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Excursion to Tindari

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Extract

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ONE

He realized he was awake, as his mind was functioning logically and not following the absurd labyrinths of dream. He could hear the rhythmic swashing of the sea; a pre-dawn breeze was blowing through the open window. Yet he stubbornly kept his eyes closed, knowing that the ill humour boiling inside him would come spewing out the moment he opened his eyes, leading him to say or do something stupid he would later regret.

The sound of whistling on the beach reached his ears. At that hour, surely someone walking to work in Vigàta. The tune was familiar, but he couldn't recall the title or lyrics. What did it matter? He never had been able to whistle himself. Not even by sticking a finger up his arse.

He stuck a finger in his arsehole
and gave a shrill whistle,
the prearranged signal
of the cops on patrol.

Some dumbshit ditty a Milanese friend at the police academy used to sing to him sometimes, which had stuck in his memory ever since. His inability to whistle had made him the favourite victim of his childhood schoolmates, all masters of the art of whistling like shepherds, sailors, mountaineers, even adding fanciful variations. Schoolmates! That's what had ruined his night's sleep! He'd been remembering them after reading in the newspaper, shortly before going to bed, that Carlo Militello, not yet fifty years old, had been named president of the second most important bank in Sicily. The paper had expressed its heartfelt best wishes to the new president and had printed a photograph of him: spectacles, almost certainly gold-rimmed, designer suit, impeccable shirt, exquisite tie. A successful man, a man of order, defender of Values (that is, stock-market values as well as Family, Country and Freedom). Montalbano remembered him well. Not as a classmate in primary school, but as a comrade in 1968!

'We'll hang the enemies of the people with their ties!'

'Banks are only good for being robbed!'

Carlo Militello, nicknamed Carlo Martello – Italian for Charles Martel – because of his supreme-commander attitudes and his penchant for confronting adversaries with words like hammer blows and punches worse than hammer blows, was the most intransigent, most inflexible of anyone. Compared to him, the Ho Chi Minh so often invoked by demonstrators seemed like a social-democratic reformist. Martello forced everyone to stop smoking cigarettes so as

not to enrich the state monopoly. Joints, yes, to their heart's content. Only once in his life, he claimed, had Comrade Stalin done the right thing, and that was when he'd set about bleeding the banks to finance the Party. 'State' was a word that gave them all nightmares, throwing them into a rage like bulls before a red cape. What Montalbano remembered most from those days was a poem by Pasolini, defending the police against the students at Valle Giulia, in Rome. All his friends had spat on those verses, whereas he, Montalbano, had tried to defend them. 'But it's a beautiful poem.' If they hadn't restrained him, Carlo Martello would've broken his nose with one of his deadly punches. But why hadn't that poem bothered him? Had he read his future as a cop in it? At any rate, over the years he'd seen his friends, the legendary comrades from 68, all turn 'reasonable'. And by dint of reason, their abstract fury had softened and finally settled into concrete acquiescence. And now, with the exception of one who, with extraordinary dignity, had been putting up with trials and incarceration for over a decade for a crime he'd neither committed nor ordered, and another who'd died in obscure circumstances, the rest had all made out rather well, hopping from left to right and back again, ending up as chief editors of newspapers, television producers, high government functionaries, senators and chamber deputies. Unable to change society, they'd changed themselves. Or perhaps they hadn't even needed to change, since in 68 they had only been play- acting, donning the costumes and masks of revolutionaries.

That appointment of Carlo Martello-Militello had really not gone down well. Especially because it had triggered another thought in his mind, by far the most troubling of all.

But aren't you cut from the same cloth as these people you're criticizing? Don't you serve the same state you fought so ferociously at age eighteen? Or are you just griping out of envy, since you're paid a pittance while they're earning billions?

A gust of wind rattled the shutter. No, he wouldn't close it, not even at the command of the Almighty. Fazio was always hassling him about it.

'Chief, excuse me for saying so, but you're really asking for trouble! You not only live in an isolated house, you also leave your window open at night! So if anyone wants to do you harm – and there are people out there who do – they can come right in, whenever and however they please!'

Then there was that other hassle named Livia.

'No, Salvo, not at night, no!'

'But don't you, in Boccadasse, sleep with the window open?'

'What's that got to do with anything? First of all, I live on the third floor, and, secondly, in Boccadasse we don't have all the burglars you have here.'

And so, when Livia phoned him one night, all upset, to tell him that the burglars of Boccadasse had cleaned out her apartment when she was out, he gave silent thanks to Genoa's thieves, then managed to express his dismay, though not as much as he should have.

The telephone started ringing.

His first reaction was to shut his eyes even more tightly, but it didn't work. It's a well-known fact that sight and hearing are not the same thing. He should have plugged his ears, but he preferred to bury his head under the pillow. Nothing doing. The ringing, faint and distant, continued. He got up, cursing the saints, went into the other room and picked up the receiver.

'Montalbano here. I should say hello, but I won't. I'm not ready to.'

There was a long silence at the other end. Then the sound of the phone hanging up. What now, after that brilliant move? Go back to bed and continue to stew over the new President of Interbanco, who, when he was still Comrade Martello, once publicly shat on a tray full of ten-thousand-lire notes? Or put on his bathing suit and have a nice swim in the freezing water? He opted for the second course. It might help him simmer down. He jumped in the water and immediately became half-paralysed. Would he ever get it through his head that, at age fifty, this was no longer a good idea? That the time for such bravado was over? He headed gloomily back to the house and could already hear the phone ringing from thirty feet away. His only choice was to accept things as they were. And, for starters, to answer the phone.

It was Fazio.

'Tell me something. Was it you who called fifteen minutes ago?'

'No, Chief, it was Catarella. He said you said you weren't ready to say hello. So I let a little time pass and then rang back myself. Feel ready now, Chief?'

'How can you be so funny first thing in the morning, Fazio? Are you at the office?'

'No, Chief. Somebody got killed. Zap!'

'What's that supposed to mean, "zap"?'

'He got shot.'

'No. A pistol shot goes "bang", a *lupara* goes "boom", a machine gun goes "ratatatatat", and a knife goes "swiss".'

'Then it was a bang, Chief. Just one shot. To the face.'

'Where are you?'

'At the scene of the crime. Isn't that what they call it? Via Cavour 44. You know where it is?'

'Yeah, I know. Was he shot at home?'

'He was just coming home, sticking his key in the front door. They left him sprawling on the pavement.'

*

Can a murder ever be said to happen at the right moment? No, never. A death is always a death. Nevertheless, it was a concrete, incontrovertible fact that Montalbano, while driving to Via Cavour 44, felt his bad mood passing. Jumping right into an investigation would help to chase away the dark thoughts that had cluttered his mind upon awakening.

*

When he got there he had to fight his way through the crowd. Like flies drawn to shit, even though it was barely dawn, an excited throng of men and women blocked the street. There was even a girl with a baby in her arms. The little thing gaped wide-eyed at the scene, and the mother's teaching methods made his balls spin.

'Everybody out of here!'

A few people started to move away at once, while others had to be shoved by Galluzzo. But one could still hear moaning, a kind of sustained whimper. It was a woman of about fifty, dressed all in black; she was being restrained by two men to prevent her from throwing herself on the corpse, which lay belly-up on the pavement, face rendered unrecognizable by a gunshot wound between the eyes.

'Get that woman out of here.'

'But she's his mother, Chief.'

'She can go and cry at home. She's only in the way. Who informed her? Did she hear the shot and come running?'

'No, sir. She couldn't have heard the shot, since she lives in Via Autonomia Siciliana 12. Apparently somebody informed her.'

'And was she just sitting there, all ready with her black dress on?'

'She's a widow, Chief.'

'All right, be nice, but get her out of here.'

Whenever Montalbano talked this way, it was hopeless. Fazio approached the two men, muttered something to them, and they dragged the woman away.

The inspector walked up beside Dr Pasquano, who was crouching over the victim's head.

'Well?' he asked.

'Not well at all,' the doctor replied. And he went on, even more rudely than Montalbano, 'Do I really need to explain what happened? They shot him once. Bull's eye, in the middle of the forehead. The exit wound took out half his cranium in the back. See those little clots? They're bits of his brain. Satisfied?'

'When did it happen, in your opinion?'

'A few hours ago. Around four or five in the morning.'

A short distance away, Vanni Arquà, the new chief of forensics, was examining the most ordinary of stones with the eye of an archaeologist who's just discovered a Palaeolithic artefact. Montalbano wasn't fond of Arquà, and his antipathy was openly returned.

'Did they kill him with that?' asked the inspector, indicating the stone, a look of seraphic innocence on his face.

Vanni Arquà looked at him with undisguised disdain.

'Don't be ridiculous! It was a firearm.'

'Have you recovered the bullet?'

'Yes. It ended up embedded in the wood of the front door, which was still closed.'

'And the cartridge?'

'Look, Inspector, I'm not required to answer your questions. The case is going to be handled by the captain of the Flying Squad. Commissioner's orders. You're to play only a supporting role.'

'What do you think I'm doing? You don't call this support?'

Judge Tommaseo, the assistant prosecutor, was nowhere to be seen. They would have to wait before they could move the victim's body.

'Fazio, why isn't Inspector Augello here?'

'He's on his way. He spent the night with friends in Fela. We called him on his mobile phone.'

Fela? It would take him another hour to get to Vigàta. And in what condition! Dead tired and sleepless! Friends, right! He'd likely spent the night with some woman whose husband was out getting his fun somewhere else.

Galluzzo came up.

'Tommaseo just phoned. Asked if we could go and pick him up in one of our cars. He crashed into a pole about two miles outside Montelusa. What should we do?'

'Go and get him.'

Nicolò Tommaseo rarely got where he wanted to go in his car. He drove like a dog on drugs. The inspector didn't feel like waiting for him. Before leaving, he had a look at the corpse.

A kid barely twenty years old, in jeans and sports jacket, with a ponytail and earring. The shoes must have cost him his inheritance.

'Fazio, I'm going to the office. You wait for the judge and the Flying Squad captain. See you later.'

*

He decided to go to the port instead. Leaving the car on the wharf, he began walking slowly, one step at a time, along the eastern jetty, towards the lighthouse. The sun had risen bright red, apparently happy to have managed it one more time. On the horizon were three black dots, motor trawlers returning late to shore. He opened his mouth wide and took a deep breath. He liked the smell of Vigàta's port.

'What are you talking about? All ports have the same stink,' Livia once said to him.

It wasn't true. Every harbour had a different smell. Vigàta's combined, in perfect doses, wet cordage, fishing nets drying in the sun, iodine, rotten fish, dead and living algae and tar with, deep in the background, a hint of petrol. Incomparable. Before reaching the flat rock under the lighthouse, he bent down and picked up a handful of pebbles.

At the rock, he sat down. Gazing at the water, he thought he saw the face of Carlo Martello appear indistinctly before him. He angrily threw the handful of pebbles

at it. The image broke apart, flickered and vanished. Montalbano lit a cigarette.

*

'Oh, Chief, Chief, Chief!' Catarella assailed him as soon as he came through the front door of headquarters. 'Doctor Latte, the one with an *s* at the end, called three times! He wants to talk to you poissonally in poisson! Says it's rilly rilly urgint!'

He could guess what Lattes, the chief of the commissioner's cabinet, nicknamed 'Caffé-Lattes' for his nervous, unctuous manner, had to say.

Commissioner Luca Bonetti-Alderighi, Marquis of Villabella, had been explicit and severe. Montalbano never looked his superior in the eye, but always slightly higher; he was fascinated by the man's hair, which was very thick, with a great big shock on top that curled back like certain human shit piles deposited in the open countryside. Noticing that the inspector was averting his gaze, the commissioner had made the mistake of believing he'd finally intimidated his subordinate.

'Montalbano, now that the new captain of the Flying Squad, Ernesto Gribaudo, has arrived, I'm going to tell you once and for all: you're going to play a supporting role from here on in. Your department will only handle little things; the big stuff will be handled by the Flying Squad in the person of Captain Gribaudo or his second-in-command.'

Ernesto Gribaudo, a living legend. Once, when glancing at the chest of a man who'd been killed by a burst of Kalashnikov fire, he'd declared the victim dead from a dozen stab wounds inflicted in rapid succession.

'Excuse me, Mr Commissioner, could you give me a few practical examples?'

Luca Bonetti-Alderighi had beamed with pride and satisfaction as Montalbano stood before him on the other side of his desk, leaning slightly forward, a humble smile playing on his lips. Indeed, the inspector's tone had been almost beseeching. The commissioner had him in the palm of his hand!

'Please be more explicit, Montalbano. What sort of examples do you mean?'

'I'd like to know what things I should consider little and what things I should consider big.'

Montalbano, too, was congratulating himself. His imitation of Paolo Villaggio's immortal Fantozzi was succeeding marvellously.

'What a question, Montalbano! Petty theft, domestic quarrels, small-time drug-dealing, brawls, ID checks on immigrants, that's the small stuff. Murders, that's big.'

'Mind if I take notes?' Montalbano had asked, pulling a piece of paper and a pen out of his pocket.

The commissioner had looked at him in bewilderment. And the inspector, for a moment, had felt frightened, thinking he'd pulled the other's leg a little too hard and the commissioner had caught on.

But no. The commissioner had actually been scowling in disdain.

'Go right ahead.'

And now Lattes was about to reiterate the commissioner's explicit orders. A murder did not fall within his province. It was a matter for the Flying Squad. Montalbano dialled the cabinet chief's number.

'Montalbano, old boy! How are you? Eh? And how's the family?'

Family? He was an orphan and not even married.

'They're all fine, thanks. And yours?'

'All well, by the Virgin's good graces. Listen, Montalbano, on the matter of that murder committed last night in Vigàta, the commissioner—'

'I already know, Dr Lattes. It's not my concern.'

'That's not true! Who ever said that? I called you, in fact, because the commissioner actually *wants* you to take the case.'

Montalbano felt a mild shock. What could this mean?

He didn't even know the victim's vital statistics. Want to bet it will turn out the boy was the son of some bigwig? Were they trying to get him to take on some tremendous headache? Not a hot potato, but a glowing firebrand?

'I'm sorry, Dr Lattes. I was at the crime scene, but I didn't start any investigation. You can understand. I didn't want to tread on anyone's turf.'

'Of course I understand, Montalbano! We have some extremely sensitive people in this police department, thanks be to God!'

'Why isn't Captain Gribaudo on the case?'

'You don't know?'

'I know nothing.'

'Well, last week Captain Gribaudo had to go to Beirut for an important conference on—'

'I know. Was he held up in Beirut?'

'No, no, he's back, but, upon his return, he immediately came down with a violent case of dysentery. We were worried it might be some sort of cholera – it's not so unusual in those places, you know – but then, by the Virgin's good graces, it turned out not to be.'

Montalbano himself thanked the Virgin for having forced Gribaudo not to stray more than a foot and a half from the nearest toilet.

'What about his second-in-command, Lieutenant Foti?'

'He was in New York for a conference organized by Rudolph Giuliani, you know, the "zero tolerance" mayor. The conference dealt with the best ways to maintain order in a large metropolis—'

'Didn't that end two days ago?'

'Yes, of course, but, you see, afterwards, Lieutenant Foti decided to explore Manhattan a little and got shot in the leg by some muggers who stole his wallet. He's in hospital at the moment. Nothing serious, thank God.'

*

Fazio didn't turn up until after ten.

'Why so late, Fazio?'

'Please, Chief, I don't want to hear about it. First we had to wait for the assistant prosecutor's assistant. Then—'

'Wait. Explain.'

Fazio looked up to the heavens. Having to rehash the whole affair brought back all the nervous agitation he'd suffered that morning.

'OK. When Galluzzo went to pick up Assistant Tommaseo, who'd wrapped his car around a tree—'

'Wasn't it a pole?'

'No, Chief. He thought it was a pole, but it was a tree. To cut a long story short, Tommaseo hurt his forehead and was bleeding. Galluzzo took him to the emergency department at Montelusa Hospital. From there, Tommaseo, who by then also had a headache, called to ask for a replacement. But it was early and there was nobody in the office. So Tommaseo called a colleague of his at home, Judge Nicotra. So then we had to wait for Judge Nicotra to get dressed, have breakfast, get in his car and drive to the crime scene. Meanwhile, Captain Gribaudo was nowhere to be seen. Ditto his lieutenant. After the ambulance finally arrived and the body was taken away, I waited another ten minutes for the Flying Squad. Seeing that nobody was coming, I left. If Captain Gribaudo wants me, he can come and look for me here.'

'What did you find out about the murder?'

'What the fuck do you care, Chief, with all due respect? It's the Flying Squad's case!'

'Gribaudo's not coming, Fazio. He's holed up in a toilet somewhere, shitting his soul out. Foti got shot in New York. Lattes called and told me. The case is ours.'

Fazio sat down, eyes gleaming with contentment. He immediately pulled from his pocket a piece of paper covered with minuscule writing. He began reading.

'Emanuele Sanfilippo, known as Nenè, son of Gerlando Sanfilippo and Natalina Patò—'

'That's enough,' said Montalbano.

He was irritated by what he called Fazio's 'records-office complex', but what irked him most was the tone of voice his sergeant used when citing birth dates, relatives, marriages, etc. Fazio understood at once.

'Sorry, Chief.' But he didn't put the piece of paper back in his pocket. 'I'll keep it as a reminder,' he said by way of justification.

'How old was this Sanfilippo?'

'Twenty-one years and three months.'

'Was he a drug user? Dealer?'

'Apparently not.'

'Have a job?'

'No.'

'Did he live in Via Cavour?'

'Yes, sir. Third-floor flat, with living room, two bedrooms, bathroom and kitchen. He lived alone.'

'Did he rent it or own it?'

'Rented. Eight hundred thousand lire a month.'

'Did his mother pay for it?'

'His mother? She's penniless, Chief. Lives on a pension of five hundred thousand a month. If you ask me, things went as follows: around four o'clock in the morning, Nenè Sanfilippo parks his car right in front of the main entrance, he crosses the street, and—'

'What kind of car?'

'A Fiat Punto. But he's got another one in the garage. A Duetto. Get the picture?'

'Ill-gotten gains?'

'I'd say so. You should see what he had in his flat. All the latest stuff, TV, satellite dish on the roof, computer, VCR, video camera, fax, refrigerator ... And I didn't even get a good look. There are video cassettes, diskettes and CD-ROMs for the computer.... We'll have to check it all out.'

'Any news of Mimì?'

Fazio, who had got all worked up, seemed disoriented.

'Who? Oh, right. Inspector Augello? He showed up shortly after the assistant's assistant showed up. Had a look around and left.'

'Any idea where?'

'Dunno. Anyway, as I was saying, Nenè Sanfilippo inserts the key in the lock and, at that exact moment, somebody calls his name.'

'How do you know this?'

'Because he was shot in the face, Chief. Hearing his

name called, Sanfilippo turns around and takes a few steps towards the person who called him. It must have happened very fast, mind you, because he left the key in the lock.'

'Was there a struggle?'

'Apparently not.'

'Did you look at the keys?'

'There were five keys. Two for Via Cavour: main door and flat door. Two for his mother's place, main door and flat door. And the fifth is one of those ultra-modern keys that locksmiths say can't be duplicated. We don't know what door that one was for.'

'Interesting kid, this Sanfilippo. Were there any witnesses?'

Fazio started laughing.

'Are you kidding, Chief?'