

Translated excerpt

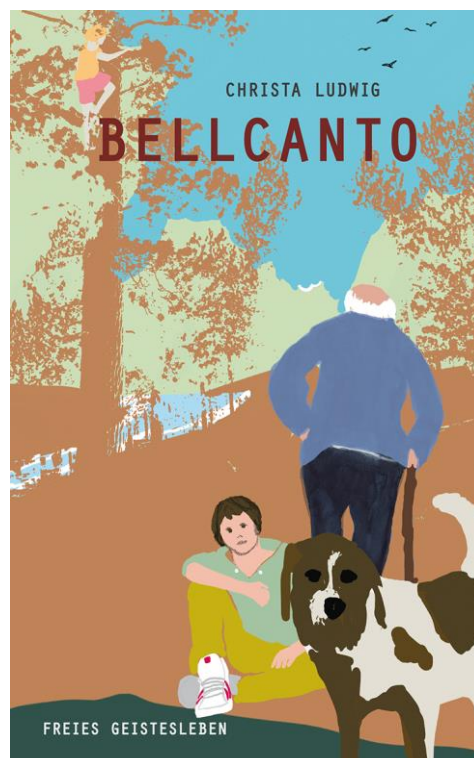
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Bellcanto

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Nabbed!

‘My name’s Robin Whack-me-whack-you-back.’

‘What?!’

The man in the unobtrusive shirt and unobtrusive trousers looked at Robin through his unobtrusive glasses.

‘What did you say?’

Why didn’t I notice that straightaway, thought Robin.

It should have struck him that there was nothing striking about the man. After all, that’s what they’re all like, and the other two were just the same - this being the third time he’d been nabbed pinching crisps in a supermarket.

‘What was that you said?’ repeated the man. ‘I asked you your name! Give it to me again - slowly!’

‘My name is Robin Whack-me-whack-you-back.’

He looked through the window. A forklift truck was trundling across the yard at the back of the supermarket. Amidst the pallets loaded with cardboard boxes an empty crisp packet swooped around in the summer breeze.

Thai Sweet Chilli: Robin recognised the packet as it went sailing past the window. One of his favourites.

‘Is that your surname?’ asked the man.

‘Which?’

‘Let’s get this straight: “Robin” is your first name, and “Whack-me-whack-you-back” is your surname: is that correct?’

Taken aback by the question, Robin accidentally looked the man straight in the eye. Lowering his gaze he stared at the crumpled packet of crisps that lay on the floor between them. ‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘Could be.’ And then he grinned. ‘Go on, have a look and see whether you can find that surname in the telephone directory. I know you’ve got it right there on your laptop.’

‘Wrong!’ The man turned his laptop around so that Robin could see the screen. No, it really wasn’t the telephone directory - it was a list of shoplifting incidents reported over the last few weeks, and the cursor was hovering over one particular entry: ‘Robin Renk, 12, thick dark hair, unusually large dark-coloured eyes, approx. 1.5m tall, markedly overweight. Truant, frequently involved in fights, only steals crisps.’

Yes, that was exactly the problem: there was almost nothing as difficult to pinch as crisps. They always made such a noise, and they were difficult to hide, even when he was wearing his floppy T-shirts. Such a pity he didn’t like chocolate.

‘Right then,’ said the man, ‘you’re twelve years old, so the courts can’t touch you. But things can’t carry on like this, can they?’

Robin looked out of the window in search of the airborne Sweet Chilli packet, but not even that was there to help him. Instead he heard a familiar rustling noise close to the man’s laptop, and then that ripping sound that he knew so well: the man was tearing open the packet of crisps. He held it out to Robin, who was still staring out of the window - though that didn’t prevent his nose from taking in the delicious odour of potatoes, cooking fat and paprika.

‘We can’t sell these now anyway’, said the man. ‘They got smashed to pieces when you walked straight into me.’

What on earth was the this guy after? Had he gone completely bananas?

Robin licked his lips and watched the man out of the corner of his eye. He had turned the laptop back round so that the screen was facing him.

‘How long have you been skipping school?’

‘They obviously don’t want me there’, said Robin. ‘Seeing that they’ve chucked me out.’

‘They threw you out, did they?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I knocked one of Maik’s teeth out, so they told me to stay away.’

‘Ah - a three-day suspension: am I right?’

Robin nodded.

‘But you were supposed to go back to school after that. So what am I to do about you now, I wonder?’

Robin tried to ignore sight and sound, and concentrate instead on smell - the smell wafting up from the open crisp packet.

‘Right then - come along with me!’

The man stood up.

‘Come on, get going!’

Where’s he taking me? Robin wondered.

He got up slowly. The man pressed the packet of crisps into his hands. ‘I’d just have to throw it away otherwise’, he murmured as he started moving off.

Robin stumbled along behind him. Back into the shop, along an aisle with rice and pasta on one side, tea and coffee on the other, past the tills, and on to the entrance/exit door.

‘You can go’, the man told him.

Robin hesitated. ‘What are you going to do about me?’ he wanted to know. ‘Will I be getting another visit from Social Services?’

The man shrugged his shoulders. ‘Don’t know yet. I might think of a better plan. You can go now!’

Robin couldn’t in fact go, as there were two doors blocking his way. He immediately heard that sound again, right in the deepest recesses of his brain - the sound of glass shattering and crashing to the ground. He pressed the packet of crisps to his chest, crushing them even more. He’d have to wait. And sure enough, a woman approached with her trolley. There was a little boy in the child seat. As soon as the inner glass door opened to let her through, the boy started struggling and tried to stand up. The trolley started slipping sideways and, seeing his chance, Robin dashed forward and caught hold of it. ‘Bye!’ he called out, just loud enough for the man to hear him.

He helped the woman push the trolley into the shop and then darted back through the glass door. He turned around uncertainly. The man was watching him. Standing there in the vestibule between the inner and outer doors, Robin found himself trapped in a glass-walled prison. He grabbed a handful of pulverised crisps from the packet and stuffed them in his mouth. He tried to breathe calmly and steadily. He knew perfectly well that he only needed to take one step forward and the door would slide open - of course he knew that! He licked the crisp remnants off his fingers, which were now clammy with sweat, cooking fat and fear. Taking another slow, deep breath he screwed up his courage and took a small step forward: the doors opened silently, and Robin raced out of his glass cage.

He ran past the cycle racks full of bikes, but got no further: instead, he fell headlong to the ground. The one good thing about it was that he managed to hold the crisp packet in such a way that it didn’t get flattened underneath him. His right foot had caught on a piece of cord. Or a wire. Or what was it, in fact? When Robin finally realised that he had tripped over a dog lead, he froze and closed his eyes tight. But that wasn’t going to help him any. He needed to see what kind of dog it was, so he had a little peek through half-open eyes. It was just a small dog, tied up outside the supermarket on much too long a lead. It sniffed around and licked up a few crisp fragments scattered over the ground. Robin kept the dog’s snout away from him with one hand while throwing a few crisps down with the other. The dog immediately pounced on them, and Robin was able to jump up and make his getaway.

The prisoner in the invalid chair

‘Sweet Song!’ screamed the old man with the scrawny neck. ‘Sweet Song!’

He sat there imprisoned in his invalid chair, trapped by the table contraption carrying his feeder cup. They had taken his armchair away, his very own beloved armchair, claiming that he needed to have this table thing. But the table was slotted into the right-hand armrest, and he couldn’t work the release mechanism. He’d managed it only a few days earlier. Had the carer woman locked him in? Accidentally? Deliberately?

Deliberately, of course! What a revolting fat tick of a woman! Swollen to bursting point just like the ticks to be found on wild animals - with cats and dogs they’re always pulled out and squashed underfoot provided someone can actually catch hold of them. When he was a child he’d had a semi-tame squirrel that used to visit him in the garden, and sometimes the squirrel had had ticks as fat and bulging as this fatso carer.

‘Sweet Song!’ he shouted. ‘Where’s my Sweet Song?’

His voice sounded scratchy, like something scrawled by a trembling hand on crumpled paper with a dried-out pen.

The door burst open, and there she stood, filling the entire door frame and balancing his supper tray on her right arm.

Yes, there she was!

‘Oh no, it’s only Tuesday, isn’t it!’ he thought, and the pain in his knee gave him a jolt that travelled all the way down to his toes. The Fat Tick always comes on Tuesdays.

On the days when his Sweet Song wasn’t visiting him it was always she who brought him his supper. None of the other carers dared to enter his room on those days, ever since he had grabbed the collar of the little woman who spoke almost no German and nearly throttled her.

‘Bello’s not coming today’, said the Fat Tick.

‘His name’s not Bello!’ he retorted angrily. ‘Don’t call him Bello! That’s what all the barbarians with no imagination call their lousy mongrels.’

‘What do you have against lousy mongrels?!’ asked the Fat Tick.

‘Nothing’, he replied. ‘I don’t even have anything against lice. But I *do* have something against brainless barbarians who can’t think of any name for a dog except “Bello”.’

She removed the feeder cup from the little table and replaced it with his supper tray: bread, butter, a bit of cheese, two tomatoes, a pickled gherkin - but no salami; there wouldn’t be a dog there that he could feed it to.

‘Well, he answers to “Bello”’, she said. ‘When we say “Sit, Bello” or “Stay, Bello”, he obeys, and he shakes hands as well.’

‘What a repulsive bunch you all are!’ he screamed in his scritch-scratchy voice. ‘Ignorant pigs who know nothing about anything! His name’s Belcanto, that’s Italian and it means ‘Sweet Song’, but you...’

‘Steffi herself sometimes calls him Bello’, she said, interrupting him. ‘And it was me who signed for him when she brought him here as a therapy dog: I watched her write his name with two Ls - and the Italian word ‘belcanto’ is spelt with *one* L. Even an ignorant pig like me knows that.’

She turned and walked to the door, then turned back around to face him once again. ‘Ring when you want your tray cleared away. Eat slowly and drink a lot. Your medicines are...’

With his left arm he pushed the tray so that it stuck out over the right-hand edge of the table-top, then grabbing it from underneath with his right hand he hurled his supper in the direction of the door with the same force that he had displayed when he throttled the little woman who didn’t speak much German.

‘There!’ he bellowed, and his voice was no longer a half-baked scribble with a dried-out pen, it was splashing great gobbets of ink in all directions. ‘There! Eat it yourself and make yourself even fatter!’

The carer went out. Quietly, soundlessly: everyone here wore shoes that made no sound.

It was the little woman who came to clear up the mess. Was she Polish? Bulgarian? Romanian? He had no idea. She wasn’t in danger of being throttled this time: he had thrown the tray quite far, so she was crawling around wiping the floor a good way away from him.

Before she left she stood there hesitantly for a while, shifting soundlessly from one foot to the other.

‘You hungry?’ she asked. ‘You eat?’

He looked at the dustpan full of cheese, gherkin and broken crockery and shook his head. He really wasn’t hungry. But on the other hand - he drew a breath and opened his mouth ready to speak...

‘Yes?’ she asked. ‘What you want?’

He should have told her he needed to go to the toilet, but he turned his head away.

‘Nothing’, he mumbled. ‘Go away!’

He hated it when he had to ask them for something, and he hated it most of all when he had to tell them that he needed to go to the toilet. He decided he would eat less and drink less. Tomorrow evening he would give the whole lot to Belcanto.

The floppy-eared sniff-monster

There was a shrill ring from the doorbell that made Robin jump. He crumpled up the crisp packet and chucked it in a drawer, together with the Star Wars comic that he had pinched from the newspaper kiosk the previous morning. He pulled his pyjama trousers a bit higher up and fastened the only button remaining on his pyjama jacket. It was early afternoon, and his headmistress had had plenty of time to put that man from Children's Services on his tail because, yet again, he hadn't turned up for school.

Or perhaps the store detective who'd nabbed him yesterday wasn't as nice as he'd seemed and had sent the police to get him? And if it *was* them, they would go on ringing and ringing until even his mother heard the noise. He'd do better to go to the door before his mother managed to rouse herself and come stumbling out of her bedroom.

But light was streaming into the hallway, the front door was open - and his mother was standing there. She was fully dressed, and was speaking to someone in a friendly and relatively unbefuddled voice. 'Ah, so you really have come!'

Who on earth had she been waiting for? Who could she be speaking to with a voice like that?

No one had called on them for at least a year, except for his father - and he wouldn't have rung, and she wouldn't have opened the door, and he couldn't have come in anyway because she'd had the lock changed.

'So that's him, is it?!' he heard his mother say.

Who? What was going on?

Robin slowly made his way to the door.

'I'm Steffi', said a voice, clearly that of a young woman, 'and this is Bellcanto.'

That didn't sound at all bad, but Robin approached the door warily all the same. And just as well! Standing there next to the woman was a dog. A dog!!!

'You can stroke him', Steffi said. 'He's as gentle as gentle can be. - Obviously, because he wouldn't be a therapy dog otherwise.'

And while Robin hid as best he could amongst the jackets hanging on the coat rack, his mother knelt down in the doorway and stroked the dog.

The 'therapy' dog!

Robin had heard of fighting dogs, hunting dogs, police dogs - but what on earth was a 'therapy dog'?

'May we, er, may we come in?' asked Steffi.

'Pardon? Oh, yes, of course. Sorry.'

His mother stood up again, and into their hallway trotted this dog of the mysterious 'therapy' variety. He was a black and white spotty dog. He looked like a broken chess board in full flight. Or like a football that had been kicked and scuffed to the point of utter shapelessness.

Back in the old days Robin had played chess and football with his father. He hadn't been much good at kicking the ball, and just about the only thing he knew about chess was that knights went round corners. That had been a long time ago. There was no chess and no football for Robin any more, and no father either. Instead, there was this monster sniffing around in every corner with his big floppy ears, his long hairy tail sweeping to and fro like a whip. Why was this creature visiting his mother?

Robin bit on the zip of his anorak.

Not another dog!

It had all begun with a similar sort of beast - not a 'therapy' dog, but one inherited from a relative. It was a very long time ago - even before the football and the chess. Robin had scarcely any recollection of the dog - he just remembered the yowling during the night and his mother's swollen eyes.

And it was *she* who was now playing with this Bello! That was his name, wasn't it? But it didn't matter very much anyway: aren't most dogs called Bello?

'And where's your son now?' asked Steffi.

What? Who?

'Robin?!?'

His mother looked round and saw that his bedroom door was open.

'Robin? He must be here somewhere. And you really think a dog will get him to go back to school?'

What?!

Robin froze in his hiding place amongst the clothes on the coat rack. Were they now planning to force him back to school with a fighting dog of the 'therapy' variety?

'Robin?'

There was no longer any chance of him tucking himself away in an anorak pocket and closing the zip: the dog was already wagging its tail right by his feet. He pushed the jackets to one side, but stayed where he was, with his back to the wall.

'What's all this about?' he asked.

'Ah!' Steffi cried. 'Bellcanto, this is Robin - look!'

'Yes, this is Robin, woof woof!' replied Robin, mimicking her. 'I don't get it, I... Just take that creature away!'

'The man...' - there was a slight hesitation in Steffi's voice - 'That man in the supermarket yesterday - do you remember?'

Robin certainly did remember!

‘He thinks that actually you’re a very nice boy. You were going to run away, really take to your heels, but despite that you stopped to help the lady get her shopping trolley and her child through the glass door.’

Ah, so that’s how it looked! Robin grinned, while his mother - alarmed - mouthed ‘Glass door?!’

‘Then on top of that you knelt down by the dog that was tied up out there, and even gave him some of your crisps...’

Ah, so that’s how it looked!

‘That was very nice of you, though as someone who knows about dogs I must just tell you that...’

The man obviously hadn’t noticed that he had tripped over the lead.

‘... dogs should never be given crisps; come to that, they shouldn’t really be given to human beings either.’ Steffi’s gaze lingered on Robin’s belly at this point.

‘And rather than the social worker paying you another visit...’

Oh no, not him again! He’d yakked away at Robin and his mother for two whole hours!

‘... he’s been in touch with us instead, as he thinks that what you need is a friend, not a social worker. And Bellcanto is the best of all possible friends.’

Robin and Bellcanto looked at each other - for the very first time. They both had dark brown eyes. Neither of them smiled: Robin didn’t want to, and of course Bellcanto couldn’t. But his eyes were laughing, and their sparkle said ‘Come and play with me! Come and race around with me!’

‘It would probably be best if we took a walk in the park to start with’, Steffi suggested.

‘Can I come too?’ asked Robin’s mother?

What?!?!?!?

Robin gazed into space. He tried to avoid looking at either his mother or the dog. He had an vague feeling that he might somehow be able to rid his mind of what his mother had just said. For months now she had never gone out of the house during the daytime. He had had to do all the shopping. She only ventured out at night - he knew that for a fact. She probably went to the petrol station on the corner, as of course he was too young to buy her booze for her.

And now she wanted to go to the park with them? What a miracle! It was a dog that had made everything go wrong in the first place, and now it was a dog that was going to make everything go right after all! Was such a thing possible?

‘I’ll go and get dressed’, he said.

If the hippopotamus cried too little

‘Sweet Song! Where’s my Sweet Song?’

It was Wednesday, after all! And it was 4 o’clock. His watch could be be wrong - it could be fast, or slow, or not working at all - but the TV could certainly be trusted, at any rate so far as giving the time of day was concerned, and the film about molluscs had been over for half an hour now, so Bellcanto should have arrived ages ago.

The old man with the scrawny neck flicked from channel to channel on the remote control. The programme on building up muscle through endurance training didn’t appeal to him, and nor did any of the talk shows, sports events or comedy programmes that flashed briefly onto the screen as his impatient thumb prodded button after button.

Had there been an accident? Had Bellcanto run in front of a car? Had he been attacked by another dog? Was he lying on a table at a vet’s somewhere having an emergency operation, or perhaps even being put down?

But no! Bellcanto had *not* run in front of car! Steffi watched over him much too carefully for that. And he had *not* been attacked! The fiercest dogs and the super-fiercest humans turned kindly and fond whenever he was around.

Whenever he was around! If only he were around right now! ‘Where’s my Sweet Song?’

The old man had been amiable all day. Agota had brought him his lunch and he had chatted away to her so far as her limited German allowed; she didn’t understand any English - she was Hungarian.

‘Vegetable rice’, Agota had told him, ‘ - what you ask for.’

‘Turn the TV on’, he’d ordered her, ‘there’s a film about molluscs at 2 o’clock.’

‘Molluscs?’

She evidently didn’t know the word. What an earth might she imagine it to mean?

‘Yes, molluscs. Soft-bodied creatures.’

‘Moll-’ she whispered as she made the cushion behind his back more comfortable for him. ‘Moll - uscs...; soft-bodied...’

‘Yes’, he said, ‘snails, worms, caterpillars - that sort of thing.’

He relished the horror showing in her eyes.

‘What did you imagine,’ he asked, ‘something soft and cuddly?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. Soft like fur. Soft like coat of Bellcanto.’

She smiled. And because she'd said 'Bellcanto' he hadn't flown into one of his rages. He had grinned and then laughed.

'“Coato-Canto”?’ he suggested. ‘“Canto-Coato”?’

And then he had eaten all his vegetable rice and drunk lots and lots and swallowed his pills and watched the film about molluscs - but there was still no Bellcanto.

'Sweet Song!' he shouted, banging the remote controller on his table top and squeezing the button on his alarm bell.

The door opened to reveal the Fat Tick.

'Do you want to go to the toilet?' she asked.

'What rubbish you talk!' he snapped back at her. 'Do I call out “Sweet Song” when I want to go to the toilet? People sing in the bath, not on the bog!'

The Fat Tick didn't come into the room herself. She stepped to one side and shoved Agota in.

'You sort that out', she said. 'But clear the coffee away first, and put the remote control out of his reach. Then he won't have anything to throw. And he certainly can't get out of his chair.'

No, he certainly couldn't get out of his chair. The table thing across the front of it was once again anchored firmly in the right-hand armrest. He clenched the remote control in his right hand, and a succession of different images flashed onto the screen: the Simpsons, a parachute, an empty football pitch, an exploding house...

What an earth had happened to Bellcanto?

The Fat Tick shut the door. He was alone with Agota. Coming over to him on her silent shoes, she reached for the television and switched it off. The image disappeared, and with it the sound of howling fans, wailing survivors, triumphant victors. She didn't take the remote control off him, and she didn't clear his little table.

'Herr Heyse,' she said, 'we sorry, we very, very sad and sorry, but Bellcanto not come today.'

'What's happened?' he asked.

'Not nothing happen, nothing at all. But Bellcanto he have to make other visit today.'

'Another visit? What, to the vet?!'

'No, no. It's a child. He have to go visit a boy.'

'But he's okay?'

'The boy? We not know much about him. Steffi say she can't tell much about him - he like a patient.'

The old man was beginning to get the picture.

‘Bellcanto very good dog’, she continued. ‘We know this very, very well. Not many dogs good like him - he so good, he needed very much.’

‘But I need him too’, murmured the old man.

‘He coming!’ she assured him. ‘He coming Friday.’

‘Then back to three times a week again next week?’

‘We not know.’

The old man let go of the remote control, which clattered onto his little table top.

‘The coffee’s cold’, he said.

‘I take coffee away?’

‘Yes’, he replied. ‘Yes, please.’

She was thunderstruck - and after a moment or two so was he. The Fat Tick had expected him to hurl the remote control at Agosta and throw his coffee in her face, instead of which he had said ‘Please’... The word was familiar enough to her - but she had never heard it from Herr Heyse before, even though it’s one of the very first words that anyone learns in a foreign language. There it is on the first page of every single Beginners’ Guide to every single language: ‘Hello. My name is Anna. How are you? Please. Thank you...’

‘The weather is going to be good tomorrow’, she said - and she said it without any mistakes and with barely any trace of an accent. Perhaps this was because this phrase, too, is on the first page of every language-learning book? Just like ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’.

‘Yes, that’s possible’, said the old man, ‘but it’s Thursday tomorrow, and he won’t be coming then either.’

Agota took hold of his coffee cup, but lifted it only a little way off the table before asking him ‘You want me take it away?’

Holding the cup some three centimetres above his table, she paused. Was she giving him the opportunity to say ‘Yes please’ again? That’s what they do in language courses, after all - repetition, repetition, repetition, until it becomes second nature: ‘Yes please’...

But he just nodded his head.

‘I want *you* to bring me my supper today’, he said. And then he spoke again, more quietly: ‘There’s a worm, a tiny little worm, that lives under the eyelids of hippopotamuses and feeds off their tears. It wasn’t mentioned in that film about molluscs, but it exists all the same. I don’t know whether it ever looks out from under the eyelid, or even whether it can see at all. I also don’t know whether it would get washed out if the hippopotamus cried too much. But I’m absolutely certain that it would starve to death if the hippopotamus cried too little.’

Agota stood there helplessly with the cup in her hand. Then she left, her shoes making not the slightest sound.

When she brought him his supper later on, she didn't mention Bellcanto again, and he didn't say 'Please' again.

'Why bring me this stuff?' he barked at her.

'This what you order', she replied.

Yes, of course, that *was* what he had ordered: mortadella sausage plus Lyons sausage; it was Wednesday, after all. No salami: dogs can't eat salami, so Steffi had said, but he was allowed to give Bellcanto a few slices of mortadella.

'You want cheese?'

He shook his head. She left the room.

He took the sausage and put it on the edge of his plate, then ate a bare few mouthfuls of bread and butter.