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CALVINO

Difficult
Loves and
Other
Stories

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ITALO CALVINO

Italo Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923 and grew up in Italy. He was an essayist and journalist and a member of the editorial staff of Einaudi in Turin. His other books include *If on a winter's night a traveller*, *Invisible Cities* and *Our Ancestors*. In 1981 he won the prestigious Premio Feltrinelli. He died in 1985.

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Difficult Loves and Other Stories

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This edition published in Vintage Classics in 2023
First published in Great Britain in two volumes by Secker and
Warburg in 1983

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

ISBN 9781784874841

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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

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The Adventure of a Soldier

In the compartment, a lady came and sat down, tall and buxom, next to Private Tomagra. She must have been a widow from the provinces, to judge by her dress and her veil: the dress was black silk, appropriate for prolonged mourning, but with useless frills and furbelows, and the veil went all around her face, falling from the brim of a massive, old-fashioned hat. Other places were free, Private Tomagra noticed, there in the compartment; and he had assumed the widow would surely choose one of them. But, on the contrary, despite the vicinity of a coarse soldier like himself, she came and sat right there, no doubt for some reason connected with comfortable traveling, the soldier quickly decided, a draft, or the direction of the train.

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Her body was in full bloom, solid, indeed a bit square. If its high curves had not been tempered by a matronly softness, you would have said she was no more than thirty; but when you looked at her face, at the complexion both marmoreal and relaxed, the unattainable gaze beneath the heavy eyelids and the thick black brows, at the sternly sealed lips, hastily colored with a jarring red, she seemed, instead, past forty.

Tomagra, a young infantry private on his first leave (it was Easter), huddled down in his seat for fear that the lady, so ample and shapely, might not fit; and immediately he found himself in the aura of her perfume, a popular and perhaps cheap scent, but now, out of long wear, blended with natural human odors.

The lady sat down with a composed demeanor, revealing, there beside him, less majestic proportions than he had imagined when he had seen her standing. Her hands were plump, with tight, dark rings; she kept them folded in her lap, over a shiny purse and a jacket she had taken off, exposing round, white arms. At her first movement, Tomagra had shifted, to make space for a broad maneuvering of her arms; but she had remained almost motionless, slipping out of the sleeves with a few brief twitches of her shoulders and torso.

The railroad seat was therefore fairly comfortable for two, and Tomagra could feel the lady's extreme closeness, though without any fear of offending her by his contact. All the same, Tomagra reasoned, lady though she was, she had surely not shown any sign of repugnance towards him, towards his rough uniform; otherwise she would have sat farther away. And, at these thoughts, his muscles, till now contracted and **Copyrighted Material** relaxed, stretched serenely; indeed,

without his moving, they tried to expand to their greatest extension, and his leg, its tendons taut, at first detached even from the cloth of his trousers, settled more broadly, not tightening the material that covered it, and the wool grazed the widow's black silk. And now, through this wool and that silk, the soldier's leg was adhering to her leg with a soft, fleeting movement, like two sharks grazing each other, and sending waves through its veins to those other veins.

It was still a very light contact, which every jolt of the train could break off and recreate; the lady had strong, fat knees, and Tomagra's bones could sense at every jerk the lazy bump of the kneecap. The calf had raised a silken cheek that, with an imperceptible thrust, had to be made to coincide with his own. This meeting of calves was precious, but it came at a price, a loss: in fact, the body's weight was shifted and the reciprocal support of the hips no longer occurred with the same docile abandon. In order to achieve a natural and satisfied position, it was necessary to move slightly on the seat, with the aid of a curve in the track, and also of the comprehensible need to shift position every so often.

The lady was impassive, beneath her matronly hat, her gaze fixed, lidded, and her hands steady on the purse in her lap. And yet her body, for a very long while, rested against that stretch of man: hadn't she realized this yet? Or was she preparing to flee? To rebel?

Tomagra decided to transmit, somehow, a message to her: he contracted the muscle of his calf into a kind of hard, square fist, and then with this calf-fist, as if a hand inside it wanted to open, he quickly knocked at the calf of the widow. To be sure, this was a very rapid movement, barely time for some flicker of the Copyrighted Material, she didn't draw

back, at least not so far as he could tell. Because immediately, needing to justify that covert movement, Tomagra extended his leg as if to get a kink out of it.

Now he had to begin all over again; that patient and prudently established contact had been lost. Tomagra decided to be more courageous; as if looking for something, he stuck his hand in his pocket, the pocket towards the woman, and then, as if absently, he left it there. It had been a rapid action, Tomagra didn't know whether he had touched her or not, an inconsequential gesture; and yet he realized what an important step forward he had made, and in what a risky game he was now involved. Against the back of his hand, the hip of the lady in black was pressing; he felt it weighing on every finger, every knuckle; now any movement of his hand would have been an act of incredible intimacy towards the widow. Holding his breath, Tomagra turned his hand inside his pocket; in other words, he set the palm towards the lady, open against her, though still in the pocket. It was an impossible position, the wrist twisted. And yet, at this point, he might just as well attempt a decisive action: and so he ventured to move the fingers of that contorted hand. There could no longer be any possible doubt: the widow couldn't have helped but notice his maneuvering, and if she didn't draw back, but pretended to be impassive and absent, it meant that she wasn't rejecting his advances. When he thought about it, however, her paying no attention to Tomagra's mobile hand might mean that she really believed he was hunting for something in that pocket: a railway ticket, a match ... There: and if now the soldier's fingertips, the pads, seemingly endowed with a sudden clairvoyance, could sense through those different stuffs the hems of subterranean garments and the roughnesses of skin,

rested, inert, on that female knee, and the train cradled it in a rocking caress.

It was then that Tomagra thought of the others: if the lady, whether out of compliance or out of a mysterious intangibility, didn't react at his boldness, facing them, there were still seated other persons who could be scandalized by that non-soldierly behavior of his, and by that possible silent complicity on the woman's part. Chiefly to spare the lady such suspicion, Tomagra withdrew his hand, or rather he hid it, as if it were the only guilty party. But this hiding it, he later thought, was only a hypocritical pretext: in fact, abandoning it there, on the seat, he intended simply to move it closer to the lady, who occupied, in fact, such a large part of the space.

Indeed, the hand groped around. There: like a butterfly's lighting, the fingers already sensed her presence; and there; it was enough merely to thrust the whole palm forward gently, and the widow's gaze beneath the veil was impenetrable, the bosom only faintly stirred by her respiration. But no! Tomagra had already withdrawn his hand, like a mouse scurrying off.

She didn't move – he thought – maybe she wants this. But he also thought: another moment and it would be too late. Maybe she's sitting there, studying me, preparing to make a scene.

Then, for no reason except prudent verification, Tomagra slid his hand along the back of the seat and waited until the train's jolts, imperceptibly, made the lady slide over his fingers. To say he waited is not correct: actually, with the tips of his fingers, wedge-like between the seat and her, he pushed with an invisible movement, which could also have been the effect of the train's speeding. If he stopped at a certain point, it **Copyrighted Material** had given any

indication of disapproval, but because, as Tomagra thought, if she did accept, on the contrary, it would be easy for her, with a half-rotation of the muscles, to meet him halfway, to fall, as it were, on that expectant hand. To suggest to her the friendly nature of his attention, Tomagra, in that position beneath the lady, attempted a discreet wiggle of the fingers; the lady was looking out of the window, and her hand was idly toying with the purse-clasp, opening and closing it. Were these signals to him, to stop? Was it a final concession she was granting him, a warning that her patience could be tried no longer? Was it this? – Tomagra asked himself – Was it this?

He noticed that this hand, like a stubby octopus, was clasping her flesh. Now all was decided: he could no longer draw back, not Tomagra. But what about her? She was a sphinx.

With a crab's oblique scuttle, the soldier's hand now descended her thigh: was it out in the open, before the eyes of the others? No, now the lady was adjusting the jacket she held folded on her lap, allowing it to spill to one side. To offer him cover, or to block his path? There: now the hand moved freely and unseen, it clasped her, it opened in fleeting caresses like brief puffs of wind. But the widow's face was still turned away, distant; Tomagra stared at a part of her, a zone of naked skin, between the ear and the curve of her full chignon. And in that dimple beneath the ear a vein throbbed: this was the answer she was giving him, clear, heart-rending, and fleeting. She turned her face all of a sudden, proud and marmoreal; the veil hanging below the hat moved like a curtain; the gaze was lost beneath the heavy lids. But that gaze had gone past him, Tomagra, perhaps had not even grazed him; she was looking beyond him, at something, or

nothing, the pretext of some thought, but anyway something more important than he. This he decided later; because earlier, when he had barely seen that movement of hers, he had immediately thrown himself back and shut his eyes tight, as if he were asleep, trying to quell the flush spreading over his face, and thus perhaps losing the opportunity to catch in the first glint of her eyes an answer to his own extreme doubts.

His hand, hidden under the black jacket, had remained as if detached from him, numb, the fingers drawn back towards the wrist: no longer a real hand, now without sensitivity beyond that arboreal sensitivity of the bones. But as the truce the widow had granted to her own impassivity with that vague glance around soon ended, blood and courage flowed into the hand again. And it was then that, resuming contact with that soft saddle of leg, he realized he had reached a limit: the fingers were running along the hem of the skirt, beyond there was the leap to the knee, and the void.

It was the end, Private Tomagra thought, of this secret spree: and now, thinking back, he found it a truly poor thing in his memory, though he had greedily blown it up while experiencing it: a clumsy feel on a silk dress, something that could in no way have been denied him, simply because of his miserable position as a soldier, and something that the lady had discreetly condescended, without any show, to concede.

In the intention, however, of withdrawing his hand, desolate, he was interrupted, as he noticed the way she held her jacket on her knees: no longer folded (though it had seemed so to him before), but flung carelessly, so that one edge fell in front of her **Copyrighted Material** in a sealed den:

perhaps a final proof of trust that the lady was giving him, confident that the disparity between her station and the soldier's was so great that he surely wouldn't take advantage of the opportunity. And the soldier recalled, with effort, what had happened so far between the widow and himself, as he tried to discover something in her behavior that hinted at further condescension, and he now considered his own actions insignificant and trivial, casual grazings and strokings, or, on the other hand, of a decisive intimacy, committing him not to withdraw again.

His hand surely agreed with this second consideration, because, before he could reflect on the irreparable nature of the act, he was already passing the frontier. And the lady? She was asleep. She had rested her head, with the pompous hat, against a corner of the seat, and she was keeping her eyes closed. Should he, Tomagra, respect this sleep, genuine or false as it might be, and retire? Or was it a consenting woman's device, which he should already know, for which he should somehow indicate gratitude? The point he had now reached admitted no hesitation: he could only advance.

Private Tomagra's hand was small and plump, and its hard parts and calluses had become so blended with the muscle that it was uniform, flexible; the bones could not be felt, and its movement was made more with nerves, though gently, than with joints. And this little hand had constant and general and minuscule movements, to maintain the completeness of the contact alive and burning. But when, finally, a first stirring ran through the widow's softness, like the motion of distant marine currents through secret underwater channels, the soldier was so surprised by it that, as if he really supposed the widow had noticed nothing till then, had really been asleep, he drew his hand away in fright.

Now he sat there with his hands on his own knees, huddled in his seat as he had been when she came in. He was behaving absurdly: he realized that. Then, with a scraping of heels, a stretching of hips, he seemed eager to reestablish the contacts, but this prudence of his was absurd too, as if he wanted to start his extremely patient operation again from the beginning, as if he were not sure now of the deep goals already gained. But had he really gained them? Or had it been only a dream?

A tunnel fell upon them. The darkness became deeper and deeper, and Tomagra then, first with timid gestures, occasionally drawing back as if he were really at the first advances and were amazed at his own temerity, then trying more and more to convince himself of the profound intimacy he had already reached with that woman, extended one hand, shy as a pullet, towards the bosom, large and somewhat abandoned to its own heaviness, and with an eager groping he tried to explain to her the misery and the unbearable happiness of his condition, and his need of nothing else but for her to emerge from her reserve.

The widow did react, but with a sudden gesture of shielding herself and rejecting him. It was enough to send Tomagra crouching in his comer, wringing his hands. But it was, probably, a false alarm caused by a passing light in the corridor which had made the widow fear the tunnel was suddenly going to end. Perhaps: or else, had he gone too far, had he committed some horrible rudeness towards her, who was already so generous towards him? No, by now there could be nothing forbidden between them; and her action, on the contrary, was a sign that this was all real, that she accepted, participated. Tomagra approached again. To be sure, in these **Copyrighted Material** of time had been

wasted, the tunnel wouldn't last much longer, it wasn't wise to allow oneself to be caught by the sudden light. Tomagra was already expecting the first grayness on the wall, there: the more he expected it, the more risky it was to attempt anything. To be sure, however, this was a long tunnel; he remembered it from other journeys as very, very long. Certainly, if he took advantage immediately, he would have a lot of time ahead of him. Now it was best to wait for the end, but it never ended, and so this had perhaps been his last chance. There, now the darkness was being dispelled, it was ending.

They were at the last station of a provincial line. The train was emptying; some passengers in the compartment had already got out, now the rest were taking down their bags, moving off. In the end they were alone in the compartment, the soldier and the widow, very close and detached, their arms folded, silent, eyes staring into space. Tomagra still had to think: Now that all the seats are free, if she wanted to be nice and comfortable, if she were fed up with me, she would move...

Something restrained him and frightened him still, perhaps the presence of a group of smokers in the passage, or a light that had come on because it was evening. Then he thought of drawing the curtains on the passage, like somebody wanting to get some sleep. He stood up with elephantine steps; with slow, meticulous care he began to unfasten the curtains, draw them, fasten them again. When he turned, he found her stretched out. As if she wanted to sleep: but apart from the fact that she had her eyes open and staring, she had slipped down, maintaining her matronly composure intact, with the majestic hat still on her head, which was resting on the seat arm.

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Tomagra was standing over her. Still, to protect this image of sleep, he chose also to darken the outside window; and he stretched over her, to undo the curtain. But it was only a way of shifting his clumsy actions above the impassive widow. Then he stopped tormenting that curtain's snap and understood he had to do something else, show her all his own, compelling condition of desire, if only to explain to her the misunderstanding into which she had certainly fallen, as if to say to her: You see, you were kind to me because you believe we have a remote need for affection, we poor lonely soldiers, but here is what I really am, this is how I received your courtesy, this is the degree of impossible ambition I have reached, you see, here.

And since it was now evident that nothing could manage to surprise the lady, and indeed everything seemed somehow to have been foreseen by her, then Private Tomagra could only make sure that no further doubts were possible, and finally the urgency of his madness managed also to grasp its mute object: her.

When Tomagra stood up and, beneath him, the widow remained with her clear, ste gaze (she had blue eyes), with her hat and veil still squarely on her head, and the train never stopped its shrill whistling through the fields, and outside those endless rows of grapevines went on, and the rain that throughout the journey had tirelessly streaked the panes now resumed with new violence, he had again a brief spurt of fear, thinking how he, Private Tomagra, had been so daring.

(1949)

The Adventure of a Crook

The important thing was not to get himself arrested immediately. Gim flattened himself in the recess of a doorway, the police seemed to run straight past, but then, all at once, he heard their steps come back, turn into the alley. He darted off, in agile leaps.

“Stop or we’ll shoot, Gim!”

Sure, sure, go ahead and shoot! he thought, and he was already out of their range, his feet thrusting him from the edge of the pebbled steps, down the slanting streets of the old city. Above the fountain, he jumped over the railing of the stairs, then he was under the archway, which amplified the pounding of his steps.

The whole circuit that came into his mind had to be rejected: Lola no, Nijderigh, Rechdator. Those guys would

soon be all over the place, knocking at doors. It was a mild night, the clouds so pale they wouldn't have looked out of place in the daytime, above the arches set high over the alleyways.

On reaching the broad streets of the new city, Mario Albanesi alias Gim Bolero slowed his pace a little, tucked behind his ears the strings of hair that fell from his temples. Not a step was heard. Determined and discreet, he crossed over, reached Armanda's doorway, and climbed to her apartment. At this time of night she surely didn't have anybody with her; she would be sleeping. Gim knocked hard.

"Who's there?" a man's voice asked, irritated, after a moment. "At this time of night people get their sleep ..." It was Lilin.

"Open up a minute, Armanda. It's me, it's Gim," he said, not loud, but firmly.

Armanda rolled over in bed, "Oh, Gim boy, just a minute, I'll open the door ... uh, it's Gim." She grabbed the wire at the head of the bed that opened the front door and pulled.

The door clicked, obedient; Gim went along the corridor, hands in his pockets; he entered the bedroom. In Armanda's huge bed, her body, in great mounds under the sheets, seemed to take up all the space. On the pillow, her face without make-up, under the black bangs, hung slack, baggy and wrinkled. Beyond, as if in a fold of the blanket, on the far side of the bed, her husband Lilin was lying; and he seemed to want to bury his little bluish face in the pillow, to recover his interrupted sleep.

Lilin has to wait till the last customer has gone before he can get into bed and sleep off the weariness that accumulates during his lazy days. There is no change in the world that Lilin

knows how to do or wants to do; if he has his smokes, he's content. Armanda can't say Lilin costs her much, except for the packets of tobacco he consumes in the course of a day. He goes out with his packet in the morning, sits for a while at the cobbler's, at the junk dealer's, at the plumber's, rolls one paper after another and smokes, seated on those shop stools, his long, smooth, thief's hands on his knees, his gaze dull, listening like a spy to everyone, hardly ever contributing a word to the talk except for brief remarks and unexpected smiles, crooked and yellow. At evening, when the last shop has closed, he goes to the wine counter and drains a liter, burns up the cigarettes he has left, until they also pull down the shutters. He comes out, his wife is still on her beat along the Corso in her short dress, her swollen feet in her tight shoes. Lilin appears around a corner, gives her a low whistle, mutters a few words, to tell her it's late now, she should come to bed. Without looking at him, on the step of the sidewalk as if on a stage, her bosom compressed in the armature of wire and elastic, her old woman's body in her young girl's dress, nervously twitching her purse in her hands, drawing circles on the pavement with her heels, suddenly humming, she tells him no, people are still around, he must go off and wait. They woo each other like this, every night.

"Well then, Gim?" Armanda says, widening her eyes.

He has already found some cigarettes on the night-table and lights one.

"I have to spend the night here. Tonight."

And he is already taking off his jacket, undoing his tie.

"Sure, Gim, get into bed. You go onto the sofa, Lilin, go on, Lilin honey, clear the sofa to bed."

Lilin lies there a bit, like a stone, then he pulls himself up, emitting a complaint without distinct words; he gets down from the bed, takes his pillow, a blanket, the tobacco from the table, the cigarette-papers, matches, ashtray. "Go on, Lilin honey, go on." Tiny and hunched, he goes off, under his load, towards the sofa in the corridor.

Gim smokes as he undresses, folds his trousers neatly and hangs them up, arranges his jacket around a chair by the head of the bed, brings the cigarettes from the dresser to the night-table, matches, an ashtray, and climbs into bed. Armanda turns off the lamp and sighs. Gim smokes. Lilin sleeps in the corridor. Armanda rolls over. Gim stubs out his cigarette. There is a knocking at the door.

With one hand Gim is already touching the revolver in the pocket of his jacket, with the other he has taken Armanda by the elbow, warning her to be careful. Armanda's arm is fat and soft; they stay like that for a while.

"Ask who it is, Lilin," Armanda says in a low voice.

Lilin, in the hall, huffs impatiently. "Who is it?" he asks rudely.

"Hey, Armanda, it's me. Angelo."

"Angelo who?" she says.

"Angelo the sergeant, Armanda. I happened to be going by, and I thought I'd come up ... Can you open the door a minute?"

Gim has got out of the bed and is signalling her to be quiet. He opens a door, looks into the toilet, takes the chair with his clothes and carries it inside.

"Nobody's seen me. Get rid of him fast," he says softly and locks himself in the toilet.

"Come on, Lilin honey, get back into bed, come on, Lilin," from the bed Armanda directs the rearrangement.

“Armanda, you’re keeping me waiting,” the other man says, beyond the door.

Calmly, Lilin collects blanket, pillow, tobacco, matches, papers, ashtray, and comes back to bed, gets in, and pulls the sheet to his eyes. Armanda grabs the wire and clicks open the door.

Sergeant Soddu comes in, with the rumpled look of an old policeman in civilian clothes, his mustache gray against his fat face.

“You’re out late, sergeant,” Armanda says.

“Oh, I was just taking a walk,” Soddu says, “and I thought I’d pay you a call.”

“What was it you wanted?”

Soddu was at the head of the bed, wiping his sweaty face with his handkerchief.

“Nothing, just a little visit. What’s new?”

“New how?”

“Have you seen Albanesi by any chance?”

“Gim? What’s he done now?”

“Nothing. Kid stuff... We wanted to ask him something. Have you seen him?”

“Three days ago.”

“I mean now.”

“I’ve been asleep for two hours, Sarge. Why are you asking me? Go ask his girls: Rosy, Nilde, Lola ...”

“No use. When he’s in trouble, he stays away from them.”

“He hasn’t shown up here. Next time, Sarge.”

“Well, Armanda, I was just asking. Anyway I’m glad to pay you a visit.”

“Good night, Sarge.”

“Good night, eh.”

Soddu turned, but

“I was thinking ... it’s practically morning, and I don’t have any other rounds to make. I don’t feel like going back to that cot. So long as I’m here, I’ve half a mind to stay. What about it, Armanda?”

“Sergeant, you’re always great, but to tell you the truth, at this time of night, I’m not receiving. That’s how it is, Sarge. We all have our schedule.”

“Armanda ... an old friend like me,” Soddu was already removing his jacket, his undershirt.

“You’re a nice man, Sergeant. Why don’t we get together tomorrow night?”

Soddu went on undressing. “It’s to pass the night, you understand, Armanda? Well, make some room for me.”

“Lilin will go on the sofa then. Go on, Lilin honey, go on out now.”

Lilin groped with his long hands, found the tobacco on the table, pulled himself up, grumbling, climbed from the bed almost without opening his eyes, collected pillow, blanket, papers, matches. “Go on, Lilin honey.” He went off, dragging the blanket along the hall. Soddu turned over between the sheets.

Next door, Gim looked through the panes of the little window at the sky, turning green. He had forgotten his cigarettes on the table, that was the trouble. And now the other man was getting into bed and Gim had to stay shut up until daylight between that bidet and those boxes of talcum powder, unable to smoke. He had dressed again in silence, had combed his hair neatly, looking at himself in the washstand mirror, above the fence of perfumes and eye-drops and syringes and medicines and insecticides that adorned the shelf. He read some labels in the light from the window, stole a box of talcum powder, and made his tour of the toilet.

There weren't many discoveries to be made: some clothes in a tub, others on a line. He tested the taps of the bidet; the water spurted noisily. What if Soddu heard? To hell with Soddu and with jail. Gim was bored, he went back to the basin, sprinkled some cologne on his jacket, spread Brilliantine on his hair. The fact was, if they didn't arrest him today, they would tomorrow, but they hadn't caught him red-handed, and if all went well, they'd turn him loose right away. To wait there another two or three hours, without cigarettes, in that cubbyhole ... why did he bother? Of course, they'd let him out right away. He opened a closet: it creaked. To hell with the closet and everything else. Inside it, Armanda's clothes were hanging. Gim stuck his revolver into the pocket of a fur coat. I'll come back and get it, he thought, she won't be wearing this till winter anyhow. He drew out his hand, white with naphthalene. All the better: the gun won't get moth-eaten. He laughed. He went to wash his hands again, but Armanda's towels turned his stomach and he wiped himself on a topcoat in the closet.

Lying in bed, Soddu had heard noises next door. He put one hand on Armanda. "Who's there?"

She turned, pressed to him, and put her big, soft arm around his neck. "It's nothing ... Who could it be? ..."

Soddu didn't want to free himself, but still he heard movements in there and he asked, as if playing: "What is it, eh? What's that?"

Gim opened the door. "Come on, Sarge, don't play dumb. Arrest me."

Soddu reached out one hand to the revolver in his jacket, hung on a peg; but he didn't let go of Armanda. "Who's that?"

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“Gim Bolero.”

“Hands up.”

“I’m not armed, Sarge, don’t be silly. I’m turning myself in.”

He was standing at the head of the bed, his jacket around his shoulders, his hands half-raised.

“Oh, Gim,” Armanda said.

“I’ll come back to see you in a few days, ’Anda,” Gim said.

Soddu got up, mumbling, and slipped on his trousers. “What a lousy job ... Never a moment’s peace ...”

Gim took the cigarettes from the table, lighted one, slipped the pack into his pocket.

“Give me a smoke, Gim,” Armanda said, and she leaned out, lifting her flabby bosom.

Gim put a cigarette in her mouth, lighted it for her, helped Soddu on with his jacket. “Let’s go, Sarge.”

“Another time, Armanda,” Soddu said.

“So long, Angelo,” she said.

“So long, eh? Armanda,” Soddu said again.

“Bye, Gim.”

They went out. In the corridor Lilin was sleeping, perched on the edge of the broken-down sofa; he didn’t even move.

Armanda was smoking, seated on the big bed; she turned off the lamp because a gray light was already coming into the room.

“Lilin,” she called. “Come on, Lilin, come to bed, come on, Lilin honey, come.”

Lilin was already gathering up the pillow, the ashtray.

(1949)

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The Adventure of a Bather

While enjoying a swim at the beach at ***, Signora Isotta Barbarino had an unfortunate mishap. She was swimming far out in the water, and when it seemed time to go back in and she turned towards the shore, she realized that an irreparable event had occurred. She had lost her bathing-suit.

She couldn't tell if it had slipped off just then, or if she had been swimming without it already for some time; of the new two-piece suit she had been wearing, only the halter was left. At some twist of her hip, some buttons must have popped, and the bottom part, reduced to a shapeless rag, had slipped down her leg. Perhaps it was still sinking a few feet below her; she tried dropping down underwater to look for it, but she immediately lost her breath and only vague green shadows flashed before her eyes.

She stifled the anxiety rising inside her, and tried to think in a calm, orderly fashion. It was noon; there were people around, in the sea, in kayaks and in rowboats, or swimming. She didn't know anyone; she had arrived the day before, with her husband, who had had to go back to the city at once. Now there was no other course, the Signora thought (and she was the first to be surprised at her clear, serene reasoning), but to find among these people a beach-attendant's boat, which there had to be, or the boat of some other person who inspired trust, hail it, or rather approach it, and manage to ask for both help and tact.

This is what Signora Isotta was thinking, as she kept afloat, huddled almost into a ball, pawing the water, not daring to look around. Only her head emerged and, unconsciously, she lowered her face towards the surface, not to delve into its secrecy, now held inviolable, but like someone rubbing eyelids and temples against the sheet or the pillow to stem tears provoked by some night-thought. And it was a genuine pressure of tears that she felt at the corners of her eyes, and perhaps that instinctive movement of her head was really meant to dry those tears in the sea: this is how distraught she was, this is what a gap there was in her between reason and feeling. She wasn't calm then: she was desperate. Inside that motionless sea, wrinkled only at long intervals by the barely indicated hump of a wave, she also kept herself motionless, no longer with slow strokes, but only with a pleading movement of the hands, half in the water; and the most alarming sign of her condition, though perhaps not even she realized it, was this usury of strength she observed, as if she had a very long and exhausting time ahead of her. **Copyrighted Material**

She had put on her two-piece suit that morning for the first time; and at the beach, in the midst of all those strangers, she realized it made her feel a bit ill-at-ease. But the moment she was in the water, on the contrary, she felt content, freer in her movements, with a greater desire to swim. She liked to take long swims, well away from the shore, but her pleasure was not an athlete's, for she was actually rather plump and lazy; what meant most to her was the intimacy with the water, feeling herself a part of that peaceful sea. Her new suit gave her that very impression; indeed, the first thing she had thought, as she swam, was: It's like being naked. The only irksome thing was the recollection of that crowded beach. It was not unreasonable: her future beach acquaintances would perhaps form an idea of her that they would have to some extent to modify later: not so much an opinion about her behavior, since at the seaside all the women dressed like this, but a belief, for example, that she was athletic, or fashionable, whereas she was really a very simple, domestic person. It was perhaps because she was already feeling this sensation of herself as different from usual that she had noticed nothing when this mishap took place. Now that uneasiness she had felt on the beach, and that novelty of the water on her bare skin, and her vague concern at having to return among the other bathers: all had been enlarged and engulfed by her new and far more serious dismay.

What she would have preferred never to look at was the beach. And she looked at it. Bells were ringing noon, and on the sand the great umbrellas with black and yellow concentric circles were casting black shadows in which the bodies became flat, and the teeming of the bathers spilled into the sea, and none of the boats was in the shore now, and as

soon as one returned it was seized even before it could touch bottom, and the black rim of the blue expanse was disturbed by constant explosions of white splashing, especially behind the ropes, where the horde of children was roiling; and at every bland wave a shouting arose, its notes immediately swallowed up by the blast. Just off that beach, she was naked.

Nobody would have suspected it, seeing only her head rising from the water, and occasionally her arms and her bosom, as she swam cautiously, never lifting her body to the surface. She could then carry out her search for help without exposing herself too much. And to check how much of her could be glimpsed by alien eyes, Signora Isotta now and then stopped and tried to look at herself, floating almost vertically. And with anxiety she saw in the water the sun's beams sway in limpid, underwater glints, and illuminate drifting seaweed and rapid schools of little striped fish, and on the bottom the corrugated sand, and on top, her body. In vain, twisting it with clenched legs, she tried to hide it from her own gaze: the skin of the pale revealing belly gleamed, between the tan of the bosom and the thighs, and neither the motion of a wave nor the half-sunken drift of seaweed could merge the darkness and the pallor of her abdomen. The Signora resumed swimming in that mongrel way of hers, keeping her body as low as she could, but, never stopping, she would turn to look out of the corner of her eye over her shoulder: at every stroke, all the white breadth of her person appeared in the light of day, in its most identifiable and secret forms. And she did everything to change the style and direction of her swimming, she turned in the water, she observed herself at every angle and in every light, she writhed upon herself; and ~~Copyrighted material~~ Copyrighted material, naked body pursued

her. It was a flight from her own body that she was attempting, as if from another person whom she, Signora Isotta, was unable to save in a difficult juncture, and could only abandon to her fate. And yet this body, so rich and so impossible to conceal, had indeed been a glory of hers, a source of self-satisfaction; only a contradictory chain of circumstances, apparently sensible, could make it now a cause for shame.

Or perhaps not, perhaps her life always consisted only of the clothed lady she had been all of her days, and her nakedness hardly belonged to her, was a rash state of nature revealed only every now and then, arousing wonder in human beings and foremost in her. Now Signora Isotta recalled that even when she was alone or in private with her husband she had always surrounded her being naked with an air of complicity, of irony, part embarrassed and part feline, as if she were temporarily putting on joyous but outrageous disguises, for a kind of secret carnival between husband and wife. She had become accustomed with some reluctance to owning a body, after the first disappointed, romantic years, and she had taken it on like someone who learns he can command a long-yearned-for property. Now, the awareness of this right of hers disappeared again among the old fears, as that yelling beach loomed ahead.

When noon had passed, among the bathers scattered through the sea a reflux towards the shore began; it was the hour of lunch at the pensioni, of picnics in front of the cabins, and also the hour in which the sand was to be enjoyed at its most searing, under the vertical sun. And the keels of boats, and the pontoons of the catamarans passed close to the Signora, and she studied the faces of the men on those boats, and sometimes decided to move towards

them; but each time a flash, a glance beneath their lashes, or the hint of an abrupt jerk of shoulder or elbow, put her to flight, with false-casual strokes, whose calm masked an already burdensome weariness. The men in the boats, alone or in groups, boys all excited by the physical exercise, or gentlemen with wily claims or insistent gaze, encountering her, lost in the sea, her prim face unable to conceal a shy, pleading anxiety, with her cap that gave her a slightly peevish, doll-like expression, and with her soft shoulders heaving around, uncertain, immediately emerged from their self-centred or brawling nirvana. Those who were not alone pointed her out to their companions with a snap of the chin or a wink; and those who were alone, braking with one oar, swerved their prow deliberately, to cross her path. Her need for trust was met by these rising barriers of slyness and double-entendre, a hedge of piercing pupils, of incisors bared in ambiguous laughter, of oars pausing, suddenly interrogatory, on the surface of the water; and the only thing she could do was flee. An occasional swimmer passed by, ducking his head blindly, and puffing out spurts of water without raising his eyes; but the Signora distrusted these men and evaded them. In fact, even though they passed at some distance from her, the swimmers, overcome by sudden fatigue, let themselves float and stretched their legs in a senseless splashing, until, by moving away, she displayed her disdain. And thus this net of compulsory hints was already spread around her, as if lying in ambush for her, as if each of those men for years had been daydreaming of a woman to whom what had happened to her would happen, and these men spent the summers at the sea hoping to be present at the right moment. There was no way out: the front of preordained male conspirators Mendicant to all men, with no

possible breach, and that savior she had stubbornly dreamed of as the most anonymous possible creature, almost angelic, a beach-boy, a sailor, could not exist: she was now sure of that. The beach guard she did see pass by, certainly the only one who would be out in a boat to prevent possible accidents with this calm sea, had such fleshy lips and such tense muscles that she would never have had the courage to entrust herself to his hands, even if – she actually thought in the emotion of the moment – it were to have him unlock a cabin or set up an umbrella.

In her disappointed fantasies, the people to whom she had hoped to turn had always been men. She hadn't thought of women, and yet with them everything should have been more simple; a kind of female solidarity would certainly have gone into action, in this serious crisis, in this anxiety that only a fellow-woman could completely understand. But possibilities of communication with members of her own sex were rarer and more uncertain, unlike the perilous ease of encounters with men; and a distrust – reciprocal this time – blocked such communication. Most of the women went by in catamarans accompanied by a man, and they were jealous, inaccessible, seeking the open sea, where the body, whose shame she suffered passively, was for them the weapon of an aggressive and calculable strategy. Now and then a boat came out packed with chirping, over-heated young girls, and the Signora thought of the distance between the profound vulgarity of her suffering and their volatile heedlessness; she thought of how she would have to repeat her appeal to them because they surely wouldn't understand her the first time; she thought of how their expression would change at the news, and she couldn't bring herself to call out to them. A blond also went by, tanned, in a

catamaran, full of smugness and egoism; surely she was going far out to take the sun completely naked, and it would never remotely occur to her that nakedness could be a misfortune or a torment. Signora Isotta realized then how alone a woman is, and how rare, among her own kind, is solidarity, spontaneous and good (destroyed perhaps by the pact made with man), which would have foreseen her appeals and come to her side at the merest hint in the moment of a secret misfortune no man would understand. Women would never save her: and her own man was away. She felt her strength abandoning her.

A little, rust-colored buoy, till then fought over by a cluster of diving kids, suddenly, at a general plunge, remained deserted. A seagull lighted on it, flapped its wings, then flew off as Signora Isotta grasped its rim. She would have drowned, if she hadn't grabbed it in time. But not even death was possible, not even that indefensible, excessive remedy was left her: when she was about to faint and couldn't manage to keep her chin up, drawn down towards the water, she saw a rapid, tensed alertness among the men on the boats around, all ready to dive in and come to her rescue. They were there only to save her, to carry her naked and unconscious among the questions and stares of a curious public; and her risk of death would have achieved only the ridiculous and vulgar result that she was trying in vain to avoid.

From the buoy, looking at the swimmers and rowers, who seemed to be gradually reabsorbed by the shore, she remembered the marvelous weariness of those returns, and the cries from one boat to another – “We'll meet on shore!”, or “Let's see who gets there first!” – filled her with a boundless envy. But then, when she noticed a thin man, in long trunks, the only person Copyrighted Material standing erect

in a motionless motorboat, looking at something or other in the water, immediately her longing to go ashore burrowed down, hid within her fear of being seen, her anxious effort to conceal herself behind the buoy.

She no longer remembered how long she had been there: already the beach crowd was thinning out, and boats were already in line again on the sand, and the umbrellas, furred one after the other, were now only a cemetery of short poles, and the gulls skimmed the water, and on the motionless motorboat the thin man had disappeared and in his place a dumbfounded boy's curly head peered from the side; and over the sun a cloud passed driven by a just-wakened wind against a cumulus collected above the hills. The Signora thought of that hour as seen from the land, the polite afternoons, the destiny of unassuming correctness and respectful joys she had thought was guaranteed her and of the contemptible incongruity that occurred to contradict it, like the chastisement for a sin not committed. Not committed? But that abandonment of hers in bathing, that desire to swim all alone, that joy in her own body in the two-piece suit recklessly chosen: weren't these perhaps signs of a flight begun some time past, the defiance of an inclination to sin, the progressive stages of a mad race towards this state of nakedness that now appeared to her in all its wretched pallor? And the society of men, among whom she thought to pass intact like a big butterfly, pretending a compliant, doll-like nonchalance, now revealed its basic cruelties, its doubly diabolical essence, the presence of an evil against which she had not sufficiently armed herself and, at once, the agent, the instrument of her sentence.

Clinging to the studs of the buoy with bloodless fingertips now with accentuated Copywinkles from the prolonged stay in