GEORGES

SIMENON

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Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903 and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. He wrote *The Venice Train* in 1965 at his home in Épalinges, shortly before embarking on a family cruise of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

GEORGES SIMENON

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Translated by Ros Schwartz

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published as *Le Train de Venise* by Presses de la Cité 1965
First published in Penguin Classics 2022
001

Set in 12.5/15 pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–54422–8

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

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Part One

I

Why was his daughter the focal point of the entire image? That bothered him a little, or rather it was afterwards particularly that he dwelled on it, once the train was on the move. And yet, it had been only a fleeting impression, produced by the swaying of the carriage and merging just as quickly with the landscape.

Why Josée and not his wife or his young son, when the three of them had been huddled together in the muggy heat?

Perhaps because his daughter's form, as she stood on a station platform watching a departing train, was the most incongruous? She was twelve; she was tall and slim, her legs and arms still skinny, and her fair hair had silver lights from swimming in the sea and sunbathing on the beach.

As they'd left the guest house, Dominique had said to her:

'You're not going to wave your father off in your swimming costume, are you?'

'Why not? You see lots of people taking the water-taxi in bathing suits. And the water-taxi stops just in front of the station. Aren't we going swimming straight afterwards?'

Dominique was wearing shorts, and her bra was visible beneath the short-sleeved striped shirt she'd bought in a

teeming narrow side street near a canal whose name escaped him.

Was it the sight of his daughter's budding breasts that was bothering him?

It was all so hazy, like the morning light, like the shimmering, warm, almost tangible mist above the water.

In his limbs and in his head, he could still feel the throbbing of the boat that had ferried them from the Lido, its steady movement over the long, flat waves, its rocking each time they passed another boat.

The sudden view of Venice, in the already warm early morning, the towers, the domes, the palaces, Saint Mark's Basilica and the Grand Canal, the gondolas and, because it was Sunday, bells ringing in all the churches, in all the belfries.

'Papa, can I buy an ice-cream?'

'At eight o'clock in the morning?'

'Me too?' asked the boy, who was only six.

His name was Louis, but from when he was a baby they'd called him Bib, because he was always asking for his bottle, which he called 'bibby', and the nickname had stuck.

Bib was also in his swimming trunks, with a checked shirt on top; both children were wearing flat-topped straw boaters, with a red band for Josée and a blue one for her brother.

Perhaps, deep down, Calmar didn't like the change of scene. For two weeks he had been feeling disoriented, rootless, with no solid ground beneath his feet. It was his wife, not him, who had wanted to spend the holidays in Venice and, of course, the children had added their voices.

He hated departures too, the goodbyes. He stood at the lowered window of the compartment, which didn't look very clean. This was the only carriage that had come from further away, from Trieste and beyond, a carriage that wasn't the same colour as the others, that looked foreign and had a different smell.

A man sitting near him, within touching distance, was watching him closely. He was probably on board already when the carriage was hitched to the Venice train.

In fact, Justin Calmar didn't ask himself any specific questions. Without being aware of it, surveying the platform in the pale light, he took in, rather impatiently, the newspaper kiosk in the left-hand corner of the tableau and, to the left and right, other people waiting like his wife and children, their gazes fixed on a relative or friend.

Everything had gone according to plan. The train was scheduled to leave at 7.54. At 7.52, a man in uniform had walked the length of the platform closing the doors, while a mechanic went from carriage to carriage tapping here and there with his hammer. Each time Calmar had taken the train, he'd witnessed the same ritual, wondering each time what the man was tapping, and then forgetting to find out.

The stationmaster came out of his office, a whistle between his lips and a red flag furled like an umbrella in his hand. Steam was gushing from somewhere. Although it wasn't steam, because this was an electric train, but in any case, the brakes were being bled, with the same spurts and jolts as in all trains.

The whistle, at last. Josée, licking her ice-cream, her

gelato, as she now called it, one hand raised in a wave. Dominique instructed him:

'Be sure to take good care of yourself and eat all your meals at Étienne's.'

A restaurant they knew, on Boulevard des Batignolles, a stone's throw from where they lived, and where, according to Dominique, the kitchen was clean and the food wholesome.

The red flag was unfurled. The stationmaster raised his arm, as did Josée and Bib, imitating his sister.

The train should have left. The clock showed 7.55.

But, instead of fully raising the flag, the stationmaster, who could see the entire length of the train, lowered his arm while giving a series of short, imperious whistle blasts.

The train wasn't leaving. The people on the platform were looking in the direction of the engine. Calmar leaned out, but could see nothing except other heads leaning out like his.

'What's going on?'

'I don't know,' replied Dominique. 'I can't see anything out of the ordinary.'

She was slim, not as slim as his daughter, naturally, and she still had a certain allure, even in shorts. Unable to tan like her children, her skin was red from the sun, and her blue eyes were hidden behind sunglasses.

Everyone was watching the stationmaster, who seemed in no hurry. The flag under his arm, he was still looking in the direction of the engine, showing no signs of impatience, waiting for goodness-knows-what, and throughout

the station it was a little like a film pausing suddenly on a still image, on a simple colour photograph.

Hands didn't know what to do with the handkerchief already unfurled. Farewell smiles were frozen and turned into grimaces.

'A latecomer?' asked a voice close to Calmar.

'I don't know. I can't see anyone running.'

The man rose, short and stocky, leaving his newspaper on the seat.

'May I?'

In the window frame, his face and shoulders replaced Justin's for a moment.

'You never know with the Italians . . .'

He'd had the opportunity to see Dominique and the two children. Calmar sat back down, a forced smile on his lips. He was well aware that Josée and Bib were impatient to get away, to rush out of that hot station and jump into the vaporetto that would take them to the beach. Meanwhile Dominique looked anxious and sad.

'Be sure to take care of yourself, Justin.'

'I promise.'

'I think the train's going to leave, this time.'

It took another two endless minutes during which all eyes were on the stationmaster, who remained unperturbed.

At last, an underling came out of an office with a glazed door, gave a signal, and the stationmaster blew his whistle, waited a few more moments and then waved his flag. The train began to pull out of the station. The platform lined with figures slid past. Justin leaned out further, as

the shape of his daughter dwindled, her red swimsuit gradually blending into all the colours of the station.

The sun caught them, bursting violently into the compartment at the same time as a gust of scorching air and, with a sigh, Calmar lowered the blue fabric blind, which billowed like a sail and rolled back up two or three times before being tethered in the right position.

They were off.

Now that he was sitting, he had the leisure, even if he didn't feel like it, to study his travelling companion, who had scrunched up his newspaper and pushed it under the seat.

For a long while, the two men played at pretending not to be looking at each other, with the difference, perhaps, that the stranger was not so quick at averting his eyes as Calmar.

He was middle-aged, around fifty-five, maybe sixty, and his shoulders were very broad, his chest powerful and his face hard-edged.

Calmar had noticed that his newspaper was printed in Cyrillic. Russian? Slovenian?

The blue blind suddenly shot up, letting the sun in again, and this time it was the man who stood up and secured it, like an old hand.

'French?' he asked, as he sat back down.

'Yes.'

'Paris?'

'Yes.'

'I noticed that your wife has a Parisian accent.'

Calmar saw no reason not to strike up a conversation,

but it is always awkward at first. The train was already pulling into Venezia Mestre, Venice's other station, and local people were walking through the corridors looking for seats in second class.

'Do you have to go home before your family for work?'

'We were all supposed to leave today. Unfortunately, there was only one seat left on the 10.32 fast train. Rather than making my family change in Lausanne and spend the night on the train, I left on my own, giving them a few more days, which is what the children wanted.'

He had the impression that his companion was staring insistently at his lightweight, textured, silk-blend suit. This was the first time in his life that he had worn such a pastel colour, a cream tone, but his wife had urged him to buy it, in the same narrow street where she had bought her blouses.

'Justin, you are almost the only person wearing dark colours.'

He would rather have been dressed differently for the journey. In Venice, or in their family guest house, it was acceptable, but here he felt as if he were in disguise. It didn't suit his plump physique.

'Nice holiday? Did you have good weather?'

'Except for a couple of thunderstorms.'

'Do you like Italian food?'

'The children love it, except for seafood, which my son won't touch . . .'

'But if you were in a guest house, you'd have been given seafood every day.'

He cringed. How did this stranger, who had only been

watching him for a few minutes, know that they'd been staying in a family guest house and not in one of the Lido's grand hotels?

He felt vaguely humiliated and regretted even more having worn his linen-and-silk-blend suit, whose Italian cut didn't look right on him at all.

This placid man sitting opposite was beginning both to annoy and intrigue him. He had probably already made a covert assessment of his two suitcases, which were not of the highest quality, having been bought for the trip. Calmar had heard that the porters of luxury hotels judged the guests by their luggage the way some men judge women, not by their dress or their furs, but by their shoes.

'Are you in business?'

'In industry rather, small-scale industry, but I don't work for myself.'

He couldn't help it. Although the man had no right to question him, he replied with almost scrupulous honesty.

'May I?'

He removed his jacket, because perspiration was oozing from his every pore, despite the draught that was still making the blind flutter and threatening to dislodge it again at any moment.

He had large, damp circles under his arms and was ashamed of them, as if they were a defect. At the office too, he was embarrassed by them, especially in front of the typists.

'Your daughter will be a very beautiful woman . . .'

The man had barely glimpsed her!

'She takes after her mother, only she's livelier . . .'

It was true. What Dominique lacked was vitality, spontaneity – what is known as zest. At thirty-two she was slim and graceful, with attractive features and eyes of a very soft blue, but there was always something self-effacing about her, as if she was afraid of drawing attention to herself, of taking up more space than was rightfully hers.

'Your wife has a very beautiful contralto voice.'

Justin gave a nervous smile. How had this man noticed all that? It was true that Dominique's deep, gentle voice contrasted with her outward fragility, which made her appealing.

Already, a new station. Padua, a crowded platform, hundreds of people, so it seemed, throwing themselves at the train – families, lots of children, babies in their mothers' arms and even a fat farm woman carrying chickens in a crate.

They swarmed in through all the doors and could be seen in the corridor, pushing and shoving, trying to move towards the front of the train to grab any free seats.

'You'll see, soon, it won't be possible to walk through the corridors.'

'Have you taken this train before?'

'Not this one, but others like it. It makes you wonder where the Italians are going to and coming from with such determination. Some days it seems as if the whole of Italy is on the move, looking for somewhere to put down roots at last.'

He had an accent that Calmar couldn't quite place.

'Engineer?'

Once again, the question gave him a jolt. At least this time he had the satisfaction of seeing his companion get it wrong.

'No. I'm not a technician at all. I work in the sales department and my job title – since everyone in our firm has a title – is Overseas Sales Manager.'

'*You speak English?*'

He replied in English:

'I was an English teacher at the Lycée Carnot.'

'Do you speak German too?'

'German too.'

'Italian?'

'No. Just enough to be able to read a restaurant menu.'

The train rounded a bend, causing the blue fabric blind to flap even harder and shoot up. The ticket inspector, who had just entered the compartment, took a few minutes to secure it, after which he asked to see their tickets.

Calmar's was a simple cardboard oblong, whereas the stranger's comprised several yellow sheets stapled together. The inspector tore off a section and slipped it into his satchel.

If he had been asked, on the train, what his impressions were, he would have been incapable of analysing them and would probably have been content to reply grumpily that he was looking forward to arriving.

It would have been more or less the same if he had been asked about his holiday. He'd had his fill of sunshine, the hordes of bathers on the beach, the noise of the vaporettos and water-taxis, of Saint Mark's Square and its pigeons, of