

The Scent of the Night

Andrea Camilleri

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Extract

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ONE

The shutter outside the wide-open window slammed so hard against the wall that it sounded like a gunshot. Montalbano, who at that moment was dreaming he was in a shoot-out, suddenly woke up, sweaty and at the same time freezing cold. He got up, cursing, and ran to close everything. The north wind was blowing so icy and insistent that instead of brightening the colours of the morning as it had always done, it was carrying them away, erasing them by half, leaving behind only after-images, or rather faint blotches of the sort made by a Sunday water-colourist. Apparently the summer, which several days earlier had already entered its final throes, had decided during the night to give up the ghost and make way for the season to come, which should have been autumn. Should have been, because, in fact, to judge from the entry it was making, this autumn was already looking like the depths of winter.

Lying back down, Montalbano started elegizing on the disappearance of the transitional seasons. Where had they

gone? Swept up like everything else by the ever faster rhythm of human existence, they too had adjusted. Realizing they represented a pause, they had died out, because nowadays no pause can ever be granted by this increasingly frenzied rat race and the endless verbs that feed it: living, eating, studying, fucking, producing, zapping, buying, selling, shitting, dying. Endless verbs that last only, however, a nanosecond, the twinkling of an eye. But weren't there once other verbs as well? To think, to meditate, to listen, and — why not? — to loaf, to daydream, to wander . . . Practically with tears in his eyes, Montalbano reminisced about spring and autumn clothes and the lightweight coat his father used to wear. Which made him realize that, to go to work, he'd have to put on a winter suit.

Making an effort, he got up and opened the armoire where he kept his heavy clothes. The stink of several tons of mothballs assailed his nostrils. At first it took his breath away, then his eyes started watering and he began to sneeze. He sneezed some twelve times in a row, mucus running down from his nose, head ringing, the pain in his chest growing sharper and sharper. He had forgotten that Adelina, his housekeeper, had forever been waging her own personal, all-out war against moths, from which she always, implacably, emerged defeated.

The inspector gave up. He closed the armoire, went over to the chest of drawers, and pulled out a heavy sweater. Here too Adelina had used chemical weapons, but Montalbano was ready this time and held his breath. He

went out on the veranda and laid the sweater down on the table, to air out at least some of the smell. But when, after washing, shaving, and getting dressed, he came back out on the veranda to put it on, the sweater — the very one, brand new, that Livia had brought him from London — was gone! How was he ever going to explain to her that some son of a bitch had been unable to resist the temptation and had reached out and grabbed it, thank you very much? He imagined exactly how the conversation with his girlfriend would go:

'Well, fancy that! It was to be expected!'

'What do you mean?'

'Because it was a gift from me!'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'It's got everything to do with it! Everything! You never attach any importance to the things I give you! Like the shirt I brought you from—'

'I still have it.'

'Of course you still have it! You've never worn it! And what is this, anyway, the famous Inspector Montalbano getting robbed by some two-bit thief? It's enough to make you bury your head in the sand!'

And at that moment he saw it. The sweater, that is. Buffeted away by the north wind, it was rolling along the sand, and as it rolled and rolled, it got closer and closer to the point where the water soaked the beach with each new wave.

Montalbano leapt over the railing and ran, sand filling

his socks and shoes, and arrived just in time to snatch the sweater away from an angry wave that looked particularly hungry for that article of clothing.

Walking back to the house, half blinded by the sand whipped into his eyes by the wind, he had no choice but to accept that the sweater had been reduced to a formless, sodden mass of wool. Once inside, the phone rang.

'Hi, darling. How are you? I wanted to let you know that I won't be at home today. I'm going to the beach with a friend.'

'You're not going to the office?'

'No, it's a holiday here. Feast of San Giorgio, patron saint of Genoa.'

'The weather's nice up there?'

'Fabulous.'

'Well, have fun. Talk to you tonight.' This was all he needed to make his day. Here he was, shivering with cold, while Livia would be lying blissfully in the sun. Still further proof that the world was no longer turning the way it used to. Now up north you died of heat, and down south you'd soon be seeing ice, bears, and penguins.

He was getting ready to reopen the armoire, holding his breath, when the phone rang again. He hesitated a moment, but then the thought of the upset stomach he would get from another whiff of mothballs persuaded him to pick up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Oh, Chief, Chief!' yelled the tortured, panting voice of Catarella. 'Is that you yourself in person, Chief?'

'No.'

'Then who is this with whom I'm speaking with?'

'This is Arturo, the inspector's twin brother.'

Why was he fucking around with that poor idiot? To vent his bad mood?

'Really?' said Catarella, astonished. 'Excuse me, Mr Twin Brother Arturo, but if the inspector's like roundabout the house, couldja tell 'im I need to talk to him?'

Montalbano let a few seconds go by. Maybe the story he'd just invented could come in handy on another occasion. He wrote down on a piece of paper, '*My brother's name is Arturo*,' then greeted Catarella.

'Here I am! What's up?'

'Oh, Chief, Chief! All hell's breaking out! You know the premises where that broker Gragano gots his office?'

'You mean Gargano?'

'Yes. Why, ain't that what I said? Gragano.'

'Never mind. I know where it is. What about it?'

'What's about it's a man with a gun's about it. Sergeant Fazio seen 'im when he was just chancing to be passing by by chance. Looks like he's got a mind to shoot the lady that works there. Says as how he wants all the money back that Gragano stole from 'im or he's gonna kill the lady.'

The inspector threw the sweater onto the floor, kicked it under the table, and was out of the door. The time it

took to get in the car was enough for the north wind to send him into seizures.

*

The *ragioniere* Emanuele Gargano, a tall, handsome, well-dressed forty-year-old with always the right shade of suntan, looked like an American film star. He belonged to that short-lived breed of businessman that is the fast climber, short-lived because by the age of fifty they're already so worn out that they're ready for the scrap heap (the latter being a favourite expression of theirs). *Ragioniere* Gargano, by his own account, was born in Sicily but had worked a long time in Milan, where, in short, and again by his own account, he'd made a name for himself as a kind of financial miracle worker. Then, judging himself sufficiently famous, he'd decided to go into business for himself in Bologna, where, still by his own account, he'd brought fortune and happiness to dozens of small investors. Some two years back he'd surfaced in Vigàta, to work towards what he called 'the economic reawakening of this beloved and unlucky land of ours', and in just a few days he had set up offices in four of the larger towns of Montelusa province. He was a man who was never at a loss for words and had great powers of persuasion over everyone he met, always with a big, reassuring smile on his face. In a week's time — spent racing from one town to the next in a shiny, eye-popping luxury car, a kind of lure for his prey — he had won over about a hundred clients, average age sixty or

more, who had turned their life savings over to him. After six months had passed, the ageing pensioners were called in to pick up, risking heart attacks on the spot, a twenty per cent return on their investment. The *ragioniere* then summoned all his clients from the surrounding province to Vigàta for a gala dinner, at the end of which he let it be known that, in the coming term, the returns might even be slightly higher. The news spread and people began lining up at the counters of his various local offices, begging Gargano to take their money. Which the *ragioniere* magnanimously accepted. In this second wave, alongside the oldsters were handfuls of kids anxious to make money as quickly as possible. At the end of the second term, the returns of the first group of clients increased to twenty-three per cent. It was smooth sailing for a while, with a stiff tail wind, but then, one day towards the end of the fourth term, Emanuele Gargano failed to show up. His agencies' employees and clients waited two days and then decided to phone Bologna, where the general management office of 'King Midas Associates' – the name of the *ragioniere's* investment firm – was supposedly located. Nobody answered. A quick investigation led to the discovery that the premises of King Midas Associates, leased by said firm, had been turned back over to their legal owner, who for his part was furious that the rent hadn't been paid for many months. After a week of pointless searches yielded not a trace of Gargano in or around Vigàta, and after several riotous assaults on the agencies by people

who had invested their money with Midas, two schools of thought emerged concerning the *ragioniere's* mysterious disappearance.

The first had it that Emanuele Gargano, after changing his name, must have moved to an island in Oceania, where he was now living it up with beautiful half-naked women, laughing all the while at those who'd placed their trust and savings in his hands.

The second found it more likely that the *ragioniere* had carelessly made off with some mafioso's money and was now serving as fertilizer six feet underground or as fish feed in the local waters.

In all of Montelusa province there was one woman, however, who saw things differently. Only one, and her name was Mariastella Cosentino.

Fiftiish, stocky, and homely, Mariastella had applied for a job at Midas's Vigàta agency and, after a brief but intense meeting with the boss in person, had been taken on. That's how the story went. Yet however brief the meeting, it had been long enough for the woman to fall hopelessly in love with the *ragioniere*. And while this was the second job for Mariastella — who, after getting a degree in accounting, had stayed home for many years to help out her parents and later her widowed father, who'd become more and more demanding before he died — it was, in fact, her first love. For Mariastella had been promised since birth to a distant cousin she'd never seen except in photographs and never known in person because he died

of an unknown illness in his youth. Things were different this time, however, and Mariastella had not only seen her beloved alive and speaking on several occasions, but had even, one morning, got so close as to smell the scent of his aftershave. That incident drove her to do something audacious – so audacious, indeed, that she would never in the world have thought herself capable of it. She took the bus to Fiacca to visit a relative who owned a perfume shop and, after smelling bottle after bottle, found the aftershave used by her beloved. She bought a flask of it, which she kept in the drawer of her bedside table. On certain nights, when she woke up alone in bed, alone in the large, empty house and overcome with distress, she would uncork it and inhale the scent, and this allowed her to go back to sleep, murmuring, 'Good night, my love.'

Mariastella was convinced that Emanuele Gargano had not run away with all the money entrusted to him, much less been killed in some row with the Mafia. When questioned by Mimì Augello (Montalbano had no desire to get involved in the case, claiming he didn't understand a damn thing about money matters), Miss Cosentino had stated that, in her opinion, the *ragioniere* must be suffering from temporary amnesia and would reappear sooner or later and set all the wagging tongues to rest. And she'd said this with such lucid fervour that Augello was in danger of believing it himself.

Armed with her faith in Gargano's honesty, Mariastella would open up the office every morning, sit down and wait

for her love to return. Everyone in town laughed at her. Everyone, that is, who hadn't had any dealings with the *ragioniere*, since those who'd lost their money were not in a laughing mood. The day before, Gallo had told Montalbano that Miss Cosentino had even gone to the bank to pay, out of her own pocket, the rent that was due on the office. So why had the guy now threatening her with a gun got it in his head to take it out on her? Poor thing, she had nothing to do with the whole affair. And why, in fact, had the distraught investor come up with his brilliant idea so late, some thirty days after Gargano's disappearance, in other words at a time when most of the *ragioniere's* victims had resigned themselves to the worst? Montalbano belonged to the first school of thought, the one that believed that the *ragioniere* had split after screwing everybody, and he felt very sorry for Mariastella Cosentino. Every time he happened to pass in front of the agency and saw her sitting there calmly behind the counter, he felt an ache in his heart that would stay with him for the rest of the day.

*

There were about thirty people in front of the King Midas office, heatedly talking and wildly gesticulating, and kept at bay by three municipal policemen. Recognizing the inspector, they surrounded him.

'Is it true there's a man with a gun inside?'

'Who is he? Who is he?'

He forced his way through the crowd, shoving and yelling, and finally reached the entrance to the building. But here he stopped, slightly bewildered. Inside he saw, recognizing them from behind, Mimi Augello, Fazio, and Galluzzo, who looked as if they were involved in some strange kind of ballet: first bending their upper bodies to the right, then to the left, then taking one step forward, one step back. He opened the glass outer door without a sound and got a better look at the scene. The office consisted of a single spacious room divided in two by a wooden counter with a sheet of glass and a cashier's window on top. Beyond this partition were four empty desks.

Mariastella Cosentino was sitting at her usual place behind the cashier's window, very pale, but calm and composed. One came and went between the two sections of the office through a small wooden door in the partition itself.

The assailant, or whatever he was — Montalbano didn't know how to define him — was standing right in the little doorway between the two sections, so that he could keep his gun trained simultaneously on Mariastella and the three policemen. He was an old man of about eighty whom the inspector recognized at once, a respected land surveyor named Salvatore Garzullo. Partly because of nervous tension, partly because of fairly advanced Parkinson's, the pistol — which dated surely back to the days of Buffalo Bill and the Sioux — was shaking so badly in the old man's

hands that whenever he aimed it at one of the inspector's men, they all took fright because they couldn't tell where an eventual shot might end up.

'I want back the money that son of a bitch stole from me, or I'm going to kill the lady!'

The land surveyor had been yelling this same demand without variation for over an hour, and by now he was getting worn out and hoarse. More than speaking, he seemed to be making gargling sounds.

Montalbano took three resolute steps, walked past the line formed by his men, and held out his hand to the old man, a smile beaming across his face.

'Dear Mr Garzullo, what a pleasure to see you! How are you?'

'I'm doing all right, thanks,' said Garzullo, confused.

But he recovered himself immediately when he saw Montalbano about to take another step towards him.

'Stay where you are or I'll shoot!'

'For Heaven's sake, Inspector, be careful!' Miss Cosentino said in a steady voice. 'If someone has to be sacrificed for Mr Gargano, let it be me. I'm ready!'

Instead of bursting out laughing at the melodrama of these lines, Montalbano felt enraged. If he could have had Gargano in his hands at that moment, he would have slapped his face to a bloody pulp.

'Let's not be foolish! Nobody here is going to be sacrificed!'

Then, turning back to the land surveyor, he began his improvisation.

'Excuse me, Mr Garzullo, but where were you yesterday evening?'

'What the hell is it to you?' the old man retorted combatively.

'For your own good, answer me.'

The old man pursed his lips, then finally decided to open his mouth.

'I'd just got back home. I was four months in Palermo hospital, and that was where they told me Gargano ran off with my money. Everything I had, after a life of hard work!'

'So yesterday evening you did not turn on the television?'

'I didn't wanna hear any of that bullshit.'

'So *that's* why you don't know!' said Montalbano, triumphant.

'What is it I'm supposed to know?' asked Garzullo, dumbfounded.

'*Ragioniere* Gargano's been arrested.'

The inspector looked out of the corner of his eye at Mariastella. He was expecting a scream, or any reaction at all; but the woman remained immobile, looking more confused than convinced.

'Really?' said the old man.

'Word of honour,' said Montalbano, in a superb

performance. 'They arrested him and confiscated twelve big suitcases stuffed full of money. They're going to start giving the money back to its rightful owners this very morning in Montelusa, at the Prefecture. Do you have the receipt for the amount you gave to Gargano?'

'I sure do!' said the old man, tapping with his free hand against his jacket pocket, where he kept his wallet.

'So there's no problem, it's all been settled,' said Montalbano.

He walked up to the old man, took the pistol out of his hand, and set it down on the counter.

'Think I could go to the Prefecture tomorrow?' Garzullo asked. 'I'm not feeling so well.'

He would have collapsed onto the floor if the inspector hadn't been ready to catch him.

'Fazio and Galluzzo, quick, put him in the car and take him to the hospital.'

The two policemen picked up the old man, who, as he was being carried past Montalbano, managed to say: 'Thanks for everything.'

'Not at all, you're very welcome,' said Montalbano, feeling like the biggest heel in the world.