

ANDREA CAMILLERI

# THE AGE OF DOUBT

*Translated by Stephen Sartarelli*



MANTLE

# ONE

He had just fallen asleep after a night worse than almost any other in his life, when a thunderclap as loud as a cannon fired two inches from his ear startled him awake. He sat up with a jolt, cursing the saints. Sleep seemed a distant memory, never to return. It was useless to remain in bed.

He got up, went over to the window, and looked outside. It was a textbook storm: sky painted uniformly black, bone-chilling lightning bolts, billows twelve feet high charging forward, shaking their great white manes. The surging sea had eaten up the beach, washing all the way up under the veranda. He glanced at his watch: not quite 6 a.m.

He went into the kitchen, prepared a pot of coffee, and sat down, waiting for it to bubble up. Little by little, the dream he had just had began to resurface in his memory. What a tremendous pain in the arse. This had been happening to him for several years now. Why did

he always have to remember every shitty little thing he happened to dream? As far as he knew, not everyone, upon waking up, dragged their dreams behind them. They simply opened their eyes, and everything that had happened to them during their sleep, good and bad, disappeared. But not him. And the worst of it was that these were problematic dreams. They raised a great many questions for most of which he had no answer. And in the end he would always get upset.

The previous evening he had gone to bed in good spirits. A week had gone by at the station with nothing of importance happening, and he'd decided to take advantage of the situation to surprise Livia and appear at her doorstep in Boccadasse unannounced. He had turned out the light, lain down in bed, and fallen asleep almost immediately. He'd started dreaming at once.

'Cat, I'm leaving for Boccadasse tonight,' he'd said, walking into the station.

'I'm coming too!'

'No, you can't.'

'Why?'

'Because!'

At this point Fazio cut in.

'I'm sorry, Chief, but you really can't go to Boccadasse.'

'Why?'

Fazio looked a little apprehensive.

'Do you mean to tell me you've forgotten, Chief?'

'Forgotten what?'

'You died yesterday morning at exactly seven fifteen.'

And he pulled a little piece of paper out of his pocket.

'You, Salvo Montalbano, son of—'

'Knock it off with the public records! Did I really die?! How did it happen?'

'You had a stroke.'

'Where?'

'Here, at the station.'

'When?'

'When you's talkin' witta c'mishner,' Catarella chimed in.

Apparently that son of a bitch Bonetti-Alderighi had pissed him off so badly that . . .

'If you want to come and have a look . . .' said Fazio, 'a mortuary chapel was set up in your office.'

They'd pushed aside the mountains of paper on his desk and laid the open coffin there. He looked at himself. He didn't look dead. But he was immediately convinced that the corpse in the coffin was his.

'Have you informed Livia?'

'Yes,' said Mimì Augello, coming up to him. Then he hugged him tightly and said, crying, 'I'm so sorry.'

And a sort of chorus kept repeating: 'We're so sorry.'

The chorus was made up of Bonetti-Alderighi, his cabinet chief Dr Lattes, Jacomuzzi, Burgio the headmaster, and two undertakers.

'Thanks,' the inspector said.

Then Dr Pasquano came forward.

'How did I die?' Montalbano asked him.

Pasquano flew off the handle.

'What! Still giving me grief, even in death! Just wait for the post-mortem results!'

'But can't you just give me a rough summary?'

'It looks like a sudden, massive stroke, but there are a few things that don't—'

'Oh, no you don't!' the commissioner broke in. 'Inspector Montalbano can't investigate his own death!'

'Why not?'

'It wouldn't be right. He's too personally involved. Anyway, the law makes no allowance for that sort of thing. I'm sorry. The case will be assigned to the new captain of the flying squad.'

At this point Montalbano got worried and took Mimì aside.

'When is Livia coming?'

Mimì seemed uneasy.

'Well, she said . . .'

'She said what?'

Mimì stared at his shoes.

'She said she didn't know.'

'Didn't know what?'

'Whether she could make it to the funeral.'

He stormed out of the room, enraged, and ran into

the courtyard, which was crowded with funeral wreaths and a waiting hearse. He pulled out his mobile phone.

‘Hello, Livia? Salvo here.’

‘Hi, how are you? Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean . . .’

‘What’s this about you not knowing if you can make it to—’

‘Salvo, listen. If you had lived, I would have done everything in my power to stay with you. I might even have married you. After wasting my life chasing after you, what else could I do? But now that I’m suddenly faced with this unique opportunity, you must understand—’

He turned the phone off and went back inside. He noticed they’d put the lid back on the coffin and the cortège was starting to move.

‘Are you coming?’ Bonetti-Alderighi asked him.

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ he replied.

But as soon as they got to the courtyard, one of the pallbearers fell, and the coffin crashed to the ground with a bang that woke him up.

\*

After that, he’d been unable to fall asleep again, besieged by unanswered questions. One, above all, hammered away at him. What did Livia mean when she said she wanted to take advantage of the opportunity? Quite simply, it meant that his death represented a sort of liberation for her. The follow-up question could only be: how much

truth was there in a dream? In this particular case, even a tiny grain of truth was too much.

Because it was true that Livia had had more than her fill. In fact, she'd had enough to fill a whole boatload of shipping containers. But how was it possible that his conscience only showed up in dreams, ruining his sleep? All the same, he thought, the fact that Livia had no intention of coming down to Sicily for his funeral was not right, whatever her reasons might be. In fact, it was downright mean.

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When he got into the car to go to the station, he noticed that the sea had come almost all the way up to the house and was less than a couple of feet from the parking area. He'd never seen the water come up this far. The beach was gone. It was all one great expanse of water.

It took him a good fifteen minutes and a couple of hundred curses before the car's engine decided to do what it was supposed to do, and this, naturally, only aggravated the state of his nervous system, which was already on the ropes from the nasty weather conditions.

He'd gone barely fifty yards when he had to stop. There was a line of traffic extending as far as the eye could see – or, rather, as far as the windscreen wipers, which couldn't quite manage to wipe away the pouring rain, allowed the eye to see.

The column of traffic was made up entirely of cars

headed towards Vigàta. In the opposite lane there wasn't so much as a moped.

After about ten minutes of this, he decided to pull out of the jam, turn back, and, at the junction with the Montereale road, take another route into town. It was longer, but it would at least get him to his destination.

But he was unable to budge, as the nose of his car was wedged right into the back of the car in front of him, and the car behind him had done the same to him.

It was hopeless. He had to stay put. He was trapped. Sandwiched. And the worst of it was that he had no idea what the hell had happened to create this situation.

After another twenty minutes or so he lost patience, opened the car door, and got out. In the twinkling of an eye he was soaked straight down to his underpants. He started running towards the front of the line of cars and soon came to the point of obstruction, the cause of which was immediately obvious: the sea had washed the road away. Completely. Both lanes were gone. In their place was a chasm, at the bottom of which lay not earth but foaming yellow water. The nose of the first car in the column was actually sticking out over the edge. Another ten inches and it would have plummeted down. The inspector, however, was immediately convinced that it was in danger, because the road surface was still crumbling, though very slowly. In twenty minutes, it was destined to be swallowed up in the chasm. The downpour made it impossible to see inside.

He went up to the car and tapped on the window. After a pause it was opened barely a crack by a young woman just over thirty wearing spectacles with lenses as thick as the bottoms of bottles. She looked terrified.

She was alone in the car.

'You have to get out,' he said to her.

'Why?'

'I'm afraid your car's going to get swallowed up if help doesn't arrive immediately.'

She made a face like a child about to cry. 'But where will I go?'

'Take whatever you need, and you can come in my car.'

She just looked at him and said nothing. Montalbano realized she didn't trust him, a total stranger.

'Listen, I'm a police inspector.'

Perhaps it was the way he said it, but the girl seemed convinced. She grabbed a sort of handbag and got out of the car. They started running side by side, then Montalbano made her get in his car.

Their clothes were so wet that when they sat down their weight made the water ooze out of her jeans and his trousers.

'I am Montalbano.'

The girl eyed him, bringing her head closer.

'Ah, yes. Now I recognize you. I've seen you on TV.'

She started sneezing and didn't stop. When she eventually finished, her eyes were watering. She removed her glasses, wiped her eyes, and put them back on.

'My name is Vanna. Vanna Digiulio.'

'Looks like you're catching a cold.'

'Of course.'

'Listen, would you like to come to my house? I've got some dry clothes that belong to my fiancée. You could change into them and put these clothes out to dry.'

'I'm not sure that would be right,' she objected, suddenly reserved.

'What?'

'That I come to your house.'

What was she imagining? That he would jump on her the moment she entered? Did he give the impression of being that kind of man? And hadn't she ever looked at herself in the mirror?

'Listen, if you're not—'

'And how would we get to your house?'

'On foot. It's barely fifty yards from here. It will be hours before anyone gets us out of this jam.'

\*

As Montalbano, after changing clothes, prepared a latte for her and a bowl of coffee for himself, Vanna had a shower, put on a dress of Livia's that was a bit loose on her, and came into the kitchen, crashing first into the doorjamb and then against a chair. How did she ever get a driver's licence, with eyes like hers? A rather plain girl, poor thing. When she was wearing jeans, one couldn't tell, but now that she was wearing Livia's dress,

Montalbano noticed that she had bandy, muscular legs. They looked more like a man's legs than a woman's. And on top of almost non-existent breasts and a mousy face, she even had an ungainly walk.

'Where'd you put your clothes?'

'I saw a little heater in the bathroom, and I turned it on and put my jeans, blouse, and jacket in front of it.'

He sat her down and served her the latte with a few of the biscotti Adelina normally bought for him and which he normally never ate.

'Excuse me a minute,' he said after drinking his first cup of coffee, and he got up and phoned the station.

'Ah, Chief, Chief! Ahh, Chief!'

'What's wrong, Cat?'

'Iss the oppocalypso!'

'What happened?'

'The wind blew the roof tiles offa the roof in probable cause o' which the water's comin' inna rooms!'

'Has it done any damage?'

'Yessir. F'rinstince, alla papers that was a toppa yer desk awaitin' f'yiz to sign 'em 'sgot so wet they's turn to paste.'

A hymn of exultation, deriding the bureaucracy, welled up joyously in Montalbano's breast.

'Listen, Cat, I'm at home. The road into town has collapsed.'

'So you's consiquintly outta reach.'

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'Unless Gallo can find a way to come and get me . . .'

'Wait a sic an' I'll put 'im on, 'e's right here.'

'What is it, Chief?'

'Well, I was on my way to the station when I ran into a traffic jam about fifty yards down the road from my house. The storm has washed away the road. My car is stuck there and I can't move it. And so I'm stranded at home. If you could manage to find a—'

Gallo didn't let him finish.

'I'll be there in half an hour, max,' he said.

The inspector returned to the kitchen, sat down again, and lit a cigarette.

'Do you smoke?'

'Yes, but my cigarettes are all wet.'

'Take one of mine.'

She accepted and held out her cigarette for him to light.

'I feel mortified for causing you so much trouble—'

'Not at all! In half an hour somebody's going to come and pick me up. Were you on your way to Vigàta?'

'Yes. I had an appointment at ten, at the harbour. My aunt is supposed to be arriving. I came all the way from Palermo. But I doubt that in this weather . . . I bet she doesn't berth until this afternoon.'

'There aren't any mail boats or ferries that come into the port at ten in the morning, you know.'

'I know. My aunt has her own boat.'

The word 'boat' got on his nerves. Nowadays when someone says 'come and see my boat', you find yourself looking at a ship of a hundred and twenty feet.

'Rowing boat?' he asked, innocent as a lamb.

She didn't get the joke.

'She's a big boat with a captain and a four-man crew. And she's always sailing. Alone. I haven't seen her for years.'

'Where's she going?'

'Nowhere.'

'I don't understand.'

'My aunt likes sailing the high seas. She can afford it. Apparently she's very rich. When Uncle Arturo died, he left her a large inheritance and a Tunisian manservant named Zizi.'

'So she bought the boat with her inheritance?'

'No, Uncle Arturo already had the boat. He also liked to spend a lot of time at sea. He didn't work, but he had a lot of money. Nobody knew where it came from. Apparently he had some sort of partnership with a banker named Ricca.'

'And what do you do, if you don't mind my asking?'

'Me?'

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if she needed to choose from the many different things she did.

'I'm a student.'

\*

In the half-hour that followed, Montalbano learned that the girl, who was an orphan and lived in Palermo, was studying architecture, didn't have a boyfriend, and, well aware that she was no beauty, loved to read and listen to music. He also learned that she didn't use perfume, lived with a cat named Eleuterio in an apartment that she owned, and preferred going to the movies to sitting in front of the television. Then she stopped all at once, looked at the inspector, and said:

'Thanks.'

'For what?'

'For listening to me. It's not every day that a man will sit and listen to me for so long.'

Montalbano felt a little sorry for her.

Then Gallo arrived.

'The road's still out,' he said, 'but the firemen and road crews are at the site. It's going to take hours.'

She stood up.

'I'm going to change.'

When they went outside, the downpour had actually intensified. Gallo took the Montereale road, at the crossroads turned towards Montelusa, and a good half-hour later, they arrived in Vigàta.

'Let's take the young lady to the Harbour Office,' the inspector said.

When Gallo pulled up, Montalbano said to Vanna:

'Go and see if they have any news. We'll wait for you here.'

Vanna returned about ten minutes later.

‘They said my aunt’s boat sent word that they’re proceeding slowly but are all right, and they expect to be in the harbour around four o’clock this afternoon.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘What am I supposed to do? I’ll wait.’

‘Where?’

‘Oh, I dunno, I’m unfamiliar with this town. I’ll go and sit in a cafe.’

‘Why don’t you come with us to the police station? You’ll be a lot more comfortable than in a cafe.’

\*

There was a small waiting room at the station. Montalbano sat her down there, and since he had bought a novel just the day before, *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*, he brought the book to her.

‘Fantastic!’ said Vanna. ‘I’ve been wanting to buy this. I’ve heard a lot of good things about it.’

‘If you need anything, ask Catarella, the switchboard operator.’

‘Thanks. You’re truly a . . .’

‘What’s the name of your aunt’s boat?’

‘Same as mine. The *Vanna*.’

Before leaving the room, he eyed the girl. She looked like a wet dog. The clothes she had put back on hadn’t completely dried and were all wrinkled. Her bun of black hair had come apart and covered half her face. And

she had a strange way of sitting that the inspector had noticed in certain refugees, who always look ready to leave the chair in which they are sitting, or to stay seated in that chair for eternity.

\*

He stopped at Catarella's post. 'Call the Harbour Office and tell them that if the *Vanna* contacts them again, I want to know what it said.'

Catarella looked flummoxed.

'What's wrong?' the inspector asked.

'How's Havana gonna contact the Harbour Office?'

Montalbano's heart sank.

'Never mind. I'll do it myself.'

## TWO

His office was unusable. Water was pouring from the ceiling as if there were ten broken pipes overhead. Since Mimì Augello wouldn't be coming in that morning, the inspector took over his deputy's room.

Around one o'clock, as he was getting up to go out for lunch, the phone rang.

'Chief, 'at'd be the Harbour Office onna phone, but I don' tink the man's a officer 'cause 'e says 'e's Lieutinint wha'ss 'is name . . . damn, I forgot!'

'Cat, a lieutenant is an officer, even though you don't have to be an officer to work at the Harbour Office.'

'Oh, rilly? So wha'ss it mean?'

'What's what mean? Never mind, I'll explain later. Put him on.'

'Good afternoon, Inspector. This is Lieutenant Garrufo from the Harbour Office.'

'Good afternoon. What can I do for you?'

'We've just had some news from the *Vanna*. They're

not far offshore, in the waters just a short way beyond the port. But as the weather's not letting up, they think they won't be able to berth until about five o'clock, since they'll have to sail a bit further out and take a different course, which—'

'Thanks.'

'They said something else, too.'

'And what was that?'

'Well, there was a lot of static on the line and I'm not sure we heard correctly, but there seems to be a dead man on board.'

'One of the crew?'

'No, no. They'd just picked him up when they called us. He was in a dinghy that by some miracle hadn't sunk.'

'Maybe from a shipwreck.'

'Apparently not, as far as we could gather . . . But we'd better wait till they come into port, don't you think?'

\*

He certainly did think they should wait.

He was almost certain, however, and would have bet his life on it, that the dead body belonged to some luckless, hungry, thirsty wretch who'd been waiting for weeks of hopeless agony to see the smoke of a steamship or even the simple outline of a fishing boat.

Better not think about such things, as the stories the fishermen told were horrific. The nets they cast into the water often came back up with corpses and body parts

which they would throw back into the sea. The remains of hundreds and hundreds of men, women, and children who, after a ghastly journey through godforsaken deserts and wastelands that had decimated their numbers, had hoped to come ashore in a country where they might be able to earn a crust of bread.

And for that journey they had given up everything, sold their bodies and souls, to pay in advance the slave traders who trafficked in human bodies and often did not hesitate to let them die, throwing them into the sea at the slightest sign of danger.

And then, for those survivors who made it to dry land, what a fine welcome they received in our country!

'Reception camps' they were called, though most often they were veritable concentration camps.

And there were even people – known, curiously, as 'honourables' – who still weren't satisfied and wanted to see them dead. They said our sailors should shell their boats, since their human cargo were all disease-carrying criminals who had no desire to work.

Pretty much the same thing that had happened to our own people, way back when they left for America.

Except that now everyone had forgotten this.

When he thought about it, Montalbano was more than certain that, with the Cozzi–Pini law and similar bullshit, the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph themselves would have never even made it to their cave.

He went to tell the girl about the phone call.

'Listen, the *Vanna* called the Harbour Office and said they'll be coming into port around five o'clock.'

'Oh, well. I guess I'll have to sit tight. Can I stay here?'

She had accompanied her request with a hopeful hand gesture, like someone begging for alms.

'Of course you can,' said the inspector. He couldn't very well kick a wet dog out of a temporary shelter.

Her smile of thanks made him feel so sorry for her that he asked without thinking:

'Actually, would you like to join me for lunch?'

Vanna immediately accepted. Gallo drove them to the restaurant, since it was still raining, though not quite as hard as before.

\*

It was a pleasure to watch her eat. She set to her food as if she had been fasting for days. The inspector did not mention the corpse the *Vanna* had taken on board. It would have ruined her appreciation of the crispy fried mullets she was wolfing down with visible delight.

When they came out of the trattoria it had stopped raining. Glancing up at the sky, the inspector became convinced it wasn't just a momentary let-up, but that the weather was changing in earnest. There was no need to phone Gallo to come and pick them up. They returned

to the station on foot, even though the road was more mud and water than asphalt.

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The moment they got there, they found Gallo waiting for them.

‘They’ve built a temporary bridge. You have to get your cars out of there at once.’

It took them about an hour, but at last Vanna and Montalbano were able to drive back to Vigàta, each in their own car.

‘Ahh, Chief! The Harbour’s Office juss called sayin’ as how the *Havana*’s comin’ in to portside!’

Montalbano glanced at his watch. It was four-thirty.

‘Do you know how to get to the port?’ he asked Vanna.

‘Yes, don’t worry. I really want to thank you for your exquisite kindness, Inspector.’

She took the novel out of her handbag and handed it to him.

‘Did you finish it?’

‘I’ve got about ten pages to go.’

‘Then keep it.’

‘Thanks.’

She held her hand out to him, and he shook it. She stood there a moment, looking at him, then leapt forward, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

It had stopped raining outside, but not in Montalbano's office. Water was still dripping from the ceiling. Apparently the space under the roof had become a leaking cistern. The inspector set himself up again in Augello's office. A short while later, there was a knock at the door. It was Fazio.

'The masons will be here tomorrow to fix the roof. The cleaning women will also be coming. I had a look at the papers that were on your desk. Might as well throw them away.'

'So throw them away.'

'And then what'll we do, Chief?'

'About what?'

'They all needed replies, but now we don't know what the questions were.'

'What the hell do you care?'

'I don't. But what are you going to say to the commissioner when he starts asking you why you have so many outstanding memos unanswered?'

He was right.

'Listen, are any of them still intact?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How many?'

'About thirty.'

'Take them and put them under a tap. Let the water run over them for about two hours.'

'But that'll ruin them, Chief!'

‘That’s the idea. When they’re nice and soaked, put them with the already useless ones. We don’t want to miss this excellent opportunity.’

‘But—’

‘Wait, I haven’t finished. Then take a chair, climb up on top of the filing cabinet, and pour about twenty jugs full of water over it. But without opening the drawers.’

‘So it’ll look like the water came from the roof?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Chief, the filing cabinet is made of iron. It’s watertight.’

Montalbano seemed disappointed.

‘Oh, well. Forget about the cabinet.’

Fazio looked bewildered.

‘But why?’

‘Look, before they can work out which documents were destroyed and redraft them, a good month, at the very least, will go by. Don’t you think that’s an incredible stroke of luck? A month without having to sign papers that are as useless as they are overdue?’

‘If you say so . . .’ said Fazio, leaving.

‘Cat, call Dr Lattes for me.’

He would tell the cabinet chief that they were forced to use boats to make their way around the station and that all their documents had become illegible. And he would also confess to a fear he had. Might this deluge not be the sign of an imminent Great Flood? For a

bureaucrat and religious fanatic such as Lattes, such words might trigger a heart attack.

\*

‘Scuse me, Chief, but izzit possible fer summon a have a lass name of “Garruso”?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘But there’s a liutinnint atta Harbour’s Office onna phone who says ’ass ’is name, Garruso. Mebbe ’e’s from up north.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Cuz ’ss possible the Northers don’ know iss a bad word down ’ere, Chief.’

‘No need to worry, Cat. The lieutenant’s name is “Garrufo”, with an f.’

‘Jeez, whatta relief!’

‘Why do you care so much?’

‘Well, I’s a li’l imbarissed to call a liutinnint a “garruso”.’

‘Put him on.’

‘Inspector Montalbano? This is Garrufo.’

‘What can I do for you, Lieutenant?’

‘We’ve got a problem. The dead man.’

People often say that death is a liberation. For those who die, naturally. Because for those who go on living it’s almost always a colossal pain in the arse.

‘Explain.’

‘Dr Raccuglia is on the scene here, and he very strongly advised that we ask you to come and have a look.’

Raccuglia was the Harbour physician, a serious, much-admired person. On top of that, the inspector liked him. And so he really had no choice but to go and have a look, as the lieutenant put it.

‘All right, I’m on my way.’

\*

As soon as he stepped outside he noticed that the sky was perfectly clear again. Only the gleaming constellation of puddles in the street bore witness to what had happened just a few hours before. The sun was beginning to set, but was strong enough to make it hot outside. Sicily’s getting to be like a tropical island, the inspector thought, with rain and sunshine continually alternating in a single day. Except that, according to what one saw in ‘Murcan films, on tropical islands you could eat, drink, and not give a fuck about anything, whereas here you only ate what the doctor allowed you to eat, drank only what your liver allowed you to drink, and every minute of life was a kick in the groin. That made quite a difference.

\*

The so-called boat was a rather large and elegant yacht, and it was berthed at the central quay. It was flying, who

knew why, the Panamanian flag. Waiting for him at the foot of the ladder was a naval lieutenant, who must have been Garrufo, and Dr Raccuglia.

A short distance away, a sailor from the Harbour Office stood guard over a dinghy lying on the quay.

There was no sign of anybody on the yacht's decks. The owner and crew must have been below.

'What's the problem, Doctor?'

'Sorry to make you come all the way here, but I wanted you to see the body before the ambulance comes and takes it away to Montelusa for the post-mortem.'

'Why?'

'Because the corpse shows certain—'

'I'm sorry, Doctor, I didn't make myself clear. Why do you think the matter falls within my jurisdiction? Wasn't the body found in international—'

'The dinghy with the corpse in it,' Lieutenant Garrufo interrupted him, 'was intercepted just outside the mouth of the harbour, not in international waters.'

'Oh,' said Montalbano.

He'd tried to unload the case onto someone else and it hadn't worked. But perhaps all was not lost, and he could still push the bitter cup away from his lips. (Damn clichés!)

'But the boat may have been brought here from far away by the currents, which have been very strong with all the bad weather . . .'

Garrufo smiled at this second, pathetic attempt.

'Inspector, I realize it's a headache for you, but there's no doubt whatsoever that the boat had just drifted out of this port, indeed because of the very same currents you mention. Understand?'

The lieutenant placed special emphasis on the last word. Montalbano surrendered.

'All right, let's have a look,' he said. 'Where is he?'

'Follow me,' said the lieutenant. 'I'll lead the way.'

\*

On deck, not a soul. They went below to the mess room. On the table in the middle of the space lay the body, covered by an oilcloth.

Montalbano had imagined the corpse differently. Lying before him was a well-built male specimen of about forty, completely naked. Aside from the face, there were no wounds or scars on the front of the body. The face, on the other hand, had been reduced to a pulp of flesh and bone that didn't look like anything.

'Did you take off his clothes or was he...?'

'They told me that's how they found him in the dinghy. Naked,' said Garrufo.

'And on the back, are there any—?'

'No wounds on the back, either.'

A sickly-sweet smell festered in the room. The corpse wasn't fresh. As the inspector was about to ask another question, a woman appeared through a door, dressed in

greasy overalls and wiping her hands with an equally greasy rag.

‘How much longer are you going to keep that thing here?’ she asked gruffly.

She opened the door to one of the two cabins giving on to the mess room, went inside, and closed the door.

At once a man of about fifty with a goatee came in, skinny as a rail and sunburnt, wearing spotless, wrinkleless white trousers, a blue blazer with silver buttons, and a military sort of cap on his head.

‘Hello. I’m Captain Sperli,’ he said, introducing himself to Montalbano.

Apparently he’d already met the other two. Based on his accent, he had to be from Genoa.

‘Is your engineer a woman?’ the inspector asked.

The captain chuckled.

‘No, she’s the owner. Since the auxiliary engine wasn’t doing too well, which is what’s been holding us up for so long, the lady wanted to check it out for herself.’

‘And she’s competent?’ Montalbano asked again.

‘She certainly is,’ said the captain. Then, in a lower voice: ‘She’s better than the engineer himself.’

At that moment they heard someone calling from the deck.

‘Anybody there?’

‘I’ll take care of this,’ said the captain.

A few moments later, two men in white tunics came

down, lifted the oilcloth together with the corpse, and carried it away.

‘In your opinion, Doctor,’ Montalbano said, ‘how long—’

He was interrupted by the reappearance of the captain. Behind him was a sailor in a black woollen sweater with the name *Vanna* written across the chest. In his hands he had a bottle of white spirit and a rag. He cleaned off the surface of the tabletop and then spread over it a white tablecloth he had taken from a small cupboard.

‘Please make yourselves comfortable,’ said the captain. ‘Will you have a drink?’

Nobody declined.

‘In your opinion, Doctor,’ Montalbano began again after a sip of a whisky he’d never had before and which tasted like the best he’d ever drunk, ‘how long—’

The cabin door opened again, and the woman reappeared. She had changed into jeans and a blouse. She had no trace of jewellery on her. She was tall, dark, attractive, and elegant. She must have been close to fifty but had the body of a forty-year-old. She went to the cupboard, took a glass, and held it out, without a word, in front of the captain. He filled it almost to the brim with whisky. Still standing, she brought it to her lips and drank half of it in a single gulp. Then she wiped her lips with the back of her hand and said to the captain:

‘Sperli, tomorrow morning we’re getting out of here, so I want you to—’

‘Just a minute,’ Montalbano cut in.

The woman looked at him as if noticing only then that he was there. And instead of speaking to him directly, she addressed the captain.

‘Who’s he?’

‘He’s Inspector Montalbano.’

‘Inspector of what?’

‘Police,’ replied the captain, a bit embarrassed.

Only then, after looking him up and down, did the woman deign to ask him directly:

‘What were you going to say?’

‘There’s no way you can leave the port tomorrow.’

‘And why not?’

‘Because we have to investigate the circumstances of the man’s death. The judge is going to want to question you and—’

‘What did I say, Sperli?’ the woman asked severely.

‘All right, all right, just drop it,’ the captain said.

‘Signora, tell me, too, what you said to the captain,’ Montalbano butted in.

‘I’d simply advised him to forget about the dinghy and not bring the body on board because it was bound to create a host of problems for us. But he—’

‘I am a man of the sea,’ said the captain, to justify his actions.

‘You see, signora—’ Lieutenant Garrufo began.

‘No, I don’t see, I’ve seen enough,’ the woman cut him off, upset. Then, setting her empty glass down on the table, she added: ‘And how long, Inspector, do you think we’ll be kept here?’

‘In the best case, no more than a week, signora.’

She stuck her hands in her hair.

‘But I’ll go crazy! What the hell am I going to do in this hole?’

Despite her obnoxious words and manner, the woman was unable to make Montalbano dislike her.

‘You can visit the Greek temples of Montelusa,’ he suggested, half seriously and half jokingly.

‘And then what?’

‘Then there’s the museum.’

‘And then what?’

‘I don’t know, you could visit some of the neighbouring towns. In Fiacca, for example, they make a kind of pizza called *tabisca*, which has—’

‘I’ll need a car.’

‘Can’t you use your niece’s?’

She looked at him in amazement. ‘What niece?’