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The Paper Moon

Andrea Camilleri

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The alarm rang, as it had done every morning for the past year, at seven thirty. But he had woken up a fraction of a second before the bell; the release of the spring that set off the ringing had sufficed. He therefore had time, before jumping out of bed, to look at the window and realize, from the light, that the day promised to be a fine one, without clouds. Afterwards he just barely had time to make coffee, drink a cup, do what he needed to do, shave and shower, drink another cup, fire up a cigarette, get dressed, go outside, get into his car and pull up at the station at nine – all at the slapstick speed of Larry Semon or Charlie Chaplin.

Until a year earlier, his morning wake-up routine had followed different rules and, most of all, there was no rush, no hundred-yard dashes.

First, no alarm clock.

Montalbano was in the habit of opening his eyes naturally after a night's sleep, with no need of external stimuli. He did have an alarm clock of sorts, but it was inside him, buried somewhere in his brain. He merely had to set it before falling asleep, telling himself, 'Don't forget you have to get up tomorrow at six,' and the next morning his eyes would pop open at six o'clock sharp. He'd always considered the alarm clock, the metal kind, a sort of instrument of torture. The three or four times he'd had to use that drill-like noise to wake up – because Livia, who had to leave the next morning, didn't trust his inner alarm – he'd spent the rest of the day with a headache. Then Livia, after a squabble, had bought a plastic alarm clock that instead of ringing made an electronic sound, a kind of unending beeeeeep, rather like a little fly that had found its way into your ear and got stuck inside. Enough to drive you crazy. He'd ended up throwing it out of the window, which had set off another memorable spat.

Second, he would wake himself up, intentionally, a bit earlier than necessary, some ten minutes earlier at the very least.

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These were the best ten minutes of the day ahead. Ah, how wonderful it was to lie in bed, under the covers, thinking of idiocies! Should I buy that book everybody's calling a masterpiece or not? Should I eat out today, or come home and bolt down what Adelina's prepared for me? Should I or shouldn't I tell Livia that I can't wear the shoes she bought me because they're too tight? That sort of thing. Poking about with the mind. While carefully avoiding any thought of sex or women. That could be dangerous terrain at such an hour, unless Livia was there sleeping beside him, ready and happy to face the consequences.

One morning a year earlier, however, things had suddenly changed. He had barely opened his eyes, calculating that he had a scant fifteen minutes to devote to his mental dawdlings, when a thought – not a whole one, but the start of one – came into his mind, and it began with these exact words: When your dying day comes . . .

What was this thought doing there with the others? How gutless! It was like suddenly remembering, while making love, that he hadn't paid the phone bill. Not that he was inordinately frightened by the idea of dying; the problem was that six thirty in the morning was hardly the proper time and place for it. If one started thinking about death at the crack of dawn, certainly by five in the afternoon one would either shoot oneself or jump into the sea with a rock round one's neck. He managed to prevent that phrase proceeding any further, blocking its path by counting very fast from one to five thousand, with eyes shut and fists clenched. Then he realized that the only solution was to set about doing the things he needed to do, concentrating on them as though it were a matter of life or death. The following morning was even more treacherous. The first thought that entered his mind was that the fish soup he'd eaten the night before had lacked some seasoning. But which? And at that exact moment the same ghastly thought came back to him: When your dying day comes . . .

As of then, he had understood that the thought would never go away. It might very well lie buried deep inside some curlicue in his brain for a day or two only to pop back out into the open when he least expected it. For no reason, he became convinced that his very survival depended on preventing that sentence ever completing itself. For if it did, he would die when the last word came.

Hence the alarm clock. To leave not even the slightest fissure in time for that accursed thought to slip through.

When she came to spend three days in Viga`ta, Livia, as she was unpacking, pointed at the bedside table and asked: 'What's that alarm doing there?'

He answered with a lie. 'Well, a week ago I had to get up really early and—'

'And a week later it's still set?'

When she put her mind to it, Livia was worse than Sherlock Holmes.

Embarrassed, he told her the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

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Livia burst out: 'You're demented!' And she buried the alarm clock in a drawer inside the armoire. The following morning it was Livia, not the alarm, who woke Montalbano. And it was a beautiful awakening, full of thoughts of life, not death. But as soon as she had left, the clock was back on the bedside table.

*

'Aah, Chief, Chief!'

'What is it, Cat?'

'There's a lady waiting for you.'

'For me?'

'She din't say what it was f 'you poissonally in poisson. She just said she wanted a talk to somebody from the police.'

'So why couldn't she talk to you?'

'Chief, she said she wanted a talk somebody superior to me.'

'Isn't Inspector Augello here?'

'No, sir. He called to say he was comin' in late 'cause he's runnin' late.'

'And why's that?'

'He says last night the baby got sick and so today the medical doctor's gonna come.'

'Cat, you don't have to say "medical doctor", just "doctor" is more than enough.'

'Iss not enough, Chief. Iss confusing. Take you, f 'rinstance. You's a doctor but not o' the medical variety.'

'What about the mother – Beba? Can't she wait for the med – the doctor herself?'

'Yessir, Miss Beba's there, Chief, but she says she wants him to be there too.'

'What about Fazio?'

'Fazio's with some kid.'

'What did this kid do?'

'Didn't do nothin, Chief. He's dead.'

'How'd he die?'

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'Doverose.'

'OK, tell you what. I'm going into my office now. You wait about ten minutes, then send in the lady.'

The inspector was furious with Augello. Ever since the baby was born, Mimý` had hovered over it as much as he'd hovered over women previously. He was head over heels in love with his young son, Salvo. That's right: not only had he called upon the inspector to baptize the kid, he'd also given him the wonderful surprise of naming him after him.

'Can't you give him your father's name, Mimý`?'

'Right! Imagine that – my father's called Eusebio.'

'So name him after Beba's father.'

'That'd be even worse. His name's Adelchi.'

'So the real reason you're naming him after me is because all the other available names seem too bizarre to you?'

'Come on, Salvo! First of all, I'm very fond of you, you're like a father to—'

A father? With a son like Mimý`?

'Oh, fuck off !'

Livia, upon learning that the newborn would be called Salvo, had burst into tears. Certain special circumstances moved her deeply. 'Mimý` loves you so much! Whereas you—'

'Oh, he loves me, does he? Do the names Eusebio and Adelchi mean anything to you?'

And ever since the kid was born, Mimý` had appeared at the station and disappeared just as fast: one minute Salvo (junior, of course) had the runs, the next minute he had red spots on his bottom or he was throwing up, the next he didn't want to suckle . . .

He'd complained about it, over the phone, to Livia.

'Oh, yeah? You've got a problem with Mimý`? All that means is he's a loving, conscientious father! I'm not so sure that you, in his position—'

He'd hung up on her.

He looked at the morning mail, which Catarella had left on his desk. By prior agreement with the post office, anything addressed to his house in Marinella was

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being forwarded to the station because sometimes he went a couple of days without returning home. Today there were only official letters, which he set aside, not feeling like reading them. He would hand them over to Fazio as soon as he got back.

The telephone rang.

'Chief, it's Dr Latte wit' an S at the end.'

Lattes, that was, chief of the commissioner's cabinet. To his horror, Montalbano had discovered a while back that Lattes had a clone in a government spokesman who appeared frequently on TV: the same air of the sacristy, the same porky-pink, beardless skin, the same little arselike mouth, the same unctuousness. An exact replica.

'My dear Montalbano, how's it going?'

'Very well, Doctor.'

'And the family? The children? Everything all right?'

He'd told him a million times he neither was married nor had any children, legitimate or illegitimate. But it was hopeless. The man was obsessed.

'Everything's fine.'

'Good, thank the Lord. Listen, Montalbano, the commissioner would like to talk to you at five o'clock this afternoon.'

Why did he want to talk to him? Usually Commissioner Bonetti-Alderighi carefully avoided him, preferring to summon Mimý` instead. It must be some colossal pain in the neck.

The door flew open violently, crashed against the wall, and Montalbano jumped out of his chair. Catarella appeared.

'Beck y'pardon, Chief, my 'and slipped. The ten minutes passed just now, just like you said.'

'Oh, yeah? Ten minutes have passed? What the hell do I care?'

'The lady, Chief.'

He'd completely forgotten. 'Is Fazio back?'

'Not yet so far, Chief.'

'Send her in.'

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A woman just under forty, who looked, at first glance, like a former Sister of Mercy: downcast eyes behind her glasses, hair in a bun, hands clenching her bag, the whole wrapped up in a broad grey frock that made it impossible to tell what lay beneath. Her legs, however – despite thick stockings and flat shoes – were long and beautiful. She stood hesitantly in the doorway, staring at the strip of white marble separating the floor tiles of the corridor from those in Montalbano's office.

'Come in, come in. Please close the door and make yourself comfortable.'

She obeyed, sitting on the very edge of one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

'What can I do for you, Signora?'

'Signorina. Michela Pardo. You're Inspector Montalbano, yes?'

'Have we met?'

'No, but I've seen you on television.'

'I'm listening.'

She seemed even more embarrassed. Settling her buttocks more comfortably into the chair, she stared at the toe of one of her shoes, swallowed twice, opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. 'It's about my brother, Angelo.'

And she stopped, as though the inspector needed only to know the name of her brother to grasp the whole problem in a flash.

'Signorina Michela, surely you realize—'

'I know, I know. Angelo has . . . he's disappeared. It's been two days. I'm sorry, I'm just very worried and confused and—'

'How old is your brother?'

'Forty-two.'

'Does he live with you?'

'No, he lives by himself. I live with Mamma.'

'Is your brother married?'

'No.'

'Does he have a girlfriend?'

'No.'

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'What makes you think he's disappeared?'

'Because he never lets a day go by without coming to see Mamma. And when he can't come, he telephones. And if he has to go away, he lets us know. We haven't heard from him for two days.'

'Have you tried calling him?'

'Yes, I've tried his home phone and his mobile. There's no answer. I even went to his house. I rang and rang the doorbell, then decided to go in.'

'You have the key to your brother's place?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you find there?'

'Everything was in perfect order. I was scared.'

'Does your brother suffer from any illness?'

'No.'

'What does he do for a living?'

'He's an informer.'

Montalbano balked. Had ratting on others become an established profession, with a year-end bonus and paid holidays, like Mafia turncoats, who had fixed salaries? He would clear this up in a minute.

'Is he often on the move?'

'Yes, but he works within a limited area. Basically he doesn't go beyond the boundaries of the province.'

'So, do you want to declare him a missing person?'

'No . . . I don't know.'

'I should warn you that we can't get moving on it straight away.'

'Why not?'

'Because your brother is an independent adult, healthy in body and mind. He might have decided to go away for a few days of his own accord. Understand? And, in the end, we don't know whether—'

'I understand. What do you suggest I do?'

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As she was asking this, she finally looked at him. Montalbano felt a sort of heatwave run through his body. Those eyes were exactly like a deep, violet lake that any man would gladly dive into and drown. It was a good thing Signorina Michela almost always kept them lowered. In his mind, Montalbano took two strokes and swam back to shore.

'Well, I would suggest you go back to your brother's place and have another look.'

'I did, yesterday. I didn't go inside, but I rang the doorbell for a long time.'

'All right – but maybe he's in no condition to come to the door.'

'Why would that be?'

'I dunno. Maybe he slipped in the bath and can't walk, or has a high fever—'

'Inspector, I didn't just ring the doorbell. I called to him. If he'd slipped in the bath, he would have answered. Angelo's apartment isn't very big.'

'I'm afraid I must insist you go back there.'

'I won't go alone. Would you come with me?' She looked at him again.

This time Montalbano found himself sinking, the water coming up to his neck. He thought about it for a moment, then decided. 'Listen, I'll tell you what. If you still haven't heard from your brother by seven o'clock this evening, come back to the station, and I'll accompany you.'

'Thank you.'

She stood up and held out her hand. Montalbano took it but couldn't bring himself to shake it. It felt like a piece of lifeless flesh.

*

Ten minutes later Fazio turned up. 'A seventeen-year-old kid. Went up to the terrace of his building and shot himself up with an overdose. There was nothing we could do, poor guy. When we got there he was already dead. The second in three days.'

Montalbano looked at him, dumbfounded. 'The second? You mean there was a first? Why wasn't I told about it?'

'Fasulo, the engineer, but with him it was cocaine,' said Fazio.

'Cocaine? What are you saying? Fasulo died of a heart-attack!'

'Well, that's what the death certificate says. It's what his friends say, too. But everybody in town knows it was drugs.'

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'Badly cut?'

'That I can't say, Chief.'

'Listen, do you know some guy named Angelo Pardo, forty-two years old and an informer?'

Fazio didn't seem surprised by Angelo Pardo's profession. Maybe he hadn't fully understood. 'No, sir. Why do you ask?'

'Seems he disappeared two days ago and his sister's getting worried.'

'You want me to—'

'No, but later, if there's still no news, we'll see.'

*

'Inspector Montalbano? This is Lattes.'

'What can I do for you?'

'Family all right?'

'I think we discussed them a couple of hours ago.'

'Of course. Listen, I'm supposed to tell you that the commissioner can't see you today, as you'd requested.'

'Doctor, it was the commissioner who asked to see me.'

'Really? Well, it makes no difference. Could you come tomorrow at eleven?'

'Definitely.'

Upon learning that he wouldn't be seeing the commissioner, his lungs filled with air and he felt suddenly ravenous. Enzo's trattoria was the only solution.

He stepped outside the police station. The day had the colours of summer, without the extreme heat. He walked slowly, taking his time, already tasting what he was about to eat. When he arrived in front of the trattoria, his heart fell to his feet. The restaurant was closed. Locked. What the hell had happened? In rage, he gave the door a swift kick, turned and started to walk away, cursing the saints. He'd taken barely two steps when he heard someone calling him.

'Inspector! Did you forget we're closed today?'

Damn! He had!

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'But if you want to eat with me and my wife . . .'

He dashed back. And ate so much that, as he was eating, he felt embarrassed, ashamed, but couldn't help himself. When he'd finished, Enzo nearly congratulated him. 'To your health, Inspector!'

The walk along the jetty was necessarily a long one. He spent the rest of the afternoon with eyelids drooping and head nodding, overcome by sleepiness. When this happened he would get up and go to wash his face.

At seven o'clock, Catarella told him the lady from the morning had returned.

As soon as she walked in, Michela Pardo said only one word: 'Nothing.'

She did not sit down. She was anxious to get to her brother's place as quickly as possible, and tried to communicate this to the inspector.

'All right,' said Montalbano. 'Let's go.'

Passing Catarella's cubby-hole, he told him: 'I'm going out with the lady. If you need me for anything, I'll be at home later.'

'Will you be coming in my car?' asked Michela Pardo, gesturing towards a blue Polo.

'Perhaps it would be best if I take my own and follow you. Where does your brother live?'

'It's a bit of a way, in the new district. Do you know Viga`ta Two?'

He knew Viga`ta Two. A nightmare dreamed up by some property speculator under the influence of the worst sort of hallucinogen. He wouldn't live there if he were dead.

Luckily for him and the inspector – who never in a million years would have spent more than five minutes in one of those gloomy six-by-ten-foot rooms defined in the brochures as 'spacious and sunny' – Angelo Pardo lived just past the new residential complex of Viga`ta Two in a small, restored nineteenth-century villa three storeys high. The front door was locked. As Michela unlocked it, Montalbano noticed that the intercom had six nameplates, which meant there were six apartments, two on the ground floor and four on the other floors.

'Angelo lives on the top floor and there's no lift.'

The staircase was broad and comfortable. The building seemed uninhabited. No voices, no sound of televisions. And yet it was the time of day when people were normally preparing their evening meal.

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On the top-floor landing there were two doors. Michela went to the one on the left. Before opening it, she showed the inspector a small window with a grille over it beside the steel-plated door. The little window's shutters were locked.

'I called him from here. Surely he would have heard me.'

She unlocked one, then another lock, turning the key four times, but did not go in. She stepped aside. 'Could you go first?'

Montalbano pushed the door, felt for the light switch, turned it on and entered. He sniffed at the air like a dog. He was immediately convinced that there was no human presence, dead or alive, in the apartment. 'Follow me,' he said to Michela.

The entrance led into a broad corridor. On the lefthand side, a master bedroom, bathroom and another bedroom. On the right, a study, kitchen, small bathroom and a smallish living room. All in perfect order and sparkling clean.

'Does your brother have a cleaning lady?'

'Yes.'

'When did she last come?'

'I couldn't say.'

'Listen, Signorina, do you visit your brother often?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

The question flustered Michela. 'What do you mean, "why"? He's my brother!'

'Granted, but you said Angelo comes to your and your mother's place practically every other day. So I suppose you come to see him here on the off days? Is that right?'

'Well . . . yes. But not so regularly.'

'OK. But why do you need to see each other when your mother's not around?'

'Good God, Inspector, when you put it that way . . . It's just something we've been in the habit of doing since we were children . . . There's always been, between Angelo and me, a sort of . . .'

'Complicity?'

'I suppose you could call it that.' She let out a giggle.

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Montalbano decided to change the subject. ‘Shall we go and see if a suitcase is missing? If all his clothes are here?’

Michela followed him into the master bedroom. She opened the armoire and looked at all the clothing, one article at a time. Montalbano noticed that it was all expensive, tailored stuff.

‘Everything’s here. Even the grey suit he was wearing last time he came to see us, three days ago. The only thing missing, I think, is a pair of jeans.’

On top of the armoire, wrapped in cellophane, were two elegant leather suitcases, one large and the other a little smaller.

‘The suitcases are here.’

‘Does he have an overnight bag?’

‘Yes. He usually keeps it in the study.’

They went into the study. The small bag lay beside the desk. One wall was covered with shelves of the sort one sees in pharmacies, enclosed in sliding glass panels. And in fact the shelves were stocked with a great many medicine containers: boxes, flasks, bottles.

‘Didn’t you say your brother was an informer?’

‘Yes. For the pharmaceutical industry.’

Montalbano understood. Angelo was what used to be called a pharmaceutical representative. But this profession, like dustmen turned ‘ecological agents’ or cleaning ladies promoted to the rank of ‘domestic collaborators’ had been ennobled with a new name more appropriate to the elegance of our age. The substance, however, remained the same.

‘He used to be – still is, actually – a doctor, but didn’t practise for very long,’ Michela felt obliged to add.

‘Fine. As you can see, Signorina, your brother’s not here. If you like, we can go.’

‘Let’s.’ She said it reluctantly, looked all around as if she thought she might, at the last moment, find her brother hiding inside a bottle of pills for liver disease.

Montalbano went ahead, waited for her to turn off the lights and double-lock the door with due diligence. They descended the stairs, silent amid the great silence of the building. Was it empty, or were they all dead? Once outside, Montalbano, seeing how disconsolate she looked, suddenly felt terribly sorry for her. ‘You’ll hear from your brother soon – you’ll see,’ he said to her softly, holding out his hand.

But she didn’t grasp it, only shook her head still more disconsolately.

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'Listen . . . your brother . . . is he seeing any . . . Isn't he in a relationship with anyone?'

'Not that I know of.' She eyed him. And as she did so, Montalbano swam desperately to avoid drowning. All at once the waters of the lake turned very dark, as though night had fallen.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

Without answering, she opened her eyes wide, and the lake turned into open sea.

Swim, Salvo, swim.

'What's wrong?' he repeated, between strokes.

Again she didn't answer. Turning her back to him, she unlocked the door, climbed the stairs, reached the top floor but didn't stop there. The inspector then noticed a recess in the wall with a spiral staircase leading up to a glass door. Michela climbed this and slipped a key into the door, but was unable to open it.

'Let me try,' he said.

He opened the door and found himself on a terrace as big as the villa. Pushing him aside, Michela ran towards a one-room structure, a sort of die standing practically in the middle. It had a door and, to one side, a window. But they were locked.

'I haven't got the key,' said Michela. 'I've never had one.'

'But why do you want . . . ?'

'This used to be the laundry. Angelo rented it with the terrace and transformed it. He comes here sometimes to read or to sun himself.'

'OK, but if you haven't got the key—'

'For heaven's sake, please break down the door.'

'Signorina, I cannot, under any circumstances . . .'

She looked at him. That was enough. With a single shoulder-thrust, Montalbano sent the plywood door flying. He went inside, but before he had even felt for the light switch, he yelled: 'Don't come in!'

He'd detected at once the smell of death in the room. Michela, however, even in the dark, must have noticed something because Montalbano caught first a stifled sob, then heard her fall to the floor, unconscious.

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'What do I do now?' he asked himself, cursing. He bent down, picked Michela up, and carried her as far as the glass door. Transporting her like that, though – as a groom carries his bride in movies – he would never make it down the spiral staircase. It was too narrow. So he put her down upright, embraced her around the waist, wrapping his hands around her back, and lifted her off the ground. In this way, with care, he could manage it. At moments, he was forced to squeeze her tighter and managed to notice that under the floppy dress, Michela hid a firm, girlish body. At last he arrived in front of the door to the other top-floor apartment and rang the bell, hoping someone was alive in there, or that the sound would at least wake them from the grave.

'Who is it?' asked an angry male voice.

'It's Inspector Montalbano. Could you open the door, please?'

The door opened and King Victor Emmanuel III appeared. An exact replica, that is: the same moustache, the same midget-like stature. Except that he was dressed in civvies. Seeing Montalbano with his arms round Michela, he got entirely the wrong idea and turned bright red.

'Please let me in,' said the inspector.

'What? You want me to let you inside? You're insane! You have the gall to ask me if you can have sex in my home?'

'No, look, Your Majesty, I—'

'Shame on you! I'm going to call the police!' And he slammed the door.

'Fucking idiot!' Montalbano gave the door a swift kick.

Thrown off balance by Michela's weight, he very nearly fell to the floor with her. He picked her up, again like a bride, and started carefully down the stairs. He knocked at the first door he came to.

'Who is it?'

A little boy, aged ten at most.

'I'm a friend of your dad's. Could you open?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because Mamma and Papa told me not to open the door to anyone when they're not in.'

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Only then did Montalbano remember that before he had lifted Michela off the ground he'd slipped her handbag over his arm. That was the answer. He carried her back up the stairs, propped her against the wall, holding her upright by pressing his own body against her (in no way unpleasant), opened the bag, took out the keys, opened the door to Angelo's apartment, dragged Michela into the master bedroom, laid her on the bed, went into the bathroom, grabbed a towel, soaked it under the tap, went back into the bedroom, placed the towel over her forehead and collapsed on to the bed, dead tired from the exertion. He was breathing heavily and drenched in sweat.

Now what? He certainly couldn't leave her alone and go back up to the terrace to see how things stood. The problem was immediately resolved.

'There he is!' shouted His Majesty, appearing in the doorway. 'See? He's getting ready to rape her!'

Behind him Fazio, pistol in hand, cursed. 'Please go home, sir.'

'You mean you're not going to arrest him?'

'Go home, now!'

Victor Emmanuel III had another brilliant idea.

'You're an accomplice! An accomplice! I'm going to call the Carabinieri!' He raced out of the room.

Fazio ran after him. He returned five minutes later. 'I managed to convince him. What on earth happened?'

Montalbano told him. Meanwhile he noticed that Michela was regaining consciousness. 'Did you come alone?' he asked.

'No, Gallo's waiting in the car.'

'Get him to come up.'

Fazio called him on his mobile phone, and Gallo arrived in a jiffy.

'Keep an eye on this woman. When she comes round, do not under any circumstance let her go up to the terrace. Got that?'

Followed by Fazio, Montalbano climbed back up the spiral staircase. It was pitch black on the terrace. Night had fallen.

He entered the little room and turned on the light. A table covered with newspapers and magazines. A refrigerator. A sofa-bed for one person. Four long planks affixed to the wall that served as a bookcase. There was a small drinks cabinet with bottles and glasses. A sink in a corner. A large leather armchair of the sort one used to see in

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offices. He'd set himself up nicely, this Angelo. Who lay collapsed in the armchair, half of his face blasted off by the shot that had killed him. He was dressed in a shirt and jeans – whose zip was open, dick dangling between his legs.

'What should I do – call?' asked Fazio.

'Call,' said Montalbano. 'I'm going downstairs.'

What was he doing there anyway? Soon the whole circus would be there: prosecutor, coroner, crime lab, and Giacovazzo, the new Flying Squad chief, who would lead the investigation. If they needed him, they knew where to find him.

When he went back into the master bedroom, Michela was sitting on the bed, frighteningly pale. Gallo was standing a couple of steps away from her.

'Go up to the terrace and give Fazio a hand. I'll stay here.'

Relieved, Gallo left.

'Is he dead?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

'Gunshot.'

'Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God!' she cried, covering her face with her hands. But she was a strong woman. She took a sip of water from a glass that Gallo must have given her.

'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why was he killed? Why?'

Montalbano threw up his hands. But Michela was already beset by another concern. 'Mamma! Oh, my God! How am I ever going to tell her?'

'Don't.'

'But I have to!'

'Listen to me. Telephone her. Tell her we've discovered that Angelo was in a terrible car accident. That he's in a grave condition. You're going to spend the night at the hospital with him. Don't tell her which one. Does your mother have any relatives around here?'

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'Yes, a sister.'

'Does she live in Viga`ta?'

'Yes.'

'Call your aunt and tell her the same thing. Ask her to go and stay with your mother. I think it's best if you spend the night here. Tomorrow morning you'll be strong enough to find the right words to tell your mother the truth.'

'Thank you,' said Michela.

She stood up, and Montalbano heard her walk into the study where there was a phone.

He, too, left the bedroom, went into the living room, sat down in an armchair and lit a cigarette.

'Chief? Where are you?'

It was Fazio.

'In here. What is it?'

'I gave the word, Chief. They'll be here in half an hour, max. But Captain Giacovazzo's not coming.'

'Why not?'

'He spoke to the commissioner and the commissioner relieved him. Apparently Giacovazzo's got some delicate matter on his hands. To cut a long story short, the case is yours, like it or not.'

'Fine. Let me know when they get here.'

He heard Michela come out of the study and lock herself into the bathroom between the two bedrooms. Ten minutes later, he heard her come out. She'd washed and put on a woman's dressing-gown. She noticed the inspector was looking at her. 'It's mine,' she explained. 'I used to spend the night here sometimes.'

'Did you talk to your mother?'

'Yes. She took it pretty well, all things considered. And Aunt Iole is already on her way to be with her. You see, Mamma isn't all there in the head. At times she's perfectly lucid, but at others it's as though she's absent. When I told her about Angelo it was as if I was talking about some acquaintance. Perhaps it's for the best. Would you like some coffee?'

'No, thanks. But if you've got a little whisky . . .'

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'Of course. I think I'll have some myself.'

She went out, then returned carrying a tray with two glasses and an unopened bottle. 'I'll see if there's any ice.'

'I drink it straight.'

'Me too.'

If a man hadn't been shot dead on the terrace, it might have been the opening scene of an amorous encounter. All that was missing was the background music. Michela heaved a deep sigh, leaned her head against the back of the armchair and closed her eyes. Montalbano decided to lower the boom.

'Your brother was killed either during or after sex. Or while he was masturbating.'

She leaped out of her chair like a fury. 'Imbecile! What are you saying?'

Montalbano behaved as though he hadn't noticed the insult. 'What's so surprising? Your brother was a fortytwo- year-old man. You yourself, who used to see him every day, told me he didn't have any women friends. So, let me put the question differently. Did he have any men friends?'

It got worse. She began to tremble, and held out her arm, index finger pointed like a pistol at the inspector.

'You are a – a—'

'Who are you trying to cover for, Michela?'

She fell back into the armchair, weeping, her hands over her face. 'Angelo . . . my poor brother . . . my poor Angelo . . .'

Through the front door, which had been left open, they heard people coming up the stairs.

'I have to go now,' said Montalbano. 'But don't go to bed yet. I'll be back in a little while, so we can continue our conversation.'

'No.'

'Listen, Michela, you can't refuse. Your brother's been murdered and we must—'

'I'm not refusing. I said no to your coming back without notice and asking me more questions when I need to have a shower, take a sleeping pill and go to bed.'

'All right. But I'm warning you, tomorrow will be a hard day for you.'

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'Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God! Why?'

One needed the patience of a saint with this woman.

'Michela, were you absolutely certain it was your brother when I broke down the door?'

'Yes,' she said. Huge tears were flowing down her face. She muttered something the inspector didn't understand.

'What did you say?'

'Elena,' she repeated, more clearly.

'Who's she?'

'A woman my brother used to . . .'

'Why did you want to cover up for her?'

'She's married.'

'How long had they been seeing each other?'

'Six months at most.'

'Did they get on well?'

'Angelo told me they quarrelled now and then . . .

Elena was . . . is very jealous.'

'Do you know anything about this woman? Her husband's name, where she lives and so on?'

'Yes.'

'Tell me.'

She told him.

'What sort of relationship do you have with Elena Sclafani?'

'I only know her by sight.'

'So you have no reason to tell her what happened to your brother?'

'No.'

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'Good. You can go to bed now. I'll pick you up tomorrow morning at around nine thirty.'

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