

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a glass of water. The hand is in silhouette, gripping the rim of a clear glass filled with water. The background is a soft, light grey, suggesting an outdoor setting like a beach or a balcony. The overall mood is serene and minimalist.

GIANFRANCO CALLIGARICH

L'ULTIMA ESTATE
IN CITTÀ



BOMPIANI



GIANFRANCO CALLIGARICH
LAST SUMMER IN TOWN

translated from the Italian
by Howard Curtis

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It's always that way. You do your best to keep yourself to yourself and then, one fine day, you somehow find you're caught up in something that sweeps you along to the bitter end.

Personally, I would happily have stayed out of the race. I'd known all kinds of people, some who'd reached the finishing post and others who hadn't even got off the starting blocks, and sooner or later they all ended up equally dissatisfied, which is why I'd come to the conclusion that it was better to stay on the sidelines and just observe life. But I hadn't reckoned with being desperately short of money one rainy day at the beginning of spring last year. All the rest followed naturally, as these things do. Let me make it clear from the start that I don't blame anyone, I had my hand of cards and I played it. That's all.

And this bay really is magnificent. It's overlooked by a Saracen fortress atop a rocky promontory that juts out into the sea for a hundred metres or so. Looking towards the coast, I can see the dazzling spread of beach and the green of the low Mediterranean

vegetation. Further on, a three-lane highway, deserted at this time of year, which tunnels into a chain of rocky hills glittering in the sun. The sky is blue, the sea clear.

I couldn't have chosen better, all things considered.

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I've always loved the sea. There must have been something in my boyhood tendency to linger on beaches that reflected the impulse which had led my grandfather to spend his youth on Mediterranean merchant ships before landing in Milan, that grim city, and cramming a house full of children. I knew this grandfather. He was a grey-eyed old Slav who died surrounded by a large number of descendants. The last words he managed to speak were a request for a little sea water, and my father, as the eldest son, left one of my sisters to mind his philatelist's shop and set off for Genoa in his car. I went with him. I was fourteen, and I remember that we didn't say a word for the whole of the ride. My father never talked a lot, and since I was already giving him a few problems with my progress at school, it was in my best interests to keep quiet. It was the shortest of my trips to the sea, just long enough to fill a bottle, and also the most pointless, because by the time we got back Grandfather was almost completely unconscious. My father washed his face with water from the bottle, but he didn't seem to particularly appreciate it.

A few years later, her proximity to the sea was one of the things that drew me to Rome. After my military service, I was faced with the problem of what to do with my life, but the more I looked around, the less I was able to come to a decision. My friends had very clear ideas – graduate, get married, and make

money – but that was a prospect that repelled me. These were the years when money mattered even more than usual in Milan, the years that saw a kind of conjuring trick at a national level also known as the Economic Miracle, and in a way even I benefited from it. It was at this time that a medical-literary magazine for which I occasionally wrote a few well thought-out and badly paid articles had the opportunity to open an office in Rome and hired me as their correspondent.

While my mother used every argument she could to prevent my departure, my father said nothing. He had watched in silence my attempts at social integration, comparing them with the successes of my elder sisters, who at a young age had married white-collar workers, perfectly respectable people, and as I had done during that trip to get water for my grandfather, I took advantage of his silence to also keep quiet. He and I never talked. I don't know which of us was to blame, I don't even know if you can talk about blame, but I always had the impression that if I had confronted him directly I would somehow have hurt him. The war had sent him a long way away without sparing him any of its well-known peculiarities. Nobody to whom a thing like that happens can return home exactly as he was before. In spite of his proud silence, it always seemed as if he was trying to make us forget something, perhaps the fact that he had returned home a shattered man and had made us watch his big body writhing as the electric shocks shuddered through it. Anyway, that's how he was, and when I was a boy I could never forgive him his unheroic profession, his love of order, his excessive respect for things, not understanding what terrible destruction he must have witnessed to set about repairing an old kitchen chair with infinite patience on the very day he came back from

the war. And yet even now, after almost thirty years, there is still something of the soldier about him, the patience, the tendency to hold his head high, the habit of not asking questions, and even now, if he had given me nothing else, I'll never forget the sensation of fearlessness that I felt as a boy, walking by his side. Because even now, my father's stride is the one thing more than any other that immediately takes me back to my childhood, and even now, even in the green expanse that surrounds me, I can return as if by magic to his side, remembering his soft, dusty stride, apparently impervious to fatigue, the stride of those long marches as a soldier, the stride that in one way or another he had somehow managed to bring back home with him.

So I set off for Rome, and everything would have gone perfectly if my father, quite unexpectedly forgoing his own pride, hadn't decided to go with me to the station and remain on the platform, waiting until the train left. The wait was long and unbearable. His big face was red from the effort of holding back the tears. We looked at each other in silence, as usual, but I realized that we were saying goodbye and all I could do was pray for the train to leave and put an end to that heartrending look I had never seen in his eyes before. There he stood on the platform, lower than me for the first time ever, so low that I could see how sparse his hair had become as he constantly turned his head to glance at the signal light at the end of the track. His big body was motionless, and he stood with his legs wide apart as if preparing to receive a blow, his hands like weights in the pockets of his overcoat, his eyes moist and his face red. And just as I was at last realizing that it meant something to be the only son, just as I was about to open my mouth and yell to him that I was getting off and that we would find a way to work things

out without destroying our lives, the train gave a little lurch and moved. And so, once again in silence, I was wrenched from him. I saw his big body give a start when the train moved. Then I saw him grow smaller the further away I got. He didn't move, didn't make a gesture. Then he vanished from sight completely.

My period of respectability didn't last long. I was dismissed after a year, though to be honest it could have happened even earlier. The small Roman office was the last asset to be liquidated before the magazine closed down along with the miracle that had given birth to it. The place in which I worked, drumming up a little advertising for the magazine and occasionally writing a few articles to indulge the unfathomable fondness of doctors for literature, was a room filled with furniture upholstered in red damask in a neo-Renaissance villa just after the wall along the Tiber.

The owner was Count Giovanni Rubino di Sant'Elia, a distinguished man in his fifties with a nonchalant and somewhat affected manner. Distant at first, almost as if he came into my office only to open the French windows that looked out on the garden and allow me to breathe in the scent of his lilacs, he ended up spending more and more time in the armchair in front of my desk and engaging me in conversations which became more familiar as his true financial situation was revealed. When he told me he was completely ruined, we decided we could be on first-name terms.

He lived with his wife, a plump blonde disorientated by her husband's straitened circumstances, in the back part of the house, opening the door only to the baker's boy, and ever since she had opened up and been confronted with some fellow who had confiscated the magnificent gilded table in the drawing

room, I had been obliged to play the part of their somewhat awkward secretary. But I was glad to do it. Especially for him. I liked seeing him come into my office, smooth the grey hairs at his temples with his hands and then jerk his elbows so that the cuffs of his spotless shirt shot out from the sleeves of his jacket. "So what are we doing?" he would say, "working?" Then I would put the lid on the typewriter and take out the bottle. He never talked, as a Milanese would have done, about his financial problems, but only about pleasant things, aristocrats and celebrities and above all women and horses, sometimes telling jokes so risqué that his eyes gleamed.

When summer arrived, we got into the habit of moving into the drawing room, and there, when the sun retreated from that part of the house, surrounded by walls that bore lighter patches where the furniture had been removed, the count would play on his Steinway grand and I would sprawl on the last remaining sofa and listen to him. Every afternoon, as soon as I heard the first notes, I would telephone the bar, order some cold beer and join him. There he would be, hopelessly carried away. Wearing an old silk dressing gown, he would dredge up his repertoire, old songs I had heard from my mother, tunes by Gershwin and Cole Porter, but above all an old American song called *Roberta*. Sometimes, we would sing together.

On the first day of autumn that year came the letter that shut the office. I informed the count, who leaned on the piano and smiled. "Well, old chap," he said, "what will you do now?" That was all he said, although I should have known that for him it was a fatal blow. Two days later, as I gathered my papers, there was a knock at the door and four determined-looking workmen loaded the piano on their backs and took it away. It was quite an

effort for them to get it through the gate, and the old Steinway must have hit a few corners, because its voice rose from the street in a kind of funereal tolling. The whole time the operation lasted, the count didn't leave his room, but when I had shaken hands with the countess, who was visibly moved, and left the house in my turn, I saw him at the window, raising his hand and waving at me. There was something so uncompromising in his gesture that I responded in the only way I thought appropriate. I put my bag down on the pavement and bowed.

For a few days after the office closed, I stayed in my hotel, pondering my future. The only thing the contacts I'd made through the magazine could offer me was a job in a pharmaceutical firm outside the city, where I would have to write advertising material from nine in the morning to six in the evening. I decided to wait for something to happen. Like an aristocrat under siege.

Every day I would go and look at the sea. With a book in my pocket, I would take the metro to Ostia and spend most of the day reading in a little trattoria on the beach. Then I would go back to the city and hang around the Piazza Navona area, where I had made a few friends, all of them adrift like me, intellectuals for the most part, with the anxious but expectant look of refugees. Rome was our city, she tolerated us, flattered us, and even I ended up realizing that in spite of the sporadic jobs, the weeks when I went hungry, the damp, dark hotel rooms with their yellowing furniture squeaking as if killed and desiccated by some obscure liver disease, I couldn't live anywhere else. And yet, when I think back on those years, I have clear memories of only a small number of places, a small number of events, because Rome by her very nature has a particular intoxication that wipes out memory.

She is not so much a city as a wild beast hidden in some secret part of you. There can be no half-measures with her, either she's the love of your life or you have to leave her, because that's what the tender beast demands, to be loved. That's the only toll you will have to pay from wherever you have come, from the green, hilly roads of the South, the straight lines of the North, or the depths of your own soul. If she is loved, she will give herself to you whichever way you want her, all you will have to do is go with the gentle flow of the present and you will be within reach of the happiness you deserve. And then you will have summer evenings glittering with lights, vibrant spring mornings, café tablecloths ruffled by the wind like girls' skirts, keen winters and endless autumns when she will seem vulnerable, sick, weary, swollen with decapitated leaves that are silent underfoot. And you will have dazzling white steps, noisy fountains, ruined temples and the nocturnal silence of the dispossessed, until time loses all meaning apart from the banal one of keeping the clocks moving. In this way you, too, waiting day after day, will become part of her. You, too, will nourish the city. Until one sunny day, sniffing the wind from the sea and looking up at the sky, you will realize that there is nothing left to wait for.

Every now and again, someone would up sticks and sail off. When it was the turn of Glauco and Serena, two of the Piazza Navona group, I moved into their apartment on Monte Mario. I'd had enough of hotel rooms by now, and I couldn't believe that I would have a place I could call my own. When, for fifty thousand lire, I also bought their clapped-out Alfa Romeo, I naturally thought that I'd reached a significant turning point in my life. I packed two suitcases with my books and moved in the same day they left. They were going because Serena had managed

to get a two-year contract as a set designer in a theatre in Mexico City, but above all because their marriage was in trouble and Glauco had stopped painting. Rome had crushed them and they were leaving, with an excessive number of suitcases. "Lousy city," Glauco said, looking out from the balcony.

"I like it here."

"Really? Then why are you always drunk?"

"Not always," I said, "often. There's a big difference." Then I looked at the valley stretching below the balcony. It was vast, cut in half by a multi-arched bridge crossed several times a day by a train as long and silent as a caterpillar. On either side rose the walls of two convents, alive with bells when the sun went down, while opposite, the closest houses merged into the greenery on the horizon. The sky was high and wide and so was the light. It was a gorgeous spot.

"It's all yours," Glauco said, indicating the room we were in. No need to make an inventory: there was an old armchair, a bookcase and a bed that folded into a sofa. The other two rooms weren't furnished at any greater expense, furniture from the Porta Portese flea market for the most part, old and likeable. One was almost completely filled with canvases, cans of paint and all the things a painter usually needs. "If you run out of money, don't sell the paintings," Glauco said, as if anyone might want to buy them. He went out, saying that he still had to say goodbye to someone in town. He didn't ask me to go with him, and I guessed that he was going to say goodbye to his girlfriend. Everyone knew he had another woman. Burly and aggressive, he could never, in any case, avoid boasting. He also knew that there was a very definite fondness between Serena and me, but he left us alone because he wasn't the kind of man to fear anyone.

Serena was still in the bedroom, surrounded by open suitcases. She must have been afraid they would swallow her up, because she was walking up and down, wringing her hands. "Where's Glauco?" she said. I told her he would be right back, and she continued to move around the room with an air of tragedy. When she passed me for the third time, I finally put an arm around her shoulders, and she huddled against my chest and looked at me in confusion. But when I hugged her tighter, she stiffened and I realized the answer was no, that she would have liked it to be yes, but on another occasion, and that in any case it was no, it was too late. We talked about Mexico until Glauco came back.

"So," he said, "shall we go?" I was surprised by the sadness in his voice. That final farewell must have been particularly hard. Standing in the middle of the room with that muscular body of his, he had the cheated, immature look of a heavyweight who has lost his title. For the first time, I felt a kind of fondness for him.

I went with them to the airport. We said goodbye, kissing each other on the cheeks, and then I went up onto the observation platform to watch them leave. As they climbed the ladder, they looked around for me. We waved at each other until they got on board. The plane took a while to get going, but at last it moved towards the centre of the runway, where it stopped as if to catch its breath, taxied and then started moving quickly until it rose as if from force of habit and kept climbing, glittering in the sun, until it disappeared. Only then did I leave the airport.

On my way back to the city, I thought about other farewells. I thought about when I'd said goodbye to my father and when I'd said goodbye to Sant'Elia, and I thought about how all these farewells had changed my life. But it's always that way, we are what we are not because of the people we've met but because of those

we've left. That's what I was thinking as I calmly drove the old Alfa Romeo. It was as slow and noisy as a whale, and the birds in the trees fell silent as it passed as if a dark cloud had crossed the sky. It had a list of owners as long as the phone book of a provincial town, but its smell of ash and leather was almost intoxicating.

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I decided to make a serious attempt to stop drinking. I would sit out on the balcony in the sun, reading, and keep away from bars and the people who frequented them. The heat made the mixture of sweet wine and cold water I was using a bit less disgusting, and gradually I even started to put on weight. The hardest part was the evening, when I'd leave the reception area of the *Corriere dello Sport* and have to face those dead hours that stretch from ten o'clock to one in the morning. Girls were a great help to me. I'd always been lucky with girls, and in those months my battle with alcohol aroused their maternal instincts. So it often happened that I would wake up in strange beds, alone, since the girls I hung around with were mostly teachers or shop assistants, which meant they had to keep regular hours. And it was great to wake up like that, all things considered. I'd get up, wander around the apartment, switch on the record player, look for coffee already made and almost always find it, so that all I had to do was reheat it. Then I'd walk into clean toilets strewn with towels, brushes, hair pins and mysterious jars of pale-coloured creams. I'd look for the bathroom and almost always find it, and spend a long time in the bath. Finally I would dry myself, get dressed and leave, closing the door behind me. The sound would echo in the empty apartment.

Out in the street, I would buy a newspaper, glance at the second-hand book stalls, stock up on provisions and go back home, making up my mind whether to spend the afternoon reading, at the cinema or at the newspaper office. It was on one of these mornings that I realized I didn't have any money in my pockets. It wasn't an unusual situation at all, but in this case it was complicated by a whole series of other misfortunes: the door I had irrevocably closed behind me, the car I had left the previous evening in a remote part of the city, the nagging feeling that I'd forgotten something which, however hard I tried, I couldn't remember. It looked like being one of those days when our shirt buttons come off in our hands, we lose our address book, we miss our appointments and every door turns into a trap for our fingers. One of those days when the only thing to do is shut ourselves in and wait for it to pass. But I couldn't do that, and so I set off on foot, in the rain.

Yes, apart from anything else, it was raining. I remember that day's rain very well. A spring rain falling intermittently on a forgetful, surprised city and filling it with scents that became ever more fragrant after every shower. So much so that there isn't, in my life, a day as rich in scents as the one on which this story began.

I got to Piazza del Popolo with my stomach empty and my shoes full of water. The square was overflowing with parked cars, and a single beam of sunlight, high in the sky, made the terraces of the Pincio shimmer. The two cafés were full of people irritated by the fact that they couldn't sit outside. Under the awning of Rosati's, I found chairs piled one on top of the other. I grabbed one and looked around for a friendly face, someone who might buy me lunch, but the only people I saw were people I couldn't stand. Then it started pouring again, so I headed for Signor Sandro's. He was an old barman with measured, skilful gestures who'd opened an elegant bar with red leather chairs and prints on the walls. It was mainly frequented by literary types, poets, film makers and a few radical journalists who ate steak and carrots, but naturally that day I couldn't find anybody I was friendly enough with to invite me to lunch. It was a place where I had credit, though, so I ordered a hamburger and a glass of Barolo and sat watching one of my favourite spectacles, Signor

Sandro making cocktails. It was at the climax of this spectacle that a magnificent silk umbrella was lowered at the door and, too late to be of any use to me, Renzo Diacono appeared. I hadn't seen him for a while, not since he, too, had ended up in television. "Leo!" he said loudly on seeing me. He was very well dressed, unlike the bearded giant he had come in with, who immediately vanished into the crowd at the counter. "What are you drinking?" he said.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" For a moment, he seemed about to say something, then, with his Piedmontese tact, he merely asked me when I might be available for a game of chess. "I don't have time for serious things anymore," he said, indicating his companion, who was returning from his siege of the counter. That was the great thing about him. Whoever he was with, he always gave the impression he'd rather be with you. "How's life?"

"I don't know," I said, "I can only answer for my own."

"Congratulations," the bearded giant said, joining us with his glass, "very wise," and he raised his glass to me. He was wearing a military greatcoat, with a scarf that went all the way down to his feet and a streaming umbrella hanging from his arm, and was considering the world from the sublime heights of a massive hangover. He had a ravaged smile, the smile of a veteran. Renzo said he was the best director on TV, when he was sober, but that was a state he probably hadn't been in for some time now. Sneering, the man apologized in reply to Renzo's remark and went back to get a refill.

"Why don't we get together this evening?" Renzo said. He also said that he and his wife had moved, and made me repeat their new address twice to make sure I wouldn't forget it. But

there was no danger of that. Even though we were a generation apart, I enjoyed his company, he was a good chess player, as well as a well-regarded historian, and his wife Viola was an excellent cook. I couldn't ask for anything better to conclude such an unlucky day.

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When I was alone I drew up a plan that would be proof against bad luck. First of all, I'd go to the newspaper office to wangle some money, then I'd catch a film, then I'd proceed to the Diaconos' house – first having gone to pick up my old Alfa Romeo. It was such a simple, such a reassuring plan that the combination of it and the wine gave me an immediate feeling of euphoria. I walked out and smelt the rain, which was coming to an end. Big isolated drops were falling on the pavement, and there were big patches of blue in the sky. I set off past the damp but dazzling buildings of the Corso, and ten minutes later entered the offices of *Corriere dello Sport*, humming *Où es-tu mon amour* in the Django Reinhardt version.

The girls at the typewriters with earphones on their heads greeted me with little cries of surprise – this wasn't the time I usually showed up – and when I asked for Rosario they pointed me to a cabin, from which my friend emerged at that very moment, browner in the face than the disc he was holding. "Well, hurray!" he said as he passed me. I didn't lose heart: even though it was obvious there was no work for me, I might still get a loan. He knew that, too: he withdrew inside his own headset and immediately started transcribing the piece onto the typewriter. I sat down and looked at him until he had to give

up. "How much do you want?" he said, putting his hand in his pocket. He gave me exactly half of what I asked him for, and on top of that I had to listen to a lecture from him. How much longer did I think I could carry on like this? Didn't I know that the head of the department was tired of not being able to rely on me? The job was there, why didn't I take it? He'd got me the job, which entitled him to say something. He was a good friend, a melancholy southerner with a discontented wife. He had left his village, a promontory over the blue Ionian Sea, to come to Rome and work as a journalist, but all he'd ended up doing was recording other people's articles on a wax disc then transcribing them. The complete idiocy of the job was proving a discouraging end to the years of his youth, but he didn't give up. He was small and dark, weary but indomitable.

I decided to get out of there. Outside, it was pouring. Torrents of water hammered down on the decapitated statues of the Forum, the collapsed columns, the palaces in the paved squares, the desolate afternoon arenas, the decorated churches and, absurdly, the overflowing fountains. For a while I waited in a doorway between splashes of rain and the curses of passers-by, other castaways like me seeking salvation in the dark caves of entrances, then, taking advantage of a break I ran, hugging the walls, until I got to a small cinema nearby. They were showing a film with Marilyn Monroe, my poor love whom I refused to think of as dead, and I watched it through twice, eating salted seeds and listening to the thunder rolling over the roofs of the houses. By the time I came out, I was madly in love with her and very badly disposed towards the world, because a dead love is already sad enough in itself without having to add the rain.

There was something cruel about the evening. The crowd had come flooding back out onto the streets, and the traffic was unnaturally suspended, paralysed, while, from time to time, the sizzling lights of trams illumined the rain-swollen sky. The newspaper headlines spoke of landslides, floods and delayed trains. To the north of the city, the river had overflowed its banks, spreading into the fields, and people waiting at the bus stops were staring up at the sky in silence. Glumly, I realized it was too late to try and recover the old Alfa Romeo, and I was forced to head immediately for the Diaconos' house. I set off on foot, but soon enough I had to take shelter in the entrance of a shop that was still open. The traffic had drained away as if by magic, and the street was now deserted. Through the rain, I could hear the radio broadcasting the evening news. They were saying that the weather would change, that spring had arrived in our part of the world. It was at this point that a taxi appeared. I stopped it, told the driver what direction to take, sat down and wrung out the bottoms of my trousers. Then I sat back and looked at the city until the meter warned me I couldn't spend any more.

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The wind was rising by the time I got to an apartment block surrounded by a damp, rustling garden. It was only at that moment, perhaps because of the smell of the wet earth, that it occurred to me that I should have brought Viola some flowers, but it was too late now and I was so hungry I could barely stand. So I carried on, confronting the final test of a lift that throughout its ride emitted a menacing drone, as if complaining about the

weight. At the second floor, I quickly tidied my hair and rang the doorbell. Viola appeared. She looked surprised. Before I could say anything, she gave a little hiccup and burst into uncontrollable laughter. I must have looked to her like a flood victim. “Come in, Leo,” she said, taking me by the arm. “God, how happy I am to see you. How did you manage to find us?”

Those were her exact words, and I just had to see how Renzo leapt to his feet when I walked into the living room to realize he had completely forgotten that he’d invited me. “Leo!” he said loudly, for the second time that day. A dozen people turned their heads languidly to look at us. They were sunk in an equal number of armchairs strewn across the vast rugs of the room, and all of them had the satisfied look of people who’d eaten. There were introductions, in which I participated through clenched teeth. “You’re wet,” Renzo said with guilty consideration. “Sit down by the fire. What can I get you?”

“A little bit of luck,” I said. But he had turned and was now pushing a drinks trolley in my direction. I hesitated: it had been a while since I’d last seen so many bottles in a place that wasn’t a bar. I chose a scotch, and when Renzo’s hand searched among the bottles, the trolley jingled triumphantly. For a while I was the centre of attention, with Renzo telling the others how much his book about pirates owed to me. I’d always been very good at helping other people with their work, but Renzo was praising me with such conviction, it was as if I’d written it myself. I even had to answer a few questions on the subject before I was able to disappear into the armchair closest to the fireplace and practise the only two skills I’d ever really mastered: keeping quiet and adapting myself to my surroundings. My return to anonymity coincided with the discovery of a vase filled with peanuts. Viola

joined me. “Hey,” she said, “you look like a monkey with its spoils.” I put the vase down on the rug while she sat down on the arm of my chair. I looked at her. In the two years since we’d last seen each other, her sweet face had become almost placid, but her legs had remained the same, the most beautiful I’d ever seen. “Would you agree to be cryogenically frozen?”

“Only if I was in love.”

“Oh, how cute!” she laughed. “I’m conducting a survey, after which I’ll make my decision,” she said apologetically, “and don’t make fun of me. No, let’s talk about us instead. Who goes first?” and she made the gesture of someone cutting a pack of cards. “You,” I said to give myself time to recover and retreat into my own daydreams. I was an expert at this, all things considered: with just a few *of courses* and a few *maybes* I was capable of making anyone feel I was listening to them with seriousness and understanding. That’s what I did with her, actually taking advantage of the pause to try and fill the gap that had been throbbing in my head since morning. I’d have given the whole vase of peanuts to know what it was I’d forgotten to do that day, but I really couldn’t remember, and so I contented myself with the warmth of the flames under my wet shoes until the fire and the alcohol had on me, too, the comforting effect that makes them both indispensable in drawing rooms, where you would never say out loud that the former might burn the building down and the latter might make you think you could die of cold on the sunniest morning of your life. “I couldn’t stand those converted bathrooms anymore,” Viola said, apparently concluding a speech I hadn’t heard.

“I imagine you must have a beautiful bathroom here,” I said, remembering the lovely old apartment on Campo dei Fiori where they’d lived before.

“Oh, it’s palatial! You absolutely must see it!” For a moment, I thought she was going to take me by the hand and drag me there whether I liked it or not. “And what about you, are you still in that little hotel in the centre?” But there was no need to answer, because at that very moment a voice rose from the armchairs, begging for a parlour game, and she had to leave me. Alone now, I started making an inventory of the people around me. For them, the rain was just a pretext to get dressed up in the right way: that much was clear immediately. With their velvet trousers, their woollen shirts and their heavy shoes, they gave the idea that, yes, of course, they knew perfectly well how things were outside, in that world full of rain and sordidness, but they also knew that a glass of Chivas and a pleasant chat with their friends would allow them to ignore the multitudes pressing against the walls.

Some of us are besieged, others do the besieging, I was thinking by the time I was on my second glass, and those doing the besieging are weary with hunger and homesickness. That’s what I was thinking, as my eyes kept slipping towards the huge white velvet sofa on which a man and a girl sat with the absent demeanour of two birds at rest. The man, perched on the arm of the sofa in a tangle that suggested he was uncommonly tall and from which his hands stuck out like two short, useless wings, made you think of a bird who in evolving over time had somehow lost contact with the sky. As for the girl, she was very beautiful. On that sofa, she looked like a migrating bird who had found a boat on which to rest while waiting for a storm to pass. Absent, alien, vaguely nervous.

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I had only just managed to get the vase of peanuts back into my possession when Renzo took me by the arm and forced me to let go and follow him among the armchairs. “What are they promising you now?” he said, referring to the left-wing newspapers for which he had worked before entering television. “I don’t know, apparently I don’t know anything about promises,” I said pointedly, but he was too caught up in what he was saying to grasp the allusion. “A job in television, that’s what they’re promising you, certainly not the revolution, well, all I did was get in ahead of the rest.” He waited for a sign of approval from me. I gave it to him. “When you feel like a job in television, all you have to do is ask for it,” he said next. “You have no idea what a bunch of idiots everyone there is. As long as you’re not an idiot, everyone will think you’re a genius.”

“But of course!” a woman huddled deep in an armchair said with embarrassing swiftness. She had been listening to the same record since she had come in. “This friend of yours,” she said, looking at me, “doesn’t look much like a pirate. If anything, he could be one of those stowaways in Conrad. You know, one of those men who’ve committed some terrible sin and expiate it by wandering from port to port? My God, how I love him!”

“Who, him?” Renzo said, pointing at me.

“Conrad,” the woman said. The record had come to a close, and she put it back to the beginning. I wondered which of the two would win in the end. Then she went back to giving it her full attention. There was no trace of sorrow in her, or of passion. Her demeanour exuded independence, an independence so absolute as to make you think that she hadn’t come into the

world like everybody else, in pain and blood, but had simply emerged, like a butterfly.

“Eva, you’ll get appendicitis if you just sit there all the time,” Viola said, joining us before my silence could grow too heavy. Renzo took the opportunity to lead me away, and once again he did so by taking me by the arm, as if the room was as big as a public square. It was big, in fact, but not quite as big as that gesture seemed to suggest. After a few steps, we almost bumped into the companion of the girl. He was wandering through the living room with the air of having just hit a piece of furniture in a spontaneous attempt to take flight. She was alone now, on the white velvet sofa. With her fingers twined in her long black hair, she was nervously laying out a pack of cards to play a game of solitaire as if some redeeming response might come from it. Renzo pulled the drinks trolley towards her. He had noticed the direction of my glances, and with his usual discretion was taking care of things. “What are you drinking, Arianna?”

She took her eyes away from her own destiny. “Anything over forty,” she said. From the smile she gave me, anybody would have said she’d spent the whole evening waiting for me. It was a smile that isolated the person it was addressed to, raising him to heights he would never have suspected he could conquer. A smile like a blow to the head, in which only one thing remained unequivocal. That she didn’t give a damn about you. “What about that game?” she said, as if the progress of the evening depended on me. I opened my palms.

“Here it is!” Viola said, joining us with paper and pencil, then said, “You come with me,” taking me by an arm, “you’re not thinking of betraying me with some nymphet!” So I had to go back to my armchair, where I discovered that the vase of

peanuts had disappeared. Ten minutes later, in the silence of the living room, all that could be heard was the rustle of the pencils on the sheets of paper, the occasional laugh and, I feared, the noise of my stomach. It was at this point that another soft noise pervaded the room. The girl, Arianna, had abandoned her sofa and was proceeding miraculously between the armchairs. The fragility of her body made whatever she did seem courageous, even just walking across a room full of friends. With every step, her glossy rain boots emitted little sighs around her knees. She reached the arm of Viola’s chair and leaned down to whisper something in her ear. It was then that the woman named Eva intervened. “Come on, Arianna, stop it! Don’t you think she’s dumb?” she said to Viola. “This morning as she was putting on her blouse, she scratched a spot on her skin, and all day long she’s been trying to phone Venice to talk to her doctor.” The girl barely looked at her, then said she had heard of people who *had died* from scratching a mole. “Really, Arianna,” Viola said, “do you have a trusted consultant of your own?”

Well, that’s how things were. The girl had gone to make her phone call, and I was trying to find an excuse to leave and go somewhere to eat when Viola, seeing that I couldn’t make up my mind to write my anonymous message on the sheet of paper, looked at me pensively and said, “Listen, would you go and get the ice from the kitchen? I’m sorry, but Ernesto isn’t here. It’s his evening off.” Because now they even had a waiter. She gave me the directions I would need to get to the kitchen, informing me that I would find it changed and that only the refrigerator was still the old one. I had a flash of hope: two years earlier, that refrigerator had been the best stocked in the city. “My old friend!” I said. “How is he?”

“Oh, you know,” she said, “one of those cold, unsatisfied types. An aesthete.” I was already on my feet. In the corridor, the girl was phoning, curled up on the floor in the dark. I had to climb over her and then carried on, sensing her eyes on my back as I felt my way along the wall in search of the light switch for the kitchen. The light came on to show a kitchen as dazzlingly white as an operating theatre. The refrigerator was in a corner, a little yellow compared with the rest of the furniture. With the flaking on the door looking like a decoration, it stood there, lordly and reserved, but I wasn’t intimidated and, after searching in the pantry for bread, I walked to it resolutely. The door opened with a slight click.

Inside, it was full of cool air and French cheeses. Holding the door open with one knee, I ate half a Camembert without any qualms, then, using a knife, I levered under the ice tray until that frozen heart of aluminium came loose with a crack so tragic as to make me fear I had killed not only the refrigerator, but the whole kitchen. Still eating, I turned on the tap and poured hot water on the tray until it broke up, then emptied the cubes of ice into the bucket and went back to the refrigerator. The open door gave it a violated air. I looked in the vegetable compartment until I found a velvety, very green courgette. I placed it on the open wound left by the ice tray and closed the door with fitting care. It wouldn’t have been the first aesthete to have a courgette in place of a heart, and anyway, it was the nearest thing to a flower that I had to hand.

The girl was still in the dark, on the floor, and I was about to climb over her when I felt her grab me by the jacket. It was an imperious gesture, to the point that almost without realizing it I found myself kneeling next to her, with the bucket in my hand. I was surprised to see that she was crying. I tried to think of something to say to her, but couldn’t find anything, and so

I limited myself to staying there beside her, while an ironic, consolatory voice on the phone kept telling her that she wouldn’t die. The girl wasn’t saying anything. She limited herself to crying and listening, then, when the voice disappeared, she stood up, passed the back of her hand over her nose and disappeared in the direction of Viola’s bathroom, leaving me to replace the receiver. I didn’t take it amiss. I knew the type, there are people who have the singular characteristic of asking for help while at the same time giving you the impression they’re doing you a favour. I put back the telephone and returned to the living room with the ice bucket. Immediately afterwards, I began shivering. I knew what it was. One of the most unpleasant effects of alcohol was that it screwed up my heat-producing nerve centres. I went and smoked a cigarette next to what remained of the fire, and soon afterwards the girl returned. Her transformation was astonishing: nobody could have suspected that a short while earlier, tears had been streaking down her insolent face. The perfunctory glance she gave me made me feel I was no more to her than a handkerchief.

The party came to an end about three. The guests abandoned their armchairs and left, as if answering a call. Everything happened so quickly that I had the impression after a while that I was watching a film where the projectionist had started showing the remaining footage at double the speed. But that, too, might have been an effect of the alcohol, I don’t know, all I know is that within a quarter of an hour the room had become silent. A curtain was swaying in front of an open window, and the turntable was going round and round beneath a pile of empty glasses and full ashtrays.

Viola and the girl were plotting on the sofa, Renzo was sucking at an empty pipe, absorbed in his own thoughts, and I was looking through the titles of the books on a shelf. When I

moved on to the paintings hanging on the walls, one of them, a freight car abandoned on a disused line, reminded me of my old Alfa Romeo abandoned on the other side of the city. “You stay here,” Viola said to Renzo, who was about to get up from his armchair. “He can see Arianna home. I’ve been trying to throw them into each other’s arms all evening, and you want to ruin everything?” Without saying a word, the girl started collecting the cards from the table, then went into the vestibule, and Viola took the opportunity to throw me a knowing glance. A moment later she reappeared. She was wearing a red plastic raincoat that swished a lot. She put the pack of cards in her pocket. “I’m ready,” she said as if, outside, a verdict awaited her. At the door, there were the usual promises of telephone calls and even an official invitation to dinner. In the old days, I would merely have had to turn up at the right time without even warning them. “You’ll have to go down on foot,” Viola said, “Arianna hates lifts.” The girl didn’t say anything. We descended the stairs in silence, limiting ourselves to waiting for each other at the doors.

Outside, the air shuddered in the gusty wind. Winter and spring were exchanging their last blows. The seasons change at night, unbeknown to the people, and we were witnessing a spectacle whose grandeur was only equalled by the silence with which it crept on us. It was a night when there was nothing that might not happen. Next to me, the girl, remote, her hands clasped over her raincoat, her eyes half closed, was greedily breathing in the scent of the plane trees with the satisfaction of someone finding herself in her own garden together with a chance guest. To regain a little composure, I looked up at the sky.

It was black and very high, and interspersed with big, racing clouds.

Gianfranco Calligarich

Last Summer in Town

L'ULTIMA ESTATE IN CITTÀ

First published in 1973, this novel is a small miracle.

Leo, a young man from Milan, arrives in Rome in the years following the economic boom. There, in a city drenched in the dolce vita atmosphere, he falls in love with the unpredictable femme fatale Arianna. Going from one job to the other, unable to pass the shadow line of age, he spends his time in a bohème of alcohol, run-down hotels, dinners at rich and well-educated friends', that help him not to starve. He has no aspiration whatsoever. While all his friends want to graduate, get married, get rich, he doesn't: it feels better to let himself go in that sweet alienation of the city, embodied by crazy and irresistible Arianna. Endorsed by Natalia Ginzburg, then forgotten, this novel is spreading now throughout the world, thus living a new brilliant life.

Gianfranco Calligarich was born in Asmara, Eritrea, from a family from Trieste. He grew up in Milan before moving to Rome where he worked as a journalist and screenplayer. He wrote many successful programmes for RAI and in 1994 was the founder of the Teatro XX Secolo. He was awarded many prizes for his plays. He is author of many novels, among which *L'ultima estate in città*, *Principessa*, *Posta prioritaria*, *La malinconia dei Crusich* (winner of Viareggio-Rèpaci Prize), *Tre uomini in fuga*.

The true quality of this novel is the way it enlightens, with a desperate clearness, a relationship between a man and a city, that is, between crowd and loneliness.

Natalia Ginzburg

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