The Terracotta Dog

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Published by Picador

Extract

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First published 2002 by Viking Penguin,
a member of Penguin Putnam Inc., New York

First published in Great Britain 2004 by Picador

First published in paperback 2004 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN-13: 978-0-330-49291-1
ISBN-10: 0-330-49291-8

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Originally published in Italian as *Il cane di terracotta* by Sellerio editore, Palermo.

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

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ONE

To judge from the entrance the dawn was making, it promised to be a very iffy day – that is, blasts of angry sunlight one minute, fits of freezing rain the next, all of it seasoned with sudden gusts of wind – one of those days when someone who is sensitive to abrupt shifts in weather and suffers them in his blood and brain is likely to change opinion and direction continuously, like those sheets of tin, cut in the shape of banners and roosters, that spin every which way on rooftops with each new puff of wind.

Inspector Salvo Montalbano had always belonged to this unhappy category of humanity. It was something passed on to him by his mother, a sickly woman who used to shut herself up in her bedroom, in the dark, whenever she had a headache, and when this happened one could make no noise about the house and had to tread lightly. His father, on the other hand, on stormy seas and smooth, always maintained an even keel, always the same unchanging state of mind, rain or shine.

This time, too, the inspector did not fail to live up to

his inborn nature. No sooner had he stopped his car at the ten-kilometre marker along the Vigàta–Fela highway, as he had been told to do, than he felt like putting it back in gear and returning to town, bagging the whole operation. He managed to control himself, brought the car closer to the edge of the road, opened the glove compartment, and reached for the pistol he normally did not carry on his person. His hand, however, remained poised in mid-air: immobile, spellbound, he stared at the weapon.

Good God! It's real! he thought.

The previous evening, a few hours before Gegè Gullotta called to set up the whole mess – Gegè being a small-time dealer of soft drugs and the manager of an open-air bordello known as 'the Pasture' – the inspector had been reading a detective novel by a writer from Barcelona who greatly intrigued him and had the same surname as he, though hispanicized: Montalbán. One sentence in particular had struck him: 'The pistol slept, looking like a cold lizard.' He withdrew his hand with a slight feeling of disgust and closed the glove compartment, leaving the lizard to its slumber. After all, if the whole business that was about to unfold turned out to be a trap, an ambush, he could carry all the pistols he wanted, and still they would fill him with holes with their Kalashnikovs however and whenever they so desired, thank you and good night. He could only hope that Gegè, remembering the years they'd spent together on the same bench in elementary school and the friendship they'd carried over into adulthood, had not decided, out of self-interest, to sell him like pork at the market, feeding

him any old bullshit just to lead him to the slaughter. No, not just any old bullshit: this business, if for real, could be really big, make a lot of noise.

He sighed deeply and began to make his way slowly, step by step, up a narrow, rocky path between broad expanses of vineyard. The vines bore table grapes, with round, firm seeds, the kind called, who knows why, 'Italian grapes', the only kind that would take in this soil. As for trying to grow vines for making wine, you were better off sparing yourself the labour and expense.

The two-storey cottage, one room on top of another, was at the summit of the hill, half hidden by four large Saracen olive trees that nearly surrounded it. It was just as Gegè had described it. Faded, shuttered windows and door, a huge caper bush in front, with some smaller shrubs of touch-me-not – the small, wild cucumber that squirts seeds into the air if you touch it with the tip of a stick – a collapsed wicker chair turned upside down, an old zinc bucket eaten up by rust and now useless. Grass had overgrown everything else. It all conspired to give the impression that the place had been uninhabited for years, but this appearance was deceptive, and experience had made Montalbano too savvy to be fooled. In fact, he was convinced somebody was eyeing him from inside the cottage, trying to guess his intentions from the moves he would make. He stopped three steps away from the front of the house, took off his jacket, and hung it from a branch of the olive tree so they could see he wasn't armed. Then he called out

without raising his voice much, like a friend come to visit a friend.

'Hey! Anybody home?'

No answer, not a sound. Montalbano pulled a lighter and a packet of cigarettes from his trouser pocket, put a cigarette in his mouth, and lit it, turning round halfway to shelter himself from the wind. That way whoever was inside the house could examine him from behind, having already examined him from the front. He took two puffs, then went to the door and knocked with his fist, hard enough to hurt his knuckles on the crusts of paint on the wood.

'Is there anyone here?' he asked again.

He was ready for anything, except the calm, ironic voice that surprised him from behind.

'Sure there is. Over here.'

*

It had all started with a phone call.

'Hello? Hello? Montalbano! Salvuzzo! It's me, Gegè.'

'I know it's you. Calm down. How are you, my little honey-eyed orange blossom?'

'I'm fine.'

'Working the mouth hard these days? Been perfecting your blow-job techniques?'

'Come on, Salvù, don't start with your usual faggot stuff. You know damn well that I don't work myself. I only make other mouths work for me.'

'But aren't you the instructor? Aren't you the one who

teaches your multicoloured assortment of whores how to hold their lips and how hard to suck?'

'Salvù, even if what you're saying was true, they'd be the ones teaching me. They come to me at age ten already well trained, and at fifteen they're top-of-the-line professionals. I've got a little Albanian fourteen-year-old—'

'You trying to sell me your merchandise now?'

'Listen, I got no time to fuck around. I have something I'm supposed to give you, a package.'

'At this hour? Can't you get it to me tomorrow morning?'

'I won't be in town tomorrow.'

'Do you know what's in the package?'

'Of course. *Mostaccioli* with mulled wine, the way you like 'em. My sister Mariannina made them just for you.'

'How's Mariannina doing with her eyes?'

'Much better. They work miracles in Barcelona.'

'They also write good books in Barcelona.'

'What's that?'

'Never mind. Just talking to myself. Where do you want to meet?'

'The usual place, in an hour.'

*

The usual place was the little beach of Puntasecca, a short tongue of sand beneath a white marl hill, almost inaccessible by land, or rather, accessible only to Montalbano and Gegè, who back in grade school had discovered a trail that

was difficult enough on foot and downright foolhardy to attempt by car. Puntasecca was only a few kilometres from Montalbano's little house by the sea just outside of Vigàta, and that was why he took his time. But the moment he opened the door to go to his rendezvous, the telephone rang.

'Hi, darling. It's me, right on time. How did things go today?'

'Business as usual. And you?'

'Ditto. Listen, Salvo, I've been thinking long and hard about what—'

'Livia, sorry to interrupt, but I haven't got much time. Actually I don't have any time at all. You caught me just as I was going out of the door.'

'All right then, goodnight.'

Livia hung up and Montalbano was left standing with the receiver in his hand. Then he remembered that the night before, he had told her to call him at midnight on the dot, because they would certainly have as much time as they wanted to talk at that hour. He couldn't decide whether to call Livia back right then or when he returned, after his meeting with Gegè. With a pang of remorse, he put the receiver down and went out.

*

When he arrived a few minutes late, Gegè was already waiting for him, pacing back and forth the length of his

car. They exchanged an embrace and kissed; it had been a while since they'd seen each other.

'Let's go sit in my car,' said the inspector, 'it's a little chilly tonight.'

'They put me up to this,' Gegè broke in as soon as he sat down.

'Who did?'

'Some people I can't say no to. You know, Salvù, like every businessman, I gotta pay my dues so I can work in peace and keep the Pasture, or they'd put me out to pasture in a hurry. Every month the good Lord sends our way, somebody comes by to collect.'

'For whom? Can you tell me?'

'For Tano the Greek.'

Montalbano shuddered, but didn't let his friend notice. Gaetano 'the Greek' Bennici had never so much as seen Greece, not even through a telescope, and knew as much about things Hellenic as a cast-iron pipe, but he came by his nickname owing to a certain vice thought in the popular imagination to be greatly appreciated in the vicinity of the Acropolis. He had three certain murders under his belt, and in his circles held a position one step below the top bosses. But he was not known to operate in or around Vigàta; it was the Cuffaro and Sinagra families who competed for that territory. Tano belonged to another parish.

'So what's Tano the Greek's business in these parts?'

'What kind of stupid question is that? What kind of fucking cop are you? Don't you know that for Tano the Greek there's no such thing as "these parts" and "those

parts" when it comes to women? He was given control and a piece of every whore on the island.'

'I didn't know. Go on.'

'Around eight o'clock this evening the usual guy came by to collect; today was the appointed day for paying dues. He took the money, but then, instead of leaving, he opens his car door and tells me to get in.'

'So what'd you do?'

'I got scared and broke out in a cold sweat. What could I do? I got in, and we drove off. To make a long story short, he took the road for Fela, and stopped after barely half an hour's drive . . .'

'Did you ask him where you were going?'

'Of course.'

'And what did he say?'

'Nothing, as if I hadn't spoken. After half an hour, he makes me get out in some deserted spot without a soul around, and gestures to me to follow some dirt road. There wasn't even a dog around. At a certain point, and I have no idea where he popped out from, Tano the Greek suddenly appears in front of me. I nearly had a stroke, my knees turned to butter. Don't get me wrong, I'm no coward, but the guy's killed five people.'

'Five?'

'Why, how many do you think he's killed?'

'Three.'

'No way. It's five, I guarantee it.'

'Okay, go on.'

'I got to thinking. Since I always pay on time, I figured

Tano wanted to raise the price. Business is good, I got no complaints, and they know it. But I was wrong, it wasn't about money.'

'What did he want?'

'Without even saying hello, he asked me if I knew you.'

Montalbano thought he hadn't heard right.

'If you knew who?'

'You, Salvù, you.'

'And what did you tell him?'

'Well, I was shitting my pants, so I said, yeah, I knew you, but just casually, by sight – you know, hello, how ya doin'. And he looked at me, you gotta believe me, with a pair of eyes that looked like a statue's eyes, motionless, dead, then he leaned his head back and gave this little laugh and asked me if I wanted to know how many hairs I had on my arse 'cause he could tell me within two. What he meant was that he knew everything about me from the cradle to the grave, and I hope that won't be too soon. And so I just looked at the ground and didn't open my mouth. That's when he told me he wanted to see you.'

'When and where?'

'Tonight, at dawn. I'll tell you where in a second.'

'Do you know what he wants from me?'

'I don't know and I don't want to know. He said to rest assured you could trust him like a brother.'

Like a brother. Those words, instead of reassuring Montalbano, sent a shiver down his spine. It was well known that foremost among Tano's three – or five – murder victims was his older brother Nicolino, whom he first

strangled and then, in accordance with some mysterious semiological rule, meticulously flayed. The inspector started thinking dark thoughts, which became even darker, if that was possible, at the words that Gegè, putting his hand on his shoulder, then whispered in his ear.

'Be careful, Salvù, the guy's an evil beast.'

*

He was driving slowly back home when the headlights of Gegè's car behind him started flashing repeatedly. He pulled over and Gegè, pulling up, leaned all the way across the seat towards the window on the side closest to Montalbano and handed him a package.

'I forgot the *mostaccioli*.'

'Thanks. I thought it was just an excuse.'

'What do you think I am? Somebody who says something and means something else?'

He accelerated away, offended.

*

The inspector spent the kind of night one tells the doctor about. His first thought was to phone the commissioner, wake him up, and fill him in, to protect himself in the event the affair took any unexpected turns. But Tano the Greek had been explicit, according to Gegè: Montalbano must not say anything to anyone and must come to the appointment alone. This was not, however, a game of cops and robbers: his duty was his duty. That is, he must inform

his superiors and plan, down to the smallest details, how to surround and capture the criminal, perhaps with the help of considerable reinforcements. Tano had been a fugitive for nearly ten years, and he, Montalbano, was supposed to go and visit him as if he were some pal just back from America? There was no getting around it, the commissioner must by all means be informed of the matter. He dialed the number of his superior's home in Montelusa, the provincial capital.

'Is that you, love?' murmured the voice of Livia from Boccadasse, Genoa.

Montalbano remained speechless for a moment. Apparently his instinct was leading him away from speaking to the commissioner, making him dial the wrong number.

'Sorry about before. I had just received an unexpected phone call and had to go out.'

'Never mind, Salvo, I know what your work is like. Actually, I'm sorry I got upset. I was just feeling disappointed.'

Montalbano looked at his watch: he had at least three hours before he was supposed to meet Tano.

'If you want, we could talk now.'

'Now? Look, Salvo, it's not to get back at you, but I'd rather not. I took a sleeping pill and can barely keep my eyes open.'

'All right, all right. Till tomorrow, then. I love you, Livia.'

Livia's tone of voice suddenly changed, becoming more awake and agitated.

'Huh? What's wrong? Eh, what's wrong, Salvo?'

'Nothing's wrong. What could be wrong?'

'Oh, no you don't, you're hiding something. Are you about to do something dangerous? Don't make me worry, Salvo.'

'Where do you get such ideas?'

'Tell me the truth, Salvo.'

'I'm not doing anything dangerous.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Why not, for Christ's sake?'

'Because you said "I love you", and since I've known you, you've said it only three times. I've counted them, and every time it was for something out of the ordinary.'

The only hope was to cut the conversation short; with Livia, one could easily end up talking till morning.

'Ciao, my love. Sleep well. Don't be silly. I have to go out again.'

*

So how was he going to pass the time now? He took a shower, read a few pages of the book by Montalbán, understood little, shuffled from one room to the other, straightening a picture, re-reading a letter, a bill, a note, touching everything that came within his reach. He took another shower and shaved, managing to cut himself right on the chin. He turned on the television and immediately shut it off. It made him feel nauseated. Finally, it was time. As he was on his way out, he decided he needed a *mostacciolo.*

With sincere astonishment, he saw that the box on the table had been opened and not a single pastry was left in the cardboard tray. He had eaten them all, too nervous to notice. And what was worse, he hadn't even enjoyed them.