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Antonio Tabucchi
Little Misunderstandings
of No Importance
And Other Stories

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

Little Misunderstandings of No Importance

“Tabucchi writes with what Italo Calvino, who shared the same translator, called “quickness” – an agility of mind and economy of narrative that pulls the reader along’ *Guardian*

‘Elegant ... amusing ... the magic of language, artfully used. Tabucchi manages to play simultaneously in the treble and in the bass’ *Los Angeles Times*

‘Meticulously crafted stories marked by wit, emotion, memory and lost grandeur’ *Publishers Weekly*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antonio Tabucchi was born in Pisa, Italy, in 1943. His critically acclaimed novels and short story collections include *Little Misunderstandings of No Importance* and *Requiem: A Hallucination* and *Pereira Maintains*, which won the Premio Viareggio and the Aristeion Prize. He died in Lisbon, his adopted home, in 2012.

Frances Frenaye (1908–1996) was an American translator of French and Italian literary works. She won the Denyse Clairouin Memorial Award in 1951 for her translation of Georges Blond’s *The Plunderers* and J. H. R. Lenormand’s *Renee*.

ANTONIO TABUCCHI

*Little Misunderstandings of
No Importance*
And Other Stories

Translated by Frances Frenaye



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Author's Note

Baroque writers loved ambiguity. Calderón, and others with him, made ambiguity into a metaphor for the world. I suppose that they were moved by faith that, on the day when we awaken from the dream of living, our earthly ambiguity will finally be explained.

I, too, speak of ambiguities, but it's not so much that I like them; I am driven, rather, to seek them out. Misunderstandings, uncertainties, belated understandings, useless remorse, treacherous memories, stupid and irredeemable mistakes, all these irresistibly fascinate me, as if they constituted a vocation, a sort of lowly stigmata. The fact that the attraction is mutual is not exactly a consolation. I might be consoled by the conviction that life is by nature ambiguous and distributes ambiguities among all of us. But this would be, perhaps, a presumptuous axiom, not unlike the baroque metaphor.

Concerning the stories collected here, I should like to supply only a few notes on their beginnings. I stole *A Riddle* in Paris one evening in 1975, and it stayed within me long enough to come out in a version that unfortunately betrays the original. I shouldn't mind if *Spells* and *Any Where Out of the World* were considered, in the broadest sense of the term, ghost stories, which doesn't mean that they can't have another interpretation. The first owes something to a theory of the French child psychologist Dr Françoise Dolto, while, in the case of the second,

Note

it may be superfluous to specify that it was inspired by Baudelaire's *Le spleen de Paris*, particularly the prose poem from which I took the title. *Bitterness and Clouds* is a realistic story. *Cinema* owes much to a rainy evening, a small railway station on the Riviera, and to the face of an actress now dead.

About the rest of the stories I have little to add. I can only say that I wish *Waiting for Winter* had been written by Henry James and *The Trains that Go to Madras* by Rudyard Kipling. They would doubtless have come off better that way. Rather than regret for what I have written, I feel regret for what I shall never be able to read.

– Antonio Tabucchi

Little Misunderstandings of No Importance

The clerk called the court to order and there was a brief silence as the nearly white-haired Federico, in his judge's robe, led the little procession through the side door into the courtroom. At that very moment the tune of *Dusty Road* surged up in my mind. I watched them take their seats as if I were witnessing a ritual, remote and incomprehensible, but projected into the future. The image of those solemn men, sitting on a bench with a crucifix hanging over it, faded into the image of a past which, like an old film, was my present. Almost mechanically my hand scribbled *Dusty Road*, while my thoughts travelled backwards. Leo, confined like a dangerous animal in the prisoner's cage, lost his sickly, unhappy look. I saw him leaning on his grandmother's Empire-style console with that old bored and knowing expression which made for his very special charm. 'Tonino,' he was saying, 'put *Dusty Road* on again, will you?' And I put the record back on. Yes, Leo deserved to dance with Maddalena, known as the Tragic Muse because as Antigone in the school play she had broken into uncontrollable sobs. This was the appropriate record, yes it was, for dancing so passionately in the drawing room of Leo's grandmother. Here were the antecedents of the trial, that evening when Leo and Federico had taken turns dancing with the auburn-haired Tragic Muse, gazing into her eyes and swearing that they weren't rivals, that they didn't give a damn for her. They were dancing for the sake of dancing,

that was all. But they were mad about her, of course, and so was I as I changed the records, looking as if I didn't care.

From one dance to another a year went by, a year marked by a certain phrase, one that we ran into the ground because it fitted any and every occasion. Missing an appointment, spending money you didn't have in the bank, forgetting a solemn promise, finding a highly recommended book a total bore, all these mistakes and ambiguities were described as 'little misunderstandings of no importance'. The original example was something that happened to Federico and roused us to memorable gales of laughter. Federico, like the rest of us, had planned his future and signed up for Classics; he was already a whiz at Greek and had played the part of Creon in *Antigone*. We, instead, had opted for Modern Literature. 'It's closer to us,' said Leo, 'and you can't compare James Joyce with those boring ancients, can you?' We were at the Caffè Goliardico, the students' meeting place, each of us with his registration book, looking over the schedule of courses, stretched out on the billiard table. Memmo had joined us; he was a fellow from Lecce with political commitments and anxious that politics be handled 'the way it should be', so we called him 'Little Pol' and the nickname stuck throughout the year. At a certain point Federico appeared on the scene, looking very upset and waving his registration book in the air. He was so breathless and beside himself that he was barely able to explain. They had signed him up, by mistake, for Law and he simply couldn't get over it. To give him moral support we went with him to the administrative office, where we tangled with an amiable but indifferent old codger who had dealt with thousands of students over the years. He looked carefully at Federico's book and then at his worried face. 'Just a little misunderstanding that can't be corrected,' he said. 'No use worrying about it.' Federico stared at him in dismay, his cheeks reddening. 'A little misunderstanding that can't be corrected?'

he stammered. The old man did not lose his composure. 'Sorry,' he said, 'that's not what I meant. I meant a little misunderstanding of no importance. I'll get it fixed for you before Christmas. Meanwhile, if you like, you can take the Law courses. That way you won't be wasting your time.' We went away choking with laughter: a little misunderstanding of no importance! And Federico's angry look made us laugh all the more.

Strange, the way things happen. One morning a few weeks later, Federico turned up at the café looking quite pleased with himself. He had just come out of a class on the philosophy of law, where he had gone merely to pass the time, and well, boys, believe it or not, he'd grasped certain problems he'd never grasped before. The Greek tragedians, by comparison, had nothing to say. He already knew the classics, anyhow, so he'd decided to stay with Law.

Federico the judge said something in a questioning tone; his voice sounded faraway and metallic as if it were coming through a telephone. Time staggered and took a vertical fall, and the face of Maddalena, ringed by tiny bubbles, floated in a puddle of years. Perhaps it's not such a good idea to go and see a girl you've been in love with on the day they're amputating her breasts. If only in self-defence. But I had no wish to defend myself; I'd long since surrendered. And so I hung about in the hall outside the operating room, where patients are made to wait for their turn. She was wheeled in, wearing on her face the innocently happy look of pre-anesthesia, which I've heard stirs up a sort of unconscious excitement. There was an element of fear, I could see, but dulled by drugs. Should I say something? What I wanted to say was: 'Maddalena, I was always in love with you; I don't know why I've never managed to tell you before.' But you can't say such a thing to a girl entering the operating room for an operation like that. Instead I broke out at

full speed with some lines from *Antigone*, which I'd spoken in the performance years before:

'Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous
than man,
Over the surging sea, with a whitening south wind wan,
Through the foam of the firth man makes his
perilous way.'

God knows how they came to mind so exactly, and whether she remembered them, whether she was in a condition to understand, but she squeezed my hand before they wheeled her away. I went down to the hospital coffee-shop, where the only alcohol was Ramazzotti Bitters and it took a dozen glasses to get me drunk. When I began to feel a bit queasy I went and sat on a bench in front of the hospital, telling myself that it would be quite mad to seek out the surgeon, a madness born of drink. Because I wanted to find the surgeon and ask him not to throw those breasts into the incinerator but to give them to me. I wanted to keep them, and even if they were rotten inside I didn't care; there's something rotten in all of us and I cared for those breasts – how could I put it? – they had a special meaning for me; I hoped he understood. But a flicker of reason stopped me; I managed to get a taxi and go home, where I slept through the afternoon. It was dark when the telephone woke me – I didn't notice the time. Federico was on the line saying: 'Tonino, it's me. Can you hear, Tonino? It's me.' 'Where are you?' I asked in a gummy voice. 'I'm down south, in Catanzaro.' 'Catanzaro? What are you doing there?' 'I'm trying for the post of prosecutor. I've heard that Maddalena's ill, in the hospital.' 'Exactly. Do you remember those breasts of hers? Well, snip, snip, they're gone.' 'What are you saying, Tonino. Are you drunk?' 'Of course I'm drunk, drunk as a drunk, and life makes me sick, and you make me sick, too, taking an exam there

in Catanzaro. Why didn't you marry her, tell me that? She was in love with you, not with Leo, and you knew it; you didn't marry her because you were afraid. And why the devil did you marry that know-it-all wife of yours, tell me that! You're a bastard, Federico!' There was a click as he hung up. I muttered a few more expletives into the telephone, then went back to bed and dreamed of a field of poppies.

And so the years continued to flutter back and forth, as they passed, while Leo and Federico continued to dance with Maddalena in the Empire-style drawing room. In the space of a second, just as in an old film, while they sat in the courtroom, the one wearing his judge's robe, the other in the prisoner's cage, the merry-go-round turned, leaves flew off the calendar and stuck to one another, and they danced with Maddalena, gazing into her eyes, while I changed the records. Up came a summer we all spent together in the mountain camp of the National Olympics Committee, the walks in the woods and the contagious passion for tennis. The only serious player was Leo, with his unbeatable backhand, his good looks, close-fitting T-shirt, glossy hair, and the towel wound casually around his neck when the game was over. In the evening we stretched out on the grass and talked of one thing and another, wondering on whose chest Maddalena would lay her head. And then a winter that took us all by surprise. First of all on account of Leo. Who could have imagined him, so well turned out and so ostentatiously futile, with an arm around the statue in the hallway leading to the university president's office, haranguing the students. He wore a very becoming olive-green parka, military style. I'd bought a blue one, which I thought went better with my eyes, but Maddalena didn't notice, or at least didn't say so. She was intent on Federico's parka, which was too big, with dangling sleeves and was bunched up round his ramrod body in a ridiculous fashion which, for some reason, was appealing to women.

Now Leo started to talk in his low-pitched, monotonous voice, as if he were telling a story, in the ironical manner that I knew so well. In the courtroom you could have heard a pin drop; the newspaper reporters hunched over their notes as if he were telling the Great Secret, and Federico, too, followed him intently. Good God, I thought, why must you pretend to follow so closely? What he's saying isn't so strange; that winter you were in on it, too. I almost imagined Federico standing up and saying: 'Gentlemen of the jury, with your permission, I'd like to tell this part myself, because I knew it at first hand. The bookshop was called *Nuovo Mondo*; it was on the *Piazza Dante* where now, if I'm not mistaken, there's a smart shop which sells perfumes and Gucci bags. It had a large room, with a closet, a smaller room and a toilet on the right side. We never kept explosives in the small room, only the strawberries Memmo brought up from Apulia after he had been there on vacation. Every evening, in season, we got together to eat strawberries and olives. The chief topic of conversation was the Cuban Revolution – there was a poster of Che Guevara over the cash register – but we talked about revolutions of the past as well. As a matter of fact, I was the one to talk about them. My friends had no historical or philosophical background, whereas I was studying for an exam on political ideas (which I passed with top marks). And so I gave them lessons – seminars, we called them – on Babeuf, Bakunin, and Carlo Cattaneo. Actually revolutions didn't really interest me. I did it because I was in love with a red-haired girl called Maddalena. I was sure she was in love with Leo, or, rather, I knew she was in love with me but I was afraid she was in love with Leo. In short, it was a little misunderstanding of no importance, a phrase popular with us at the time. And Leo was always making fun of me; he had a gift for that. He was witty and ironical and plied me with tricky catch questions which conveyed the idea that I was a liberal but he was a true radical, a

revolutionary. He wasn't all that radical, really; he put it on in order to impress Maddalena, but whether it was by chance or from conviction, he took on a prominent role and became the most important member of our group. Yet, for him, too, this was a little misunderstanding which he considered of no importance. And then you know how it is: the roles that we assume become real. In life things easily get locked in, and an attitude freezes into a choice.

But Federico said none of these things. He was listening attentively to the prosecutor's questions and Leo's answers. It's not possible, I thought to myself; it's all a play. But it wasn't a play; it was real. Leo was on trial; the things he had done were real and he was admitting to them, impassively, while Federico impassively listened. He couldn't do otherwise, I realized, because that was his role in the comedy that they were playing. At this point I was moved by an impulse to rebel, to interfere, to erase the prepared script and rewrite it. What could I do? I wondered, and the only recourse, it occurred to me, was Memmo; yes, that was the only thing to do. I went out of the courtroom, showing my press card to the *carabinieri*. In the hallway, while I was dialling the number, I racked my brain for what I was going to say. They're going to sentence Leo, I'd tell him; come quickly, because you've got to do something. He's digging his own grave; it's totally absurd. Yes, he's guilty, I know, but not to that extent; he's just a cog in a machine that's crushed him. He's pretending he was at the controls, but that's just in order to live up to his reputation. He's never manipulated any machine and perhaps there's no proof of what he's saying. He's just Leo, the Leo that used to play tennis, with a towel wound around his neck. Only he's bright, I mean bright in a stupid way, and the whole thing's absurd.

The telephone rang and rang until a cold, refined woman's voice, with a marked Roman accent, answered. 'No, His Honour