

# THE SHAPE OF WATER

ANDREA CAMILLERI

*Translated by Stephen Sartarelli*

*Viking*



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No light of daybreak filtered yet into the courtyard of Splendor, the company under government contract to collect trash in the town of Vigàta. A low, dense mass of clouds completely covered the sky as though a great gray tarp had been drawn from one corner to another. Not a single leaf fluttered. The sirocco was late to rise from its leaden sleep, yet people already struggled to exchange a few words. The foreman, before assigning the areas to be cleaned, announced that this day, and for some days to come, Peppe Schèmmari and Caluzzo Brucculeri would be absent, excused from work. More than excused, they'd been arrested: the previous evening they'd attempted to rob a supermarket with weapons in hand. To Pino Catalano and Saro Montaperto—young land surveyors naturally without employment as land surveyors, but hired by Splendor as temporary “ecological agents” thanks to the generous string-pulling of Chamber Deputy Cusumano, in whose electoral campaign the two had fought body and soul (and in that order, with the body doing far more than the soul felt like doing)—the foreman assigned the jobs vacated by Peppe and Caluzzo, that is, the sector that went by the name of “the Pasture,” because in a time now beyond memory a goatherd had apparently let his goats roam there. It was a broad tract of Mediterranean brush on the outskirts of town that stretched almost as far as the shore. Behind it lay the ruins of a large chemical works inaugurated by the ubiquitous Deputy Cusumano when it seemed the magnificent winds of progress were blowing strong. Soon, however, that breeze changed into the flimsiest of puffs before dropping altogether, but in that brief time it had managed to do more damage than a tornado, leaving a shambles of compensation benefits and unemployment in its wake. To prevent the crowds of black and not-so-black Senegalese, Algerian, Tunisians, and Libyans wandering about the city from nesting in that factory, a high wall had been built all around it, above which the old structures still soared, corroded by weather, neglect, and sea salt, looking more and more like architectures designed by Gaudì under the influence of hallucinogens.

Until recently the Pasture had represented, for those who at the time still went under the undignified name of garbage collectors, a cakewalk of a job: amid the scraps of paper, plastic bags, cans of beer, and Coca-Cola, and shit piles barely covered up or left out in the open air, now and then a used condom would appear, and it would set one thinking, provided one had the desire and imagination to do so, about the details of that encounter. For a good year now, however, the occasional condom had turned into an ocean, a carpet of condoms, ever since a certain minister with a dark, taciturn face, worthy of a Lombroso diagram had fished deep into his mind, which was even darker and more mysterious than his face, and come up with an idea he thought would solve all the South's law-and-order problems. He had managed to sell this idea to a colleague of his who dealt with the army and who, for his part, looked as if he had walked right out of a Pinocchio illustration, and together the two had decided to send a number of detachments to Sicily for the purpose of “controlling the territory,” to lighten the load of the carabinieri, local police, intelligence services, special operations teams, coast guard, the highway police, railway police and port police, the anti-Mafia, antiterrorism, antidrug, antitheft and antikidnapping commissions, and others—here omitted for the sake of brevity—quite busy with other business. Thanks to the brilliant idea of these two eminent statesmen, all the Piedmontese mama's boys and beardless Friulian conscripts who just the night before had enjoyed the crisp, fresh air of their mountains suddenly found themselves painfully short of breath, huffing in the temporary lodgings, in towns that stood barely a yard above sea level, among people who spoke a

incomprehensible dialect consisting not so much of words as of silences, indecipherable movements of the eyebrows, imperceptible puckerings of the facial wrinkles. They adapted as best they could thanks to their young age, and were given a helping hand by the residents of Vigàta themselves, who were moved to pity by the foreign boys' lost, bewildered looks. The one who saw to lessening the hardship of their exile was a certain Gegè Gullotta, a fast thinker who until that moment had been forced to suppress his natural gifts as a pimp by dealing in light drugs. Having learned through channels both underhanded and ministerial of the soldiers' imminent arrival, Gegè had had a flash of genius, and to put said flash to work for him he had promptly appealed to the beneficence of those in charge of such matters in order to obtain all the countless convoluted authorizations indispensable to his plan—those in charge being, that is, those who truly controlled the area and would never have dreamt of issuing officially stamped permits. Gegè, in short, succeeded in opening a specialized market of fresh meat and many and sundry drugs, all light, at the Pasture. Most of the meat came from the former Eastern Bloc countries, now free at last of the Communist yoke which, as everyone knew, had denied all personal, human dignity; now, between the Pasture's bushes and sandy shore, come nightfall, that reconquered dignity shone again in all its magnificence. But there was also no lack of Third World women, transvestites, transsexuals, Neapolitan faggots, Brazilian *viados*—something for every taste, a feast, an embarrassment of riches. And business flourished, to the great satisfaction of the soldiers, Gegè, and those who, for a proper cut of the proceeds, had granted Gegè permission to operate.

Pino and Saro headed toward their assigned work sector, each pushing his own cart. To get to the Pasture it took half an hour, if one was slow of foot as they were. The first fifteen minutes they spent without speaking, already sweaty and sticky. It was Saro who broke the silence.

“That Pecorilla is a bastard,” he announced.

“A fucking bastard,” clarified Pino.

Pecorilla was the foreman in charge of assigning the areas to be cleaned, and he nurtured an undisguised hatred for anyone with an education, having himself managed to finish middle school, at age forty, only thanks to Cusumano, who had a man-to-man talk with the teacher. Thus he manipulated things so that the hardest, most demeaning work always fell to the three university graduates in his charge. That same morning, in fact, he had assigned to Ciccu Loreto the stretch of wharf from which the mail boat sailed for the island of Lampedusa. Which meant that Ciccu, with his accounting degree, would be forced to account for the piles of trash that noisy mobs of tourists, many-tongued yet all sharing the same utter disregard for personal and public cleanliness, had left behind on Saturday and Sunday while waiting to embark. And no doubt Pino and Saro, after the soldiers' two days off duty, would find the Pasture one big glory hole.

When they reached the corner of Via Lincoln and Viale Kennedy (in Vigàta there was even a Cortina, Eisenhower and a Vicolo Roosevelt), Saro stopped.

“I'm going to run upstairs and see how the little guy's doing,” he said to his friend. “Wait here. I'll only be a minute.”

Without waiting for Pino's answer, he slipped into one of those midget high-rises that were no more than twelve stories high, having been built around the same time as the chemical works and having just as quickly fallen into ruin, when not abandoned altogether. For someone approaching from the sea, Vigàta rose up like a parody of Manhattan, on a reduced scale. And this explained, perhaps, the names of some of its streets.

Nenè, the little guy, was awake; he slept on and off some two hours a night, spending the rest of the time with eyes wide open, without ever crying. Who had ever seen a baby that didn't cry? Day after day he was consumed by an illness of unknown cause and cure. The doctors of Vigàta couldn't figure it out; his parents would have to take him somewhere else, to some big-shot specialist, but they didn't have the money. Nenè grew sullen as soon as his eyes met his father's, a wrinkle forming across his forehead. He couldn't talk, but had expressed himself quite clearly with that silent reproach of the person who had put him in these straits.

"He's doing a little better, the fever's going down," said Tana, Saro's wife, just to make him happy.

The clouds had scattered, and now the sun was blazing hot enough to shatter rocks. Saro had already emptied his cart a dozen times in the garbage bin that had appeared, thanks to private initiative, where the rear exit of the factory used to be, and his back felt broken. When he was a few steps from the path that ran along the enclosure wall and led to the provincial road, he saw something sparkle violently on the ground. He bent down to have a better look. It was a heart-shaped pendant, enormous, studded with little diamonds all around and with one great big diamond in the middle. The solid-gold chain was still attached, though broken in one spot. Saro's right hand shot out, grabbed the necklace, and stuffed it in his pocket. The hand seemed to have acted on its own, before his brain, still flabbergasted by the discovery, could tell it anything. Standing up again, drenched in sweat, he looked around but didn't see a living soul.

Pino, who had chosen to work the stretch of the Pasture nearest the beach, at one point spotted the nose of a car about twenty yards away, sticking out of some bushes a bit denser than the rest. Unsure he stopped; it wasn't possible someone could still be around here at this hour, seven in the morning screwing a whore. He began to approach cautiously, one step at a time, almost bent over, and when he'd reached the taillights he quickly stood straight up. Nothing happened, nobody shouted to fuck off, the car seemed vacant. Coming nearer, he finally made out the indistinct shape of a man, motionless in the passenger seat, head thrown back. He seemed to be in a deep sleep. But by the look and the smell of it, Pino realized something was fishy. He turned around and called to Saro, who came running, out of breath, eyes bulging.

"What is it? What the hell do you want?"

Pino thought his friend's questions a bit aggressive but blamed it on the fact that he had run all the way.

"Get a load of this," he said.

Plucking up his courage, Pino went up to the driver's side and tried to open the door but couldn't: it was locked. With the help of Saro, who seemed to have calmed down, he tried to reach the other door against which the man's body was partially leaning, but the car, a large green BMW, was too close to the shrub to allow anyone to approach from that side. Leaning forward, however, and getting scratched by the brambles, they managed to get a better look at the man's face. He was not sleeping; his eyes were wide open and motionless. The moment they realized that the man was dead, Pino and Saro froze in terror—not at the sight of death but because they recognized him.

~~“I feel like I’m taking a sauna,” said Saro as he ran along the provincial road toward a telephone booth. “A blast of cold one minute, a blast of heat the next.”~~

They had agreed on one thing since overcoming their paralysis upon recognizing the deceased before alerting the police, they had to make another phone call. They knew Deputy Cusumano’s number by heart, and Saro dialed it. But Pino didn’t let the phone ring even once.

“Hang up, quick!” he said.

Saro obeyed automatically.

“You don’t want to tell him?”

“Let’s just think for a minute, let’s think hard. This is very important. You know as well as I do that Cusumano is a puppet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He’s a puppet of Luparello, who is everything—or was everything. With Luparello dead, Cusumano’s a nobody, a doormat.”

“So?”

“So nothing.”

They turned back toward Vigàta, but after a few steps Pino stopped Saro.

“Rizzo, the lawyer,” he said.

“I’m not going to call that guy. He gives me the creeps. I don’t even know him.”

“I don’t either, but I’m going to call him anyway.”

Pino got the number from the operator. Though it was still only seven forty-five, Rizzo answered after the first ring.

“Mr. Rizzo?”

“Yes?”

“Excuse me for bothering you at this hour, Mr. Rizzo, but . . . we found Mr. Luparello, you see, and . . . well, he looks dead.”

There was a pause. Then Rizzo spoke.

“So why are you telling me this?”

Pino was stunned. He was ready for anything, except that bizarre response.

“But . . . aren’t you his best friend? We thought it was only right—”

“I appreciate it. But you must do your duty first. Good day.”

Saro had been listening to the conversation, his cheek pressed against Pino’s. They looked at each other, nonplussed. Rizzo acted as if they’d told him they’d just found some nameless cadaver.

“Shit! He was his friend, wasn’t he?” Saro burst out.

“What do we know? Maybe they had a fight,” said Pino to reassure him.

“So what do we do now?”

“We go and do our duty, like the lawyer said,” concluded Pino.

They headed toward town, to police headquarters. The thought of going to the carabinieri didn’t

even cross their minds, since they were under the command of a Milanese lieutenant. The Vigà police inspector, on the other hand, was from Catania, a certain Salvo Montalbano, who, when he wanted to get to the bottom of something, he did.

“Again.”

“No,” said Livia, still staring at him, her eyes more luminous from the amorous tension.

“Please.”

“No, I said no.”

*I always like being forced a little*, he remembered her whispering once in his ear; and so, aroused, he tried slipping his knee between her closed thighs as he gripped her wrists roughly and spread her arms until she looked as though crucified.

They eyed each other a moment, panting, when suddenly she surrendered.

“Yes,” she said. “Now.”

At that exact moment the phone rang. Without even opening his eyes, Montalbano reached out with his arm to grab not the telephone so much as the fluttering shreds of the dream now inexorably vanishing.

“Hello!” he shouted angrily at the intruder.

“Inspector, we’ve got a client.” He recognized Sergeant Fazio’s voice; the other sergeant, Tortorella, was still in the hospital with the nasty bullet he’d taken in the belly from some would-be mafioso who was actually just a pathetic two-bit jerk-off. In their jargon a “client” meant a death they should look into.

“Who is it?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“How was he killed?”

“We don’t know. Actually, we don’t even know if he was killed.”

“I don’t get it, Sergeant. You woke me up to tell me you don’t know a goddamn thing?”

Montalbano breathed deeply to dispel his pointless anger, which Fazio tolerated with the patience of a saint.

“Who found him?” he continued.

“A couple of garbage collectors in the Pasture. They found him in a car.”

“I’ll be right there. Meanwhile phone the Montelusa department, have them send someone from the lab, and inform Judge Lo Bianco.”

As he stood under the shower, he reached the conclusion that the dead man must have been a member of the Cuffaro gang. Eight months earlier, probably due to some territorial dispute, a ferocious war had broken out between the Vigàta Cuffaros and the Sinagra gang, who were from Fela. One victim per month, by turns, and in orderly fashion: one in Vigàta, one in Fela. The latest, a certain Mario Salino, had been shot in Fela by the Vigatese, so now it was apparently the turn of one of the Cuffaro thugs.

Before going out—he lived alone in a small house right on the beach on the opposite side of town

from the Pasture—he felt like calling Livia in Genoa. She answered immediately, drowsy with sleep.

“Sorry, but I wanted to hear your voice.”

“I was dreaming of you,” she said. “You were here with me.”

Montalbano was about to say that he, too, had been dreaming of her, but an absurd prudishness held him back. Instead he asked:

“And what were we doing?”

“Something we haven’t done for too long,” she said.

At headquarters, aside from the sergeant, there were only three policemen. The rest had gone to the home of a clothing-shop owner who had shot his sister over a question of inheritance and then escaped. Montalbano opened the door to the interrogation room. The two garbage collectors were sitting on the bench, huddling one against the other, pale despite the heat.

“Wait here till I get back,” Montalbano said to them, and the two, resigned, didn’t even reply. They both knew well that any time one fell in with the law, whatever the reason, it was going to be a long affair.

“Have any of you called the papers?” the inspector asked his men. They shook their heads no.

“Well, I don’t want them sticking their noses in this. Make a note of that.”

Timidly, Galluzzo came forward, raising two fingers as if to ask if he could go to the bathroom.

“Not even my brother-in-law?”

Galluzzo’s brother-in-law was a newsman with TeleVigàta who covered local crime, and Montalbano imagined the family squabbles that might break out if Galluzzo weren’t to tell him anything. And Galluzzo was looking at him with pitiful, canine eyes.

“All right. But he should come only after the body’s been removed. And no photographers.”

They set out in a squad car, leaving Giallombardo behind on duty. Gallo was at the wheel. Together with Galluzzo, he was often the butt of facile jokes, such as “Hey, Inspector, what’s new in the chicken coop?”

Knowing Gallo’s driving habits, Montalbano admonished him, “Don’t speed. We’re in no hurry.”

At the curve by the Carmelite church, Peppe Gallo could no longer restrain himself and accelerated screeching the tires as he rounded the bend. They heard a loud crack, like a pistol shot, and the car skidded to a halt. They got out. The right rear tire hung flabbily, blown out. It had been well worked over by a sharp blade; the cuts were quite visible.

“Goddamn sons of bitches!” bellowed the sergeant.

Montalbano got angry in earnest.

“But you all know they cut our tires twice a month! Jesus! And every morning I remind you: don’t forget to check them before going out! But you ass-holes don’t give a shit! And you won’t until the day somebody breaks his neck!”

For one reason or another, it took a good ten minutes to change the tire, and when they got to the Pasture, the Montelusa crime lab team was already there. They were in what Montalbano called the meditative stage, that is, five or six agents circling round and round the spot where the car stood.

hands usually in their pockets or behind their backs. They looked like philosophers absorbed in deep thought, but in fact their eyes were combing the ground for clues, traces, footprints. As soon as Jacomuzzi, head of the crime lab, saw Montalbano, he came running up.

“How come there aren’t any newsmen?”

“I didn’t want any.”

“Well, this time they’re going to accuse you of trying to cover up a big story.” He was clearly upset. “Do you know who the dead man is?”

“No. Who?”

“None other than ‘the engineer,’ Silvio Luparello.”

“Shit!” was Montalbano’s only comment.

“And do you know how he died?”

“No. And I don’t want to know. I’ll have a look at him myself.”

Offended, Jacomuzzi went back to his men. The lab photographer had finished, and now it was Dr. Pasquano’s turn. Montalbano noticed that the coroner was forced to work in an uncomfortable position, his body half inside the car, wiggling his way toward the passenger seat, where a dark silhouette could be seen. Fazio and the Vigàta officers were giving a hand to their Montelusa colleagues. The inspector lit a cigarette and turned to look at the chemical factory. That rural landscape fascinated him. He decided he would come back one day to take a few snapshots, which he’d send Livia to explain some things about himself and his island that she was still unable to understand.

Lo Bianco’s car pulled up and the judge stepped out, looking agitated.

“Is it really Luparello?” he asked.

Apparently Jacomuzzi had wasted no time.

“So it seems.”

The judge joined the lab group and began speaking excitedly with Jacomuzzi and Dr. Pasquano, while in the meantime had extracted a bottle of rubbing alcohol from his briefcase and was disinfecting his hands. After a good while, long enough for Montalbano to broil in the sun, the men from the lab got back in their cars and left. As he passed Montalbano, Jacomuzzi said nothing. Behind him, the inspector heard an ambulance siren wind down. It was his turn now. He’d have to do the talking and acting; there was no escape. He shook himself from the torpor in which he was stewing and walked toward the car with the dead man inside. Halfway there, the judge blocked his path.

“The body can be removed now. And considering poor Luparello’s notoriety, the quicker we do it the better. In any case, keep me posted daily as to how the investigation develops.”

He paused a moment, and then, to make the words he’d just said a little less peremptory:

“Give me a ring when you think it’s appropriate,” he added.

Another pause. Then:

“During office hours, of course.”

He walked away. During office hours, not at home. At home, it was well known, Judge Lo Bianco was busy penning a stuffy, puffy book, *The Life and Exploits of Rinaldo and Antonio Lo Bianco, Masters of Jurisprudence at the University of Girgenti at the Time of King Martin the Younger (1402-1409)*. These Lo Biancos, he claimed, however nebulously, were his ancestors.

“How did he die?” he asked the doctor.

“See for yourself,” said the doctor, standing aside.

Montalbano stuck his head inside the car, which felt like an oven (more specifically, crematorium), took his first look at the corpse, and immediately thought of the police commissioner.

He thought of the commissioner not because he was in the habit of turning his thoughts up the hierarchical ladder at the start of every investigation, but merely because some ten days earlier he had spoken with old Commissioner Burlando, who was a friend of his, about a book by Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, which they had both read. The commissioner had argued that every death, even the most abject, was sacred. Montalbano had retorted, in all sincerity, that in no death, not even a pope’s, could he see anything sacred whatsoever.

He wished the commissioner were there beside him now, to see what he saw. This Luparello had always been an elegant sort, extremely well-groomed in every physical detail. Now, however, his tie was gone, his shirt rumpled, his glasses askew, his jacket collar incongruously half turned up, his socks sagging so flaccidly that they covered his loafers. But what most struck the inspector was the sight of the trousers pulled down around the man’s knees, the white of the underwear showing inside the trousers, the shirt rolled up together with the undershirt halfway up his chest.

And the sex organ obscenely, horridly exposed, thick and hairy, in stark contrast with the meticulous care shown over the rest of his person.

“But how did he die?” he asked the doctor again, coming out of the car.

“Seems obvious, don’t you think?” Pasquano replied rudely. “You did know he’d had heart surgery,” he continued, “performed by a famous London surgeon?”

“No, I did not. I saw him on TV last Wednesday, and he looked in perfect health to me.”

“He may have looked healthy, but he wasn’t. You know, in politics they’re all like dogs: the minute they realize you can’t defend yourself, they attack. Apparently he had a double bypass in London. They say it was a difficult operation.”

“Who was his doctor in Montelusa?”

“My colleague Capuano. He was getting weekly checkups. His health was very important to him—you know, always wanted to look fit.”

“You think I should talk to Capuano?”

“Absolutely unnecessary. It’s plain as day what happened here. Poor Mr. Luparello felt like having a good lay in the Pasture, maybe with some exotic foreign slut, and he had it, all right, and left his carcass behind.”

He noticed that Montalbano had a faraway look in his eyes.

“Not convinced?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t really know, to tell you the truth. Can you send me the results of the autopsy tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?! Are you crazy? Before Luparello I’ve got that twenty-year-old girl who was raped in a shepherd’s hut and found eaten by dogs ten days later, and then there’s Fofò Greco, who had his tongue cut out and his balls cut off before they hung him from a tree to die, and then—”

Montalbano cut this macabre list short.

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“Pasquano, let’s get to the point. When can you get me the results?”

“Day after tomorrow, if in the meantime I don’t have to run all over town looking at other corpses

They said good-bye. Montalbano called over the sergeant and his men and told them what they had to do and when to load the body into the ambulance. He had Gallo drive him back to headquarters.

“You can go back afterward and pick up the others. And if you speed, I’ll break your neck.”

Pino and Saro signed the sworn statement. In it their every movement before and after they discovered the body was described. But it neglected to mention two important things, which the garbage collectors had been careful not to reveal to the law. The first was that they had almost immediately recognized the dead man, the second that they had hastened to inform the lawyer Rizzo of the discovery. They headed back home, Pino apparently with his thoughts elsewhere, Saro now and again touching the pocket that still held the necklace.

Nothing would happen for at least another twenty-four hours. In the afternoon Montalbano went back to his house, threw himself down on the bed, and fell into a three-hour sleep. When he woke, the mid-September sea was flat as a mirror, he went for a long swim. Back inside, he made himself a dish of spaghetti with a sauce of sea urchin pulp and turned on the television. Naturally, all the local news programs were talking about Luparello’s death. They sang his praises, and from time to time a politician would appear, with a face to fit the occasion, and enumerate the merits of the deceased and the problems created by his passing. But not a single one of them, not even the news program of the opposition’s channel, dared to mention where and in what circumstances the late lamented Luparello had met his end.

Saro and Tana had a bad night. There was no doubt Saro had discovered a secret treasure, the kind to be found in tales where vagabond shepherds stumble upon ancient jars full of gold coins or find little lambs covered in diamonds. But here the matter was not at all as in olden times: the necklace, a modern construction, had been lost the day before, this much was certain, and by anyone's guess it was worth a fortune. Was it possible nobody had come forward to declare it missing? As they sat at their small kitchen table, with the television on and the window wide open, like every night, to keep the neighbors from getting nosy and gossiping at the sight of the slightest change, Tana wasted no time opposing her husband's intention to go and sell it that very day, as soon as the Siracusa brother's jewelry shop reopened.

"First of all," she said, "we're honest people. We can't just go and sell something that's not ours."

"But what are we supposed to do? You want me to go to the foreman and tell him I found the necklace, turn it over to him, and have him give it back to its owner when they come to reclaim it? That bastard Pecorilla'll sell it himself in ten seconds flat."

"We could do something else. We could keep the necklace at home and in the meantime tell Pecorilla about it. Then if somebody comes for it, we'll give it to them."

"What good will that do us?"

"There's supposed to be a percentage for people who find things like this. How much do you think it's worth?"

"Twenty million lire, easy," Saro replied, immediately thinking he'd blurted out too high a figure. "So let's say we get two million. Can you tell me how we're going to pay for all of Nenè's treatment with two million lire?"

They talked it over until dawn and only stopped because Saro had to go to work. But they'd reached a temporary agreement that allowed their honesty to remain intact: they would hang on to the necklace without whispering a word to anyone, let a week go by, and then, if nobody came forward, they'd pawn it.

When Saro, washed up and ready to leave, went to kiss his son, he had a surprise: Nenè was sleeping deeply, peacefully, as if he somehow knew that his father had found a way to make him well.

Pino couldn't sleep that night either. Speculative by nature, he liked the theater and had acted in several well-meaning but increasingly rare amateur productions in and around Vigàta. So he read theatrical literature. As soon as his meager earnings would allow him, he would rush off to Montelusa's only bookstore and buy his fill of comedies and dramas. He lived with his mother, who had a small pension, and getting food on the table was not really a problem. Over dinner his mother had made him tell her three times how he discovered the corpse, asking him each time to better explain a certain detail or circumstance. She'd done this so that she could retell the whole story the next day to her friends at church or at the market, proud to be privy to such knowledge and to have her son so clever as to get himself involved in such an important affair. Finally, around midnight, she'd gone to bed, and shortly thereafter Pino turned in as well. As for sleeping, however, there was r

chance of that; something made him toss and turn under the sheets. He was speculative by nature, we said, and thus, after wasting two hours trying to shut his eyes, he'd convinced himself it was no use, it might as well be Christmas Eve. He got up, washed his face, and went to sit at the little desk he had in his bedroom. He repeated to himself the story he had told his mother, and although every detail fit and it all made sense, the buzz in his head was still there, in the background. It was like the "hot or cold" guessing game: as long as he was reviewing everything he'd said, the buzz seemed to be saying "You're cold." Thus the static must be coming from something he'd neglected to tell his mother. And in fact what he hadn't told her were the same things he, by agreement with Saro, had kept from Inspector Montalbano: their immediate recognition of the corpse and the phone call to Rizzo. And here the buzz became very loud and screamed, "You're hot hot hot!" So he took a pen and paper and wrote down word for word the conversation he'd had with the lawyer. He reread it and made some corrections, forcing himself to remember even the pauses, which he wrote in, as in a theatrical script. When he had got it all down, he reread the final draft. Something in that dialogue still didn't work. But it was too late now; he had to go to Splendor.

Around ten o'clock in the morning, Montalbano's reading of the two Sicilian dailies, one from Palermo and the other from Catania, was interrupted by a phone call from the commissioner.

"I was told to send you thanks," the commissioner began.

"Oh, really? On whose behalf?"

"On behalf of the bishop and our minister. Monsignor Teruzzi was pleased with the Christian charity—those were his exact words—which you, how shall I say, put into action by not allowing any unscrupulous, indecent journalists and photographers to paint and propagate lewd portraits of the deceased."

"But I gave that order before I even knew who it was! I would have done the same for anybody."

"I'm aware of that; Jacomuzzi told me everything. But why should I have revealed such an irrelevant detail to our holy prelate? Why should I disabuse him, or you, of your Christian charity? Such charity, my dear man, becomes all the more precious the loftier the position of the object of charity, you know what I mean? Just imagine, the bishop even quoted Pirandello."

"No!"

"Oh, yes. He quoted *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the line where the father says that one cannot be held forever to a less-than-honorable act, after a life of great integrity, just because of one moment of weakness. In other words, we cannot pass on to posterity the image of Luparello with his pants momentarily down."

"What did the minister say?"

"He certainly didn't quote Pirandello, since he wouldn't even know who that is, but the idea, however tortuous and mumbled, was the same. And since he belongs to the same party as Luparello, he took the trouble to add another word."

"What was that?"

"Prudence."

"What's prudence got to do with this business?"

“I don’t know, but that’s the word he used.”

“Any news of the autopsy?”

“Not yet. Pasquano wanted to keep him in the fridge until tomorrow, but I talked him into examining him late this morning or early in the afternoon. I don’t think we’re going to learn anything new from that end, though.”

“No, probably not,” Montalbano concurred.

Returning to his newspapers, Montalbano learned much less from them than he already knew of the life, miracles, and recent death of Silvio Luparello, engineer. They merely served to refresh his memory. Heir to a dynasty of Montelusa builders (his grandfather had designed the old train station and his father the courthouse), young Silvio, after graduating with highest honors from Milan Polytechnic, had returned to his hometown to carry on and expand the family business. A practicing Catholic, he had embraced the political ideals of his grandfather, a passionate follower of Don Luigi Sturzo (the ideals of his father, who had been a Fascist militia-man and participated in the March on Rome, were kept under a respectful veil of silence), and had cut his teeth at the FUCI, the national organization of Catholic university students, creating a solid network of friendships for himself. Thereafter, on every public occasion—demonstration, assembly, or gala—Silvio Luparello had always showed up alongside the party bigwigs, but always one step behind them, half smiling as if to say that he stood there by choice, not out of hierarchical protocol. Officially drafted numerous times as a candidate in both the local and parliamentary elections, he had withdrawn every time for the noblest of reasons (always duly brought to the public’s attention), invoking that humility, that desire to serve in silence and shadow, proper to every true Catholic. And in silence and shadow he had served for nearly twenty years, until the day when, fortified by all that his eagle eyes had seen in the shadow, he took a few servants of his own, first and foremost Deputy Cusumano. Later he would likewise get Senator Portolano and Chamber Deputy Tricomi to wear his livery (though the papers called them “fraternal friends” and “devoted followers”). In short, the whole party, in Montelusa and its province, had passed into his hands, as had some 80 percent of all public and private contracts. Not even the earthquake unleashed by a handful of Milanese judges, unseating a political class that had been in power for fifty years, had touched him. On the contrary: having always remained in the background, he could now come out into the open, step into the light, and thunder against the corruption of his party cronies. Barely a year’s time, as the standard-bearer for renewal, he had become provincial secretary, to the acclaim of the rank and file. Unfortunately, however, this glorious appointment had come a mere three days before his death. One newspaper lamented the fact that cruel fate had not granted a man of such lofty and exemplary stature the time needed to restore his party to its former splendor. In commemorating him, both newspapers together recalled his great generosity and kindheartedness, his readiness to lend a hand, in any circumstance, to friend and foe alike, without partisan distinction.

With a shudder, Montalbano remembered a news story he’d seen the previous year on some local TV station. In the town of Belfi, his grandfather’s birth-place, Luparello was dedicating a small orphanage, named after this same grandfather. Some twenty small children, all dressed alike, were singing a song of thanks to the engineer, who listened with visible emotion. The words of that little song had etched themselves indelibly in the inspector’s memory:

*What a good man,  
What a fine fellow  
Is our dear  
Signor Luparello.*

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In addition to glossing over the circumstances of the engineer's death, the newspapers also carefully ignored the rumors that had been swirling for untold years around far less public affairs in which he had been involved. There was talk of rigged contract competitions, kickbacks in the billions of lire, pressures applied to the point of extortion. And in all these instances the name that constantly popped up was that of Counselor Rizzo, first the caddy, then the right-hand man, and finally the alter ego of Luparello. But these always remained rumors, voices in the air and on the wind. Some even said that Rizzo was a liaison between Luparello and the Mafia, and on this very subject the inspector had once managed to read a confidential report that spoke of currency smuggling and money laundering. Suspicions, of course, and nothing more, since they were never given a chance to be substantiated: every authorization request for an investigation had been lost in the labyrinths of that same courthouse the engineer's father had designed and built.

At lunchtime Montalbano phoned the Montelusa flying squad and asked to speak with Corporal Ferrara. She was the daughter of an old schoolmate of his who had married young, an attractive, sharp-witted girl who every now and then, for whatever reason, would try to seduce him.

"Anna? I need you."

"What? I don't believe it."

"Do you have a couple of free hours this afternoon?"

"I'll get them, Inspector. Always at your service, night and day. At your beck and call, even, or as you like, at your whim."

"Good. I'll come and pick you up in Montelusa, at your house, around three."

"This must be happiness."

"Oh, and, Anna, wear feminine clothes."

"Spike heels and slit dress, that sort of thing?"

"I just meant not in uniform."

Punctually, at the second honk, Anna came out the front door in skirt and blouse. She didn't ask any questions and limited herself to kissing Montalbano on the cheek. Only when the car turned onto one of the three small byways that led from the provincial road to the Pasture did she speak.

"Um, if you want to fuck, let's go to your house. I don't like it here."

At the Pasture there were only two or three cars, but the people inside them clearly did not belong to Gegè Gullotta's evening shift. They were students, boys and girls, married lovers who had nowhere else to go. Montalbano took the little road to the end, not stopping until the front tires were already sinking into the sand. The large shrub next to which Luparello's BMW had been found was on the left but could not be reached by that route.

"Is that where they found him?" asked Anna.

“Yes.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s get out.”

As they headed toward the water’s edge, Montalbano put his arm around her waist and pressed her toward him; she rested her head on his shoulder, smiling. She now understood why the inspector had invited her along: it was all an act. Together they would look like a pair of lovers who had found a place to be alone at the Pasture. In their anonymity they would arouse no curiosity.

*What a son of a bitch!* she thought. *He doesn’t give a shit about my feelings for him.*

At a certain point Montalbano stopped, his back to the sea. The shrub was in front of them, about a hundred yards away as the crow flies. There could be no doubt: the BMW had come not by way of the small roads but from the beach side and had stopped after circling toward the bush, its nose facing the old factory; that is, in the exact opposite position to that which all the other cars coming off the provincial road had to take, there being absolutely no room in which to maneuver. Anyone who wanted to return to the provincial road had no choice but to go back up the byways in reverse. Montalbano walked another short distance, his arm still around Anna, his head down: he could find no tire tracks; the sea had erased everything.

“So what now?”

“First I have to call Fazio. Then I’ll take you back home.”

“Inspector, may I tell you something in all honesty?”

“Of course.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Inspector? Pasquano here. Where the hell have you been hiding? I’ve been looking for you for three hours, and at headquarters they couldn’t tell me anything.”

“Are you angry at me, Doctor?”

“At you? At the whole stinking universe!”

“What have they done to you?”

“They forced me to give priority to Luparello, the same way, exactly, as when he was alive. So even in death the guy has to come before everyone else? I suppose he’s first in line at the cemetery, too?”

“Was there something you wanted to tell me?”

“Just an advance notice of what I’m going to send you in writing. Absolutely nothing: the departed died of natural causes.”

“Such as?”

“To put it in unscientific terms, his heart burst, literally. In every other respect he was healthy, you know. It was only his pump that didn’t work, and that’s what screwed him, even though they made a valiant attempt to repair it.”

“Any other marks on the body?”

“What sort of marks?”

“I don’t know, bruises, injections . . .”

“As I said, nothing. I wasn’t born yesterday, you know. And anyway, I asked and obtained permission for my colleague Capuano, his regular doctor, to take part in the autopsy.”

“Covering your ass, eh Doc?”

“What did you say?”

“Something stupid, I’m sorry. Did he have any other ailments?”

“Why are you starting over from the top? There was nothing wrong with him, just a little high blood pressure. He treated it with a diuretic, took a pill every Thursday and Sunday, first thing in the morning.”

“So on Sunday, when he died, he had taken it.”

“So what? What the hell’s that supposed to mean? That his diuretic pill had been poisoned? You think we’re still living in the days of the Borgias? Or have you started reading remaindered mystery novels? If he’d been poisoned, don’t you think I would have noticed?”

“Had he dined that evening?”

“No, he hadn’t.”

“Can you tell me at what time he died?”

“You’re going to drive me crazy with questions like that. You must be watching too many American movies, you know, where as soon as the cop asks what time the crime took place, the coroner tells him the murderer finished his work at six-thirty-two P.M., give or take a few seconds thirty-six days ago. You saw with your own eyes that rigor mortis hadn’t set in yet, didn’t you? You

felt how hot it was in that car, didn't you?"

"So?"

"So it's safe to say the deceased left this world between seven and nine o'clock the evening before he was found."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else. Oh yes, I almost forgot: Mr. Luparello died, of course, but he did manage to do first—to have sex, that is. Traces of semen were found around his lower body."

"Mr. Commissioner? Montalbano here. I wanted to let you know I just spoke with Dr. Pasquano on the phone. The autopsy's been done."

"Save your breath, Montalbano. I know everything already: around two o'clock I got a call from Jacomuzzi, who was there and filled me in. Wonderful, eh?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"It's wonderful, that is, that someone in this fine province of ours should decide to die a natural death and thereby set a good example. Don't you think? Another two or three deaths like Luparello and we'll start catching up with the rest of Italy. Have you spoken to Lo Bianco?"

"Not yet."

"Please do so at once. Tell him there are no more problems as far as we're concerned. They can go on with the funeral whenever they like, if the judge gives the go-ahead. Listen, Montalbano—I forgot to mention it this morning—my wife has invented a fantastic new recipe for baby octopus. Can you make it Friday evening?"

"Montalbano? This is Lo Bianco. I wanted to bring you up to date on things. Early this afternoon I got a phone call from Dr. Jacomuzzi."

*What a wasted career!* Montalbano thought furiously to himself. *In another age he would have made an excellent town crier.*

"He told me the autopsy revealed nothing abnormal," the judge continued. "So I authorized burial. Do you have any objection?"

"None."

"Can I therefore consider the case closed?"

"Think I could have two more days?"

He could hear, literally hear, the alarm bells ringing in the judge's head.

"Why, Montalbano? Is there something wrong?"

"No, Your Honor, nothing at all."

"Well, why then, for the love of God? I'll confess to you, Inspector—I've no problem doing so—that I, as well as the chief prosecutor, the prefect, and the commissioner, have been strongly pressured to bring this affair to an end as quickly as possible. Nothing illegal, mind you. Urgent entreaties, a very proper, on the part of those—family, political friends—who want to forget the whole sad story a

soon as possible. And they're right, in my opinion."

"I understand, Your Honor. But I still need two days, no more."

"But why? Give me a reason!"

He found an answer, a pretext. He couldn't very well tell the judge his request was founded on nothing, or rather on the feeling that he'd been hoodwinked—he didn't know how or why—by someone who at that moment was proving himself to be shrewder than he.

"If you really must know, it's out of concern for public opinion. I wouldn't want anyone to start whispering that we closed the case in haste because we had no intention of getting to the bottom of things. As you know, it doesn't take much to start people thinking that way."

"If that's how you feel, then all right. You can have your forty-eight hours. But not a minute more. Try to understand the situation."

"Gegè? How's it going, handsome? Sorry to wake you at six-thirty in the evening."

"Fucking shit!"

"Gegè, is that any way to speak to a representative of the law? Especially someone like you, who before the law can only shit your pants? And speaking of fucking, is it true you're doing it with a ten-and-change black man?"

"Ten-and-change?"

"Inches of cock."

"Cut the shit. What do you want?"

"To talk to you."

"When?"

"Tonight, late. You tell me what time."

"Let's make it midnight."

"Where?"

"The usual place, at Puntasecca."

"A big kiss for your pretty lips, Gegè."

"Inspector Montalbano? This is Prefect Squatrito. Judge Lo Bianco communicated to me just now that you asked for another twenty-four hours—or forty-eight, I can't remember—to close the case of the late Mr. Luparello. Dr. Jacomuzzi, who has politely kept me informed of all developments, told me that the autopsy established unequivocally that Luparello died of natural causes. Far be it from me to think—what am I saying, to even dream—of interfering in any way, since in any case there'd be no reason to do so, but do let me ask you: why this request?"

"My request, sir, as I have already explained to Justice Lo Bianco and will now reiterate, was dictated by a desire for transparency, to nip in the bud any malicious supposition that the police department might prefer not to clarify every aspect of the case and wish to close it without due verification of all leads. That's all."

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