

Luigi Guicciardi

Inspector Cataldo's
Criminal Summer

Translated from the Italian by Iain Halliday



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The characters and incidents portrayed and the names used herein are fictitious and any resemblance to the names, character, or history of any person is coincidental and unintentional. And, agreeing with another writer, I note that Guiglia must not be sought in lists of Italian towns, but in that other atlas, where are all the imaginary places wherein the mystery of life unfolds.

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CHAPTER ONE

The meeting

It is only the end of June and it is already too hot in Guiglia. At ten in the morning the windows of the houses shine in the sun, and the glare is stronger than it should be. It is holiday time – the schools are closed, the kids are all out on their bikes every day. But right now there is a strange silence in the almost lazy, somnolent air, in the few hotels that are open, in the streets, in the calm, in the light.

And in Via Dante Alighieri there is a detached house that seems immersed in the quiet. Apart that is from two voices – one shrill, the other low – that debate and dispute rhythmically, each filling the other's pauses with a subtle, hidden tension.

'I know we're meeting tomorrow morning, we've got that appointment, and I could have left it till then,' says the younger one. 'But I thought you might want some idea of what I've found beforehand. And I thought you might be able to give me some advice...'

'That's alright, Giulio. Have I ever said no to you? So...'

'That's why I asked you to come over,' continues Giulio Zoboli, slightly uneasy. 'You know, since you're in Guiglia and the university's closed...'

'It's fine,' says the other man, cutting Zoboli short with a gesture. 'I've already told you that. So, let's see it...'

'Here, this is everything I've gathered so far,' and he pushes a large canvas-bound notebook across the desk, towards the professor. Then he smiles, shy and proud at the same time, while the older man puts on his glasses and starts leaf-

ing through the notebook, concentrating, almost as though he does not understand.

‘It looks like a big job,’ he says, reading through the pages filled with tiny handwriting. Then he falls silent and waits.

‘I’ve been working on it for three months, right up to the day before yesterday. It’s all unpublished correspondence, as you said, and all of it with important intellectuals – Croce, Gentile, Pirandello...’ He stops, as though studying the effect of his words on the other man, almost savouring it. ‘There’s even a letter from Joyce.’

‘Really?’ He perks up, almost starts, but manages to conceal his excitement. ‘Good. And can we reconstruct the correspondence?’ as he stares at Zoboli. ‘I mean, both sides...’

‘Oh yes. Almost all of it. Formiggini built up a fine archive in his thirty years as a publisher, and he kept everything in there: originals of letters from other people and carbon copies of his replies. That’s the good thing about it.’

‘A real treasure trove.’ He nods, but without smiling, almost as though he is thinking about something else. Indeed, a moment later he adds, ‘By the way. Did you find out if anyone has seen this material before?’

‘No one, I’m sure of it. The director of the Estense Library assures me I’m the first.’

‘Good. And tell me,’ pointing to the pages of the notebook, ‘how did you work on it?’

‘As you can see, I copied the most interesting parts of all the letters, naturally in chronological order, from some thirty sets of correspondence – the most promising ones based on the name of the correspondent. And of course I copied some of the more important letters in their entirety. This one here, for example...’

He stands up and moves round the desk until he is beside

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the professor, bending over slightly and pointing to a page.

'A 1913 letter from Momigliano. He was due to edit an edition of Porta's *Ninetta del Verzé*, but then he got cold feet.' He thinks, pauses. 'The letter's very... how shall I put it?'

'Awkward?'

'Well... no, let's say delicate. There were some problems regarding censorship, back in those days. Pornography...'

'And do you think it's important?'

'This one is, definitely. It goes beyond his personal situation and throws some light on a slice of life in terms of national customs...'

'At the beginning of the century. Right.'

The professor reads a few lines in silence. Then he lifts his gaze to his assistant, purses his lips in reflection and in approval.

'Good. Very good.'

'And that's not all,' Zoboli says, as he goes back behind the desk, encouraged now as he opens a drawer and pulls out a sheaf of pages, stapled together.

'This is the paper. What you've got there is all the material in the notebook, isn't it? The transcriptions of the letters, the texts... lots of them. This is the conclusion.' He looks into his eyes, almost euphoric. 'The verdict...'

'Let's have a look...'

He takes the pages, reads a few sentences, then he stops, stares for a moment at Zoboli in silence, adjusts his glasses and continues reading in earnest. When he finishes he takes off his glasses and places them on the sheets of paper, rubbing his tired eyes.

'I think it'll do.'

The glasses are for long-sightedness and have heavy, unfashionable frames, making him look older than he is. And

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Luigi Ramondini is not that old, not much older than his assistant. He has just turned forty-three and only recently become full Professor of Italian Literature at Bologna University. Zoboli is forty, and works for Ramondini, on temporary contracts.

‘A good job well done. Yes. There’s just one thing... I have to tell you something. I didn’t mention it before because I only found out yesterday...’

There are deep lines running from the professor’s nose towards his cheeks, making his face seem sculpted into a grin.

‘They want me to present the paper. The people on the organizing committee. They want a big name, so to speak... more academic authority, you see. That’s the thing. There’s no other reason.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘There wasn’t much I could say. I tried to tell them there was someone already working on it... under my direction I mean, and that this person was keen to present the paper at the conference. But it didn’t do any good.’

‘But you’d promised.’

‘No, you can’t say I promised. I didn’t promise you anything, you obviously misunderstood. I only told you there was a chance of working on something new, on unpublished manuscripts with good prospects for publication. Nothing more. I never mentioned the conference, you just interpreted it that way.’ He is huffing now, getting angry. ‘You really ought to start listening to people sometimes, instead of just hearing your own voice.’

‘So it’s my fault then? Here we go again! First you tell me to work hard, that it’ll be worthwhile because the *concorso* is coming up and this would be an extra qualification which

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might help me win a job in it this time... and that you'll give me advice and all the rest. And I take it all on board, I work like nobody's business for three months, turning down a supply teaching job and then you come along, fresh as a daisy, to tell me I'm the one who misunderstood, and that they've decided I'm not good enough... but what do they care who wrote it, if the paper's good?

'Listen, it's not my fault. This isn't Delfini, the writer you wrote that book about, the book few people have actually read. This is new research, I mean... they want guarantees...'

'Exactly! And what better guarantee than you!'

'Don't start with the sarcasm now. I understand, really I do. You're the one who's done all the work...'

'Thanks so much...'

'But you have to see my side too. Again, it's not my fault. But that's the way things stand,' and he opens his arms as he adds, 'and there's nothing I can do about it.'

'That's right, nothing. And you'll use all this,' pointing to the papers and the notebook, 'just like that, without even an acknowledgment... because you get the money and all the credit. It's already decided, isn't it?'

His voice had become high-pitched, even squeaky, and now that he has finished, his face red, there are traces of saliva at the corners of his mouth.

'It's up to you. If you want to leave all this with me – and I'm not making any secret of the fact that it'll help me in writing up the paper – I can tell you that from this very moment on I am truly grateful to you...'

'Don't mention it.'

'Only if you want to, of course...'

'And if I don't want to?'

The other man is very calm when he replies, 'Well, I'll take

this opportunity to remind you that at the end of this year the *concorso* for research jobs will be taking place and you're in the running, you've been in the running for some years... and I'm on the panel, as you well know...'

He looks at Zoboli, who is silent now, and continues: 'And as you also know, you won't be the only one competing. We'll see who's got the most publications, a PhD, or other things... the marks for the written exam and the oral, marks from the panel. From me too of course...'

'What is this? A threat?'

He smiles slightly, as he searches for the words. 'Why put it like that? I'd say it's more of a warning. I always like to forewarn people. Particularly those with whom I have, or could have, an official working relationship. But only after the competition...'

He smiles again as he lets the topic peter out, but perhaps it is precisely because of that smile that something clicks in the other man, a pent-up anger, perhaps, or that indefinable, subtle tension, a resentment that is already stale, something he has been carrying around within himself for some time.

'You think you've got me in the palm of your hand, don't you? You've got me with my back to the wall. But just be careful, Professor. Be careful because I know something about you, remember? Something that perhaps no one else should ever know...'

Now it is Ramondini who stares, without interrupting this time. He gets to his feet, slightly rigid, his knuckles turning white as he grips the edge of the desk.

'And there's nothing you can do about that, either. Because it has all already happened and you did quite well out of it... very well if I may say so.'

Perhaps he would have added something else, or the other

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man would have spoken, and they would have raised their voices, both of them, in that isolated house, with no one to disturb them. But suddenly they were both stock still, looking each other in the eye, startled.

'What was that?'

A noise had come in through the open window looking out onto the garden. Sharp and metallic and nearby. Giulio, in his shirt sleeves with two circles of sweat under his armpits, goes to look. He leans out, turns his head right to left, while the man behind him doesn't move. Then he shakes his head, closes the window and turns back, stopping in the middle of the room.

'No-one. I wonder...'

Ramondini nods, his hands in his pockets. He opens his mouth to speak, then he thinks better of it and says nothing. He looks at the closed window, just beyond Giulio's shoulders and the sheets of paper and the notebook open on the desk. Then, slowly, he extends his hand and picks everything up, staring at Giulio, who makes no protest. The papers rustle slightly as Ramondini puts them in his briefcase. Giulio remains motionless as he watches him leave, without even a goodbye, his steps muffled in the entrance. He can show himself out.

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