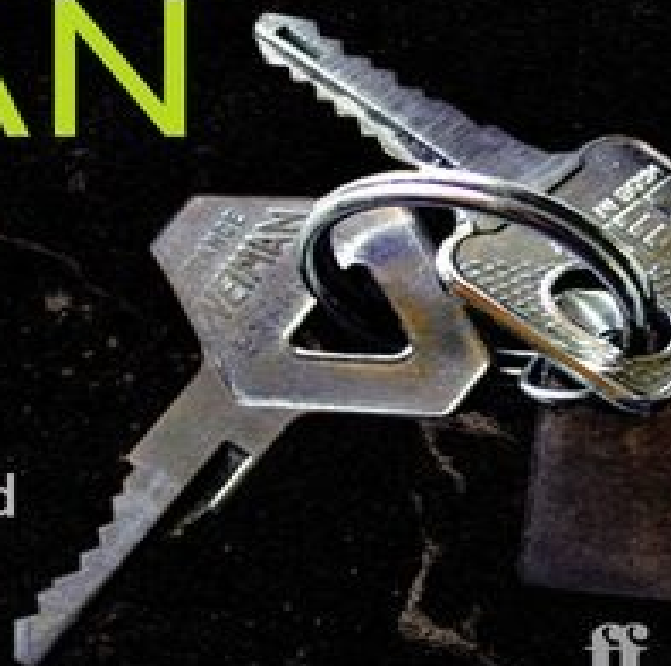


AN INSPECTOR ZEN MYSTERY

Michael
DIBDIN
**COSI FAN
TUTTI**

'One of British crime
fiction's most distinguished
and distinctive voices.'

ANDREW TAYLOR



ff

MICHAEL DIBDIN

Così Fan Tutti

ff
faber and faber

For Katherine, *fedel quanto bella*

Contents

Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph

The setting is supposedly Naples
Love's the reason
It's a great life in the forces
Both of them play their parts well
Friend Don Alfonso
Two delinquents
Without love, but not without lovers
A man in hiding
He speaks a language we don't understand
Officers and gentlemen
Let's play!
The two naïve lovers
A hint of suspicion
Too true
What? Why? When? How?
On the street
Two bizarre girls
What interesting faces
Am I awake or dreaming?
Such innocence! Isn't it sweet?
Let him in immediately
Fate's to blame
The things they've done
No one knows where he is
A worthless woman
Something new
What, a kiss?
It doesn't seem possible
We'd better humour them
What place can this be?
A woman's heart
A little thief
What a row!
Now that's true constancy

That's what you think, but it isn't true

We've got to get our hands on him

Confused and ashamed

A hopeless passion

So many languages

Are you flesh and blood, or what?

The moment of truth is here

What looks! What clothes!

A nice surprise

At the agreed place

You've already done this!

The gates of hell

Where am I?

Don't make me look bad!

The forms of law

Finale

Author's Note

The Zen Series from Michael Dibdin

About the Author

By the Same Author

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Ah, chi mai fra tanti mali,
chi mai può la vita amar?

Lorenzo Da Ponte: *Così fan tutte*

La scena si finge in Napoli

If there had been anyone about in Via Greco on the morning in question, this is what they would have seen.

The sun had just cleared the roof-line of the five-storey buildings on Via Martucci, and in the space of a few seconds its sharply angled brilliance transformed the scene like theatre lighting revealing a stage set. Each object, however mundane, was picked out by the soft yet intense glare, and invested with a glamorous air of significance and portent.

The spectators, had there been any, would no doubt have scrutinized each object thus revealed, trying to decide on its role in the spectacle about to unfold. That tree at the corner of the two streets, for example, casting a crisp shadow across the pitted black paving slabs – was it just decorative, mere scene-setting, or was it destined to play a crucial part in the drama, to become a virtual character in its own right, perhaps as the site of the famous Act Two duet of seduction and surrender familiar to every music lover?

Similarly, the buildings so insistently yet tenderly picked out by the steadily growing light – are they simply characteristic in-fill, or will each have become individually familiar, by the time the curtain finally falls, as a source of threat or refuge? The entrances look practicable, yet the façades themselves might easily be painted flats, over-compensating for their two-dimensionality with a fusillade of detail.

Other aspects of the scene seem less problematic. Those clustered rubbish bins, for example, surely hint at the agenda of this supposedly ‘radical’ new production. Like the ranks of cars stacked two or even three deep in Via Greco, turning it into a car park with only a slender central aisle left free for traffic, these clearly represent a message from the director to the effect that this is Naples *now*, a nexus of politico-socio-economic realities very different from the picturesquely generalized setting which the composer and his librettist had in mind, providing a refreshing contemporary slant on the frankly rather trite contrivances of the original concept – although the music is divine, of course.

But despite all these cunning touches, a bare stage can hold only a limited amount of interest in the absence of any human participants to provide some dramatic point. And here, after what seems like a retrospect a perfectly judged delay, they come.

However, it is immediately clear that these are merely extras, a sort of mobile extension of the set who will fill in with some optional business the director has dreamt up before the action properly begins. In keeping with the tone of gritty realism already established, they are dressed as garbage collectors, in blue overalls, stout gloves and boots. Following a large orange truck marked *Comune di Napoli*, they make their way steadily down Via Strozzi, emptying the stacked bins and plastic bags of refuse, before turning right into the smaller side-street.

But now at long last one of the principals enters, not through one of the doorways but from a ramshackle, cleverly hidden between two sections of the backdrop representing a modern apartment building to the left of Via Greco, up on the rise opposite the high wall of tufa, above which stand the gardens of an imposing villa higher up the hillside.

Despite his evident star status, he is unprepossessing in appearance. The air is mild, even at this early hour, but he is bundled up in an expensive-looking overcoat, leather gloves and a tartan scarf.

one hand he carries an executive briefcase, in the other a set of keys. He strides towards the ranks of parked cars, actuating an electronic device attached to the key-chain. One of the vehicles – a silver-grey Alfa Romeo – responds with flashing indicator lights and a series of enthusiastic beeps.

And now something strange happens, something as uncanny and yet effortless as a modulation in some remote key. To reach his car, the man must pass the orange truck heading towards the communal garbage skip outside the apartment building from which he has just emerged. As he does so, he finds his way obstructed by two of the crew who are walking alongside the truck in the narrow alley left free between the parked cars.

Rather than step into one of the spaces between the cars, the man keeps forging ahead, forcing the two blue-overalled workmen to give way to him. This they do, as though acknowledging the aura of power the man has about him, marking him as someone to be deferred to, not to be crossed. One of them moves to one side, between the silver-grey Alfa and its neighbouring vehicle, a battle-scarred Fiat Uno. The other drops back, apparently waiting for the truck to pass so that he can fall in behind and leave the way clear.

And this is where the strange thing happens. For as the male principal passes the first blue-overalled supernumerary, the latter turns around holding an object which must have been concealed in one of the many pockets of his costume. It appears to be a rolled-up newspaper, no doubt *L'Unità* or *Manifesto* or some such publication devoted to the aspirations and struggles of the proletariat, thrust neatly into the director's jejune rethink. In an oddly elegant gesture, the workman waves the newspaper at the man in the overcoat, as though swatting a fly circling his head. At the same moment, although without any obvious sense of cause and effect, the latter tumbles forward as if he had tripped on the raised edge of one of the black paving slabs – always a hazard, even in this relatively well-tended area of the city.

Luckily the other workman, now level with the rear of the still moving truck, is just in time to catch the falling man, thus preventing him from doing himself any serious injury. The gesture seems at first to indicate a compromise in the directorial line already established – the essential goodness of people everywhere, despite the ideological gulfs that appear to divide them – which half the audience fear and the other half secretly hopes will spill over into what the latter will applaud as human warmth and the former dismiss as feeble sentimentality.

As if to confirm this hypothesis, the first workman now tosses aside his newspaper, which hits the paving stones with a sharp metallic ring, and bends to grasp the victim's feet. Without a word, the two lift him clear of the ground, holding him suspended limply in midair by his shoulders and calves. By now the truck, in its inexorable progress, has passed them. With a single preliminary swing they heave the inert body up and over the tail-gate, where it disappears from view.

While the first workman retrieves the wrench which was wrapped in the newspaper, his colleague presses a green button protruding from a box mounted on the rear of the truck. With a loud roaring noise, the massive ram begins to descend. The top and sides are dirty and dull, but the curved black has been polished by constant abrasion to an attractive silvery sheen. The ram moves steadily down into the body of the truck, the racket of its powerful machinery completely obliterating any sound which might otherwise be audible.

At this point there is a welcome touch of comedy as the man's feet appear above the tail-gate of the garbage truck. Clad in highly polished brogues and red-and-black chequered socks below which a length of bare white leg is just visible, they proceed to execute a furious little dance, jerking this way and that like puppets at a Punch and Judy show – possibly a knowing allusion to the *commedia dell'arte*, which of course originated in this city.

The ram has meanwhile come to a halt in a series of shudders which shake the whole truck. One of the workmen runs over and activates another button on the raised console, reversing the mechanism for a moment while his colleague stuffs the upstart limbs down and out of sight. Then the ram continues its interrupted descent, this time completing its destined trajectory, scooping in all the rubbish which has been deposited there and crushing it into a compact mass, the individual components barely distinguishable one from another.

The blue-overalled workmen climb aboard the platform at the rear of the orange truck and wave to the driver, who immediately accelerates away, ignoring the overflowing skip standing outside the modern apartment block from which the man in the overcoat emerged earlier. The vehicle roars down the gently sloping street and disappears around the corner to the left. For a few moments its engine can be heard faintly in the distance, then all is still again.

If there had been anyone about in Via Greco on the morning in question, this is what they would have seen. And in fact several people were about: an old man shaving by the light from his window to save electricity, a single mother who had been up all night with her colicky baby, a child of ten taking in washing on a flat roof high above the street, a vagrant who slept in one of the parked cars by arrangement with the owner. But oddly enough none of them ever mentioned the extraordinary event they had just witnessed to the police or the newspapers, or even to their families, with the exception of Signora Pacca, the insomniac mother, who told the whole story in a low voice to her father that night over dinner. He smiled and nodded and muttered 'Really?' and 'Amazing!' from time to time. But Signor Pacca was stone deaf, and there was no one else in the room.

For the rest, no one breathed a word about what they had seen, although the affair soon became a matter of national notoriety. As if by unspoken agreement, they all acted as though they were opera-goers who, arriving fashionably late, had missed the overture.

La causa è amore

‘Not Gesualdo!’

‘Sabatino? Never!’

The man leaning against the counter smiled in a distant, almost supercilious way. He did not say anything.

‘Mamma put you up to this, didn’t she?’ demanded the older of the sisters with a knowing look.

The man raised his eyebrows expressively.

‘She has naturally mentioned her concern. Repeatedly and on numerous occasions, for that matter. But hers is not mine.’

‘Then what is?’ the younger sister returned swiftly.

Instead of replying, the man raised his hand to summon the barman.

‘I think I could stand another coffee. How about you two? The pastries here are supposed to be the best in town.’

‘I really couldn’t.’

‘I shouldn’t, really ...’

The man smiled again.

‘Exactly what your lovers will say when a suitable opportunity presents itself, according to your mother.’

He turned to the barman.

‘Two *sfogliatelle* for the ladies, and another coffee for me.’

The older sister fixed him with an intense glare. She was tall for a Neapolitan, but with the characteristic sallow skin, glowing dark eyes and very fine black hair, which she wore short. Her features were sharply delineated, especially the firm, decisive mouth and the long straight nose.

‘I don’t care whether this was your idea, Dottor Zembla, or mamma’s,’ she declared. ‘In either case, it is a transparent attempt, as vain as it is despicable, to undermine the feelings which Gesualdo and I cherish for one another, feelings such as persons of your generation are no longer capable of and whose strength and purity you cannot therefore be expected to understand. If I wished to be vulgar, I might suggest that it is precisely your inability to feel such emotions yourself which has generated the envy and rancour which lie behind this sordid attempt to discredit our poor lovers.’

Aurelio Zen shook his head.

‘You are too ingenious, Signorina Orestina. My interest in this matter is entirely mercenary.’

‘*Pronti, dottore!*’ cried the barman, setting the coffee and the two scallop-shaped pastries on the marble counter.

‘How does money come into it?’ asked the younger woman, glancing down at the plate before her. Her appearance was softer and less formidable than her sister’s, her hair longer and lighter, her flesh paler and plumper.

‘Whose money?’ Orestina enquired pointedly.

Zen sipped the scalding coffee, served in a cup preheated by boiling run-off from the espresso machine.

‘Your mother’s,’ he said.

‘Aha!’

‘Let me explain to you her way of thinking ...’

‘We know that only too well,’ returned the younger woman. ‘She thinks that Sabatino and Gesualdo are thugs, criminals, gangsters, drug dealers, and Heaven knows what else!’

‘Oh certainly, Signorina Filomena! That goes without saying. But where your mother and I differ is that she doesn’t believe that they are really in love with you. Not only have you chosen to bestow your beauty, brains and breeding on these worthless individuals – I paraphrase your mother’s rhetoric here – but, even worse, they are only diverting themselves with you, and will move on to new conquests as soon as they have got what they want.’

‘That’s a horrible thing to say!’ cried Filomena, her green eyes watering. ‘Sabatino is always very sweet and respectful to me and he really cares about my feelings. Mamma has no right to say that he doesn’t love me. She’s just jealous, that’s all.’

‘Gesualdo’s only crime is that his parents were poor and lived in the wrong part of town,’ her sister protested. ‘It’s simply shameful of mamma to condemn him for that. He’s the finest, truest, kindest and straightest man I’ve ever met, and worth any number of the snobby, snotty, spoilt brats she would like to marry us off to!’

Aurelio Zen drained his coffee and reached towards his pocket, then paused, frowning. He shook his fingers as though to relieve a cramp.

‘My analysis of the situation exactly,’ he replied. ‘Which is why it’s doubly unfortunate that you are unwilling to put their fidelity to the test. As it is, your mother and I may have to wait a long time to see which of us has won.’

‘Won?’ snapped Orestina. ‘Won what?’

‘Are you saying that you and mamma have made a bet on our future happiness?’ demanded her sister. ‘How dare you do such a thing? As though our lives were a horse race or a football match!’

Aurelio Zen shrugged.

‘All I wanted to do was to prove your mother wrong. But since you won’t cooperate ...’

Filomena lunged forward impulsively and grabbed one of the *sfogliatelle*.

‘And why should we cooperate?’ she demanded. ‘What’s in it for us?’

‘A trip to London, for a start.’

‘London?’

‘We’d need to make your sudden departure look natural, of course. What more normal than the two literature students in their final year at the university should go off to England to brush up their language?’

‘I’ve always wanted to go to London,’ murmured Orestina wistfully.

‘Well, here’s your chance,’ Zen remarked with a broad smile. ‘And if you turn it down, ladies, you shall be forced to conclude that, despite your fervent protestations, you’re not really as sure of your boyfriends as you claim to be.’

‘Sabatino would never be unfaithful to me!’ said Filomena.

‘I trust Gesualdo like my own self!’ declared Orestina.

‘I’ve found a very good package deal,’ Zen went on. ‘Air tickets, nice hotel in the centre, generous discounts at selected shops, clubs and discos. True, it means flying Alitalia, but a colleague of mine knows someone who works for the ground staff at the airport and he can get you upgraded.’

The younger woman brushed the pastry crumbs from her ample bosom.

‘When would we be going?’

‘Right away. That gives you a couple of weeks over there before you have to be back to sit your

exams.'

'Out of the question,' said Orestina.

'I'll need to discuss it with Sabatino,' said Filomena.

Zen clapped his hand to his forehead.

'For God's sake! The whole point is that they're not to know that it's a test.'

'But I always tell Sabatino everything!' wailed the younger sister, starting to weep again.

'Look!' said Zen. 'If Sabatino and Gesualdo are the paragons you claim, what have you got to lose? You not only get the holiday of a lifetime in London, all expenses paid, but a chance to demonstrate once and for all that these young men, despite their other shortcomings, are indeed worthy of your devotion – and of your hand in marriage. In short, you get a chance to prove your mother wrong, and at her expense!'

There was a silence.

'How much?' asked Orestina.

Zen gave her an ingenuous smile.

'Pardon me?'

'You have just admitted that your interest in this is purely mercenary. So how much are we talking about?'

Zen twirled his left hand in the air.

'A hundred thousand? I forget exactly. The money isn't really important. I just suggested it to add certain piquancy to the whole experience.'

Orestina nodded.

'I see. Well, let's see if we can't make this "experience" still more piquant for you, Dottor Zembler. I propose a side-bet for the same amount between the three of us. If you win, we will pay you fifty thousand each in addition to the hundred from mamma. If you lose, Filomena and I split the pot, hundred thousand lire each. What do you say?'

Aurelio Zen frowned and appeared to struggle for a moment. Then he thrust out his arm, grasping Orestina's delicate but surprisingly muscular hand, and shook it vigorously.

'What will you do with your winnings?' he demanded.

Filomena clapped her hands together, her face beaming with anticipated pleasure.

'I'll take Sabatino out for an evening on the town!' she cried enthusiastically. 'We'll go to a movie and then have dinner somewhere and dance the night away. I'll make it an evening we'll never forget, not even when we're your age, Don Alfonsetto!'

Zen turned to the older sister.

'And you, *signorina*?'

'I shall add it to my savings,' she replied coolly.

'You're good with money,' Zen commented. 'Like your father.'

'Leave our father out of this!' snapped Orestina.

She scooped up the remaining pastry, which her sister had been eyeing, wrapped it in a paper napkin and slid it into her bag.

'And now we must be going, or we'll be late for our classes.'

Aurelio Zen laid a hand on both their sleeves.

'Mind, don't tell your boyfriends! Otherwise the deal's off.'

'I don't *need* to tell Gesualdo,' Orestina replied scornfully.

'Exactly!' Filomena chimed in. 'Sabatino already knows whatever I'm going to say to him. We're so perfectly attuned. It's almost mystical, the rapport we have.'

Aurelio Zen stood looking at the two sisters, so different, so similar, so confident, so vulnerable. For a moment he felt a slight sense of regret, almost of guilt, at what he was doing. Then he shook his head, paid the bill, took them each by the arm and led them out into the bright wash of sunlight overlaying the town and the bay beyond.

Bella vita militar

By contrast with the balmy, expansive warmth of the street, the funicular station was dark and cavernous, the air cool, a faint draught edged with the smell of mould and oil. A pair of young rats chased one another playfully about between the rails. The cables were already in operation, slithering over the runners like silvery serpents. A few moments later the train appeared in the gloom below, inching up the hillside and slowing to a gentle, pneumatic halt alongside the steeply pitched platform.

Zen boarded the middle carriage, its floor stepped like a stairway, and opened his copy of *Mattino*. The headlines had a distinctly second-hand air, following up on stories which had made their debut earlier in the week: the controversy over future plans for the site of the steel plant at Bagnoli, the initiative by the mayor to retain various measures hastily instituted to clean up the city in time to host the G7 conference, the disappearance of a former minister in the regional government who was under investigation for alleged association with organized crime.

The morning rush hour was long over and the train was almost empty, conveying mostly students and a few elderly women heading for the shopping streets around Via Toledo. In theory, Zen should have been at work over an hour and a half ago, but he did not appear at all concerned by this fact. Once again, his hand strayed to his pocket, as though he had mislaid something. It was now two weeks, three days and ten hours since he had smoked his last cigarette, but old habits die hard. The craving for nicotine had passed surprisingly quickly, but at certain ritualistic moments of the day – over a coffee when reading the paper – he found himself reaching for the ghostly pack of *Nazionali* he could still hear calling out to him faintly.

Halfway down the hill, the train shunted on to a loop to pass its opposite number on the way up. On the sprayed concrete walling of the tunnel, Zen made out the slogan STRADE PULITE – ‘Clean Streets’ crudely daubed in black paint. It sounded like an allusion to the ‘Clean Hands’ investigation into institutionalized corruption which had brought down the political class that had governed Italy since the war. But it was hard to see what ‘Clean Streets’ could mean, particularly on emerging from the funicular’s lower terminus into the filthy, teeming, chaotic alleys of the Tavoliere district, where the morning market was in full swing.

Zen walked down to the grim bulk of the Castel Nuovo, crossed the wide boulevard which ran along the seafront and waited at the tram stop opposite. It was theoretically possible to take a bus from his home to the port, changing in Piazza Municipio, but given the vagaries of the city’s public transport system Zen preferred to use the funicular and trams and walk the rest. Bus stops in Naples were purely notional markers which could be, and frequently were, moved without warning, and which in any case provided no guarantee that a given service would ever appear. But if a track existed, Zen reasoned, sooner or later something was bound to come along it.

And he was in no hurry. Quite the contrary! For the first time in his career, Aurelio Zen was his own boss, to the extent anyone ever could be in the police force. If he came in late and left early, or even failed to show up at all, the only way he could be found out was if one of his own staff snitched on him. And he had been at great pains to ensure that they had a vested interest in making sure that this never occurred.

One of the first effects of Zen’s posting to Naples, predating his actual arrival, had been the has

closure of various profitable and long-established business enterprises operating from the police station inside the port area, much to the distress of all involved. This painful decision had been reluctantly taken after an emergency meeting of the management and staff. This was the first time that anyone could remember an outsider being appointed to command the harbour detail. And not just an outsider, but a former operative of the illustrious Criminalpol, who worked directly out of the ministry in Rome!

For such a high-flyer to be transferred to a lowly, routine job in the South could mean only one thing, they all agreed. A clean-up had been ordered, and this Zen – his name didn't even sound Italian – had been selected to enforce it with ruthless efficiency. The only mystery was why their modest little scam had been singled out in this way when, as everyone knew, there was so much serious, big-time abuse going on. But perhaps that was precisely the point, someone suggested. The men at the ministry didn't dare touch the big names, to whom they were too closely linked and indebted, so they were making a show of doing something by sending one of their hatchet men to pick on low-level activities in which they took no direct interest.

Zen's first job had been to convince his new colleagues that this was not the case. It proved to be one of the toughest assignments he had ever faced. After holding out for over three weeks, during which time he had made no progress whatsoever, he finally decided to do something completely uncharacteristic, something so foreign to his nature that he debated the wisdom of the move right up to the last minute, and only then went ahead because there was no alternative. He decided to tell them the truth.

Since he could hardly convene the entire corps for this purpose, he deliberately selected the most hostile and truculent of the officers under his command, Giovan Battista Caputo. Caputo was a wiry, energetic man in his early thirties with a prow-shaped face, a hook nose, a flamboyant black moustache and a mouthful of sharp white teeth which were exposed up to the gums when he flashed one of his infrequent, vaguely menacing smiles. He looked like a composite of every gene pool which had ever flourished around the bay: Etruscan traders, Greek settlers, Roman playboys, Barbary pirates and Spanish imperialists. If he could win over Caputo, Zen reckoned, he would win the keys not only to his new command but to the city itself.

'You're all wondering what I'm doing here,' he declared when Caputo presented himself in his office.

'That's none of our business,' was the unyielding reply.

'I'm going to tell you anyway,' said Zen. 'Sit down.'

'I prefer to stand.'

'I don't give a damn what you prefer. I'm ordering you to sit down.'

Caputo obeyed stiffly.

'The answer to the question I just raised is very simple,' Zen went on. 'I requested a transfer.'

For all the effect of these words on Caputo, Zen might just as well not have spoken.

'You don't believe me,' Zen remarked.

'It's none of our business,' repeated Caputo stolidly.

'And it's easy to see why you don't,' continued Zen. 'Why should anyone request a transfer from the capital to a posting in a provincial city where he has no family, no friends and doesn't speak the dialect? And not even to the main Questura but to a dead-end job with the port detail?'

Caputo looked Zen in the eye for the first time, but still offered no comment. Zen took out his pack of *Nazionali* and offered one to his subordinate, who shook his head.

'The answer to this question is not so simple,' Zen said, exhaling a cloud of smoke. 'To use

classical allusion, I had to choose between Scylla and Charybdis. I had made enemies at the ministr powerful enemies. I knew that they would not let me continue in my previous job, and I suspected th they might attempt to send me to a punishment posting. My only hope was to anticipate them b applying for such a move myself. I took a look at the positions vacant and chose this one. I'm th correct rank to command this detachment, and since it effectively constitutes a massive demotio from my former position with Criminalpol, my enemies could not intervene without revealing the hand. I had accepted defeat, but on my terms, not theirs.'

'Who are your enemies?' whispered Caputo, all attention now.

'Political.'

'On the right or the left?'

Zen smiled condescendingly.

'No one uses those words any more, Caputo. We're all in the centre nowadays. And my enemies ar about as close to the centre as it's possible to be. In fact at the time of which I am speaking one of their number was the Minister of the Interior.'

Caputo's eyes widened.

'You mean ...?'

'I do indeed.'

Caputo licked his lips nervously.

'Maybe I will have a cigarette after all,' he said.

Zen pushed the packet across the desk.

'That explains what I am doing here,' he said. 'It also explains my total lack of interest in any an all aspects of my job. This posting has been forced on me as the least of various evils on offer, but I c not feel the slightest degree of professional involvement or responsibility. I am sure that you and yo colleagues are perfectly capable of carrying out your duties in a satisfactory manner, and my on wish is to leave you free to do so without interference or supervision. In short, just pretend I'm n here and carry on as you always have done. Do I make myself clear?'

Caputo flashed his shark's smile.

'Yes, sir.'

'The only thing that concerns me is that nothing occurs which might draw unwelcome attention this detachment, and hence give my enemies an excuse to move me to the killing fields of Sicily some God-forsaken hole up in the mountains. I'm sure I can count on your experience and discretio Caputo, to ensure this does not happen. As far as everything else is concerned, I leave matters entire in your hands. In fact the less I know about it, the better pleased I shall be.'

Caputo nodded briskly and stood up.

'Will there be anything else, sir?'

Zen was about to shake his head when a thought struck him.

'Actually, I'd like a *cappuccino scuro*. Not too hot, lots of foam, no chocolate.'

He lay back, glancing at the clock on the wall. Less than five minutes later there was a knock at th door and a uniformed patrolman entered bearing a tray laden with a glass of mineral water, a selectio of freshly baked pastries and the *cappuccino*.

Every morning after that, an identical tray appeared a few minutes after Zen's arrival at the offic For a while, that was all. Then, about three weeks after his conversation with Caputo, he came in on day to find a large cardboard box in the corner of the room. It proved to contain fifty cartons *Nazionali*, 10,000 cigarettes in all. Zen removed three cartons and took them home, and stacked th rest in the empty drawers of his filing cabinet.

After that, things improved by leaps and bounds. He was greeted in respectful yet friendly fashion by everyone he met, and his orders and requests were obeyed with alacrity, sometimes before he even realized that he had made them. He normally showed up at work each morning about eleven, unless he had something better to do, leaving again shortly before lunch. Today he was entertaining Valeria at home, so he planned to make no more than a token appearance before stopping by the market to shop for whatever took his fancy.

Cars and vans and lorries surged sluggishly along the partitioned channel supposedly reserved for the trams, but in practice used by all and sundry as a relief route from the traffic-clogged Via Cristoforo Colombo. Once in a while, the city's *vigili* would swoop down and start handing out fines, but such actions were sporadic and tokenistic, repressive blitzes by a colonial power which knew that the struggle against the local population was unwinnable but could not afford to concede this openly.

In the dock area behind Zen, the white Tirrenia line steamer which had arrived from Sardinia the morning before was tied up on one side of the passenger terminal. On the other lay a sleek grey warship flying a flag he found familiar but which he couldn't identify. Farther back, in one of the outer docks, a huge aircraft carrier displayed the unmistakable emblem of the Stars and Stripes.

A dull ringing from the embedded rails announced the arrival of an elderly tram, swaying and nodding its way out of the tunnel burrowed under the Monte di Dio. Zen folded up his newspaper and waited patiently while it trundled through the massed traffic towards him, its bell jingling plaintively. Ten minutes later, the tram deposited him in Piazza del Carmino, outside one of the main entrances to the port area. Zen walked in through the open gates, nodding perfunctorily to the armed guard, who returned a sketchy salute.

He crossed the concrete yard inside the gates and turned right towards the four-storey building which housed the detachment of the *Polizia dello Stato* responsible for law enforcement within the port area. Most of this enclave, as well as the neighbouring parts of the city centre, had been flattened by both Allied and German bombing during the war, but the police station had miraculously been spared. Thanks to its restrained proportions, sturdy design and traditional materials, it stood out as a model of old-world grace and charm amid the brutalities of the surrounding architecture.

The size of the building belied the modest number of personnel deployed there, having been constructed at a time when the port was much more active than it was now, after interminable labor disputes had diverted much trade south to Salerno. The ground and first floors were the only ones in official use, and the second used only as a dumping ground for forgotten files and broken furniture. As for the top storey, it appeared equally abandoned at this time of day, although once night had fallen it had turned into one of the liveliest venues in the whole area, much frequented by sailors who for one reason or another did not have a pass permitting them to leave the port enclave. But Zen was careful to know nothing of this, nor about how the prostitutes who worked there got past the guards at the gates, and still less about the contraband goods and illegal substances which reputedly changed hands on the same premises.

He walked in through the open doorway, acknowledging the greetings of the three uniformed men lounging about in the hall, and climbed the stairs to his office on the first floor. The trio discreetly broke off their conversation until he had reached the landing, then resumed in a low tone. The murmur of their voices reached up through the cool, shadowy spaces of the stairwell like the distant drone of bees.

Tutti due fan ben la loro parte

He had been in the office barely a minute when there was a knock at his door.

‘Come in!’ called Zen, surprised and pleased that his *cappuccino* had arrived so quickly.

But it was Giovan Battista Caputo who appeared. His manner was unusually subdued.

‘Sorry to disturb you, chief. Can I have a word?’

Zen waved his hand wearily.

‘We had a spot of trouble last night,’ Caputo announced, coming in and closing the door.

‘Mmm?’

‘We’ve got a couple of warships in at the moment. An American aircraft carrier and a Greek frigate. A group of sailors from the carrier spent the evening in that bar by the passenger terminal.’

Zen nodded. He had visited the place on a brief guided tour of the dock area with Caputo a couple of weeks earlier, the idea being to provide Zen with a bluffer’s guide to his new job. The bar, in question, he had been given to understand, was operated by the same consortium responsible for the various phantom enterprises which operated from the top floor of the police station, and served among other things as a perfectly legal front allowing prospective clients to be screened before being granted admission to this inner sanctum. It was a poky place which nevertheless managed to provide a splash of life and colour amid the grandiose austerities of the *stazione marittima*.

The most striking feature of the place was a large neon sign in the window, reading, in English: MORE DRINKS. According to Caputo’s account of the incident the previous night, a group of American sailors had apparently taken this advice literally, downing a staggering variety and quantity of wines, beers, spirits and liqueurs before trooping off to explore the town. All went well until they ran into another party returning to the Greek frigate.

‘One of the Americans comes from a Greek family,’ Caputo explained, ‘so he started trying to talk to them. Only it seems his Greek isn’t all that good any more, or maybe he was too drunk. Anyway whatever it was he said sounded insulting to the Greeks. A fight broke out, and the Americans got the best of it.’

‘Mmm,’ repeated Zen, inspecting his finger-nails.

‘When the Greeks got back to their ship, the word went round about what had happened and a bunch of them go out looking for revenge. They come across a man in American uniform and start to push him around. Next thing they know he’s pulled a knife and stabbed two of them. One of our men was coming back from the bar, where he’d been compiling a report on the earlier incident, and he immediately arrested the attacker.’

Zen yawned lengthily.

‘Really, Caputo, I hardly think you need to bother me with this sort of thing.’

‘I wouldn’t have, sir, except for one thing. We informed the Americans that one of their crew was under arrest, and they sent a couple of officers over to identify him. And here’s where it gets sticky. You see, it turns out this man we’ve arrested is not one of their men at all.’

A shrug from Zen.

‘So?’

Caputo sighed.

‘Look, chief, you made it very clear that you didn’t want anything happening here which might compromise you and provide an opening for your enemies in Rome, right?’

‘Mmm?’

‘Well, this is shaping up to become just that, I’m afraid. One of the Greek sailors was badly injured, and he’s still in critical condition. The Greek consul has lodged an official complaint, and the Americans aren’t too happy that we allowed someone masquerading as one of their personnel into a supposedly secure area. I’ve already fielded three calls from the Questore this morning ...’

‘Damn! What did you tell him?’

‘I said you were out of the office conducting further enquiries in person. But he didn’t sound pleased. I think you’d better get back to him as soon as possible.’

‘I don’t even know the number.’

Caputo told him. Zen picked up the phone.

‘Stay here,’ he told Caputo, who was heading discreetly for the door. ‘I may need back-up.’

Despite his alleged impatience to discuss the case, the police chief of the *provincia di Napoli* kept Zen waiting on the line for over ten minutes before deigning to speak to him. When he did, however, he left Zen in no doubt that Caputo had not exaggerated the gravity or urgency of the situation.

‘I understand that you’re new to the city,’ the Questore remarked in a quiet, suave voice more effective than any hectoring. ‘We naturally have to make allowances for that. I remember wondering at the time whether it was a wise appointment. Naples is a unique city, and one which in many ways is difficult if not impossible for an outsider to understand.’

Zen sat there gripping the receiver tightly and wishing that he had not given up smoking.

‘But then I told myself that this was after all simply a matter of policing the port area, a relatively minor and routine operation. I assumed that a man of your apparent experience would be able to handle it, even allowing for your lack of local knowledge. But within a few months of your arrival here we now have all the ingredients of a major international incident in the making, a scenario which makes the city look like some Third World hellhole where bands of drunken sailors and local thugs have it out with knives among the wharves. We’ve spent a lot of time and money trying to upgrade the image of Naples in the world, and our efforts were crowned with the G7 conference. Now your slackness and incompetence threatens to bring all that work to naught!’

‘It’s impossible for my men to be everywhere,’ Zen protested feebly.

‘This affray occurred less than fifteen metres from the main passenger terminal,’ said the Questore. ‘If you can’t police that area properly, what *can* you do? Anyway, it’s too late to worry about that now. The essential thing is to bring this investigation to a suitable conclusion in the shortest possible time, a conclusion which will satisfy and reassure all the interested parties – who, I need hardly remind you, include two of our principal NATO allies. What progress have you made?’

‘What progress have we made?’

He eyed Caputo desperately.

‘Well, the individual responsible ...’

Caputo held up his arms, crossed at the wrist.

‘... is in custody ...’

Caputo ran one finger across his closed lips as though tugging at a zipper.

‘... but has so far refused to talk.’

Caputo was now pacing up and down the floor, darting glances this way and that, one hand shading his eyes.

‘My men are conducting a thorough search of the scene ...’ Zen went on.

Caputo made writing motions on the palm of his left hand.

‘... and taking detailed statements from witnesses.’

‘What leads are you working on?’ demanded the Questore.

‘What leads are we working on?’

‘Must you repeat everything I say? Yes, leads! Theories, ideas, hypotheses. Something which might begin to explain this incident and which I can communicate to the Prefect for subsequent transmission to Rome.’

Caputo stood on the other side of the desk, his arm thrust forward, holding up three fingers.

‘We are working on three main theories at the moment,’ Zen replied evenly. ‘The first is that the perpetrator ...’

He glanced at Caputo, who was waddling bow-legged around the room with his hands clutched like claws beside his hips.

‘... was a cowboy,’ concluded Zen.

‘A *what?*’

Caputo shook his head furiously. Zen covered the mouthpiece of the phone.

‘An *American!*’ hissed Caputo.

‘... that he was an American,’ Zen told the Questore.

‘But the United States naval authorities have explicitly denied that he was one of their men!’

‘Exactly!’ retorted Zen. ‘According to this theory, the suspect was an undercover CIA agent who had been entrusted with the mission of murdering one of the Greek sailors, the son of an influential Communist politician.’

He looked triumphantly at Caputo, who gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up.

‘And the second theory?’ pursued the Questore after a pause which suggested that he was taking notes.

‘The second ...’

Caputo had transformed himself into a smaller, slighter, quicker individual moving around the room with exaggerated naturalness, glancing furtively from side to side, his hands occasionally darting out to one side or the other as though of their own accord.

‘... is that the man was a common pickpocket,’ Zen went on, ‘who had infiltrated himself into the port area disguised as an American sailor. He approached the Greek sailors, intending to make a touch and when they started roughing him up under the mistaken impression that he actually was an American, he reverted to type and pulled a knife.’

‘I don’t like that one so much,’ the Questore replied neutrally. ‘Reflects badly on the city. What about the third theory?’

‘The third?’ replied Zen. ‘Ah, you’re going to *love* the third.’

He gazed helplessly at Caputo, who was prancing gaily about, his hands indicating the contours of a generous bosom and rearranging the folds of an invisible skirt.

‘According to this theory, the man was in fact a woman,’ Zen informed his superior.

‘A woman?’

‘A prostitute. We try to keep them out of the port area, of course, but ...’

‘Surely to God you can at least ascertain the sex of the individual in your custody?’ demanded the Questore icily.

‘His sex? Yes, of course.’

Caputo quickly sketched an enormous male organ in the air.

‘He’s a man. No question about that.’

‘But you just told me that you were working on the theory that he was a prostitute!’

Zen hesitated a moment.

‘Exactly, a transvestite prostitute.’

‘But he was dressed as a *man*!’

‘Outwardly, yes. But he was wearing female undergarments.’

The Questore was briefly silent.

‘In other words ...?’

‘In other words, he was a man dressed as a woman dressed as a man.’

‘But that’s absurd!’

‘Oh, there’s a demand for that sort of thing,’ Zen replied in a worldly tone. ‘But unfortunately on this occasion he had mistaken his clientele. They started beating him up, and he drew his knife in self-defence. But be that as it may, all the indications are that this was merely a banal crime of mistaken identity. I’ll have a full report on your desk within twelve hours ...’

Seeing Caputo signalling frantically, Zen broke off. Caputo held up the first two fingers of his left hand and whirled the right round and round.

‘... or twenty-four at the very most,’ Zen concluded.

‘I shall pass on what you have told me to the relevant parties,’ said the Questore curtly. ‘But I must remind you that if a satisfactory solution has not emerged within the period you mention, it is you and not I who will be held responsible. I am not prepared to cover for you on this case, and I regret that my department is too overstretched to permit me to dispatch one of our operatives to put your house in order for you. So I trust that you will give this matter your fullest and most urgent attention.’

‘You may depend on it, sir.’

He hung up and turned to Giovan Battista Caputo.

‘That’s all right, then,’ he remarked, stretching luxuriously. ‘You’ve got till tomorrow to stitch something together.’

Caputo’s face fell.

‘What about you, chief? Don’t you even want to interview the suspect?’

‘Impossible, I’m afraid,’ Zen replied, reaching for his coat. ‘I have a prior engagement which I just can’t get out of. Which reminds me, do you have any contacts at the opera? A friend of mine mentioned that she’d like to go, and I said I’d take her. Then I phone the box office and they tell me the whole run’s been sold out for a month.’

Caputo grunted sympathetically.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

Amico Don Alfonso

‘But are you sure it’ll work?’

‘When it comes to love, no one can be sure of anything.’

A short silence.

‘Two weeks isn’t much time.’

‘The shorter, the better. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. If they were gone for a month, the lads might start to grow sentimental.’

A longer silence. It wasn’t really silence, of course, not even this far up the Vomero, on one of the steep, stepped alleys inaccessible to the most daring or desperate of Neapolitan drivers. From the streets below, on the foothills sloping down to the bay, rose a muffled cacophony of car horns, all at slightly different pitches, a rhythmic urban symphony in some indecipherable time signature. Punctuating this medley, nearer at hand, came the gruff staccato barking of the shaggy, semi-feral dog kept chained up on the flat roof surrounding the cupola of Santa Maria del Petraio, presumably to ward off burglars. And, overlaying all, the cries of a gang of boys playing football on the steps below a fast and demanding game whose main challenge was to prevent the ball going missing in one of the inaccessible walled gardens all around, or plunging precipitously down the entire length of the *salita* of 287 steps to the point where it crossed the broad curve of paved street looping up the hillside.

Most dramatic were the intermittent appearances of aircraft on their final approach to Capodichino – monstrously large, deafening and unpredictable apparitions, seemingly near enough to touch. And yet, despite everything, the terrace where they were sitting seemed an oasis of calm and stillness, a secluded refuge miraculously isolated from the stress and stridency of the city all around.

Calling it a terrace was a bit of an exaggeration, too. In reality it was merely a section of flat tarred roof extending around two sides of a partial one-storey extension added illegally twenty years earlier to allow the original building to be converted into two apartments. The extension housed the kitchen and bathroom, while the bedroom and sitting room were on the floor below. There was a small eating area adjoining the kitchen, but now the summer had arrived Aurelio Zen preferred to take his meals outside, at an old marble-topped table in the shade of the green-and-white striped canvas awning.

The silence which still persisted between him and his guest was not at all awkward, and neither showed any urgency to break it. It was a large, comfortable silence, as unconstrained and embracing as the hazy sunlight which coated every surface around them, or the blowsy air which shifted caressing to and fro. In the extreme distance, the ghostly outline of the peninsula of Sorrento could just be made out, like an old print bleached out by the sun. The peak of Vesuvius loomed above the imposing perimeter wall of the San Martino monastery. To the right, Capri was almost completely obscured in the haze, a fading memory. In the strait between the island and the peninsula the dark rectangular block of a ship seemed to hover on the horizon, perhaps the ferry which Zen had seen that morning now on its way to Sicily, or even farther south, to Malta and Tunisia.

‘Anyway, I suppose we had to do *something*,’ said the woman sitting beside Aurelio Zen, as though concluding a lengthy internal debate.

‘Of course we did,’ he agreed idly. ‘Whatever the truth about that pair may be, they certainly aren’t the sort you want your daughters associating with. Family background unknown, consorting with

known criminals, frequenting some of the worst streets in the city, no visible means of support but plenty of money to throw around ...'

'Not to mention handsome and charming,' added Valeria.

Zen nodded slowly.

'It's a deadly combination all right. One which both demands and justifies the measures we're taking.'

'Yes, but will it work?'

They had met by the purest chance at a party given by the British Consulate. Zen had been invited through an official whom he had helped to uncover a scheme to smuggle illegal Asian immigrants into Britain on cargo ships plying between Naples and Liverpool. As for Valeria, she was there thanks to her friendship with the wife of some politico in the economic affairs department of the Campania regional government, who had made a polished, vapid, interminable speech of the kind which such functionaries can turn out at a moment's notice to suit any occasion from a conference marking the anniversary of the birth or death of X to the inauguration of a new building, bilateral agreement, cultural artefact, exhibition or plaque to, by, in or about Y.

The idea behind the gathering, as far as Zen could make out, was to sip industrial-grade sparkling wine, nibble at fiddly, self-destructing canapés and socialize at the top of your voice with people you already knew or who were eager to know you. This left Zen, a nobody who knew no one, at a distinct disadvantage. He was just wondering how soon he could decently leave when his contact appeared and led him across the room to be introduced to Signora Valeria Squillace.

The Englishman was a bluff, burly, jovial type who had recently been transferred to Naples in a fit of bureaucratic whimsy after many years in Finland, whose idiosyncratic language he had apparently mastered to the degree that foreigners ever can. His Italian, however, was still rudimentary, and Zen's English – to say nothing of his Finnish – practically non-existent. Their official dealings had been through an interpreter, but now they were on their own. To make matters worse, the room was crowded and noisy, while Signora Squillace was slightly deaf in one ear and too vain to wear a hearing aid.

As a result, Zen discovered once they were alone together that his new acquaintance was under the illusion that his name was Alfonso Zembla and that he was looking for a house to rent. For a while he kept waiting for a suitable opportunity to correct her, but eventually gave up. The matter was of no consequence. He had no interest in finding somewhere permanent to live in Naples, and no reason to suppose that he would ever see the woman again. She was in her forties, tall and well-proportioned with hazel eyes, wavy black hair with the odd streak of silver, and an expressive mouth which seemed to be perpetually struggling to suppress an ironic smile.

But none of this was enough to persuade Zen to try and follow up on the encounter, nor had Valeria Squillace given the slightest hint that she would welcome such an attempt. So it came as a complete surprise when he received a telephone call from her two days later at the hotel where he was staying at the time. She reminded him of their meeting, explained that she had got his number from their mutual acquaintance at the Consulate, apologized for disturbing him at home and then got to the point.

'I understand you work for the police, Dottor Zembla. I have a personal problem which you might be able to help me with. In return, I would be prepared to offer you a limited lease at a very reasonable rent on a small property I own near San Martino.'

Zen was lying on the bed, nude except for his socks, watching a Japanese cartoon featuring children with enormous eyes engaging in hand-to-hand combat with evil adversaries whose eyes were undesirably small.

‘What sort of problem?’ he said guardedly, flipping over to the neighbouring channel, where a ~~overweight egomaniac with insincere hair was direct selling a 64-piece set of silver-plated cutlery.~~

‘It’s something I’d rather not discuss on the telephone,’ his caller replied coyly. ‘Do you think would be possible for us to meet briefly, say tomorrow?’

They made a date for the following afternoon in the bar of Zen’s hotel. That morning at work he asked Giovan Battista Caputo if he knew anything about the Squillace family. Caputo screwed his face into a mask of mental effort.

‘Name rings a bell,’ he said. ‘Let me make a few calls.’

He returned fifteen minutes later with a précis of his efforts. Manlio Squillace, the *capofamiglia* had died of a heart attack two years earlier following his arrest on charges of ‘financial irregularities’. He had been an eminent local entrepreneur who had made a fortune from speculative land transactions in the sixties and seventies, and was widely rumoured to have been associated with organized crime. He was survived by his wife Valeria and two daughters, Orestina and Filomena.

It was the latter, Zen discovered that afternoon, who were the problem which Signora Squillace hadn’t been prepared to discuss over the phone. They were in their early twenties, language students in their final year of university. With their looks and qualifications, to say nothing of the family connections, they could have had their pick of any number of nice boys from good homes and with excellent career prospects.

‘Instead of which they want to throw themselves away on a couple of gangsters!’ Valeria Squillace wailed over her *cappuccino* and brioche. ‘At times I worry that it must be in the blood, something they’ve got from their father. Not that he was a criminal himself, of course, but he had to associate with all sorts of people in his line of work, and some of it must have rubbed off on Orestina and Filomena. How else do you explain them taking up with those hoodlums?’

It didn’t seem to Zen that an explanation was that far to seek, but he sensed that it wouldn’t be helpful to say so. Instead he asked Signora Squillace how he could help her.

‘The worst of it is that they don’t seem to realize what they’re getting themselves into,’ she replied. ‘Whenever I raise the matter with them, they simply accuse me of snobbery and prejudice. And of course I have no proof that those two are criminals, but I can sense it in my bones.’

She looked at Zen.

‘If you were to look through the police records, Don Alfonso, perhaps you would be able to find something definite, some hard evidence I can use to open their eyes to the truth before it’s too late.’

Intrigued and amused, Zen had agreed. The next day he sent in a routine request to the Questura for information relating to Troise, Gesualdo and Capuozzo, Sabatino. The results were unexpected, to say the least. First came a written reply, via fax, stating that no records existed in those names. Given that the police maintained a dossier on just about every man, woman and child in the country, even if only to list whether or not they had fulfilled their legal duty of voting in every local and national election, the complete absence of the men’s names was itself a form of negative proof that something was amiss.

But it was the next development which seemed to confirm that Signora Squillace’s suspicions had not been exaggerated. This took the form of a telephone call from an official at the élite *Direzione Investigativa Antimafia*. He explained that Zen’s request had been routinely copied to him since the two names were on a file of suspected gang members whom the DIA had under long-term surveillance, and wanted to know what had brought them to the attention of the port police. Zen invented a vague but plausible cover story and promised to relay any further information he might have to the DIA before taking any action himself.

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