Rounding the Mark

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Extract

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ONE

Stinking, treacherous night. Thrashing and turning, twisting and drifting off one minute, jolting awake and then lying back down – and it wasn't from having bolted down too much octopus *a strascinasali* or sardines *a beccafico* the evening before. No, he didn't even have that satisfaction. The evening before, his stomach had twisted up so tight that not even a blade of grass could have slipped through. It had all started when dark thoughts assailed him after he'd seen a story on the national evening news. When it rains it pours – *all'annigatu, petri di 'ncoddru* – or, 'rocks on a drowned man's back' as Sicilians call an unrelenting string of bad breaks that drag a poor man down. And since he'd been desperately flailing in storm-tossed seas for a few months now, feeling at times like he'd already drowned, that news had been like a big rock thrown right at him, at his head, in fact, knocking him out and finishing off what feeble strength he had left.

With an air of utter indifference, the anchor-woman

had announced, in reference to the police raid of the Diaz School during the G8 meetings in Genoa, that the public prosecutor's office of that city had concluded that the two Molotov cocktails found inside the school had been planted there by the policemen themselves, to justify the raid. This finding, continued the anchor-woman, came after the discovery that an officer who claimed to have been the victim of an attempted stabbing by an anti-globalist during the same raid had, in fact, been lying. The cut in his uniform turned out to have been made by the policeman himself, to show just how dangerous these kids were, and it was now emerging that the only thing those young people were doing at the Diaz School was sleeping peacefully. After hearing this news, Montalbano had sat there in his armchair for a good half-hour, unable to think, shaking with rage and shame, drenched in sweat. He hadn't even had the strength to get up and answer the telephone when it rang and rang. One needed only think a minute about this news – which the press and television were leaking out in dribs and drabs as the government watchfully looked on – and it became clear that his Genoese colleagues had committed an illegal action on the sly, a coldly calculated vendetta, fabricating evidence into the bargain, the sort of thing that brought to mind long-buried episodes of the Fascist police or the Scelba period.

Then he'd made up his mind and decided to go to bed. As he got up from the armchair, the telephone resumed its

irritating refrain of rings. Without even realizing, he picked up the receiver. It was Livia.

'Salvo! My God, I've tried calling you so many times! I was starting to get worried! Couldn't you hear the phone?'

'I could, but I didn't feel like answering. I didn't know it was you.'

'What were you doing?'

'Nothing. Thinking about what I'd just seen on television.'

'You mean what happened in Genoa?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh. I saw the news, too.' She paused, then: 'I wish I was there with you. Do you want me to catch a plane tomorrow and come down? That way we could talk in peace. You'll see—'

'Livia, there's not much left to say at this point. We've talked it over many times these last few months. This time I'm serious. I've made my decision.'

'What decision?'

'I'm resigning. Tomorrow I'm going to go and talk to Commissioner Bonetti-Alderighi and give him my resignation. I'm sure he'll be delighted.'

Livia did not immediately react, and Montalbano thought perhaps they'd been cut off.

'Hello, Livia? Are you there?'

'I'm here. Salvo, in my opinion you're making a big mistake to leave this way.'

'What way?'

'Out of anger and disappointment. You want to leave the police force because you feel betrayed, as if the person you trusted most—'

'Livia, I don't *feel* betrayed, I *have been* betrayed. We're not talking about feelings here. I've always done my job honourably. With integrity. If I gave a crook my word, I kept it. And that's why I'm respected. That's been my strength, can you understand that? But now I'm fed up, I'm sick of it all.'

'Please don't yell,' said Livia, her voice quavering.

Montalbano didn't hear her. There was a strange noise inside him, as if his blood had reached boiling point. He continued:

'I never once fabricated evidence, not even against the worst criminals! Never! If I had, I would have been stooping to their level. And then you really could have said that this is a filthy job! Do you realize what happened, Livia? The people attacking that school and planting false evidence weren't a bunch of stupid, violent beat policemen; they were commissioners and vice-commissioners, inspectors and captains and other paragons of virtue!'

Only then did he realize that the noise he was hearing in the receiver was Livia sobbing. He took a deep breath.

'Livia?'

'Yes?'

'I love you. Goodnight.'

He hung up. Then he went to bed. And the treacherous night began.

*

The truth of the matter was that Montalbano's malaise had set in a while back, when the television had first shown the Prime Minister strolling up and down the narrow streets of Genoa, tidying the flower boxes and ordering the inhabitants to remove the underwear hung out to dry on balconies and windowsills while his Interior Minister was adopting security measures more suited for an imminent civil war than for a meeting of heads of state: setting up wire fences to block access to certain streets, soldering shut the manholes, sealing the country's borders, closing certain railway stations, establishing boat patrols at sea, and even installing a battery of missiles. This was such an excessive display of defence, thought the inspector, that it became a kind of provocation. Then what happened, happened: one of the demonstrators got killed, of course, but perhaps the worst of it was that certain police units had thought it best to fire tear gas at the most peaceable demonstrators, leaving the most violent ones, the so-called 'black bloc', free to do as they pleased. Then came the ugly episode at the Diaz School, which resembled not so much a police operation as a wicked and violent abuse of power with the sole purpose of venting a repressed lust for revenge.

*

Three days after the G8, as polemics raged all over Italy, Montalbano had arrived late to work. No sooner had he pulled up in his car and got out, than he'd noticed two painters whitewashing one of the walls outside the station.

'Ahh, Chief, Chief!' cried Catarella, seeing him come in. 'They wrote us some nasty things last night!'

Montalbano didn't immediately understand.

'Who wrote to us?'

'I don't poissonally know them that writ 'em.'

What the hell was Catarella talking about?

'Was it anonymous?'

'No, Chief, it wasn't on nominus, it was onna wall outside. An' 'at was why Fazio, foist ting this morning, called for the painers to come cover it up.'

At last the inspector understood why the two painters were there.

'What'd they write on the wall?'

Catarella turned beetroot red and attempted an evasion.

'They wrote some bad words with black spray paint.'

'Yeah, like what?'

'Sleazeball cops,' replied Catarella, keeping his eyes lowered.

'Is that all?'

'No, sir. They also wrote "murderers". Sleazeballs and murderers.'

'Why you taking it so hard, Cat?'

Catarella looked like he was about to burst into tears.

''Cause nobody in here's no sleazeball or murderer,

startin' wit' you, sir, and endin' wit' me, the smallest wheel on the cart.'

By way of consolation, Montalbano patted Catarella's shoulder and headed towards his office. Catarella called him back.

'Oh, Chief! I almost forgot. They also wrote "goddamn cuckolds".'

Imagine ever finding any obscene graffiti in Sicily without the word 'cuckold' in it! The word was a guarantee of authenticity, a classic expression of so-called Sicilitude. The inspector had just sat down when Mimì Augello came in. He was cool as a cucumber, his face relaxed and serene.

'Any news?' he asked.

'Did you hear what they wrote on the wall last night?'

'Yeah, Fazio told me.'

'Doesn't that seem like news to you?'

Mimì gave him a befuddled look.

'Are you joking or serious?'

'I'm serious.'

'Well, then, swear to me on a stack of Bibles. Do you think Livia cheats on you?'

This time it was Montalbano who gave Mimì a puzzled look.

'What the fuck are you talking about?'

'So you're not a cuckold. And I don't think Beba cheats on me, either. OK, on to the next word: sleazeball. True, two or three women have called me a sleaze, I won't deny it. But I bet nobody's ever called you one, so that word

doesn't refer to you. Murderer, forget it. So what's the problem?'

'Well, aren't you the razor wit, with your Sunday crossword-puzzle logic!'

'Wait a second, Salvo. Is this somehow the first time we've been called bastards, sons of bitches, and murderers?'

'The difference is that this time, it's true.'

'Ah, so that's how you see it?'

'Yes, it is. Explain to me why we acted that way in Genoa, after years and years without any incidents of that sort.'

Mimì looked at him, eyelids drooping so low that they nearly covered his eyes, and said nothing.

'Oh, no you don't!' said the inspector. 'Answer me verbally, not with that little "cop stare" of yours.'

'All right. But first I want to make something clear. I'm in no mood to pick any bones with you. OK?'

'OK.'

'I know what's bugging you. The fact that all this happened under a government that you don't trust and openly oppose. You think the political leaders are up to their necks in this affair.'

'Excuse me, Mimì, but have you read the newspapers? Have you watched the TV news? They have all said, more or less clearly, that at the time, there were people in the command rooms in Genoa that had no business being there: ministers, members of Parliament, all from the same party.

The party that's always calling for law and order. Their law and their order, mind you.'

'And what does that mean?'

'It means that part of the police force, the most fragile part – even though they think they're the strongest – felt protected. So they went wild. And this, in the best of cases.'

'Could there be any worse?'

'Of course. Maybe we were manipulated, like marionettes on a stage, by people who wanted to conduct a kind of test.'

'What kind of test?'

'Of how people would react to a show of force. How many favourably, how many unfavourably. Luckily it didn't go too well for them.'

'Bah!' said Augello, unconvinced.

Montalbano decided to change the subject.

'How's Beba doing?'

'Not too well. She's having a difficult pregnancy. She can't sit up much and has to lie down most of the time, but the doctor says it's nothing to be worried about.'

*

After miles and miles of solitary walks along the jetty, hours and hours spent sitting on the rock of tears, contemplating the events in Genoa until his brain began to smoke; after eating what must have amounted to several hundred pounds of *càlia e simenza*; after countless night-time phone

conversations with Livia, the wound the inspector carried inside him was beginning at last to heal when he got wind of another brilliant police action, this time in Naples. A handful of cops had been arrested for forcibly removing some allegedly violent political activists from a hospital into which they'd been admitted. After bringing them to a barracks, the police treated them to a flurry of kicks and punches and a torrent of obscenities and insults. But what most upset Montalbano was the reaction of other policemen to the news of their colleagues' arrest. Some chained themselves to the gate of the Central Police building in an act of solidarity; others organized demonstrations in the streets; the unions made some noise; and a deputy commissioner who in Genoa had kicked a demonstrator already on the ground was greeted as a hero when he came to Naples. The same politicians who'd been in Genoa for the G8 were behind this curious (though not so curious for Montalbano) semi-revolt on the part of the forces of order against the judges who had issued the arrest warrants. And Montalbano couldn't take it any more. This last, bitter morsel he just couldn't swallow. One morning, as soon as he got to work, he called Dr Lattes, chief of the Montelusa police commissioner's cabinet. Half an hour later, Lattes informed him, through Catarella, that the commissioner could see him at twelve noon on the dot. The men at the station, who had learned to gauge their boss's mood from the way he walked into the office each morning, realized at

once that this was not a good day. And so, from the vantage point of Montalbano's desk, the station seemed deserted that morning. No voices, no sounds whatsoever. Catarella was standing guard at the entrance door, and as soon as anyone came in, he opened his eyes wide, put his forefinger over his nose, and enjoined the intruder to silence.

'Sssssshhhh!'

All who entered the station acted like they were attending a wake.

Around ten o'clock, Mimì Augello, after knocking discreetly and being told to come in, entered the inspector's office with a grim expression on his face. As soon as he saw him, Montalbano got worried.

'How's Beba doing?'

'Fine. Can I sit down?'

'Of course.'

'Can I smoke?'

'Of course, but don't let the minister see you.'

Augello fired up a cigarette, inhaled, and held the smoke in his lungs a long time.

'You can exhale now,' said Montalbano. 'You have my permission.'

Mimì looked at him, confused.

'Yes,' the inspector continued, 'this morning you seem Chinese to me. You ask my permission for every little thing. What's wrong? Is it so hard to tell me what you want to tell me?'

'Yes,' Augello admitted. He put out his cigarette, got more comfortable in his chair, and began, 'Salvo, you know I've always thought of you as my father—'

'Where'd you get that idea?'

'Where'd I get what idea?'

'That I'm your father. If it was your mother who told you, she's a liar. I'm fifteen years older than you, and though I may have been precocious, at age fifteen I wasn't—'

'Salvo, I didn't say you were my father, I said I thought of you as a father.'

'And you got off on the wrong foot. Drop the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost shit. Just say what you have to say and get the hell out of my hair, 'cause today's not a good day.'

'Why did you ask to see the commissioner?'

'Who told you that?'

'Catarella.'

'I'll deal with him later.'

'No, you won't. If anything, you'll deal with me right now. I was the one who told Catarella to tell me if you contacted Bonetti-Alderighi, which I expected you would do sooner or later.'

'But what's so unusual about me, an inspector, wanting to talk to my superior?'

'Salvo, you know you can't stand Bonetti-Alderighi. You hate his guts. If he was a priest at your deathbed wanting to give you last rites, you'd get up out of bed and

kick him out of your room. I'm gonna talk to you straight, OK?'

'Talk however the fuck you like.'

'You want to leave.'

'A little holiday would do me some good.'

'You're unbearable, Salvo. You want to resign.'

'Don't I have the right?' Montalbano burst out, sitting up at the edge of his chair, ready to leap to his feet.

Augello wasn't intimidated.

'You have every right. But first let me finish telling you what I have to say. Remember when you said you had a suspicion?'

'A suspicion of what?'

'That the events in Genoa had been deliberately provoked by a political faction that in one way or another had promised to protect the police. Remember?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I just want to point out to you that what happened in Naples happened when there was a Centre-Left government in power, before the G8 meetings. We just didn't find out about it till later. What do you make of that?'

'That makes it even worse. Do you think I haven't thought about these things, Mimì? It means the whole problem is a lot more serious than we realize.'

'How's that?'

'It means the rot is inside us.'

'Did you just find that out today? With all the books

you've read? If you want to leave, go ahead and leave. But not right now. Leave because you're tired, because you've reached the age limit, because your haemorrhoids hurt, because your brain can't function any more, but don't quit now.'

'And why not?'

'Because it would be an insult.'

'An insult to whom?'

'To me, for one – and I may be a womanizer, but I'm a decent man. To Catarella, who's an angel. To Fazio, who's a classy guy. To everybody who works for the Vigàta Police. To Commissioner Bonetti-Alderighi, who's a pain in the arse and a formalist, but deep down is a good person. To all your colleagues who admire you and are your friends. To the great majority of people who work for the police and have nothing to do with the handful of rogues at the top and the bottom of the totem pole. You're slamming the door in all of our faces. Think about it. See you later.'

He got up, opened the door, and went out. At eleven thirty Montalbano had Catarella ring up the commissioner's office. He told Dr Lattes he wouldn't be coming; the thing he had to tell him was of little importance, no importance at all.

After phoning, he felt the need for some sea air. Passing by the switchboard, he said to Catarella:

'Now run off and report to Inspector Augello.'

Catarella looked at him like a beaten dog.

'Why do you wanna insult me, Chief?'

Insult him. Everyone was feeling insulted by him, but he wasn't allowed to feel insulted by anyone.

*

All of a sudden he couldn't stand to lie in bed another minute, hashing and rehashing the words he'd exchanged with Mimì over the last few days. Hadn't he communicated his decision to Livia? What was done was done. He turned towards the window. A faint light filtered in. The clock said a few minutes before six. He got up and opened the shutters. To the east, the glow of the imminent sunrise sketched arabesques of wispy, rainless clouds. The sea was a little stirred up by the morning breeze. He let the air fill his lungs, feeling a bit of his treacherous night being carried off with each exhalation. He went in the kitchen, filled the coffee pot and, while waiting for it to boil, opened the doors to the veranda.

The beach – at least as far as the eye could see through the haze – looked deserted by man and beast. He drank two cups of coffee, one right after the other, put on his swimming trunks, and went down to the beach. The sand was wet and compacted; maybe it had rained during the night. At the water's edge, he stuck his foot out. The water felt a lot less icy than he had feared. He advanced warily, cold shudders running up his spine. *Why, at over fifty years of age, do I keep trying to do these stunts?* he asked himself. *I'll probably end up with one of those colds that numbs my head and has me sneezing for a week.*

He began swimming in slow, broad strokes. The sea smelt harsh, stinging his nostrils like champagne, and he nearly got drunk on it. Montalbano kept swimming and swimming, his head finally free of all thought, happy to have turned into a kind of mechanical doll. He was jolted back to human reality when a cramp suddenly bit into his left calf. Cursing the saints, he flipped onto his back and did the dead man's float. The pain was so sharp that it made him grit his teeth. Sooner or later it would pass. These damned cramps had become more frequent in the last two or three years. Signs of old age lurking round the corner? The current carried him lazily along. The pain was starting to abate, and this allowed him to take two arm-strokes backwards. At the end of the second stroke, his hand struck something.

In a fraction of a second, Montalbano realized he'd struck a human foot. Somebody else was floating right beside him, and he hadn't noticed.

'Excuse me,' he said hastily, flipping back onto his belly and looking over at the other.

The person beside him didn't answer, however, because he wasn't doing the dead man's float. He was actually dead. And, to judge from the way he looked, he'd been so for quite a while.