

The Shape of Water

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Extract

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ONE

No light of daybreak filtered yet into the courtyard of Splendour, the company under government contract to collect trash in the town of Vigàta. A low, dense mass of clouds completely covered the sky as though a great grey tarpaulin had been drawn from one corner to another. Not a single leaf fluttered. The sirocco was late to rise from its leaden sleep, yet people already struggled to exchange a few words. The foreman, before assigning the areas to be cleaned, announced that this day, and for some days to come, Peppe Schèmmari and Caluzzo Brucculeri would be absent, excused from work. More than excused, they'd been arrested: the previous evening they'd attempted to rob a supermarket, weapons in hand. To Pino Catalane and Saro Montaperto – young land surveyors naturally without employment as land surveyors, but hired by

Splendour as temporary 'ecological agents' thanks to the generous string-pulling of Chamber Deputy Cusumano, in whose electoral campaign the two had fought body and soul (and in that order, with the body doing far more than the soul felt like doing) – the foreman assigned the jobs vacated by Peppe and Caluzzo, that is, the sector that went by the name of the 'Pasture,' because in a time now beyond memory a goatherd had apparently let his goats roam there. It was a broad tract of Mediterranean brush on the outskirts of town that stretched almost as far as the shore. Behind it lay the ruins of a large chemical works inaugurated by the ubiquitous Deputy Cusumano when it seemed the magnificent winds of progress were blowing strong. Soon, however, that breeze changed into the flimsiest of puffs before dropping altogether, but in that brief time it had managed to do more damage than a tornado, leaving a shambles of compensation benefits and unemployment in its wake. To prevent the crowds of black and not-so-black Senegalese, Algerians, Tunisians and Libyans wandering about the city from nesting in that factory, a high wall had been built all around it, above which the old structures still soared, corroded by weather, neglect and sea salt, looking

more and more like architectures designed by Gaudi under the influence of hallucinogens.

Until recently the Pasture had represented, for those who at the time still went under the undignified name of garbage collectors, a cakewalk of a job: amid the scraps of paper, plastic bags, cans of beer and Coca-Cola, and shit piles barely covered up or left out in the open air, now and then a used condom would appear, and it would set one thinking, provided one had the desire and imagination to do so, about the details of that encounter. For a good year now, however, the occasional condom had turned into an ocean, a carpet of condoms, ever since a certain minister with a dark, taciturn face worthy of a Lombroso diagram had fished deep into his mind, which was even darker and more mysterious than his face, and come up with an idea he thought would solve all the south's law and order problems. He had managed to sell this idea to a colleague of his who dealt with the army and who, for his part, looked as if he had walked right out of a Pinocchio illustration, and together the two had decided to send a number of detachments to Sicily for the purpose of 'controlling the territory', to lighten the load of the carabinieri, local police,

intelligence services, special operations teams, coast-guard, the highway police, railway police and port police, the anti-Mafia, anti-terrorism, anti-drug, anti-theft and anti-kidnapping commissions, and others — here omitted for the sake of brevity — quite busy with other business. Thanks to the brilliant idea of these two eminent statesmen, all the Piedmontese mama's boys and beardless Friulian conscripts who just the night before had enjoyed the crisp, fresh air of their mountains suddenly found themselves painfully short of breath, huffing in their temporary lodgings, in towns that stood barely a yard above sea level, among people who spoke an incomprehensible dialect consisting not so much of words as of silences, indecipherable movements of the eyebrows, imperceptible puckerings of the facial wrinkles. They adapted as best they could, thanks to their young age, and were given a helping hand by the residents of Vigàta themselves, who were moved to pity by the foreign boys' lost, bewildered looks. The one who saw to lessening the hardship of their exile was a certain Gegè Gullotta, a fast thinker who until that moment had been forced to suppress his natural gifts as a pimp by dealing in light drugs. Having learned through channels both underhanded

and ministerial of the soldiers' imminent arrival, Gegè had had a flash of genius, and to put said flash to work for him he had promptly appealed to the beneficence of those in charge of such matters in order to obtain all the countless convoluted authorizations indispensable to his plan – those in charge being, that is, those who truly controlled the area and would never have dreamt of issuing officially stamped permits. Gegè, in short, succeeded in opening a specialized market of fresh meat and many and sundry drugs, all light, at the Pasture. Most of the meat came from the former Eastern Bloc countries, now free at last of the communist yoke which, as everyone knows, had denied all personal, human dignity; now, between the Pasture's bushes and sandy shore, come nightfall, that reconquered dignity shone again in all its magnificence. But there was also no lack of Third World women, transvestites, transsexuals, Neapolitan faggots, Brazilian *viados* – something for every taste, a feast, an embarrassment of riches. And business flourished, to the great satisfaction of the soldiers, Gegè and those who, for a proper cut of the proceeds, had granted Gegè permission to operate.

Pino and Saro headed toward their assigned work

sector, each pushing his own cart. To get to the Pasture took half an hour, if one was slow of foot as they were. The first fifteen minutes they spent without speaking, already sweaty and sticky. It was Saro who broke the silence.

'That Pecorilla is a bastard,' he announced.

'A fucking bastard,' clarified Pino.

Pecorilla was the foreman in charge of assigning the areas to be cleaned, and he nurtured an undisguised hatred for anyone with an education, having himself managed to finish middle school, at age forty, only thanks to Cusumano, who had a man to man talk with the teacher. Thus he manipulated things so that the hardest, most demeaning work always fell to the three university graduates in his charge. That same morning, in fact, he had assigned to Ciccu Loreto the stretch of wharf from which the mail boat sailed for the island of Lampedusa. Which meant that Ciccu, with his accounting degree, would be forced to account for the piles of trash that noisy mobs of tourists, many-tongued yet all sharing the same utter disregard for personal and public cleanliness, had left behind on Saturday and Sunday while waiting to embark. And

no doubt Pino and Saro, after the soldiers' two days off duty, would find the Pasture one big glory hole.

When they reached the corner of Via Lincoln and Viale Kennedy (in Vigàta there was even a Cortile Eisenhower and a Vicolo Roosevelt), Saro stopped.

'I'm going to run upstairs and see how the little guy's doing,' he said to his friend. 'Wait here. I'll only be a minute.'

Without waiting for Pino's answer, he slipped into one of those midget high-rises that were not more than twelve storeys high, having been built around the same time as the chemical works and having just as quickly fallen into ruin, when not abandoned altogether. For someone approaching from the sea, Vigàta rose up like a parody of Manhattan, on a reduced scale. And this explained, perhaps, the names of some of its streets.

Nenè, the little guy, was awake; he slept on and off for some two hours a night, spending the rest of the time with eyes wide open, without ever crying. Who had ever seen a baby that didn't cry? Day after day he was consumed by an illness of unknown cause and cure. The doctors of Vigàta couldn't figure it out; his parents would have to take him somewhere else,

to some big-shot specialist, but they didn't have the money. Nenè grew sullen as soon as his eyes met his father's, a wrinkle forming across his forehead. He couldn't talk, but had expressed himself quite clearly with that silent reproach of the person who had put him in these straits. 'He's doing a little better, the fever's going down,' said Tana, Saro's wife, just to make him happy.

*

The clouds had scattered, and now the sun was blazing hot enough to shatter rocks. Saro had already emptied his cart a dozen times in the garbage bin that had appeared, thanks to private initiative, where the rear exit of the factory used to be, and his back felt broken. When he was a few steps from the path that ran along the enclosure wall and led to the provincial road, he saw something sparkle violently on the ground. He bent down to have a better look. It was a heart-shaped pendant, enormous, studded with little diamonds all around and with one great big diamond in the middle. The solid-gold chain was still attached, though broken in one spot. Saro's right hand shot out, grabbed the necklace, and stuffed it in his pocket. The hand seemed

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to have acted on its own, before his brain, still flabbergasted by the discovery, could tell it anything. Standing up again, drenched in sweat, he looked around but didn't see a living soul.

*

Pino, who had chosen to work the stretch of the Pasture nearest the beach, at one point spotted the nose of a car about twenty yards away, sticking out of some bushes a bit denser than the rest. Unsure, he stopped; it wasn't possible someone could still be around here at this hour, seven in the morning, screwing a whore. He began to approach cautiously, one step at a time, almost bent over, and when he'd reached the taillights he quickly stood straight up. Nothing happened, nobody shouted to fuck off, the car seemed vacant. Coming nearer, he finally made out the indistinct shape of a man, motionless, in the passenger seat, head thrown back. He seemed to be in a deep sleep. But by the look and the smell of it, Pino realized something was fishy. He turned around and called to Saro, who came running, out of breath, eyes bulging. 'What is it? What the hell do you want?' Pino thought his friend's questions a bit aggressive but blamed it on the

fact that he had run all that way. 'Get a load of this,' he said.

Plucking up his courage, Pino went up to the driver's side and tried to open the door but couldn't: it was locked. With the help of Saro, who seemed to have calmed down, he tried to reach the other door, against which the man's body was partially leaning, but the car, a large green BMW, was too close to the shrub to allow anyone to approach from that side. Leaning forward, however, and getting scratched by the brambles, they managed to get a better look at the man's face. He was not sleeping; his eyes were wide open and motionless. The moment they realized that the man was dead, Pino and Saro froze in terror — not at the sight of death but because they recognized him.

*

'I feel like I'm taking a sauna,' said Saro as he ran along the provincial road toward a telephone booth. 'A blast of cold one minute, a blast of heat the next.'

They had agreed on one thing since overcoming their paralysis upon recognizing the deceased: before alerting the police, they had to make another phone

call. They knew Deputy Cusumano's number by heart, and Saro dialled it. But Pino didn't let the phone ring even once.

'Hang up, quick!' he said.

Saro obeyed automatically.

'You don't want to tell him?'

'Let's just think for a minute, let's think hard. This is very important. You know as well as I do that Cusumano is a puppet.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'He's a puppet of Luparello, who is everything — or was everything. With Luparello dead, Cusumano's a nobody, a doormat.'

'So?'

'So nothing.'

They turned back toward Vigàta, but after a few steps Pino stopped Saro.

'Rizzo, the lawyer,' he said.

'I'm not going to call that guy. He gives me the creeps. I don't even know him.'

'I don't either, but I'm going to call him anyway.'

Pino got the number from the operator. Though it was still only seven forty-five, Rizzo answered after the first ring.

'Mr Rizzo?'

'Yes?'

'Excuse me for bothering you at this hour, Mr Rizzo, but . . . we found Mr Luparello, you see, and . . . well, he looks dead.'

There was a pause. Then Rizzo spoke.

'So why are you telling me this?'

Pino was stunned. He was ready for anything, except that bizarre response.

'But . . . aren't you his best friend? We thought it was only right—'

'I appreciate it. But you must do your duty first. Good day.'

Saro had been listening to the conversation, his cheek pressed against Pino's. They looked at each other, nonplussed. Rizzo acted as if they'd told him they'd just found some nameless cadaver.

'Shit! He was his friend, wasn't he?' Saro burst out.

'What do we know? Maybe they had a fight,' said Pino to reassure him.

'So what do we do now?'

'We go and do our duty, like the lawyer said,' concluded Pino.

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They headed toward town, to police headquarters. The thought of going to the carabinieri didn't even cross their minds, since they were under the command of a Milanese lieutenant. The Vigàta police inspector, on the other hand, was from Catania, a certain Salvo Montalbano, who, when he wanted to get to the bottom of something, he did.

TWO

'Again.'

'No,' said Livia, still staring at him, her eyes more luminous from the amorous tension.

'Please.'

'No, I said no.'

I always like being forced a little, he remembered her whispering once in his ear; and so, aroused, he tried slipping his knee between her closed thighs as he gripped her wrists roughly and spread her arms until she looked as though crucified.

They eyed each other a moment, panting, when suddenly she surrendered.

'Yes,' she said. 'Now.'

At that exact moment the phone rang. Without even opening his eyes, Montalbano reached out with his arm to grab not the telephone so much as the