The Snack Thief

Andrea Camilleri

Published by Picador

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.



First published 2003 by Viking Penguin,
a member of Penguin Putnam Inc., New York

First published in Great Britain 2004 by Picador

First published in paperback 2005 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-49297-3

Copyright © Sellerio editore 1996
Translation copyright © Stephen Sartarelli 2003

Originally published in Italian as *Il ladro di merendine* by Sellerio editore, Palermo.

The right of Andrea Camilleri to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written
permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized
act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal
prosecution and civil claims for damages.

7 9 8

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by Intype Libra Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Visit **www.panmacmillan.com** to read more about all our books and to buy
them. You will also find features, author interviews and news of any author
events, and you can sign up for e-newsletters so that you're always first to hear
about our new releases.

ONE

He woke up in a bad way. The sheets, during the sweaty, restless sleep that had followed his wolfing down three pounds of sardines *a beccafico* the previous evening, had wound themselves tightly round his body, making him feel like a mummy. He got up, went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and guzzled half a bottle of cold water. As he was drinking, he glanced out of the wide-open window. The dawn light promised a good day. The sea was as flat as a table, the sky clear and cloudless. Sensitive as he was to the weather, Montalbano felt reassured as to his mood in the hours to come. Because it was still too early to get up, he went back to bed and readied himself for two more hours of slumber, pulling the sheet over his head. He thought, as he always did before falling asleep, of Livia lying in her bed in Boccadasse, outside Genoa. She was a soothing presence, propitious to any journey, long or short, 'in country sleep', as Dylan Thomas had put it in a poem he liked very much.

No sooner had the journey begun when it was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. Like a drill, the

sound seemed to enter one ear and come out of the other, boring through his brain.

'Hello!'

'Whoozis I'm speaking with?'

'Tell me first who you are.'

'This is Catarella.'

'What's the matter?'

'Sorry, Chief, I din't rec'nize your voice as yours. You mighta been sleeping.'

'I certainly might have, at five in the morning! Would you please tell me what the hell is the matter without busting my balls any further?'

'Somebody was killed in Mazàra del Vallo.'

'What the fuck is that to me? I'm in Vigàta.'

'But, Chief, the dead guy—'

Montalbano hung up and unplugged the phone. Before shutting his eyes he thought that perhaps his friend Valente, vice-commissioner of Mazàra, was looking for him. He would call him later, from his office.

*

The shutter slammed hard against the wall. Montalbano sat bolt upright in bed, eyes agape with fright, convinced, in the haze of sleep still enveloping him, that he'd been shot at. In the twinkling of an eye, the weather had changed: a cold, humid wind was kicking up waves with a yellowish froth, the sky was now entirely covered with clouds that threatened rain.

Cursing the saints, he got up, went into the bathroom, turned on the shower and lathered himself. All at once the water ran out. In Vigàta, and therefore also in Marinella, where he lived, water was distributed roughly every three days. Roughly, because there was no way of knowing whether you would have water the very next day or the following week. For this reason Montalbano had taken the precaution of having several large tanks installed on the roof of his house, which would fill up when water was available. This time, however, there had apparently been no new water for eight days, for that was the maximum autonomy granted him by his reserves. He ran into the kitchen, put a pot under the tap to collect the meagre trickle that came out, and did the same in the bathroom sink. With the bit of water thus collected, he somehow managed to rinse the soap off his body, but the whole procedure certainly didn't help his mood.

While driving to Vigàta, yelling obscenities at all the motorists to cross his path – whose only use for the Highway Code, in his opinion, was to wipe their arses with it, one way or another – he remembered Catarella's phone call and the explanation he'd come up with for it, which didn't make sense. If Valente had needed him for some homicide that took place in Mazàra, he would have called him at home, not at headquarters. He had concocted that explanation for convenience's sake, to unburden his conscience and sleep for another two hours in peace.

*

'There's absolutely nobody here!' Catarella told him as soon as he saw him, respectfully rising from his chair at the switchboard. Montalbano had decided, with Sergeant Fazio's agreement, that this was the best place for him. Even with his habit of passing on the wildest, most unlikely phone calls, he would surely do less damage there than anywhere else.

'What is it, a holiday?'

'No, Chief, it's not a holiday. They're all down at the port because of that dead guy in Mazàra I called you about, if you remember, sometime early this morning or thereabouts.'

'But if the dead guy's in Mazàra, what are they all doing at the port?'

'No, Chief, the dead guy's here.'

'But, Jesus Christ, if the dead guy's here, why the hell are you telling me he's in Mazàra?'

'Because he was from Mazàra. That's where he worked.'

'Cat, think for a minute, so to speak . . . or whatever it is that you do: if a tourist from Bergamo was killed here in Vigàta, what would you tell me? That somebody was killed in Bergamo?'

'Chief, the point is, this dead guy was just passing through. I mean, they shot him when he was on a fishing boat from Mazàra.'

'Who shot him?'

'The Tunisians did, Chief.'

Montalbano gave up, demoralized.

'Did Augello also go down to the port?'

'Yessir.'

His second-in-command, Mimì Augello, would be delighted if he didn't show up at the port.

'Listen, Cat I have to write a report. I'm not in for anyone.'

*

'Hello, Chief? I got Signorina Livia on the line here from Genoa. What do I do, Chief? Should I put her on or not?'

'Put her on.'

'Since you said, not ten minutes ago, that you wasn't in for nobody—'

'I said put her on, Cat . . . Hello, Livia? Hi.'

'Hi, my eye. I've been trying to call you all morning. The phone at your house just rings and rings.'

'Really? I suppose I forgot to plug it back in. You want to hear something funny? At five o'clock this morning, I got a phone call about—'

'I don't want to hear anything funny. I tried ringing at seven-thirty, at eight-fifteen, I tried again at—'

'Livia, I already told you I forgot—'

'You forgot *me*, that's what you forgot. I told you yesterday I was going to phone you at seven-thirty this morning to decide whether—'

'Livia, I'm warning you. It's windy outside and about to rain.'

'So what?'

'You know what. This kind of weather puts me in a bad mood. I wouldn't want my words to be—'

'I get the picture. I just won't phone you any more. You phone me, if you feel like it.'

*

'Montalbano! How are you? Officer Augello told me everything. This is a very big deal, one that will certainly have international repercussions. Don't you think?'

Montalbano felt at sea. He had no idea what the commissioner was talking about. He decided to be generically affirmative.

'Oh, yes, yes.'

International repercussions?

'Anyway, I've arranged for Augello to confer with the prefect. The matter is, how shall I say, beyond my competence.'

'Yes, yes.'

'Are you feeling all right, Montalbano?'

'Yes, fine. Why?'

'Nothing, it just seemed . . .'

'Just a slight headache, that's all.'

'What day is today?'

'Thursday, sir.'

'Listen, why don't you come to dinner at our house on Saturday? My wife'll make you her black spaghetti in squid ink. It's delicious.'

Pasta with squid ink. His mood was black enough to dress a hundred pounds of spaghetti. International repercussions?

*

Fazio came in and Montalbano immediately laid into him.

'Would somebody please be so kind as to tell me what the fuck is going on?'

'C'mon, Chief, don't take it out on me just because it's windy outside. For my part, early this morning, before contacting Inspector Augello, I had somebody phone you.'

'You mean Catarella? If you have Catarella phoning me about something important, then you really must be a shit-head, since you know damn well that nobody can ever understand a fucking thing the guy says. What happened, anyway?'

'A motor trawler from Mazàra, which according to the ship's captain was fishing in international waters, was attacked by a Tunisian patrol boat and sprayed with machine-gun fire. The fishing boat signalled its position to one of our patrols, the *Fulmine*, then managed to escape.'

'Good going,' said Montalbano.

'On whose part?' asked Fazio.

'On the part of the captain of the fishing boat, who instead of surrendering had the courage to run away. What else?'

'The shots killed one of the crew.'

'Somebody from Mazàra?'

'Sort of.'

'Would you please explain?'

'He was Tunisian. They say his working papers were in order. Down around Mazàra all the crews are mixed. First of all because they're good workers, and secondly because,

if they're ever stopped, they can talk to the patrols from the other side.'

'Do you believe the trawler was fishing in international waters?'

'Me? Do I look like a moron or something?'

*

'Hello, Inspector Montalbano? This is Major Marniti of the Harbour Office.'

'What can I do for you, Major?'

'I'm calling about that unfortunate incident on the Mazarese fishing boat, where the Tunisian was killed. I'm questioning the captain, trying to determine exactly where they were at the moment they were attacked, and to establish the sequence of events. Afterwards, he's going to drop into your office.'

'Why? Hasn't my assistant already questioned him?'

'Yes.'

'Then there's really no need for him to come here. Thanks for calling.'

They were trying to drag him into this mess by the ear.

*

The door flew open with such force that the inspector jumped out of his chair. Catarella appeared, looking very agitated.

'Sorry 'bout that, Chief. Door slipped outa my hand.'

'If you ever come in like that again, I'll shoot you. What is it?'

'Somebody just now phoned that somebody's inside a lift.'

The inkwell, made of finely wrought bronze, missed Catarella's forehead but made such a noise when it struck the wooden door that it could have been a cannon shot. Catarella cringed, covering his head with his arms. Montalbano started kicking his desk. In rushed Fazio, his hand on his open holster.

'What was that? What happened?'

'Get this arsehole to explain to you this business about somebody stuck in a lift. Let 'em call the damn fire department! But get him out of here, I don't want to hear his voice.'

Fazio returned in a flash.

'Somebody got killed in a lift,' he said, brief and to the point, to pre-empt any further flying inkwells.

*

'Giuseppe Cosentino, security guard,' said the man standing near the open lift door, introducing himself. 'I was the one who found Mr Lapècora.'

'How come there's nobody around? Where are all the nosy neighbours?' Fazio asked in amazement.

'I sent them all home. They do what I say around here. I live on the sixth floor,' the security guard said proudly, adjusting the jacket of his uniform.

Montalbano wondered how much authority Giuseppe Cosentino would have if he lived in the basement.

The dead Mr Lapècora was sitting on the floor of the

lift, with his shoulders propped against the rear wall. Next to his right hand was a bottle of Corvo white, still corked and sealed. Next to his left hand, a light grey hat. Dressed to the nines, tie and all, the late Mr Lapècora was a distinguished-looking man of about sixty, with eyes open in a look of astonishment, perhaps for having wet his trousers. Montalbano bent down and with the tip of his forefinger touched the dark stain between the dead man's legs. It wasn't piss, but blood. The lift was one of those set inside the wall, so there was no way to look behind the corpse to see if the man had been stabbed or shot. He took a deep breath and didn't smell any gunpowder, though it was possible it had already dissipated.

They needed to alert the coroner.

'You think Dr Pasquano is still at the port or would he already be back in Montelusa by now?'

'Probably still at the port.'

'Go and give him a ring. And if Jacomuzzi and the forensics gang are there, tell them to come too.'

Fazio raced out. Montalbano turned to the security guard, who, sensing he was about to be addressed, came to attention.

'At ease,' Montalbano said wearily.

The inspector learned that the building had six floors, with three apartments per floor, all inhabited.

'I live on the sixth floor, the top floor,' Giuseppe Cosentino felt compelled to reaffirm.

'Was Mr Lapècora married?'

'Yessir. To Antonietta Palmisano.'

'Did you send the widow home too?'

'No sir. She doesn't know she's a widow yet, sir. She went out early this morning to visit her sister in Fiacca, seeing as how this sister's not in good health. She took the six-thirty bus.'

'Excuse me, but how do you know all these things?'

Did living on the sixth floor grant him that power too? Did they all have to tell him what they were doing and why?

'Mrs Palmisano Lapècora told my wife yesterday,' the security guard explained. 'Seeing as how the two women talk to each other and everything.'

'Do the Lapècoras have any children?'

'One son. He's a doctor. But he lives a long way from Vigàta.'

'What was Lapècora's profession?'

'Businessman. Had his office in Salita Granet, number twenty-eight. But in the last few years, he only went there three times a week: Monday, Wednesday and Friday, seeing as how he didn't feel much like working any more. He had some money stashed away, didn't have to depend on anyone.'

'You are a gold mine, Mr Cosentino.'

The security guard sprang back to attention.

At that moment, a woman of about fifty appeared, with legs like tree trunks. Her hands were loaded with plastic bags filled to bursting.

'I went shopping!' she declared with a surly glance at the inspector and the security guard.

'I'm glad,' said Montalbano.

'Well I'm not, all right? Because now I have to climb up six flights of stairs. When are you going to take the body away?'

And, glaring again at the two men, she began her difficult ascent, snorting like an enraged bull.

'A terrible woman, Mr Inspector. Her name is Gaetana Pinna. She lives in the apartment next to mine, and not a day goes by without her trying to start an argument with my wife, who, since she's a real lady, won't give her the satisfaction. And so the woman gets even by making a horrible racket, especially when I'm trying to catch up on my sleep after my long shift.'

*

The handle of the knife stuck between Mr Lapècora's shoulder blades was worn. A common kitchen utensil.

'When did they kill him, in your opinion?' the inspector asked Dr Pasquano.

'To make a rough guess, I'd say between seven and eight o'clock this morning. I'll be able to tell you more precisely a little later.'

Jacomuzzi arrived with his men from the crime lab, and they began their intricate search.

Montalbano stepped out of the building's main door. It was windy, the sky still overcast. The street was a very short one, with only two shops, one opposite the other. On the left-hand side of the street was a greengrocer, behind whose counter sat a very thin man with thick glasses. One of the lenses was cracked.

'Hello, I'm Inspector Montalbano. This morning, did you by any chance see Mr Lapècora come in or go out of the front door of his building?'

The thin man chuckled and said nothing.

'Did you hear my question?' asked the inspector, slightly miffed.

'Oh, I heard you all right,' the greengrocer said. 'But as for seeing, I can't help you much there. I couldn't even see a tank if one came through that door.'

On the right-hand side of the street was a fishmonger's shop, with two customers inside. The inspector waited for them to come out, then entered.

'Hello, Lollo.'

'Hello, Inspector. I've got some really fresh striped bream today.'

'I'm not here to buy fish, Lollo.'

'You're here about the death.'

'Yeah.'

'How'd Lapècora die?'

'A knife in the back.'

Lollo looked at him open mouthed.

'Lapècora was murdered?!'

'Why so surprised?'

'Who would have wished Mr Lapècora any harm? He was a good man, Mr Lapècora. Unbelievable!'

'Did you see him this morning?'

'No.'

'What time did you open up?'

'Six-thirty. Ah, but I did run into his wife, Antonietta, on the corner. She was in a rush.'

'She was running to catch the bus for Fiacca.'

In all likelihood, Montalbano concluded, Lapècora was killed in the lift, as he was about to go out. He lived on the fourth floor.

*

Dr Pasquano took the body to Montelusa for the autopsy. Meanwhile, Jacomuzzi wasted a little more time filling three small plastic bags with a cigarette butt, a bit of dust and a tiny piece of wood.

'I'll keep you posted.'

Montalbano went into the lift and signalled to the security guard, who had not moved an inch all the while, to come along with him. Cosentino seemed hesitant.

'What's wrong?'

'There's still blood on the floor.'

'So what? Just be careful not to get it on your shoes. Would you rather climb six flights of stairs?'