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Written by Andrea Camilleri

Translated by Stephen Sartarelli

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THE WINGS OF THE SPHINX

Translated by Stephen Sartarelli

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ONE

Whatever happened to those early mornings when, upon awakening, for no reason, he would feel a sort of current of pure happiness running through him?

It wasn't the fact that the day was starting out cloudless and windless and shining bright with the sun. No, it was a different sensation, one that had nothing to do with his meteoropathic nature. If he had to explain, it was like feeling in harmony with all of creation, perfectly synchronized with a great stellar clock precisely positioned in space, at the very point that had been destined for him since birth.

Foolishness? Fantasy? Maybe.

But the indisputable fact was that he used to have this feeling rather often, whereas now, for the last few years, it was goodbye, nice knowing you. Gone. Vanished. In fact, nowadays early mornings very often inspired a feeling of refusal in him, a sort of instinctive rejection of what awaited him once he was forced to accept the new day, even if there were no particular hassles awaiting him in

the hours ahead. And the proof of this was in the way he acted upon emerging from sleep.

Now the moment he raised his eyelids, he immediately lowered them again, remaining in darkness for a few more seconds, whereas before, the moment he opened his eyes, he kept them open, even slightly agape, avidly taking in the light of day.

And this, he thought, is surely because of my age.

But immediately Montalbano Two rebelled against this conclusion.

Because for a few years now, two different Montalbanos had existed inside the inspector, and they were always in disagreement. The moment one of them said something, the other would assert the opposite. As a matter of fact:

'What's this about your age?' said Montalbano Two. *'How is it possible that, at fifty-six, you already feel old? You want to know the real truth?'*

'No,' said Montalbano One.

'Well, I'm going to tell you anyway. You want to feel old because it suits you just fine. Since you've grown tired of what you are and what you do, you've created this excuse about getting old. But if you really feel that way, why don't you write a nice letter of resignation right now and call it quits?'

'And what would I do then?'

'You would play the old man. Get yourself a dog to keep you company, go out in the morning to buy the newspaper, sit down on a

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bench, let the dog run free, and start reading the paper, beginning with the obituaries.'

'Why the obituaries?'

'Because whenever you read that someone your age has just died while you're still fairly alive, you'll feel a certain satisfaction that'll help you hang around for at least another twenty-four hours. An hour later—'

'An hour later you and your dogs can fuck yourselves,' said Montalbano One, chilled by the prospect.

'Well, then, get up, go to work, and stop being so annoying,' Montalbano Two concluded decisively.

While he was in the shower the telephone rang. He went to answer it completely naked, leaving a stream of water in his wake. Adelina, in any case, would be by later to clean the house.

'Chief, whadd I do, wake y'up?'

'No, Cat, I was awake.'

'You sure sure sure 'bout that, Chief? Yer not jess sayin' 'at to be nice?'

'No, you needn't worry. What is it?'

'Chief, what else could it be if I'm callin' you foist ting in the morning?'

'Cat, do you realize that you never call to give me any good news?'

There was a pause, and then Catarella's voice became all choked up.

'Ah, Chief, Chief! Whyddya say that? You wanna

humiliate me? If it was up to me, I'd wake you up every single mornin wit' rilly good news, like, I dunno, like you jess won tirty billions inna lattery, or that you was jess made chief o' police, or ...'

Not having heard the door open, the inspector suddenly saw Adelina standing before him, staring at him, keys still in hand. Why had she come so early? Embarrassed, he instinctively turned towards the telephone to hide his pudenda. It would seem the male backside is considered less shameful than the front. The housekeeper quickly fled into the kitchen.

'Cat, wanna bet I know why you're calling? A dead man was found somewhere. Am I right?'

'Yes and no, Chief.'

'Where am I wrong?'

'It's a dead lady, Chief.'

'Listen, isn't Inspector Augello around?'

'He's a'ready atta scene o' the crime, Chief. But the inspector jess called me now sayin' to call you now, Chief, sayin' as how it's bitter if you go there, too, Chief, poissonally in poisson.'

'Where was she found?'

'Atta Sarsetto, Chief, right around the 'Murcan bridge.'

That was far along the road to Montelusa. And the inspector had no desire to get behind the wheel.

'Send a car over to pick me up.'

‘The cars’re all inna garage and can’t go nowheres, Chief.’

‘They all broke down at the same time?’

‘Nossir, Chief, they’s workin’ all right. But the fack is there’s no more money to buy petrol. Fazio called Montelusa but they tol’ ’im to be patient ’cause the money’s onna way an’ll be here in a few days, but not much . . . So fer now only the flyin’ squad can drive, an’ Deputy Garruso’s escort.’

‘His name is Garrufo, Cat.’

‘Is name is what ’is name is. All ’at matters is you unnastand who I mean, Chief.’

The inspector cursed the saints. The police stations had no petrol, the courts had no paper, the hospitals had no thermometers, and meanwhile the government was thinking about building a bridge over the Straits of Messina. But there was always plenty of petrol for the useless escorts of ministers, vice-ministers, undersecretaries, committee chairmen, senators, chamber deputies, regional deputies, cabinet chiefs, and under-assistant briefcase-carriers . . .

‘Have you informed the prosecutor, forensics and Dr Pasquano?’

‘Yessir. But Dr Quaspano got rilly rilly pissed off.’

‘Why?’

‘He says how since he ain’t bibiquitous, he can’t get to the scene for a couple a hours. Chief, could you asplain sumpin a me?’

'Sure, Cat.'

'Whass bibiquitous mean?'

'It means being in many different and faraway places at the same time. Tell Augello I'm on my way.'

He went into the bathroom and got dressed.

'Coffee's ready,' Adelina informed him.

As soon as he walked into the kitchen, the housekeeper looked him up and down and said, 'You know you're still a good-lookin' man, Signore?'

Still? What was that *still* supposed to mean? Montalbano darkened. But then Montalbano Two immediately appeared.

'Oh, no, you don't! You can't get pissed off! You're contradicting yourself, considering that barely an hour ago you felt old and decrepit!'

Better change the subject.

'Why'd you come early today?'

'Cause I gotta catch a bus to Montelusa to go and talk to Judge Sommatino.'

He was the judge overseeing the prison where Pasquale, the housekeeper's younger son, was being 'detained'. Pasqualino was a habitual offender whom Montalbano himself had arrested twice, and for whose firstborn son the inspector had been made godfather at the baptism.

'Parently the judge is gonna put in a good word so's he can come a home for house arrest.'

The coffee was good.

'Lemme have another cup, Adeli.'

Since Dr Pasquano was going to be arriving late, he might as well take his time.

*

In the days of the Greeks, the Salsetto had been a river. Later, in the days of the Romans, it became a brook, then a rivulet by the time of Italian unification, and later still, in the Fascist era, a stinking little trickle, before finally becoming, with the advent of democracy, an illegal dumping ground. During the Allied invasion in 1943, the Americans built a metal bridge over the now dried-up riverbed, but one night a few years later the span disappeared, having been entirely dismantled between sunrise and sunset by iron-thieves. The spot, however, had retained the name.

The inspector pulled up in a clearing where there were already five police cars, two private vehicles, and the van for transporting corpses to the mortuary. The squad cars all belonged to Montelusa Central Police; of the private cars, one belonged to Mimì Augello, the other to Fazio.

‘How come in Montelusa they’ve got petrol to drown in and we don’t have a drop?’ the inspector asked himself aloud, feeling annoyed.

He chose not to answer.

Augello came up as soon as he saw him get out of the car.

‘Mimì, couldn’t you have scratched your balls by yourself?’

‘Salvo, I’m not going to play your game anymore.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that if I hadn’t had you come here, later you’d be driving me crazy saying, “Why didn’t you tell me this, why didn’t you tell me that . . .”’

‘What’s the corpse like?’

‘Dead,’ said Augello.

‘Mimi, a quip like that is worse than a shot in the back. Fire off another, and I’ll shoot you in self-defence. I’ll ask you again: what’s the corpse like?’

‘Young. Barely more than twenty. And she must have been beautiful.’

‘Have you identified her?’

‘Are you kidding? She’s completely naked and there aren’t any clothes about, not even a handbag.’

They walked to the edge of the clearing.

A sort of narrow goat-path led down to the dump some thirty feet below. At the bottom of the path stood a group of people, among whom the inspector recognized Fazio, the chief of forensics, and Dr Pasquano, who was bent over what looked like a mannequin. Prosecutor Tommaseo, on the other hand, was standing in the middle of the path and spotted the inspector.

‘Wait, Montalbano, I’ll be right there.’

‘What’s going on? Is Pasquano here?’ said Montalbano.

Mimi gave him a confused look.

‘Why wouldn’t he be here? He got here half an hour ago.’

Apparently the doctor’s blow-up at poor Catarella had all been for show.

Pasquano was famous for having a nasty disposition, and he was very keen on being known as an impossible man. Sometimes he took great pleasure in hamming it up just to maintain his reputation.

‘Aren’t you coming down?’ asked Tommaseo, panting as he climbed up.

‘What for? You’ve already seen her yourself.’

‘She must have been very beautiful. A fantastic body,’ said the prosecutor, his eyes glistening with excitement.

‘How was she killed?’

‘A bullet to the face from a large-calibre revolver. She’s absolutely unrecognizable.’

‘Why do you think it was a revolver?’

‘Because the guys from forensics can’t find the empty case.’

‘What happened, in your opinion?’

‘Why, it’s obvious, my friend! Plain as day! Clearly, the couple pull up in the clearing, get out of the car, take the path down to the dry riverbed, which is more secluded. The girl takes her clothes off and then, after sexual intercourse—’ he stopped, licked his lips, and swallowed at the thought of intercourse— ‘the man shoots her in the face.’

‘And why would he do that?’

‘I dunno. That’s what we’re going to find out.’

‘Listen, was there a moon?’

Tommaseo gave him confused look.

‘Well, it wasn’t a romantic encounter, you know, there wasn’t any need for moonlight, they were just there to—’

‘I think I know what they were there to do, sir. What I meant was that, since these past few nights there hasn’t been any moonlight, we should have found two corpses, not one.’

Tommaseo now looked utterly lost.

‘Why two?’

‘Because climbing down that path in total darkness, they would certainly have broken their necks.’

‘But what are you saying, Montalbano! Surely they had a torch! Of course they’d planned the whole thing out! Well, unfortunately I have to go now. I’ll be hearing from you. Good day.’

‘Do *you* think that’s the way it went?’ Montalbano asked Mimì after Tommaseo had gone.

‘If you ask me, it’s just another of Tommaseo’s sexual fantasies! Why would they go down into a dump to have sex? It stinks so bad down there you can’t even breathe! And there are rats big enough to eat the flesh off your bones! They could have easily done it right here, in this clearing, which is famous for all the fucking that goes on every night! Have you had a look around at the ground? It’s a sea of condoms!’

‘Did you point this out to Tommaseo?’

‘Of course. But you know what he answered?’

‘I can imagine.’

‘He said that it’s possible those two went to fuck in the dump because it was more thrilling to do it surrounded by shit. A taste for depravity, get it? The kind of thing that only enters the mind of someone like Tommaseo!’

‘OK. But if the girl wasn’t a professional whore, it’s possible that, with all the cars in this clearing and all the trucks passing by, she—’

‘The trucks that go to the dump don’t come through here, Salvo. They discharge their stuff on the other side, where there’s an easier descent that somebody made specifically for heavy vehicles.’

Fazio’s head popped up at the top of the path.

‘Good morning, Chief.’

‘Are they going to be here much longer?’

‘No, Chief, another half an hour or so.’

The inspector didn’t feel like seeing Vanni Arquà, chief of forensics. He felt a visceral antipathy towards him, which was entirely mutual.

‘Here they come,’ said Mimi.

‘Who?’

‘Look over there,’ replied Augello, pointing towards Montelusa.

Over the path connecting the provincial road to the dump there rose a big cloud that looked just like a tornado.

'*Matre santa*, the press!' exclaimed the inspector.

Obviously somebody from the commissioner's office had spilled the beans.

'I'll see you guys at the office,' he said, racing towards his car.

'I'm going back down,' said Augello.

*

The real reason he hadn't gone down into the dump was that he didn't want to see what he would have had to see, given that Augello said the corpse was of a girl barely more than twenty years old. It used to be that he felt afraid of dying people, while the dead made no impression on him. Whereas now, and for the past few years, he could no longer bear the sight of people cut down in their youth. Something inside him utterly rebelled against what he considered a thing against nature, a sort of ultimate sacrilege, even if the young victim had been a crook or a murderer in turn. To say nothing of children! The moment the evening news displayed the mangled bodies of little children, killed by war, famine, or disease, he would turn the television off . . .

'It's your frustrated paternal instinct,' was Livia's conclusion, stated with a good dose of malice, after he had confided this problem to her.

'I have never heard of frustrated paternal instincts, only frustrated maternal instincts,' he had retorted.

‘Well, if it’s not frustrated paternal instincts,’ Livia insisted, ‘maybe it means you have a grandfather complex.’

‘How can I have a grandfather complex if I’ve never been a father?’

‘What’s that got to do with it? Ever heard of a hysterical pregnancy?’

‘It’s when a woman has all the signs of being pregnant but isn’t.’

‘Exactly. And you’re having a hysterical grandfatherhood.’

Naturally the argument had ended in a nasty squabble.

*

From the front doorway of the police station the inspector heard Catarella speaking frantically.

‘No, Mr C’mishner, sir, the inspector can’t come to the phone cause he in’t bibiquitous. He’s at the Sarsetto in so much as— Hallo? Hallo? Whaddhe do, hang up? Hallo?’

He saw Montalbano.

‘Ahhh, Chief, Chief! ’At was the C’mishner!’

‘What’d he want?’

‘He din’t say, Chief. He said only as how he wanted a talk to you rilly emergently.’

‘OK. I’ll call him later.’

On his desk was a mountain of papers to be signed. His heart sank at the sight. It really wasn’t his day. He turned on his heels and passed by Catarella’s closet.

'I'll be right back. I'm going to have a coffee.'

After the coffee, he smoked a cigarette and went for a short walk. Then he returned to his office and called the commissioner.

'Montalbano here. Your orders, sir.'

'Don't make me laugh!'

'Why, what did I do?'

'You said: your orders, sir!'

'So? What was I supposed to say?'

'It's not what you say that matters, it's what you do. I give the orders, you can be sure of that, but I can't – I don't dare – imagine what you do with them!'

'Mr Commissioner, sir, I would never allow myself to do what you think I do with them.'

'Let's drop it, Montalbano, it's better that way. What ever happened with that Piccolo business?'

Montalbano was befuddled. What piccolo business? He didn't know of any piccolo-makers in Vigàta.

'Er, Mr Commissioner, I don't know of any musical-instrument makers in—'

'For God's sake, Montalbano! What are you talking about? Giulio Piccolo is a person, not an instrument; he's retired, seventy years old, and ... Listen, Montalbano, listen very carefully to what I'm about to say, which you can take as an ultimatum: I demand a thorough, written report on the matter by tomorrow morning.'

He hung up. Surely the file on this Giulio Piccolo, about whom he couldn't remember a single thing, must be

buried somewhere in that mountain of paper in front of him. Did he have the courage to set his hand to it? Ever so slowly, he extended his right arm and, with a lightning-quick jab – as you might make to grab a poisonous animal that could bite you – he grabbed the folder at the top of the pile. He opened it and his jaw dropped. It was none other than the file on Giulio Piccolo. He felt like falling to his knees and thanking St Anthony, who must certainly have worked this miracle. He opened the folder and started reading. Mr Piccolo’s fabric shop had burned down. The firemen had determined the cause to be arson. Mr Piccolo declared that the shop was set on fire because he had refused to pay protection money. The police, on the other hand, believed that it was Piccolo himself who had set fire to his shop to collect the insurance. There was, however, something that didn’t make sense. Giulio Piccolo was born in Licata, lived in Licata, and his shop was located on the main street of Licata. So why was this case not being handled by the Licata police instead of Vigàta’s? The answer was simple: because at Montelusa Central, they had confused Licata with Vigàta.

The inspector picked up a ballpoint and a sheet of paper with the Vigàta Police letterhead, and wrote:

Respected Mr Commissioner,

As Vigàta is not Licata, nor Licata Vigàta, there’s been an error of position, sir. What seems to you inaction, on the order you gave, is nothing at all save respect for jurisdiction, sir.

He signed it and stamped it. Bureaucracy had re-awakened a long-lost poetical vein in him. True, the lines stumbled a bit, but Bonetti-Alderighi would never notice that he had answered him in rhyme. The inspector called Catarella, gave him the Piccolo file and the letter, telling him to send the lot to the commissioner after properly registering it according to protocol.