



# Montalbano's First Case



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About the Author

# 1

Montalbano had been given a sort of prediction, in the most indirect of ways, concerning his upcoming promotion to inspector. It came exactly two months before the official communication, with all its customary stamps.

In fact, in all government offices worthy of the name, predicting (or forecasting, if you prefer) the future, more or less distant, of each member of said office—and of those nearby—is a trivial, obvious, and everyday exercise. There's no need, for instance, to peruse the entrails of a quartered carcass or to consult the flight of birds like in the olden days. Nor is it necessary to read the bottoms of coffee cups, as people do nowadays. And yet, in those offices, oceans of coffee are brewed and consumed every day. No, to make a prediction (or forecast, if you prefer), all it takes is half a word, the start of a look, a faint murmur, and the intention to raise one's brow. And these predictions (or forecasts, et cetera) are not exclusive to the bureaucrats' careers, transfers, promotions, reprimands, notes of merit or demerit, but often and happily extend to their private lives.

"Mark my words, before the week's out, Falcuccio's wife will make a cuckold of him with the specialist Stracuzzi," the accountant Piscopo whispered to the surveyor Dalli Cardillo as they watched their colleague Falcuccio head to the lavatory, blissfully unaware.

"Are you serious?" the surveyor asked, taken aback.

"As a heart attack."

"And how are you so sure?"

"Please," Piscopo said with a half smile, as he tipped his head over one shoulder and placed his right hand on his heart.

"Have you ever seen Mrs. Falcuccio?"

"Me? No, never. Why do you ask?"

"Because I know her."

"So what?"

"You see, my dear accountant, she's fat, hairy, and half a midget."

"What difference does that make? Are you saying that fat, hairy half midgets lack that thing all other women have between their legs?"

And the extraordinary thing is that, seven days after that conversation, as predicted, Mrs. Falcuccio was found panting with pleasure—"Mother Mary! I'm dying!"—in the vast, widowed bed of Stracuzzi.

If this is what happens in a regular office, imagine the degree of accuracy of those

predictions (or forecasts, et cetera) made in a police station where the entire staff, with no hierarchical distinction, is specifically trained and instructed to note even the smallest clue, the slightest shift in the wind, and to draw all the pertinent conclusions.

The news of his promotion didn't catch Montalbano off guard; it was standard procedure, as they often say in those offices, and he had more than paid his dues during his apprenticeship as deputy of Mascalippa, a small town lost within the Erean Mountains, serving under Chief Inspector Libero Sanfilippo. What Montalbano was worried about was where they were going to send him, what they called the *destination*. And that word, *destination*, was much too similar to another word: *destiny*. In fact, a promotion also meant a transfer. And thus a change in residence, in routine, in friendships: a whole new destiny to discover. Honestly, he had grown tired of Mascalippa and its surroundings, but not of its inhabitants, who were neither worse nor better than any others, with the right percentage of criminals and upstanding citizens, idiots and smart people; no, what he couldn't endure any longer was the landscape. Let's get one thing straight: If there was a part of Sicily he really loved to look at it, it was the dry and scorched Sicily, yellow and brown, where stubborn patches of green jumped out like a shot from a cannon; where the little houses balanced on top of the hills looked like white dice that were about to roll down at the first strong gust of wind; where at high noon even lizards and snakes couldn't muster the strength to hide in the brush or under a stone and just lay there resigned to their fate, regardless of what it might bring. And most of all, he liked to look at the beds of what used to be rivers and creeks, or at least that's how the street signs referred to them—Ipsas, Salsetto, Kokalos—now nothing more than a long line of white stones and dusty pebbles. He liked looking at that landscape, of course he did: but living inside it, day in and day out, was enough to drive a man insane. That's because he was a man of the sea. In Mascalippa, on certain mornings at dawn, when he would open the window and take a deep breath, instead of feeling his lungs fill with air, he had the impression that they were being emptied, as if he were drowning. Certainly, the early morning air of Mascalippa was good for you, special, it smelled of hay and grass, of open countryside, but it wasn't enough for him—and actually, one of these days it was going to suffocate him. He needed the sea breeze, he needed the smell of seaweed, he needed to taste the salt when he licked his lips. He needed long walks by the sea early in the morning, with the waves that came up to caress his feet. A destination to a mountain town like Mascalippa would have been worse than ten years in the can.

The same morning that someone who had nothing to do with police station, but who was still a government employee (that is, the local postmaster), had prophesized his transfer, Montalbano was summoned by his boss, Chief Inspector Libero Sanfilippo. He was a real cop, one of those who knew if someone was telling the truth or bullshitting before they even opened their mouth. And at the time, in 1985, his kind was already an endangered species. Like those doctors who had what was called a "clinical eye," and could diagnose their patients' ailments just by looking at them; nowadays, if they don't have at least a hundred different lab results cooked up by a thousand different technologically advanced machines, they don't understand a goddamn thing, not even a good old-fashioned flu. Years later, when Montalbano happened to think back on those first years of his career, Libero Sanfilippo held a place of prominence; without making a big deal out of it, he had taught Montalbano many

things. First and foremost, how to keep his inner balance in the face of serious and upsetting events.

“If you let yourself be overrun by your emotions, by dismay, horror, indignation, and empathy, you’re completely fucked,” Sanfilippo had reminded him every chance he got. But Montalbano could only follow this principle in part, because at times, in spite of his resistance, he was overwhelmed by his feelings and emotions.

Second, Sanfilippo had told him how to cultivate the clinical eye that Montalbano had envied so much in his superior. But, concerning this second teaching, he took only what he could: Clearly, that kind of X-ray vision, like Superman’s, was, for the most part, a gift of nature.

The negative side of Chief Inspector Sanfilippo—at least in the eyes of his liberal deputy—was his complete, blind devotion to all order worthy of a capital O. The institutional Order. The public Order. The social Order. In his first few days in Mascalippa, Montalbano had wondered why a sufficiently educated gentleman would so passionately trust an abstract idea that, as soon as you applied it to the real world, took on the unpleasant shape of a nightstick and a pair of handcuffs. His answer came one day when, by chance, he happened to steal a glance at his superior’s ID. His full name read Libero Pensiero Sanfilippo. Mother of God! Libero Pensiero, Volontà, Libertà, Palingenesi, Vindice—these were all typical names anarchists gave to their sons and daughters! Undoubtedly, the chief inspector’s father was an anarchist and his son, out of spite, not only had become a cop, but also became obsessed with the idea of Order in an extreme attempt to destroy his father’s genetic legacy.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning. Please shut the door and take a seat. You can smoke if you want. But please watch the ashes.”

Yup. That was because in addition to Order with a capital O, Sanfilippo also liked the lowercase order. If as much as a speck of ash fell outside the ashtray, Sanfilippo would start to get antsy; he’d change color, and you could tell he was suffering.

“How’s the Amoruso-Lonardo case coming? Any developments?” the inspector began.

Montalbano wavered. What case? Filippo Amoruso: sixty years old, retired, had moved the wall around his garden slightly while making repairs, annexing about five inches of the garden belonging to his neighbor, Pasquale Lonardo: eighty years old, retired. The latter, upon discovering the misdeed, had declared in the presence of a third party that he had repeated carnal congress with the late mother, known to each and all as the greatest of whores, of said Amoruso. After hearing said statement, Amoruso, without uttering a single sound, proceeded to insert five inches of steel into the belly of said Lonardo, oblivious to the fact that said Lonardo, in that precise moment, was holding a hoe, which he used to crack his opponent’s head before collapsing to the ground. Now both men were in the hospital, charged with disorderly conduct and attempted murder. The chief inspector’s question, in all its pointlessness, could mean only one thing: he was beating around the bush before getting to what he really wanted to talk about. Montalbano braced for impact.

“Not really,” he said.

“Good, good.”

Silence. Montalbano moved his left buttock a few inches forward and crossed his

legs. He wasn't feeling at ease. Something in the air made him nervous. In the meantime, Sanfilippo had produced a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and was using it to polish his desk.

"Yesterday afternoon, as I'm sure you know, I was in Enna. The chief asked to speak to me," he said suddenly.

Montalbano uncrossed his legs and didn't say a word.

"He notified me of my promotion to deputy chief of police and my transfer to Palermo."

Montalbano felt a knot in his throat.

"Congratulations," he managed to articulate.

Did he really summon him to tell him something that everyone and their mother had known for over a month? The chief inspector removed his glasses, held the lenses up to the light, and put them back on.

"Thanks. He also told me that you'd be promoted in a couple of months at most. Have you heard anything about it?"

"Yeh'," Montalbano mumbled. He couldn't utter the letter *s*, because his tongue had grown stiff; he was tense and wound as tightly as a spring.

"The chief asked me if I thought it was a good idea for you to take my place."

"Here?"

"Of course. Here in Mascalippa. Where else?"

"Bu-bu-bu-bu ..." Montalbano stammered.

And it wasn't clear whether he was stuttering or if he had run out of *t*'s. He knew it! From the moment he had entered that room he'd been expecting the bad news! And here it was, delivered right on time. In a matter of seconds he saw the landscape of Mascalippa and its surroundings pass before his eyes. It was certainly splendid, but not his cup of tea. For good measure, he also saw four cows grazing on the withering grass. He felt a cold shiver down his spine, like a bout of malaria.

"I told him I didn't think it was a good idea," Sanfilippo said looking at him with a half smile.

Did that son of a bitch of a superior want to give him a heart attack? Did he want to see him fall to the floor gasping for breath? Although he was on the brink of a nervous breakdown, Montalbano's spirit of contradiction got the better of him.

"And why, in your opinion, isn't it a good idea for me to be the chief inspector of Mascalippa?"

"Because you're completely incompatible with the environment."

He paused, and widened his smile.

"Or rather, the environment is incompatible with you."

Sanfilippo was a hell of a cop!

"When did you figure it out? I didn't do anything to ..."

"The hell you didn't! You didn't speak, you didn't say anything—you're right about that. But you did it, and you did plenty. A few weeks after you got here I already had you all figured out."

"What in the world did I do exactly?"

"I'll give you only one example. You remember that time we went to interview those farmers on Mount Stellario and we had lunch with that family of shepherds?"

"Yes," Montalbano said, biting his lip.

“They had set a table outside, it was a beautiful day, the mountaintops were still white with snow. Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“You kept your head down, you didn’t want to look at the view. They offered us fresh ricotta cheese and you murmured that you weren’t hungry. Then the head of the household said that it was so clear that you could see the lake. He pointed to it, down there in the valley. I looked. A gem sparkling in the sun. I invited you to look at that wonderful sight. You agreed, but you closed your eyes immediately and turned white. You didn’t touch any of the food, and then there was that other time ...”

“Enough, please, have mercy.”

The chief inspector was enjoying himself, toying with Montalbano like a cat with a mouse. So much so that he had forgotten to tell him how his conversation with the chief had ended. As Montalbano was still recovering from the memory of that awful day spent on Mount Stellario, he had the gnawing sensation that Sanfilippo didn’t have the courage to tell him the truth. That is, that the chief was sticking to his original plan: Montalbano was going to become the chief inspector of Mascalippa.

“And the chief?” he dared.

“What about the chief?”

“What did he have to say about your observation?”

“That he would think about it. But if you want to know what I think ...”

“Of course I want to know!”

“I think I managed to convince him. He’ll let his superiors decide where to transfer you.”

And what were they going to decide, the Higher-Ups, the Supreme Beings, the Gods, who like all other gods worthy of the name, reside in Rome? This nagging question prevented him from enjoying the suckling pig that the trattoria owner Santino had ceremoniously announced the day before.

“Today, you didn’t do me proud,” Santino said, slightly offended, having seen him eat without gusto.

Montalbano opened his arms and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of resignation. “Sorry, Santi, but I’m not feeling too well.”

He left the trattoria and suddenly found himself lost in the nothingness, trying to feel his way around. When he had entered the trattoria the sun was out; about an hour later, a thick and gloomy fog had risen. That was how it was in Mascalippa.

He headed home with a shrunken heart, avoiding, only at the last second, collisions with other human shadows. The day was dark and the darkness had seeped inside him as well. As he walked, he made a decision that he knew to be final, indisputable: if they were going to assign him to a town like Mascalippa, he would have to resign. He’d rather become a lawyer, or an assistant to a lawyer, or the security guard in a law office, as long as he was in a place by the sea.

He had rented a small apartment composed of two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen, right downtown, so that, when he opened the window, he couldn’t see the mountains and the hills. There was no central heat and in spite of the four electric heaters that were constantly on during winter nights, the best thing to do was to go to bed and bury yourself under the blankets, with only your face and a hand poking out

to read. Reading and thinking about what he had read were things he always liked to do; that was why the two rooms were filled to the rafters with books. He could easily start one in the evening and go on till morning, without any breaks. Luckily there was no risk of being disturbed at night by violent crimes. God only knew why all the killings, shootings, and bloody fistfights always happened during the day. And there was never a need to open an investigation; they were all crimes without mystery: John shot Bob over some money and readily confessed; Jack stabbed Tom over his cheating wife and confessed. If he wanted to use his brain, Montalbano was forced to solve the weekly crossword puzzle. Anyway, the years he spent in Mascalippa working under someone like Sanfilippo hadn't been wasted—on the contrary.

That night, however, the idea of staying in bed to read or watching some bullshit program on TV seemed completely unbearable. By then, Mery had certainly returned home from the school where she taught Latin. They had met in college during their years of protest. They were the same age—actually, she was four months younger than he. From the moment they first saw each other, they knew they were birds of a feather, and shortly thereafter they went from friendship to a sort of romantic relationship that was absolutely free: when they felt like seeing each other, one called the other and they met. Later, they fell out of touch. Around 1975, Montalbano had heard that Mery had gotten married but had that she broken it off after less than a year. He ran into her by chance, in Catania, on Via Etna, a week after he had been assigned to Mascalippa. Desperate, he had gotten in his car, driven for over an hour, and arrived in Catania with the intention of seeing a movie that had just come out: the movies they showed in the one theater in Mascalippa were at least three years old. There, in the lobby, as he was waiting in line to buy his ticket, he heard somebody calling his name. It was she, Mery, on her way out of the theater. She had been beautiful and voluptuous as a girl, but now maturity and experience had given her a collected, almost secret kind of beauty. In the end, Montalbano didn't see the movie; he followed Mery to her apartment, where she lived alone without any plans of getting married ever again. The first time around had been more than enough. Montalbano had spent the night with her, and the next morning at six, he had driven back to Mascalippa. From then on it had become a sort of routine—Montalbano would make the drive to Catania at least a couple times a week.

“Hi, Mery. It's Salvo.”

“Hi. You know what?”

“What?”

“I was just about to call you.”

Montalbano changed color. What if Mery had called to tell him she was busy that night and couldn't see him?

“Why?”

“I wanted to ask you if you could swing by a little earlier than usual so we can have dinner together. Last night a colleague took me to a restaurant that ...”

“I'll be at your place at seven thirty. Does that work?” Montalbano cut to the chase, almost singing with joy.

The restaurant, *Il Delfino*, didn't have the most original of names. But the imagination that was lacking on its sign abounded inside the kitchen: they brought out

at least ten different appetizers consisting entirely of seafood, each one more heavenly than the next. The baby octopus *a strascinasale* melted before even touching his palate. And how about the stone bass cooked in an angelic sauce whose ingredients Montalbano couldn't quite identify? Plus, he was with Mery, and when it came to eating, she was almost as gallant as he was. When you're eating and enjoying yourself, if you don't have someone next to you who's having as much fun as you are, your own pleasure is diminished, dulled.

They didn't speak. Every so often they would look each other in the eyes and smile. At the end of the meal, after the fruit course, the lights in the room were dimmed and then turned off. Some of the patrons protested. Out of the kitchen door came a waiter pushing a cart on which was a cake with a lit candle and a bucket of ice with a bottle of champagne. Surprised, Montalbano watched as the waiter pulled up to their table. The lights came back on and all the patrons started clapping as someone shouted:

"Happy birthday! Happy birthday!"

It must have been Mery's birthday and he had completely forgotten. What a jerk he was! What a dumbass! But he couldn't help it: He was horrible with dates.

"Ple-ple-ple ... please forgive me, I forgot that today was ... was your ..." he stuttered, feeling ashamed and taking her hand.

"My what?" asked Mery, clearly amused, looking at him with sparkling eyes.

"Isn't it your birthday?"

"Mine? It's *your* birthday!" said Mery, bursting into laughter.

Montalbano looked at her completely dumbstruck. She was right!

As soon as they got home, Mery opened her closet and took out a box adorned in the style that shopkeepers call "gift wrapping" that's basically a triumph of tacky ribbons, tape, and bad taste.

"With my best wishes."

Montalbano opened it. It was a heavy sweater, very elegant; the type people wear in the mountains.

"You'll need it for those Mascalippa winters."

As soon as she finished her sentence, she noticed Salvo had made a strange face.

"What's going on?"

And Montalbano told her about his promotion and his talk with the chief inspector.

"... And so I have no idea where they're sending me," he concluded.

Mery remained silent. She looked at her watch and saw that it was ten thirty. Then she quickly got up from her chair.

"Sorry, I have to make a phone call."

She went to her bedroom and closed the door so he couldn't hear her. Montalbano suffered a slight bout of jealousy. But after all, he couldn't expect Mery not to have other men in her life. After a little while he heard her calling him. When he got into the bedroom Mery was already under the sheets waiting for him.

Later, as they were lying in bed, Mery whispered in his ear, "I called Uncle Giovanni."

Montalbano blanked.

"Who's that?"

"My mother's younger brother. I'm his favorite niece. He's a big shot in the ministry. I asked him to find out where they're sending you. I hope you don't mind ..."

“Not at all,” Montalbano said, kissing her.

Mery called him at the office at six the following evening.

She only said one word.

“Vigata.”

Then she hung up.

## 2

The one who had pronounced those three syllables, *Vi-ga-ta*, from the highest peak of the Roman Olympus, in the Empyrean of the Palaces of Powers, wasn't just another soothsayer, but a Supreme Being, a God of that religion called Bureaucracy, one of those whose words marked an escapable destiny. Someone who, after being duly implored, had provided a clear and precise answer, much better than those of the Cumaen Sibyl or of Pythia or of Apollo in Delphi. For the answers of Sibyl, Pythia, or Apollo always had to be interpreted by the priests, and the different interpretations almost never matched. "*Ibis rebidis non morieris in bello*," Sibyl would tell the soldier who was about to leave for war. Thank you and come again. But a comma needed to be added either before or after that *non* for the soldier to know whether he was going to end up six feet under or whether he was going to walk away. And inserting the comma was the priests' job, and they would provide their interpretation depending on the donation. Here there was nothing to interpret. The Supreme Being had said Vigata, and Vigata it was going to be.

After receiving Mery's phone call there was no way Montalbano could remain seated behind his desk. He murmured something unintelligible to the guard, went out, and started to walk around town. As he was walking he could barely keep from dancing the boogie-woogie, which, at the time, was precisely the rhythm he felt running through his veins. Mother Mary, how wonderful! Vigata! He tried to conjure up his memories of the place, and the first image that came to mind was a sort of postcard showing the port with its three piers and, on the left, the massive shape of a huge tower. Then he remembered the main drag and the café in the middle of it, with its billiard room. He used to go there every now and then, when his father felt like a game of pool. And while his father was playing, he'd eat a huge wedge of ice cream, usually a *pezzo duro*—that's what they called it—the cream and chocolate one. Or he'd get the *cassata*, a kind of ice cream they made there that you couldn't find anywhere else. He could still taste it between his tongue and his palate. And with that taste came the name of the café: Castiglione. Who knew if it was still there and if they still made that unforgettable ice cream? Then two colors flashed before his eyes, as bright as the sun: yellow and blue. The yellow of the fine sand and the blue of the seawater. Without realizing it, he had come to a sort of belvedere from which he could see the whole valley and the mountain peaks. Naturally, they were not the Dolomites, but they were still mountains. They were more than enough to plunge him into the darkest of melancholies, an unbearable sensation of exile. This time he managed to look at the

landscape and he even enjoyed it a little, comforted by the certainty that he wouldn't have to see it again any time soon.

That evening he called Mery to thank her.

"I had my own interests in my mind," she said.

"What interests? I don't understand."

"If they had sent you to Abbiategrasso or Casalpusterlengo it would have been impossible to see each other. But it's only two hours to Vigata from Catania. I checked the map."

Montalbano didn't know what to say; he was touched.

"Did you think you were going to get rid of me that easily?" Maria continued.

They laughed.

"One of these days I want to swing by Vigata. I want to see if it's still like I remember. Naturally, I won't tell anyone that ..."

He stopped talking. An icy snake slithered down his spine, paralyzing him.

"Salvo, what's up? Are you still there?"

"Yes. Nothing, I was just thinking of something ..."

"What?"

Montalbano hesitated; he was afraid of offending her. But the doubt was stronger than any other consideration.

"Mery, can Uncle Giovanni be trusted? Are we absolutely sure that ..."

He heard a deep laugh come from the other end of the line.

"I knew it!"

"What did you know?"

"That sooner or later you'd have asked that question. My uncle told me your destination is already final. The decision has been made. You can be sure of it. Actually, let's do this. When you decide to go to Vigata, let me know ahead of time. That way I can get a day off and we can go together. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"Of course what? About Vigata or about tomorrow?"

"About both."

But he immediately knew that was bullshit. Or at least partly bullshit. The next evening he would certainly go to Catania to spend time with Mery, but he was going to visit Vigata on his own. Her presence would distract him. To tell the truth, the first verb that came to his mind wasn't *distract*, but rather *disturb*. And he was a little ashamed of it.

Vigata was more or less the way he remembered it. There were a few new buildings on Piano Lanterna; they were horrible dwarfish skyscrapers about fifteen to twenty stories high, while the little houses piled one on top of the other against the limestone hill, their small and intricate streets teeming with life, had disappeared completely. Those used to be mostly *catoj*—that is, houses made up of one single room; during the day the front door would remain open to let in air and light. That way, as you walked through those alleys, you could observe a woman giving birth, a family feud, a priest administering a dying man his last rites, the preparations for a wedding or a funeral. All out in the open. And everything drowned in a babble of voices, laments, laughs, prayers, blasphemies, and insults. He asked a passerby what had happened to those

small houses and the man told him that a terrible flood had washed them into the sea a few years earlier.

He had forgotten, by contrast, the smell of the port. A mixture of stagnant seawater, rotten seaweed, decaying ropes, sunbaked tar, diesel fuel, and sardines. Each element contributing to that scent, taken by itself, wasn't exactly a celebration of the senses, but the whole thing together concocted the most refined of perfumes, mysterious and unmistakable. He sat down for a bit. He didn't even light a cigarette, not wanting to contaminate, with the smell of tobacco, the perfume he had just rediscovered. He remained like that for a while, watching the seagulls, until a grumbling in his stomach told him it was time to eat. The sea air had awoken his appetite.

He returned to the main drag, called Via Roma, and he immediately noticed a sign that read TRATTORIA SAN CALOGERO. Commending his soul to our lord and savior, he went in. All the tables were empty; certainly it wasn't the right time—too early.

"Can I eat?" he asked the waiter with white hair who, hearing him come in, had appeared at the kitchen door and was looking at him.

"I don't know, can you?" he answered in a dry tone.

He sat down, mad at himself for having asked such a stupid question.

"Today we have seafood salad—spaghetti with squid ink or clams, or with sea urchin."

"Spaghetti with sea urchin is hard to get right," Montalbano said doubtfully.

"I got my degree in sea urchin," the waiter said.

Montalbano wanted to swallow his own tongue in one big gulp. Two to nothing.

Two stupid remarks on his part and two smart answers from the waiter.

"And for the second course?"

"Fish."

"What kind of fish?"

"Whatever kind you want."

"But how is it prepared?"

"That depends on the fish."

Better to keep his mouth shut.

"Bring whatever you think is best."

He realized he had made the right decision. When he left the trattoria he had consumed three appetizers, a bowl of spaghetti with sea urchin big enough for four people, and six perfectly fried red mullets, and yet, he felt light as a feather, filled with a sense of well-being so intense he had a stupid smile stamped on his face. He was absolutely certain that once he moved to Vigata, this was going to be his restaurant of choice.

By then it was three in the afternoon. He spent an hour rummaging around town and then decided to take a long walk along the east pier. He took it slowly, one step at a time. The silence was broken only by the sound of the waves against the docks, by the cries of the seagulls, and, from time to time, by the rumbling of a diesel engine on a fishing boat. Right under the lighthouse there was a flat rock. He sat on it. The day was of an almost painful clarity; every now and then he would feel a breeze. After a while, he got up. It was time to go back to the car and return to Mascalippa. Halfway down the pier, he suddenly stopped. An image had appeared before his eyes: some kind of hill, blindingly white, which looked like a giant staircase that led down into the sea.

What was it? Where was it? The Turkish Staircase—that’s what it was! It had to have been around there somewhere.

He went straight to Café Castiglione, which was still where it had always been—he had checked earlier to make sure.

“Can you tell me how to get to the Turkish Staircase?”

“Of course.”

The waiter told him how to get there.

“Could you bring me a wedge of pezzo duro? I’ll be in the billiard room.”

“What kind?”

“Cassata.”

He walked into the other room. Two gentlemen were playing a game of pool, with the help of two of their friends. He sat down at a table, and he slowly ate his cassata, savoring every single spoonful. All of sudden an argument broke out between the two players. Their friends intervened.

“Let’s ask the gentlemen to settle this,” one of them said.

Another, speaking to Montalbano, said, “Do you know how to play pool?”

“No,” Montalbano said, a bit embarrassed.

They looked at him with contempt and went back to their argument. Montalbano finished his cassata, paid at the register, went out, retrieved the car he had parked nearby, and left for the Turkish Staircase.

Following the waiter’s directions, at a certain point he took a left turn, drove a few meters of paved road leading downhill, and then stopped. The road ended and he had to walk on the sand. He took off his shoes and socks, and left them in the car, which he locked. Then he rolled up his pants and walked down to the shore. The water was cool, not cold. Behind the cape, the Turkish Staircase suddenly appeared.

It wasn’t as intimidating as he remembered; when you’re little everything looks bigger than it actually is. But even in its new dimensions, it still possessed a surprising beauty. The highest part of the white limestone hill popped against the clear, cloudless blue sky and was crowned by the deep green of the brush. At its base, the last steps, which dipped into the light blue of the sea, illuminated by the sun, took on the sparkling hue of an intense pink. The more withdrawn part of the ridge was painted with the yellow of sand. The excessive colors made Montalbano dizzy; they were literally screaming at him, so much so that he had to close his eyes for a moment and cover his ears with his hands. He still had a hundred yards to go before reaching the hill, but he preferred to look at it from a distance: He was afraid of becoming part of the painting’s reality, of becoming paint himself, another blotch of color—the wrong one, no doubt.

He sat down on the dry sand, mesmerized. He stayed like that for a while, smoking one cigarette after another, absorbed by the various colors the light of the setting sun took on as it reflected off the lowest steps of the Turkish Staircase. He got up after sunset and decided to return to Mascalippa later that night. The best thing would be to return to Trattoria San Calogero for another meal. He walked slowly back to the car. Every now and then he would turn around to look; he really didn’t want to leave that place. He drove toward Vigata at ten miles an hour, exposing himself to the insults and curses of the drivers who had to pass him on that narrow road. He paid them no mind; he was in one of those rare moods in which if someone had punched him, he would

have turned the other cheek. Before entering the town, he stopped to restock on cigarettes for the journey home. Then he went to a gas station, filled up the tank, and had the oil and tire pressure checked. He looked at his watch; he still had a half hour to kill. He parked the car and walked back to the port. Now there was a large ferry docked at the pier.

A long line of cars and trucks was waiting to board.

“Where’s that going?” he asked a passerby.

“That’s the daily to Lampedusa.”

Finally, it was a decent hour. In fact, when he entered the trattoria, three tables were already taken. A younger apprentice was helping the waiter. He approached Montalbano with a faint smile.

“Same as at lunch?”

“Yes.”

The waiter leaned toward him.

“Did you like the Turkish Staircase?”

Montalbano looked at him, confused.

“Who told you I ...”

“News travels fast in these parts.”

And they probably already knew he was a cop!

About a week later, while they were still in bed, Mery asked a question out of the blue.

“Did you ever go to Vigata?”

“No,” Montalbano lied.

“How come?”

“I didn’t have time.”

“Aren’t you curious to see what it’s like? You told me you’d been there as a child, but it must have changed since then.”

Gee, she really wouldn’t let it go! If he didn’t make an immediate decision, who knew how long she would keep it up.

“We’ll go next Sunday, okay?”

They decided that Mery would take her own car all the way up to the road to Caltanissetta. There she would leave it in a parking lot where Montalbano would pick her up.

So Montalbano had to go back to Vigata pretending as if he hadn’t been there a few days before.

First he took her to the port and then to the Turkish Staircase.

The girl was overwhelmed. But since she was a woman—that is, she was one of those creatures capable of reconciling the loftiest peaks of poetry with the coarsest concreteness—she looked at Montalbano, who couldn’t take his eyes off such a beautiful place, and, in dialect, said, “I’m starving.”

And this was the Shakespearean dilemma Montalbano had to face. Should he take her to Trattoria San Calogero, and risk being recognized by the waiter, or should he try a new restaurant, and risk being served horrible food?

The prospect of driving back with a stomach upset by a meal he wouldn’t have even fed to the dogs made his decision. As they went back to the town, he arranged things

so that he and Mery would stumble upon the trattoria as if by chance.

“Should we try this place?”

As soon as he entered, he looked for the waiter.

A quick glance was all they needed.

“You’ve never seen me before,” said Montalbano’s eyes.

“I’ve never seen you before,” the waiter’s eyes answered.

After a heavenly meal, Montalbano took Mery to Castiglione, and suggested she try the pezzo duro.

After her ice cream, Mery said she had to use the restroom.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” said Montalbano.

He stepped onto the sidewalk. The street was practically empty. In front of him stood city hall, with its little colonnade. Leaning on one of the columns, a traffic cop was talking to a couple of stray dogs. From the left-hand side a car was driving up slowly. All of a sudden a sports car came speeding out of nowhere. Right in front of Montalbano, the sports car swerved slightly and sideswiped the slower car as it passed. Both drivers stopped and got out. The one with the slower car was an elderly gentleman who wore glasses. The other was a tall youngster with a mustache. As the older gentleman was checking the damage to his car, the youngster put a hand on his shoulder and when the older man turned to look at him, the younger man punched him hard in the face. It all happened in a matter of seconds. As he fell to the ground, a fat man with a birthmark on his face got out of the sports car, grabbed the youngster, forced him back into the car, and a moment later they took off with a screech.

Montalbano ran toward the old man, whose face was covered in blood and who couldn’t even speak. The blood was coming out of his nose and his mouth. Meanwhile, the traffic cop was walking toward them as slowly as he could. Montalbano sat the old man down in the passenger seat; clearly he was in no condition to drive.

“Take him to the emergency room,” he told the cop.

It looked like he was moving in slow motion.

“Did you get the plates of the other car?” Montalbano asked him.

“Yes,” the traffic cop said removing a pen and notepad from his pocket.

He wrote down the number. Montalbano, who still remembered it clearly, noticed it was wrong.

“The last two digits are wrong. I got a good look at them. It wasn’t fifty-eight—it was sixty-three.”

The cop reluctantly corrected the plate number and started the car.

“Wait a minute. Don’t you want to take down my information?” he asked.

“Why would I need it?”

“What do you mean, why? I’m a witness.”

“Fine, fine. If you insist.”

He wrote down Montalbano’s name and address as if they were offensive. After closing his notepad, he gave him the stinkeye and took off without saying a word.

When Mery finally appeared on the sidewalk, the cop had just left to take the old man to the hospital.

“I freshened up a bit,” Mery said without noticing a thing. “Shall we?”

A month and half went by without any changes. From the Supreme Spheres came no messages regarding either promotions or transfers. Montalbano began to think it had been a big joke, that someone was laughing at his expense. Consequently, he was in a horrible mood; metaphorically speaking, he was kicking and snorting, like a horse assailed by horseflies.

“Try to be reasonable,” Mery would plead, trying to calm him down, since she had become the main target of her friend’s bad temper. “Why would anyone want to mess with you like that?”

“How do I know? Maybe you and your uncle Giovanni can tell me!”

And it would always end in a big fight.

Then, one fine morning, Chief Inspector Sanfilippo called Montalbano into his office and, with a smile that cut his face in two, finally gave him the answer from the Council of Gods: chief inspector of Vigata.

Montalbano’s face first turned yellow, then changed to bright red, and finally became green. Sanfilippo was worried he was about to have a heart attack.

“Montalbano, are you feeling all right? Have a seat!”

He poured Montalbano a glass of water from a bottle he kept on his desk and handed it to him.

“Drink this!”

Montalbano obeyed. Judging from this reaction, Sanfilippo got the wrong the idea.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like Vigata? I’ve been there, you know. It’s a beautiful little town—you’ll see, you’ll be happy there.”

Montalbano went back to that beautiful little town—as the chief inspector called it—four days later. This time he was there in an official capacity, to introduce himself to his colleague Locascio, whom he was going to relieve. The police station was located in a decent building, a three-story house at the beginning of the main drag for those coming from Montereale, or at the end of it for those coming from Montelusa—the county capital, home to the prefecture, the police headquarters, and the courthouse. Locascio, who lived on the third floor with his wife, in the chief inspector’s apartment, immediately told him that they were going to repaint it before they left.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? Aren’t you going to live there?”

“No.”

Locascio misunderstood.

“I see, you don’t like anyone keeping tabs on you, huh? You’re lucky, you still get some action at night!” he said, poking him in the ribs with his elbow.

The day Montalbano officially took over, Locascio introduced him to all of his men, one by one. There was one detective a bit older than the others whom Montalbano liked at first sight; his last name was Fazio.

He was going to take his time to find the right place to live.

In the meantime, he rented a bungalow from a hotel a couple of miles out of town. The books and the few things he owned were in storage in Mascalippa and could wait there for a while.

### 3

Two days after arriving in Vigata, Montalbano got in his car and drove to Montelusa to introduce himself to the police chief, whose last name was Alabiso. The soothsayers predicted that one day, as soon as the ministry deemed it appropriate, he would be given the boot: he had been the head of the political squad (which still existed, although every now and then it would change its name) and by now he knew too much. To top it all off, he was known for his inflexible character and his unwillingness to compromise. Sometimes men endowed with good qualities, when put in certain positions, became unfit for duty because of those same qualities—especially when seen through the eyes of people who lacked those qualities, but were involved in politics nonetheless. Alabiso was considered unfit because he wouldn't give anyone special treatment.

The chief saw Montalbano immediately, shook his hand, and asked him to sit down. But he looked a little distracted; every so often he would stop in the middle of his sentences and stare at Montalbano. All of sudden he said, "Let me ask you a question. Haven't we met before?"

"Yes," Montalbano answered.

"Right! I thought I'd seen you before! Did we meet on the job?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"When was that?"

"About seventeen years ago."

The chief looked at him, surprised.

"But at that time you were just a boy!"

"Not exactly. I was eighteen."

The chief grew defensive. He was getting suspicious.

"Was it in '68?" he guessed.

"Yes."

"Was it in Palermo?"

"Yes."

"Back then I was chief inspector."

"And I was a university student."

They looked at each other in silence.

"What did I do to you?" the chief asked.

"You kicked me in the ass. So hard you tore a hole in my pants."

"Oh. And what did you do?"

“I managed to punch you in the face.”

“Did I arrest you?”

“No. There was a brief struggle but I managed to escape.”

At this point the chief said something unbelievable, so softly that Montalbano didn't think he had heard him right.

“The good old days!” he said with a sigh.

Montalbano was the first to burst out laughing; the chief followed shortly thereafter. Then they found themselves hugging in the middle of the room.

After that they got back to business. They spoke especially about the turf war between the Cuffaro and Sinagra families, which had caused at least two deaths on each side each year. According to the chief, each family had its own saint in paradise.

“I'm sorry, what paradise?”

“A political paradise.”

“Are they two representatives from different parties?”

“No, they belong to the same majority party and even to the same group. You see, Montalbano, it's a theory I have. But it's been difficult to prove.”

“And it's because of this theory that they want to fuck you over,” Montalbano thought.

“Maybe it's completely unfounded. Who knows?” the chief continued. “But there are certain coincidences that ... might be worth looking into.”

“Sorry, but have you spoken about this to my predecessor?”

“No.”

There was no explanation.

“Then why are you telling me?”

“Chief Inspector Sanfilippo is a dear friend of mine. He told me what I needed to know about you.”

Every morning he left the hotel to go to the police station and had to drive, after a series of curves, down a straight road that ran parallel to the beach, long and deep. The area was called Marinella. There were three or four houses built right on the sand, far apart from one another. Nothing too pretentious: All of them were one story high. All of them had huge tanks on their roofs, to store water. Two of them had their tanks on the sides of a sort of terrace that served as both the roof and the solarium of the house, accessed through an external staircase made of stone. Each house also had a small back patio where, in the evening, one could sit down to eat and look out at the sea.

Every time Montalbano drove by, he left a piece of his heart there: If he managed to set foot in one of those houses he would never come out again. Mother Mary, what a dream! Waking up early in the morning and taking a walk by the sea! And maybe, weather permitting, going for a long swim!

Montalbano hated barbershops. When he was forced to go because his hair had grown down to his shoulders, he was in a foul mood.

“Where can I get my haircut?” he asked Fazio one morning, with the tone of someone inquiring about the closest funeral home.

“The best for you would be Totò Nicotra's place.”

“What do you mean, ‘the best for me’? Let's get one thing straight, Fazio. I'll never