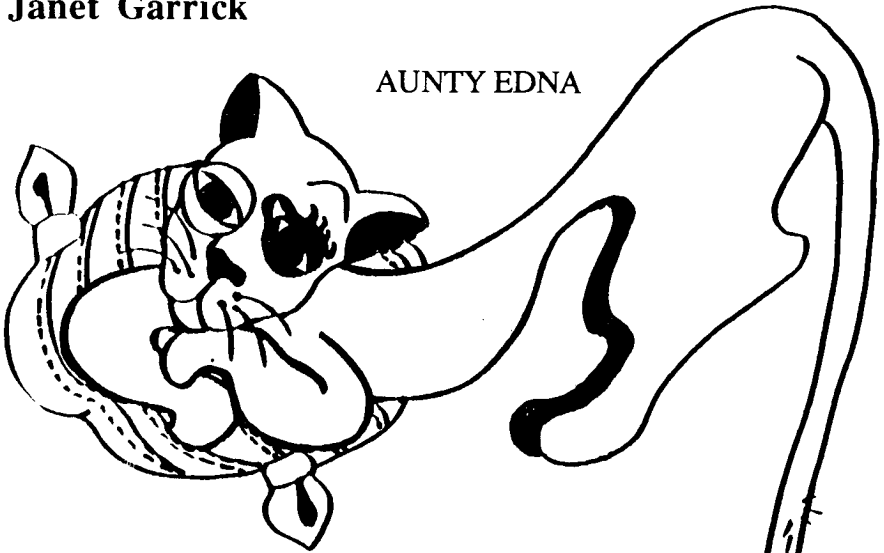


# Janet Garrick

## AUNTY EDNA



Aunty Edna, the one who has a bent nose and protruding teeth, sits, as usual, in the old, worn-down armchair that wobbles whenever the occupier moves and digs its broken springs into unassuming bottoms. As it offers its discomfort as often to the half-Persian cat as to Aunty Edna, and as it is at present moulting season, its crimson velvet is coated with long, black hairs that will stick fast to her nylon dress and later probably take quite some brushing to remove.

But Aunty Edna should, after all, be happy to have a chair, wobbly or otherwise, hairy or not. For who, when it comes down to it, has paid for the roof firmly fixed above the chair that so efficiently shields her from the January heat or the misery of the grey clouds in July? Whenever has she contributed to those solid red tiles that block the too-brilliant light of the stars on the clearest nights?

Father, of course, would, at any given moment, be ready to provide the answer to those two questions, even without their being asked. But his wife's gentle remonstrations — "She is your sister, dear,"



“One must show compassion to those less fortunate than oneself” — always puts the reins on his impulsiveness.

Therefore, he says nothing. Therefore, his dry mouth remains closed. But every slow, Sunday afternoon Father can be seen, shoulders hunched under his old, grey jumper, prowling around the back yard. His face contorts wildly between saintliness and murderousness. His hands are thrust deep in his pockets. What greater proof, indeed, could he give of their emptiness?

Since Aunt Edna came to stay and, in keeping with the legend, never left again, a rather intriguing phenomenon has occurred: Father — asthmatic, pet-hating Father — has taken a particular liking to the cat. At least at certain moments. Or, to be more precise, in certain places. And only in certain places. For, to tell the truth, you couldn't say he ever pays it a great deal of attention in the garden. Nor in the kitchen. And he definitely doesn't coax and coddle it whenever it wanders into the main bedroom — that forbidden realm of deep, purple carpet, crimson curtain and intricate, gold-threaded quilt.

On the contrary. When our half-Persian cat, yielding to a temptation far too great for its feline soul, saunters — *comme par hasard* — into the bedroom and over towards its favourite claw-sharpener, Father indulges in a highly impressive display of paternal authority: waving his fearsome sleeve high above his balding head, he brings a rolled-up magazine down with an emphatic thud beside the bushy tail.

And with considerable results. For it has to be admitted that after so many months of practice, Father has become something of a good shot. Not, of course, that he is so gross as to bang his cylindrical weapon directly *upon* the tail — that would look too much like petty, spiteful anger instead of sober, rational justice. Rather, and it is in this that his skill must be admired, he aims his scroll just close enough to brush against the nerve tips of the cat hairs.

Then he sits back, stern, impartial arbitrator, and watches as our poor, half-Persian cat squeals, jumps in the air and makes a desperate flight back into the hallway, more often than not into a pair of consoling arms.

But in the lounge room — in the lounge room things take on a different colour. And a most surprising one. For who would have guessed that this homely and sunny rectangle that fits so neatly into the corner of our L-shaped house could be endowed with a mysterious power?

Who would have divined, searching amidst a lame bookcase, gay, floral curtains that slowly fade in the summer light, a vinyl couch, an

oversized television and Auntie Edna's rickety armchair. Who would have touched upon the thought of magic?

And yet the facts are there: when Father is in the lounge room, Auntie Edna squeezed into her appropriated chair, her nephews and nieces no less tightly squeezed together on the couch, he is invariably overcome with a sweet, a tender affection for the half-Persian cat.

And no matter how disgruntled his mood is, no matter how great the particular trespass is that one of us will inevitably have committed during the course of the evening. Did someone guess straight away the latest riddle he came home with? Did Mother double-salt the string beans? Did that stupid-fish-faced-over-fed-mutt from across the road get in the front gate again and shit on the front lawn?

All is forgotten the precious moment when the cat strolls into the lounge room, places its rubbery paws one after the other in a line that leads towards its chair of adoption, and finds Auntie Edna's considerable bulk filling all the available space.

It is at this point that Father turns a pair of watery, brown eyes over towards the cat — eyes softened, rounded by the compassion brimming from their orbs. And that the cat, never one to hold a grudge and always happy to get some sympathy anyway, gives a soft, a poignant plaint of dismay.

"Haa" cries Father, as if it were too much for him. "Wha's - a - matter, Puss? Haven't ya got anywhere to sit?"

"Myou!" repeats Puss as pathetically as possible. "Myou! No I haven't because Auntie Edna's in my chair."

There is a squeaking of broken springs and the muffled "clop" of a wooden chair leg on the carpet.

Auntie Edna sucks hard on a fruity-flavoured bonbon, of which she has an apparently unending supply.

"Nowhere to sit your furry old bot?" Father stretches out his sunburned, callused hand and runs it gently over the tiny head. The cat responds affectionately to the caress.

"Ah, times are hard, pussikins." He picks up the soft, elastic body and drops it playfully in his lap. "And things don't always go the way we'd like them to."

"Dad!" the youngest and boldest son usually moans. "We can't hear the T.V."

"Alright, alright," yields Father, who-can-never-win and whom-everyone-is-always-against. He flops back in his corner, his attention

entirely given over to the creature who has just become his best, his only friend.

Aunty Edna's endless, and timeless, virtues need hardly be mentioned. Be it morning or evening, summer or winter, Aunty Edna's talcy, cracked skin smells nice — sickly, but nice. Her sparse hair is always well combed. And she is kind and sweet. Invariably in a good mood, she is never irritated, never raises her voice, even with Baby, who delights in tormenting her. Even with Puss, who devastates her stockings. Even with Father, whose cracks about the formation of her nose constitute the most successful part of his humour.

And Aunty Edna is just wonderful-with-us-kids. She reads to us, she plays Junior scrabble or checkers with us and always pretends to lose without trying. Her pockets are always full of rainbow-coloured "sweeties" that she distributes generously at any time of the day. And the lolly is always accompanied with a nice compliment.

"Here's for your pretty rose-bud mouth," she says to Robby, who screws up his ten year old boxer-to-be face in disgust, but takes the lolly anyway.

"This is for the sweetest of all cheeky-faced three-year-olds," she says to Baby, although our littlest one has just wiped chocolaty hands all over her skirt.

But Aunty Edna doesn't mind, because Aunty Edna is the most easy-going person alive. Not only will she inevitably say "yes" to our slightest requests, but she lets us change channels right when she's in the middle of a movie. Or rather, for precision's sake once again, it'd be better to say she doesn't complain when we run in and switch programmes without asking.

For nobody ever bothers to *ask* Aunty Edna what she would prefer — what game, what book, what channel, what cake at morning or afternoon tea. So sure we are of meeting with her smiling approbation, her easy compliance. And, after all, Aunty Edna does have her chair. That, nobody ever disputes her.

"A tiny slice of trifle, Edna? With a bit of cream to help it go down?"

A wobbly lump of custard and jelly props messily into a tupperware bowl. The mixture looks like colourful glue.

*For a lousy cook.*

"If it's not too much trouble, Dot," apologizes Edna, "a spoonful of cream would be rather nice." She leans over with the top half of her body, picks up the bowl and leans back again, closely examining the contents.

"No trouble at all!" cries Dot, who is prancing around the room with a spoon and a carton of thickened cream in her hands. She stops in front of Edna, dishes out the topping. "Careful not to spill it on your dress though, Edna dear." Dot articulates slowly and loudly.

*Think I was bloody hard of hearing the way she talks. Either that or senile.*

"I'll be careful, dear." Edna looks up softly at her sister-in-law. "It looks so scrumptious I wouldn't want to waste a drop of it, anyway."

Genuinely flattered, Dot smiles back, warmly and brightly.

*A pretty woman, when she smiles. Pity Cyril doesn't give her more to smile about.*

Dot sits down and the room falls into the hum of the television. The family munches intently on its trifle.

*Sickly. And gluey. But at least it's free.*

The television covers the noise of the eating. As always with these people, there seems to be a kind of unannounced race to finish eating the first.

By far the champion, Cyril begins to lick the back of his teaspoon and puts down his bowl before anyone else. Then he looks mischievously around the room and his mouth begins to twitch at the corners.

*Heaven help us. Cyril's going to make a joke.*

"You can have as much cream as you want, Edna. No trouble at all for us." Edna's younger brother speaks with excessive politeness. "But at the rate you're going, there might be a bit of trouble for you later on — when you try and get out of your chair!"

Edna sighs noiselessly.

Scattered about on the floor, the children squeal in merriment and bob their heads: a handful of fire-crackers popping off.

"Oh Cyril, you are a wag!" exclaims Edna, and she covers her giggling mouth with her hand.

*You are a drip.*

"Aunty Edna'll have to sleep sitting up in the chair all night!" screeches one of the boys.

*And you always were one. For as long as I can remember.*

“Or else she’ll have to go to bed with the chair stuck to her!” adds Robby.

*You always were the slowest goose of a kid anyone ever saw.*

“Or else we’ll have to bring in the saw and cut up the chair so’s Auntie Edna can get out!” The eldest girl is never to be outdone.

*Rude, ill-bred kids, too. Still, with a father like that.*

“Calm down, everybody,” laughs Dot. “You’re luck Auntie Edna’s such a good sport. Aren’t they, Edna?”

“It’s kind of you to defend me, Dot.” Edna nods appreciatively.

*But you’d be better off giving them all a clip around the ear.*

There is another silence. The television drones on: it’s an old series being run for the third time. The children are slightly bored.

“Daddy,” cries one of the younger girls, suddenly inspired. “What was it the boys used to say about Auntie Edna’s nose when she was a girl?”

Cyril gazes over at his daughter with affection. “Well, pet, they used to say a lot of things.” His eyes grow dreamy. “But what I most recall is how they used to say...”

*They used to say they had more fun with me than any of the other girls in the district. They used to say...*

“...they couldn’t tell if there’d been a rain storm, or if Auntie Edna had a cold!”

*...that if I hadn’t been lumped with a diabetic mother and a half-wit teenage brother to look after, they wouldn’t hesitate in asking me.*

The room is again exploding with exaggerated giggles. Edna’s hand covers her open mouth.

“Daddy.” The baby climbs up onto Cyril’s knee as if it were story time. “Do you think Auntie Edna must have told a lot of fibs like Pinnocchio did, to have such a long nose?”

“Suzie!” warns Dot gently.

*They used to say that they could talk to me as if they’d known me all their lives.*

“Either that,” Cyril chuckles heartily at his daughter’s wit. “Or one big whopper!”

*Stick it out, Edna.*

“She did use to tell us she was the smartest girl in the class at school.”

*Not that much longer to go.*

“And was she really, Daddy?”

*One two...Edna's fingers count imperceptibly in her lap. Six months and you'll be out of here...*

“And was she really?”

“I don't know, she was always pretty clever at selling socks at Woolworths, weren't you, Edna?”

*And what the hell would you have had to eat if I hadn't sold socks, you idiot?*

“Cyril,” Dot admonishes her husband. “An honest job's never anything to be ashamed about.”

“How long was it, Edna — thirty, thirty-five years behind the same counter?”

*That's what I let you think, you fool.*

“Thirty-seven,” Edna sighs resignedly. “And not a penny to show for it.”

*Apart from the roll-over...*

“Mm, so we've gathered.” A great deal of the former jollity has left Cyril's voice.

“But I can't complain. We must take what the Lord gives us in life. After al, he gave me a brother like you.”

“And me a sister like you.” Cyril's mouth is twitching again. But there's no sign of humour this time.

*A house, a bar, an enormous telly all to myself. A soft leather couch, a pool...*

Edna's eyes close in relish.

“Cyril!” Dot sounds alarmed. “What a way to speak to your sister! Look — our Edna's having a turn. Edna dear.”

The young woman jumps up and runs over to her sister-in-law, rids her of her tray and takes one of the brown, spotted hands in her own. “Would you like me to make you a nice, hot cup of tea before bed?”

Edna's eyes open and she looks humbly into the concerned face before her. “Oh, Dot,” she sighs and blinks a few times, “I hardly dare accept.” She pauses awkwardly and blushes. “But if it wouldn't put you out too much. Well, a cup of tea would be just lovely.”