

The Voice of the Violin

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Extract

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ONE

Inspector Salvo Montalbano could immediately tell that it was not going to be his day the moment he opened the shutters of his bedroom window. It was still night, at least an hour before sunrise, but the darkness was already lifting, enough to reveal a sky covered by heavy rain clouds and, beyond the light strip of beach, a sea that looked like a Pekingese dog. Ever since a tiny dog of that breed, all decked out in ribbons, had bitten painfully into his calf after a furious fit of hacking that passed for barking, Montalbano saw the sea this way whenever it was whipped up by crisp, cold gusts into thousands of little waves capped by ridiculous plumes of froth. His mood darkened, especially considering that an unpleasant obligation awaited him that morning. He had to attend a funeral.

*

The previous evening, finding some fresh anchovies cooked by Adelina, his houskeeper, in the fridge, he'd dressed

them in a great deal of lemon juice, olive oil and freshly ground black pepper, and wolfed them down. And he'd relished them, until it was all spoiled by a telephone call.

'H'lo, Chief? Izzatchoo onna line?'

'It's really me, Cat. You can go ahead and talk.'

At the station they'd given Catarella the job of answering the phone, mistakenly thinking he could do less damage there than anywhere else. After getting mightily pissed off a few times, Montalbano had come to realize that the only way to talk to him within tolerable limits of nonsense was to use the same language as he.

'Beckin' pardon, Chief, for the 'sturbance.'

Uh-oh. He was begging pardon for the disturbance. Montalbano pricked up his ears. Whenever Catarella's speech became ceremonious, it meant there was no small matter at hand.

'Get to the point, Cat.'

'Tree days ago somebody aks for you, Chief, wanted a talk t' you in poisson, but you wasn't 'ere an' I forgotta reference it to you.'

'Where were they calling from?'

'From Florida, Chief.'

Montalbano was literally overcome with terror. In a flash he saw himself in a sweatsuit jogging alongside fearless, athletic American narcotics agents working with him on a complicated investigation into drug trafficking.

'Tell me something. What language did you speak with them?'

'What langwitch was I asposta speak? We spoke 'Talian, Chief.'

'Did they tell you what they wanted?'

'Sure, they tol' me everyting about one ting. They said as how Vice Commissioner Tamburrano's wife was dead.'

Montalbano breathed a sigh of relief, he couldn't help it. They'd called not from Florida, but from police headquarters in the town of Floridia near Siracusa. Caterina Tamburrano had been gravely ill for some time, and the news was not a complete surprise to him.

'Chief, izzat still you there?'

'Still me, Cat, I haven't changed.'

'They also said the obsequious was gonna be on Tuesday morning at nine o'clock.'

'Thursday? You mean tomorrow morning?'

'Yeah, Chief.'

He was too good a friend of Michele Tamburrano not to go to the funeral. That way he could make up for not having even phoned to express his condolences. Floridia was about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Vigàta.

'Listen, Cat, my car's in the garage. I need a squad car at my place, in Marinella, at five o'clock sharp tomorrow morning. Tell Inspector Augello I'll be out of the office until early afternoon. Got that?'

*

He emerged from the shower, skin red as a lobster. To counteract the chill he felt at the sight of the sea, he'd

made the water too hot. As he started shaving, he heard the squad car arrive. Indeed, who, within a ten-kilometre radius, hadn't heard it? It rocketed into the drive at supersonic speed, braked with a scream, firing bursts of gravel in every direction, then followed this display with a roar of the racing engine, a harrowing shift of gears, a shrill screech of skidding tyres, and another explosion of gravel. The driver had executed an evasive manoeuvre, turning the car completely round.

When Montalbano stepped out of the house ready to leave, he saw Gallo, the station's official driver, rejoicing.

'Look at that, Chief! Look at them tracks! What a manoeuvre! A perfect one-eighty!'

'Congratulations,' Montalbano said gloomily.

'Should I put on the siren?' Gallo asked as they were about to set out.

'Put it in your arse,' said a surly Montalbano, closing his eyes. He didn't feel like talking.

*

Gallo, who suffered from the Indianapolis Complex, stepped on the accelerator as soon as he saw his superior's eyes shut, reaching a speed he thought better suited to his driving ability. They'd been on the road barely fifteen minutes when the crash occurred. At the scream of the brakes, Montalbano opened his eyes but saw nothing, head lurching violently forward before being jerked back by the safety belt. Next came a deafening clang of metal against

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metal, then silence again, a fairy-tale silence, with birds singing and dogs barking.

'You hurt?' the inspector asked Gallo, seeing him rub his chest.

'No. You?'

'Nothing. What happened?'

'A chicken ran in front of me.'

'I've never seen a chicken run in front of a car before. Let's look at the damage.'

They got out. There wasn't a soul about. The long skid marks were etched into the tarmac. Right at the spot where they began, you could see a small, dark stain. Gallo went up to it, then turned triumphantly around.

'What did I tell you?' he said to the inspector. 'It was a chicken!'

A clear case of suicide. The car they had slammed into, smashing up its entire rear end, must have been legally parked at the side of the road, though now it was sticking out slightly. It was a bottle-green Renault Twingo, positioned so as to block a unpaved drive leading to a two-storey house with shuttered windows and doors some thirty metres away. The squad car, for its part, had a shattered headlight and a crumpled right bumper.

'So now what do we do?' Gallo asked dejectedly.

'We're going to go on. Will the car run, in your opinion?'

'I'll give it a try.'

Reversing with a great clatter of metal, the squad car

dislodged itself from the other vehicle. Nobody came to the windows of the house. They must have been fast asleep, dead to the world. The Twingo had to belong to someone in there, since there were no other homes in the immediate area. As Gallo was trying with his bare hands to bend out the bumper, which was scraping against the tyre, Montalbano wrote down the phone number of the Vigàta police headquarters on a piece of paper and slipped this under the Twingo's windscreen wiper.

*

When it's not your day, it's not your day. After they'd been back on the road for half an hour or so, Gallo started rubbing his chest again, and from time to time he twisted his face in a grimace of pain.

'I'll drive,' said the inspector. Gallo didn't protest.

When they were outside the town of Fela, Montalbano, instead of continuing along the main road, turned onto the road that led to the centre of town. Gallo paid no attention, eyes closed and head resting against the window.

'Where are we?' he asked, as soon as he felt the car come to a halt.

'We're at Fela Hospital. Get out.'

'But it's nothing, Inspector!'

'Get out. I want them to have a look at you.'

'Well, just leave me here and keep going. You can pick me up on the way back.'

'Cut the shit. Let's go.'

Between auscultations, three blood pressure exams, X-rays, and everything else in the book, it took them over three hours to have a look at Gallo. In the end they ruled that he hadn't broken anything; the pain he felt was from having bumped hard into the steering wheel, and the weakness was a natural reaction to the fright he'd had.

'So now what do we do?' Gallo asked again, more dejected than ever.

'What do you think? We keep going. But I'll drive.'

*

The inspector had been to Floridia three or four times before. He even remembered where Tamburrano lived, and so he headed towards the Church of the Madonna delle Grazie, which was practically next door to his colleague's house. When they reached the square, he saw the church hung with black and a throng of people hurrying inside. The service must have started late. Apparently he wasn't the only one to have things go wrong.

'I'll take the car to the police garage in town and have them look at it,' said Gallo. 'I'll come and pick you up afterwards.'

Montalbano entered the crowded church. The service had just begun. He looked around and recognized no one. Tamburrano must have been in the first row, near the coffin in front of the main altar. The inspector decided to remain where he was, near the entrance. He would shake

Tamburrano's hand when the coffin was being carried out of the church. When the priest finally opened his mouth after the Mass had been going on for some time, Montalbano gave a start. He'd heard right, he was sure of it.

The priest had begun with the words, 'Our dearly beloved Nicola has left this vale of tears . . .'

Mustering up the courage, he tapped a little old lady on the shoulder.

'Excuse me, signora, whose funeral is this?'

'The dear departed Ragioniere Pecoraro. Why?'

'I thought it was for the Signora Tamburrano.'

'Ah, no, that one was at the Church of Sant'Anna.'

It took him almost fifteen minutes to get to the church of Sant'Anna, practically running the whole way. Panting and sweaty, he found the priest in the deserted nave.

'I beg your pardon. Where's the funeral of Signora Tamburrano?'

'That ended almost two hours ago,' said the priest, looking him over sternly.

'Do you know if she's being buried here?' Montalbano asked, avoiding the priest's gaze.

'Most certainly not. When the service was over, she was taken in the hearse to Vibo Valentia, where she'll be entombed in the family vault. Her bereaved husband followed behind in his car.'

So it had all been for naught. He had noticed, in the Piazza della Madonna delle Grazie, a cafe with tables outside. When Gallo returned, with the car repaired as

well as could be expected, it was almost two o'clock. Montalbano told him what happened.

'So now what do we do?' Gallo asked for the third time, lost in an abyss of dejection.

'You're going to eat a brioche with a *granita di caffè*, which they make very well here, and then we'll head home. With the Good Lord's help and the Blessed Virgin's company, we should be back in Vigàta by evening.'

*

Their prayer was answered, the drive home smooth as silk.

'The car's still there,' said Gallo when Vigàta was already visible in the distance.

The Twingo was exactly the way they'd left it that morning, sticking slightly out from the top of the unpaved drive.

'They've probably already called headquarters,' said Montalbano.

He was bullshitting: the look of the car and the house with its shuttered windows made him uneasy.

'Turn back,' he suddenly ordered Gallo.

Gallo made a reckless U-turn that triggered a chorus of horn blasts. When they reached the Twingo, he executed another, even more reckless, then pulled up behind the damaged car.

Montalbano stepped out in a hurry. What he thought he'd just seen in the rear-view mirror, when passing by, turned out to be true: the scrap of paper with the

telephone number was still under the windscreen wiper. Nobody'd touched it.

'I don't like it,' the inspector said to Gallo, who was now standing next to him. He started walking down the drive. The house must have been recently built; the grass in front was still burned from the lime. There was also a stack of new tiles in a corner of the yard. Montalbano carefully examined the shuttered windows. No light was filtering out.

He went up to the front door and rang the doorbell. He waited a short while, then rang again.

'Do you know whose house this is?'

'No, Chief.'

What should he do? Night was falling and he could feel the beginnings of fatigue. Their pointless, exhausting day was starting to weigh on him.

'Let's go,' he said. Then he added, in a vain attempt at convincing himself, 'I'm sure they called.'

Gallo gave him a doubtful look, but didn't open his mouth.

*

Gallo wasn't even invited into headquarters. The inspector had sent him immediately home to rest. His second-in-command, Mimi Augello, wasn't in; he'd been summoned to report to the new commissioner of Montelusa, Luca Bonetti-Alderighi, a young and testy native of Bergamo

who in the course of one month had succeeded in creating knife-blade antipathies all around him.

'The commissioner was upset you weren't in Vigàta,' said Fazio, the sergeant he was closest to. 'So Inspector Augello had to go in your place.'

'*Had to go?*' the inspector retorted. 'He probably just saw it as a chance to show off!'

He told Fazio about their accident that morning and asked him if he knew who owned the house. Fazio didn't, but promised his superior that he'd go to the town hall the following morning and find out.

'By the way, your car's in our garage.'

Before going home, the inspector interrogated Catarella.

'Try hard to remember. Did anyone happen to call about a car we ran into?'

No calls.

*

'Let me try and understand a minute,' Livia said angrily by phone from Boccadasse, Genoa.

'What's to understand, Livia? As I said, and now repeat, François's adoption papers aren't ready yet. Some unexpected problems have come up, and I no longer have the old commissioner behind me always smoothing everything out. We have to be patient.'

'I wasn't talking about the adoption,' Livia said icily.

'You weren't? Then what were you talking about?'

'Getting married, that's what. We can certainly get married while the problems of the adoption are being worked out. The one thing does not depend on the other.'

'No, of course not,' said Montalbano, who was beginning to feel harried and cornered.

'Now I want a straight answer to the following question,' Livia went on, implacably. 'Supposing the adoption isn't possible: what will we do? Will we get married anyway, in your opinion, or won't we?'

A sudden, loud thunderclap gave him a way out.

'What was that?'

'Thunder. There's a terrible stor—'

He hung up and pulled out the plug.

*

He couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, snarling himself up in the sheets. Around two in the morning, he realized it was useless. He got up, got dressed, grabbed a leather bag given to him some time ago by a house burglar who'd become his friend, got in his car and drove off. The storm was raging worse than ever; lightning bolts illuminated the sky. When he reached the Twingo, he slipped his car in under some trees and turned off the headlights. From the glove compartment he extracted a gun, a pair of gloves and a torch. After waiting for the rain to let up, he crossed the road in one bound, went up the drive and flattened himself against the front door. He rang and rang the

doorbell but got no answer. He then put on the gloves and pulled a large key ring with a dozen or so variously shaped picklocks out of the leather bag. The door opened on the third try. It was locked with only the latch and hadn't been dead-bolted. He entered, closing the door behind him. In the dark, he bent over, untied his wet shoes and removed them, keeping his socks on. He turned on the torch, keeping it pointed at the ground. He found himself in a large dining room that opened onto a living room. The furniture smelled of varnish. Everything was new, clean and orderly. A door led into a kitchen that sparkled like something one might see in an advertisement; another door gave onto a bathroom so shiny it looked as if no one had ever used it before. He slowly climbed the stairs to the upper floor. There he found three closed doors. The first one he opened revealed a neat little guest room; the second led into a bigger bathroom than the one downstairs, but unlike it, this one was decidedly messy. A pink towelling bathrobe lay rumpled on the floor, as though the person wearing it had taken it off in a hurry. The third door was to the master bedroom. And the naked, half-kneeling female body, belly resting against the edge of the bed, arms spread, face buried in the sheet that the young, blonde woman had torn to shreds with her fingernails in the final throes of her death by suffocation, must have belonged to the owner of the house.

Montalbano went up to the corpse and, removing a glove, touched it lightly: it was cold and stiff. She must

have been very beautiful. The inspector went back downstairs, put his shoes back on, wiped up the wet spot they had made on the floor, went out of the house, closed the door, crossed the road, got in his car and left. His thoughts were racing as he drove back to Marinella. How to have the crime discovered? He certainly couldn't go and tell the judge what he'd been up to. The judge who'd replaced Lo Bianco – on a leave of absence to pursue his endless historical research into the lives of a pair of unlikely ancestors – was a Venetian by the name of Nicolò Tommaseo who was always talking about his 'irrevocable prerogatives'. He had a little baby face that he hid under a Belfiore martyr's moustache and beard. As Montalbano was opening the door to his house, the solution to the problem finally came to him in a flash. And thus he was able to enjoy a brief but god-like sleep.