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Opening Extract from...

August Heat

Written by Andrea Camilleri

Translated by Stephen Sartarelli

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Translated by Stephen Sartarelli

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1

He was sleeping so soundly that not even cannon-fire could have woken him. Well, maybe not cannon-fire, but the ring of the telephone, yes.

Nowadays, if a man living in a civilized country (ha!) hears cannon-blasts in his sleep, he will, of course, mistake them for thunderclaps, gun salutes on the feast day of the local saint, or furniture being moved by the upstairs neighbours, and go on sleeping soundly. But the ring of the telephone, the triumphal march of the mobile, or the doorbell, no: those are sounds of summons to which the civilized man (ha-ha!) has no choice but to surface from the depths of slumber and answer.

So, Montalbano got out of bed, glanced at the clock, then at the window, from which he gathered that it was going to be a very hot day, and went into the dining room where the telephone was ringing wildly.

'Salvo! Where were you? I've been trying to get hold of you for half an hour!'

'I'm sorry, Livia. I was in the shower so I couldn't hear the phone.'

First lie of the day.

Why did he tell it? Because he was ashamed to tell her he had still been asleep? Or because he didn't want to embarrass her by telling her she'd woken him? Who knows?

'Did you go to look at the house?'

'Livia! It's barely eight o'clock!'

'I'm sorry. I'm just so desperate to know if it's all right . . .'

The whole business had started about two weeks before when he'd had to tell Livia that, contrary to plan, he would not be able to leave Vigàta for the first half of August because Mimì Augello had been forced to take his holiday earlier than expected due to complications with his in-laws. But the change had not produced the calamitous results he had feared. Livia was very fond of Beba, Mimì's wife, and of Mimì himself. She had complained a little, of course, but Montalbano had thought that would be the end of it. He had been wrong. Way off the mark, in fact. The following evening Livia had called back with a surprise request.

'I'm looking for a house, straight away, two bedrooms, living room, by the sea, in your area.'

'I don't understand. Why can't we just stay at my place in Marinella?'

'You can be so stupid, Salvo, when you put your mind

to it! I meant a house for Laura, her husband and their little boy.'

Laura was Livia's dearest friend, the one to whom she confided her Joyful and not-so-Joyful Mysteries.

'They're coming here?'

'Yes. Do you mind?'

'Not at all. I think Laura and her husband are very nice, you know that. It's just that . . .'

'It's just what?'

Jesus, what a pain!

'I was hoping we could finally spend a little more time together, just the two of us, alone—'

'Ha-ha-ha-ha!'

A laugh rather like that of the witch in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

'What's so funny?'

'What's so funny is that you know damn well the only one who's going to be alone is me – me and nobody else – while you're spending your days and maybe even your nights at the station working on the latest murder.'

'Come on, Livia, it's August. With this kind of heat, even the killers down here wait until autumn.'

'Was that a joke? Am I supposed to laugh?'

Thus had begun the long search for a house, with the help – inconclusive – of Catarella. 'Chief, I tink I gotta place like you's lookin' for, out by Pezzodipane.'

'But Pezzodipane's six miles from the sea!'

'Iss true, but to make up for it, there's a artifishy lake.'

Or: 'Livia, I found a lovely little apartment in a sort of block near—'

'A *little* apartment? I told you clearly I want a house.'

'Well, an apartment's a house, isn't it? What else is it? A tent?'

'No, an apartment is not a house. It's you Sicilians who confuse the matter by calling an apartment a house, whereas when I say "house", I mean "house". Would you like me to be more specific? I want you to find a free-standing, single-family residence.'

The estate agents in Vigàta laughed in his face.

'What – you think you can come in on the sixteenth of July and have found a house by the sea for the first of August? It was all let a long time ago.' But they'd told him to leave his telephone number. If, by chance, somebody cancelled at the last minute, they would let him know. And a miracle happened, at the very moment he had given up hope.

'Hello – Inspector Montalbano? This is the Aurora estate agency. A nice little villa by the sea has come free, the sort of thing you were looking for. It's at Marina di Montereale, in the Pizzo district. But you'd better come over quickly, because we're about to close.'

He'd left in the middle of an interrogation and rushed to the agency. From the photos it was exactly what Livia wanted. He'd arranged that Mr Callara, the agency boss, would pick him up the following morning at around nine

o'clock to show him the house, which was less than six miles from Marinella.

Montalbano realized that six miles on the road to Montereale at the height of summer could as easily mean five minutes as two hours, depending on traffic. Too bad. Livia and Laura would have to make do. It couldn't be helped.

The following morning, as soon as he got into the car, Callara started to talk and didn't stop. He began with recent history, recounting how the house had been let to a certain Jacolino, a clerk in Cremona who had paid the required deposit. But just last night, Jacolino had phoned the agency saying his wife's mother had had an accident so they couldn't leave Cremona for the time being. And the agency had rung him, Montalbano, straight away.

Next, Mr Callara had delved into history. That was, he had told him in full detail how and why the house had been built. Some six years ago, an old fellow of about seventy, who went by the name of Angelo Speciale – Monterealese by birth, but an emigrant to Germany, where he'd worked for the rest of his life – had decided to build himself this house so he could come back to his home town once and for all with his German wife. This German wife, whose name was Gudrun, was a widow with a twenty-year-old son called Ralf. Got that? Got it. Well, Angelo Speciale had come to Montereale in the company of his stepson, Ralf, and gone around for a month, looking for the right location. When he'd found it, and bought it,

he went to see Mr Spitaleri, the developer, and asked him to draw up the plans. He had waited a year and more for the construction to be completed. Ralf had stayed with him all the time.

Then they went back to Germany to have their furniture and other possessions shipped to Montereale. But a weird thing happened. Since Angelo Speciale didn't like flying, they had taken the train. When they got to Cologne station, however, Mr Speciale couldn't find his stepson, who had been travelling in the bunk above his. Ralf's suitcase was still in the compartment, but there was no trace of him. The night conductor said he hadn't seen anyone leave the train at any of the earlier stops. In short, Ralf had disappeared.

'Did they ever find him?'

'Would you believe it, Inspector? They never did! From that moment on, no one ever heard from him again.'

'And did Mr Speciale move into the house?'

'That's the best part! He never did! Poor Mr Speciale, he hadn't been back in Cologne a month before he fell down the stairs, hit his head and died!'

'What about the twice-widowed Mrs Gudrun? Did she come down here to live?'

'What was she going to do here, poor thing, without her husband or son? She called us three years ago and told us to let the house. And since then we have, but only in the summer.'

'Why not during the rest of the year?'

'It's too isolated, Inspector. You'll see for yourself.'

It was indeed isolated. One got there by turning off the provincial road on to an uphill track, with only a rustic cottage, another slightly less rustic cottage and, at the end, the house. There were hardly any trees or other vegetation. The entire area was parched by the sun. But the moment one arrived at the house, which was at the top of a hill, the view changed. It was breathtaking. Below, extending in both directions, there was a beach of golden sand, dotted here and there with a few umbrellas; and in front, the clear, open, welcoming sea. The house, which was all on one floor, had two bedrooms, a big one with a double bed and a smaller one with a single, a spacious living room with rectangular windows looking on to nothing but sea and sky, certainly not a television. The kitchen was sizeable and equipped with an enormous fridge. There were even two bathrooms. And a terrace that was perfect for open-air dining in the evening.

'I like it,' said the inspector. 'How much is it?'

'Well, Inspector, normally we don't let a house like this for only two weeks, but since it's for you . . .'

He spat out a figure that was like a cudgel to the head. But Montalbano didn't feel a thing. After all, Laura was rich and could play her part in alleviating the poverty of southern Italy. 'I like it,' he repeated.

'Naturally, there will be some additional expenses—'

'Naturally, there *won't* be any additional expenses,' said Montalbano, who didn't want to be taken for a fool.

'Okay, okay.'

'How do you get down to the beach?'

'Well, you go through the little gate on the terrace, then walk about ten yards to a small stone staircase that leads down to it. There are fifty steps.'

'Could you give me about half an hour?'

Callara looked befuddled. 'If you keep it to half an hour . . .' he said.

From the moment he'd seen it, Montalbano had wanted to dive into that sea, which seemed to be beckoning him, and go for a long swim. He swam in his underpants.

When he returned, the sun had dried him off by the time he had climbed the fifty steps.

*

On the morning of 1 August, Montalbano went to Palermo's Punta Raisi airport to meet Livia, Laura and her son, Bruno, a little boy of three. Guido, Laura's husband, would come later by train, bringing a car and their baggage across the strait. Bruno was one of those children incapable of sitting still for two consecutive minutes. Laura and Guido were a little concerned that the boy still didn't talk and communicated only with gestures. He didn't even like to draw or scribble like other children of his age; to make up for it, however, he was a master at breaking the *cojones* of all creation.

They went to Marinella, where Adelina had prepared

lunch for the whole gang. But Montalbano's housekeeper had already gone when they arrived, and Montalbano knew he wouldn't see her again for the remainder of Livia's fifteen days there. Adelina had a deep antipathy towards Livia, and the feeling was mutual.

Guido stumbled in around one o'clock. They ate, and immediately afterwards, Montalbano got into his car with Livia to lead the way for Guido, in his car with his family. When Laura saw the house, she was so excited she hugged and kissed Montalbano. Bruno indicated that he wanted the inspector to hug him too. But as soon as Montalbano picked him up, the child spat the sweet he was sucking into the inspector's eye.

They agreed that the following morning Livia would come to see Laura in Salvo's car, since he could get a lift to work in a patrol car, and would stay for the day. That evening, when he finished work, Montalbano would get somebody to drive him to Pizzo, and together they would decide where to go out to eat.

That seemed to the inspector an excellent plan, since it would allow him at lunchtime to feast on whatever he liked best at Enzo's trattoria.

*

The troubles at the beachside house in Pizzo began on the morning of the third day. When Livia went to see her friend, she found the place upside-down: clothes had been pulled out of the armoire and piled on the terrace

chairs, mattresses pushed up under the windows of the bedrooms, kitchen utensils strewn across the ground in the parking area in front of the entrance. Bruno, naked, with the garden hose in hand, was doing his best to soak the clothes, mattresses and sheets. The moment he saw her he tried to soak Livia too, but she, knowing him well, stepped out of the way. Laura was lying on a deck-chair next to the low terrace wall, a wet rag over her forehead.

'What on earth is going on?'

'Have you been inside the house?'

'No.'

'Look inside from the terrace, but be careful not to go in.'

Livia went in through the little terrace gate, and looked into the living room.

The first thing she noticed was that the floor had turned almost black.

The second thing she noticed was that the floor was alive – it was moving in all directions. After which she didn't notice anything, having understood what she had seen. She screamed and ran off the terrace.

'Cockroaches! Thousands of them!'

'This morning, at the crack of dawn,' said Laura, with great effort, as if lacking even the breath to go on living, 'I got up to get a drink of water, and I saw them, but there weren't so many of them then … so I woke up Guido, and we tried to salvage whatever we could, but we

soon gave up. They kept coming up out of a crack in the living-room floor . . .'

'And where's Guido now?'

'He went to Montereale. He rang the mayor, who was very nice. He should be back at any moment.'

'Why didn't he try Salvo?'

'He said he couldn't bring himself to call the police over an invasion of cockroaches.'

Some fifteen minutes later Guido pulled up, followed by a car from the mayor's office carrying four pest-controllers, armed with cans of poison and brooms.

Livia took Laura and Bruno back to Marinella, while Guido stayed behind to coordinate the disinfestation and clean the house. Around four o'clock in the afternoon he, too, appeared at Marinella.

'They were coming out of that crack in the floor. We sprayed two whole cans down there, then cemented it up.'

'There wouldn't happen to be any more of those cracks, would there?' Laura asked, seeming unconvinced.

'Don't worry, we looked everywhere,' said Guido, settling the matter. 'It won't happen again. We can go home without any anxiety.'

'Why did they all come out like that?' Livia cut in.

'One of the pest-controllers explained that the house must have shifted imperceptibly during the night, causing the floor to crack. And the cockroaches, which were living

underground, came up because they were attracted by the smell of food or by us. It's hard to say which.'

*

The second invasion came on the fifth day. Not cockroaches, this time, but little rodents. When she got up that morning, Laura saw some fifteen of them, tiny little things, pretty even. But they fled out of the french windows to the terrace at high speed as soon as she moved. She found another two in the kitchen, munching bread crumbs. Unlike many other women, Laura was not terrified of mice. Guido summoned the mayor again, drove into Montereale, and came back with two mousetraps, a quarter of a pound of strong cheese, and a red cat, pleasant and patient – so patient, in fact, that he didn't take offence when Bruno tried immediately to gouge out one of his eyes.

'How can this be? First cockroaches climb out of the floor, and now mice,' Livia asked Montalbano, as soon as they'd got into bed.

With Livia lying naked beside him, Montalbano didn't feel like talking about rodents. 'Well, the house hadn't been lived in for a year . . .' was his vague reply.

'It probably should have been swept, cleaned and disinfected before Laura and her family moved in,' Livia concluded.

'I could do with some of that myself,' Montalbano suggested.

'Some of what?' asked Livia, confused.
'A thorough cleansing.'
And he kissed her.

*

The third invasion came on the eighth day. Again it was Laura, the first to get up, who discovered it. Out of the corner of her eye she saw one, jumped straight into the air and, without knowing how, landed on top of the kitchen table, on her feet, eyes squeezed shut. Then, when she felt it was safe enough, she opened her eyes, trembling and sweaty, and looked at the floor.

Where some thirty spiders were strolling blithely along, as if in a representative parade of the species: one was short and hairy, another had only a ball-like head on very long, wiry legs, a third was reddish and the size of a crab, a fourth was the spitting image of the dreaded black widow . . .

Laura was unfazed by cockroaches and unafraid of mice, but she flew into convulsions the moment she saw a spider. She suffered from 'arachnophobia', a difficult word, which in plain language means an irrational, uncontrollable fear of spiders.

So, with her hair standing on end, she let out an ear-splitting scream and fainted, falling off the table and on to the floor, hitting her head, which began to bleed.

Woken with a start, Guido bolted out of bed and rushed to his wife's rescue. But he didn't notice Ruggero

– the cat – racing out of the kitchen, terrorized first by Laura's scream and then by the thud of her fall.

The upshot was that Guido found himself flying parallel to the ground until his head collided, like a bumper, with the fridge.

When Livia arrived at the usual time to go for a swim with her friends, she walked into what looked like a field hospital.

Laura and Guido's heads were wrapped in bandages, while Bruno's foot was taped up: when he'd got out of bed he'd knocked a glass of water off the bedside table. It had shattered on the floor, and he had walked over the slivers of glass. Nonplussed, Livia noticed that even Ruggero was limping – a result of his collision with Guido.

The now familiar squad of pest-controllers arrived, sent by the mayor, who by now had become a friend. With Guido overseeing operations, Laura, who still seemed upset, said to Livia under her breath, 'This house doesn't like us.'

'Oh, come on! A house is a house. It doesn't have likes and dislikes.'

'I'm telling you, it doesn't like us.'

'Oh, please.'

'This house is cursed!' Laura insisted, her eyes sparkling as if she had a fever.

'Please, Laura, don't be silly. I know your nerves are frayed but—'

'I'm beginning to reconsider all those films I've seen about haunted houses full of spirits that come up from hell.'

'But that's all make-believe!'

'I bet I'm right. Just you wait and see.'

*

On the morning of the ninth day, it was raining hard. Livia and Laura went to the Montelusa museum; the major invited Guido to visit a salt mine and he took Bruno with him. That night it rained harder.

*

On the morning of the tenth day, it was still bucketing down. Laura phoned Livia to say she and Guido were taking Bruno to hospital – one of the cuts on his foot was oozing pus. Livia decided to take advantage of the circumstances to put Salvo's house in order. Late that evening the rain stopped, and everyone was convinced that the following day would be clear and hot, perfect for the beach.