

# Antonio Tabucchi

## A Riddle

(ITALY)

Last night I dreamed of Miriam. She was wearing a long white dress which, from a distance, seemed like a nightgown. She was walking along the beach; the waves were dangerously high and breaking in silence; it must have been the beach at Biarritz, but it was totally deserted. I was sitting on the first of an interminable line of empty deck chairs, but perhaps it was another beach because at Biarritz I don't remember deck chairs like those; it was just an imaginary beach. I waved to her, inviting her to sit down, but she went on walking, as if she didn't know me, looking straight ahead and, when she passed close by, I was struck by a gust of cold air, like an aura which she carried behind her: and then, with the unsurprised amazement of a dream, I realized that she was dead.

Sometimes it's only in a dream that we glimpse a plausible solution. Perhaps because reason is fearful; it can't fill in the gaps and achieve completeness, which is a form of simplicity; it prefers complexity, with all its gaps, and so the will entrusts the solution to dreams. But then tomorrow, or some other day, I'll dream that Miriam's alive, that she'll walk close to the sea, respond to my call and sit down on a deck chair belonging to the beach at Biarritz or to an imaginary beach. With her usual languid, sensual gesture she'll push back her hair, look out to sea, point to a sailing boat or a cloud, and laugh. And we'll laugh together because here we are, we've made it, we've kept our appointment.

Life's an appointment—what I'm saying is very banal, Monsieur, I realize; the only thing is that we don't know when, where, how, and with whom. Then we think: if I'd said this instead of that or that instead of this, if I'd got up late instead of early, today I'd be imperceptibly different from what I am, and perhaps the world would be imperceptibly different, too. Or else it would be the same and I couldn't know it. For instance, I shouldn't be here telling a story, proposing a riddle that has no solution or else that has always had an inevitable solution, only I don't know about it and so, every now and then, rarely, when I'm having a drink with a friend, I say: Here's a riddle for you, let's see how you solve it. But then, why do you care about riddles? Do you go in for puzzles and the like, or is it just the sterile curiosity with which you observe other people's lives?

An appointment and a journey, this too is banal, I mean as a definition of life; it's been said any number of times, and then in the great journey there are other journeys, our insignificant trips over the crust of this planet, which is journeying also, but where to? It's all a riddle; perhaps you find me a bit odd. But, at that time, I had come to a standstill; I was stuck in a morass of boredom, in the lethargic mood of a man who is no longer very young, but not completely an adult, who is simply waiting for life.

And instead Miriam came on the scene. "I'm the Countess of Terrail, and I have to get to Biarritz." "And I'm the Marquis of Carabas, but I seldom leave my estate." That's exactly how it began, with this exchange. We were at Chez Albert, near the Porte Saint-Denis, not exactly a stamping ground for countesses. In the afternoon, after I'd closed the shop, I went to this bistro for a drink. It's gone now and, in its place, there's one of those establishments that sell human flesh on film—it's the times. Albert would have liked to be buried at Père-Lachaise, because Proust is there, but I think he wound up in the cemetery at Ivry, another sign of the times. The old days—I don't mean to hark back to the past—but they were different, they really were. Take today's motor cars: the engine's all squeezed in—you could wrap it up in a handkerchief—and there's not even room to take the carburettor apart. Albert wasn't exactly my partner, but he might just as well have been because he got hold of many of the cars. He'd been a racing driver before there were macadam roads, when drivers wore special goggles to keep out the dust. He was a wee slip of a man, grown melancholy from standing behind the bar, who laughed only when he'd had a glass too many. At such moments he drew off some Alsatian beer and put a pitcher of it on the bar, just like in a cowboy film, exclaiming: "Speed!" Speed had done him in, but not too much; he was lame in one leg and his left hand had lost its grip. He was the one to get hold of the car that had belonged to Agostinelli, that is, to Proust. Lord knows how he did it. Agostinelli was Proust's chauffeur, and a good fellow; together they visited all the Gothic cathedrals of Normandy. I don't know if there was anything between them, and it doesn't really matter. Proust, as you know, had his particular tastes. Anyhow, to go back to what I was saying, during my first year of Literature at the university I'd written a paper that I thought I might turn into a thesis, but then I dropped out; the Sorbonne and its professors seemed pointless to me. My thesis was to be entitled *What Proust Saw from a Car*. Obviously the car, not Proust, was what interested me. One fine day I made up my mind and sold the piece for publication in two instalments in a third-class magazine, a feeble imitation of *Harper's Bazaar* (I'm not telling you the name, so you won't find it) and, God knows how, it fell into Albert's hands. He took that for granted; everything fell into his hands. And then, you know how life is, like a woven fabric in which all the threads cross, and what I want one day is to see the whole pattern. That's why, one evening, I went to Chez Albert with a copy of the magazine under my arm and ordered a drink. I was wandering about Saint-Denis because I'd been told that, in the area, there was a body shop owned by an old man who repaired vintage cars. I was a proper mechanic, because I grew up in a garage at Meudon, the town where Céline

lived. Not that I knew him; he was a bad egg, they say, but a good doctor, apparently, especially to the poor. Albert saw the magazine under my arm. "There's a piece in there about Proust's car," he said, "by a lunatic who signs himself the Marquis of Carabas." "I'm the Marquis of Carabas," I said, "but for the moment I'm what they call fallen on hard times. I'm looking for the Pegasus body shop, where I hear there's a job." Albert looked at me hard, as if to see whether I was joking, but I wasn't; I was in low spirits. "Don't take it so hard, my boy; the shop's in that courtyard over there, and so is Agostinelli's car, which I brought in last Sunday. I bought it at a junkyard in Suresnes, where they didn't have the foggiest idea what it was. Now it's only a matter of putting it back into working order."

And that's what we spent the summer doing. "This one's not for sale," said Albert. "It's the car in which I want to run my last race, destination Père-Lachaise, with a little band behind, playing *En passant par la Lorraine*." Lorraine is where he came from, of course. I don't know if you can visualize Proust's car, but probably you've seen a photograph of it. It was a monument, with headlights like searchlights, which served, on the trip through Normandy, to light up the facades of the various cathedrals. When Proust and Agostinelli arrived in a town after dark, they drove through the empty streets up to the cathedral square, stopping on a slight incline so that the headlights would point upwards and illuminate the tympanum. "Agostinelli . . ." Proust would say, and open the volume of Ruskin, which was his bible. This is all true; he wrote it up in the *Le Figaro* of 1907 under the title *Impressions de route en automobile*. Of course, I was never quite sure that our car really had been Proust's. In the junkyard where Albert had bought it there was no registration paper and it was impossible to trace the original owner. But, in the glove compartment, there was a pair of gloves, which Albert insisted were the real thing. If he liked the idea, what was wrong with it? Only the car wasn't used for his funeral; but that's another story.

When the owner of the repair shop died, I took over. For some time I had been a silent partner. Monsieur Gélain had given me a free hand and I had made a pile of money, partly thanks to Albert, who found the vintage cars. Sales were my affair; I created a mid-city headquarters for public relations because we couldn't receive prospective buyers at the shop. It was a microscopic but handsome set-up on the fashionable Avenue Foch: a waiting room and a paneled office with two leather-upholstered chairs and a brass plate on the door: PEGASUS. DE-LUXE VINTAGE CARS. I received customers twice a week—Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning—as advertised. Most of the time I was bored to death because there was seldom more than one buyer a month. But seven or eight sales a year yielded all the money I wanted. Albert managed to find old wrecks that cost him a song and he had made connections with a repair shop in Marseilles which sold us museum pieces for a pittance. All we had to do was fix them up, but that was quite a job. I enjoyed it, and I took on a bright, nimble-fingered young assistant, the son of one of Albert's cousins, called Jacob who, like him, came from Lorraine. For three of four years we restored a bit of everything: Delages, Aston Martins, a Hispano-

Suiza, an Isotta Fraschini, and even a 1922 Fiat Mefistofele, the most beautiful racing car in the world. That one wasn't a car, really; it was a torpedo, a copy of the 1908 original, and in 1924 it set a world speed record. The customers were usually Americans, rolling in money, mad about Europe, with an abominable accent and a craving for vintage cars. They pictured themselves as so many Fitzgeralds, geniuses and wastrels, drunk on champagne, Montmartre, and *Sous le ciel de Paris*. Those, too, were the days. People had been scared by bombs and the slaughter in the trenches and they wanted to celebrate and feel themselves alive: let's laugh and have fun; life's a gift to be enjoyed; we don't want to be like the foolish virgins. There was an Egyptian, one of our best customers, a jovial, fat fellow; he wanted a car every three months, one for every season, he said, laughing like a child. He drank like a sponge and wrecked the cars, one after another. Eventually he came to a bad end; the French police arrested him, I never knew why; for political reasons, they said, but your guess is as good as mine. Albert wanted me to get married. "Get yourself a wife, Carabas," he used to say. "You're over thirty and you need the right kind of woman. What's a man to do, in the house, after he's spent the day fixing a hood? Time slips by, without our noticing, and you'll be an old man before you know it." Albert was a bit of a philosopher, like every good mechanic. You may not believe it, Monsieur, but the study of automobiles is very instructive: life's a gearbox, a wheel here, a pump here and then the transmission, which links it all up and turns power into movement, yes, just the way it is in life. Some day I'd like to understand the workings of the transmission that ties the components of my life together. It's the same idea; just open up the hood and study the humming motor; then tie up all the minutes, people, and events and say: here's the engine block (that stage of my life); here's Albert (the starter); here am I (the pistons with their valves) and here's the spark plug that sets off the spark and gives the word to go. The spark was Miriam, of course, as you probably realize, but what was the transmission? Not the obvious one, as I told Albert, which was a Bugatti Royale, but the real, hidden one, which ties all the components together and causes a car to move just the way this one moved, with its rhythm, pulse, acceleration, speed and final slow-down.

"There's no resisting a Bugatti Royale," I said to Albert. "I'm going." He looked up from wiping the bar and I thought I saw a shadow of melancholy cross his eyes. "It'll give you problems," he said, "you know that better than I do, but I understand. It's your race. You've always been stuck between the starting line and the track and now you're in a position to run. You're too young and the fascination of risk is too strong."

But first I must go back, because that isn't where our conversation ended, I mean the conversation between Miriam and myself, when I told her I was the Marquis of Carabas but I had no mind to leave my estate. "Don't joke, please," she said. "I'm not joking," I replied. Then she repeated: "Don't joke, please." And picking up her glass, distractedly, as if what she was about to say were the most natural thing in the world, "They want to kill me," she added. She said it with the voice of a woman who has seen, drunk, and loved too much and so was beyond lying. I stared at her, like a fool, not knowing

what to answer and then I objected, ignobly, "What's in it for me?" She emptied her glass, hurriedly, with the melancholy smile of disillusionment. "Very little," she said; "you're quite right, practically nothing." She left some change on the table and wearily pushed back her hair. "Excuse me," she said, and went away. Besides her glass she had left a matchbox with Miriam written on it, and a telephone number. I didn't call; better pass it up, I said to myself. But the following Saturday, I met the Count. I was in my office on the Avenue Foch, summer was at hand and through the window I could see the new green leaves on the trees. I was reading a book by an Italian dandy who drove to Peking at the turn of the century—I don't remember his name—when the Count came in. Of course, I didn't know at first who he was. He was a stout man, no longer young, with a short reddish beard, wearing a navy-blue blazer, light-colored trousers, and old-fashioned sunglasses and carrying a newspaper and a cane, a rich banker or lawyer type of fellow. He introduced himself and sat down, crossing his legs awkwardly because of his weight. "I believe my wife contacted you about a job proposal," he said deliberately, "and I'd like to clarify the terms." His tone of voice was flat and bored, as if the matter did not concern him and he wanted to get rid of it with a cheque. "We have an old car," he went on, "A 1927 Bugatti Royale, and my wife has got it into her head to take it to Biarritz, to take part in a rally at San Sebastian." As I had foreseen, he pulled out a chequebook and signed a cheque for an amount more than the price of the car. His expression was more and more bored; as for me, I was sparked up, but I tried to keep cool. There are plenty of drivers around, I nearly said. If you put an ad in the paper there'll be a flock of applicants; as for me, right now, I'm sorry, but I'm very busy. Instead, he got in first: "I want you to turn down my wife's offer." And he held out the cheque. It stayed in his hand, because I was staring at him stupidly, taken by surprise. At the same time I had a feeling that there was something fishy about the whole story; it was too vague and contradictory. I don't know why, perhaps just instinctively. I said: "I don't know your wife or anything about a job proposal. I don't know what you're talking about." It was his turn to be taken aback, I was sure of it, but he didn't flinch. He tore up the cheque and threw it into the wastepaper basket. "If that's so," he said, "please excuse the interruption. My secretary must have made a mistake; goodbye." As soon as he'd left, I called the number Miriam had left me. The Hôtel de Paris answered: "The Count and Countess have gone out. Do you want to leave a message?" "Yes, it's a personal message for the Countess; tell her that the Marquis de Carabas called, that's all."

It was a genuine Bugatti Royale, a *coupé de ville*. I don't know if that means anything to you, Monsieur; it's quite understandable if it doesn't. Albert and I went to fetch it, in a little garage on the Quai d'Anjou, behind a wooden door opening onto a courtyard as musky as an English house, with the Seine running below. Albert couldn't believe his eyes. "It's impossible," he said, "impossible," caressing the long, tapering fenders; I don't know whether you get the idea, but the Bugatti has something of a woman's body about it, a woman lying on her back with her legs out in front of her. It was a superb specimen, the body in excellent condition, the damask velvet upholstery in fairly good shape

aside from a few moth holes and a single tear. The main problem—at least at first sight—lay in the wheels and the exhaust pipes. The engine seemed unaffected by its long idleness and in need only of being roused from its slumber. We roused it successfully and drove it to the shop. The elephant on the hood was missing, and this was an unpleasant surprise, because you can't take a Bugatti Royale to a rally without its elephant. Perhaps you didn't know, but at the top of the radiator the Royale had a silver elephant sculpted by Ettore Bugatti's brother, Rembrandt. It wasn't just a trademark like the Rolls Royce's Spirit of Ecstasy or the Packard swan, it was a symbol, undecipherable, like all symbols; an elephant standing on his hind legs, with his trunk upraised and trumpeting, in a gesture of attack or mating. Is it too glib to say that these two go together? Perhaps so. But just imagine this: A Bugatti Royale on its haunches, climbing a slight incline, with fenders flared, ready to gather speed and intoxication, with power throbbing behind a fabulous radiator grille and, atop it, an elephant with upraised trunk.

I wanted to stay on the sidelines. Albert called the Countess at the Hôtel de Paris to find out if she knew what had become of the elephant. It had simply disappeared; in any case, it was lost, he reported. The car had been standing too long; she says to make a copy. And so we had three weeks to do something about it, while we were touching up the engine and the upholstery. One cylinder needed adjusting, but that was not a big job. The upholsterer was a wily young fellow with a shop on the Rue Le Peletier, who sent antique fabrics to be repaired by the nuns of a certain convent. There's nobody like a nun for a painstaking job, believe me, and their mending was invisible; it was all done on the reverse side, where it left a network of threads like a telephone exchange. The worst thing was the elephant. A sculptor of sorts offered to make a clay copy to be covered with metal, but bumps and jolts would soon have caused it to crack. Finally Albert thought of a cabinetmaker from Lorraine—this story is full of Lorrainers—who had a shop in the Marais, an old fellow who carved wood in naturalistic style. It was easy enough to find a photograph of the elephant, which we took to the old man, together with the exact measurements, telling him to make an identical copy. After that we had to see to the chrome plating, and that came out satisfactorily. Of course, if you looked at the figure when the car was standing still you could see that it was a fake, but in motion it seemed like the real thing.

The morning of our departure was quite an event. Albert had fallen completely into the role of father, and kept asking whether I needed this or had forgotten that. The day before I'd bought a leather suitcase—the car and the trip deserved nothing less—as well as a cream-colored linen jacket and another in leather and an Italian silk scarf. When I got to the Hôtel de Paris a liveried doorman opened the car, and, feeling like the Marquis of Carabas, I told him to call the Countess. A porter came with a valise and a vanity case; she arrived, on her husband's arm, greeted me distractedly and got into the back seat. Here was the first surprise of the day. I had been fearful of seeing the Count again because I didn't exactly like him, but he spoke to me as if we'd never met, playing the part to perfection. It was a Monday towards the end of

June. "We'll meet in Biarritz a week from today," he said affably to his wife. "If you like you can send your driver to pick me up at the station—my train gets in at eight thirty-five in the evening; otherwise we'll meet at the Hôtel des Palais." I went into first gear, and she gave a brief wave of her hand through the open window.

The second surprise was her telling me to take the Route Nationale 6, and her tone of voice, a dry, decisive tone which seemed to reflect a strong will or else some sort of phobia. I objected that this wasn't the shortest way to Biarritz. "I want to take another route," she said sharply. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't argue the point." And there was a third surprise as well. When I first met her at Chez Albert she was so defenceless and such an open book that I thought I could read her whole life on her face; now, instead, she had withdrawn behind a mask of distance and reserve, like a real countess. She was beautiful, and that was no surprise, but now she seemed to me of an absolute beauty, because I understood that no beauty in the world is greater than that of a woman, and this, you'll understand, Monsieur, put me into a sort of frenzy. Meanwhile the Bugatti glided over the gentle, inviting roads of France, up and down and along level stretches, the way our roads go, bordered by plane trees on either side. Behind me the road retreated, before me it opened up, and I thought of my life and the boredom of it, and of what Albert had said to me, and I felt ashamed that I'd never known love. I don't mean physical love, of course, I'd had that, but real love, the kind that blazes up inside and breaks out and spins like a motor while the wheels speed over the ground. It was like that, a sort of remorse, an awareness of mediocrity or cowardice. Up to now my wheels had turned slowly and tediously over a long, long road, and I couldn't remember a single landscape along the way. Now I was travelling another road, which led nowhere, with a beautiful and distant woman who was escaping or fleeing from I knew not what. It was a useless race across France, I felt quite sure, on a road as empty as those that had gone before. Those were my exact thoughts at that particular moment. Limoges was not far, we were deep in the countryside, where farmers were working among their fruit trees. Limoges, I thought, what does Limoges have to do with my life? I drew the car over to the side of the road and stopped. Turning towards her, I said: "Look here. . . ." Before I could say any more she laid a finger gently across my lips and murmured: "Don't be a fool, Carabas." Without another word she got out and came to sit beside me. "Go on," she said, "I know that we're taking an absurd route, but perhaps everything's absurd, and I have my reasons."

It's a curious sensation to arrive in a strange city, knowing that there you'll love with a love you've never experienced before. That's how it was. We stopped at a little hotel on the river—I don't remember the name of the river that runs by Limoges. The room had faded wallpaper and very ordinary furniture; in those years many hotels were like that; you've only to look at the films of Jean Gabin. Miriam asked me to say that she was my wife, she didn't want to identify herself and the hotel didn't ask for the papers of both members of a couple. From the room we could see the river, bordered by willows; it was a fine night and we fell asleep at dawn. "Who is it you're running away from,

Miriam," I asked her. "What's wrong in your life?" But she laid a finger across my lips.

An absurd route, as I said before. We went down to Rodez and then towards Albi and its vineyards, because of a landscape she wanted to see. I thought it was an outdoor view but it was a painting, and we found it. We skipped Toulouse and made for Pau, because her mother had spent her childhood there, and I lingered over the idea of her mother as a child, in a boarding school which we couldn't locate. It was the first time I'd thought of the childhood of a woman companion's mother, a new and strange sensation. We looked at the splendid square and at the houses, with their white attic windows suspended from tile roofs, and I imagined a winter in Pau, behind one of those windows. I was tempted say: Listen, Miriam, let's forget about everything else and spend the winter behind one of these windows, in this city where nobody knows us.

When we got to Biarritz it was Saturday; the rally was to be the next day. I thought we'd go to the Hôtel des Palais and take two rooms there, but she chose to go elsewhere, to the Hôtel d'Angleterre, and she signed the register in my name. In luxury hotels, too, they don't ask to see a woman's papers. She was hiding out, obviously, and I was haunted by the strange sentence she had pronounced on the day of our first meeting, a subject to which she refused to return. I put my hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes—we had gone down to the beach at sunset, seagulls were standing around, a sign of bad weather, they say, and some children were playing in the sand. "I want to know," I told her, and she said: "Tomorrow you'll know everything. Tomorrow evening, after the rally, we'll meet here on the beach and go for a drive in the car. Don't insist, please."

The rally rules demanded that every driver be dressed in the style of the period of his car. I had bought a pair of baggy Zouave-style trousers and a tan cloth cap with a visor. "This is a show," I said to Miriam; "it's not a race, it's a fashion parade." But she said no, I'd see. Competition wasn't the order of the day, but almost. The course ran along the ocean, a road riddled with curves hanging over the water: Bidart, Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Domibane and, finally, San Sebastian. We set out three by three, our names drawn by lot, regardless of the type of car. The time was to be clocked and calculated according to each car's horsepower. And so we started out with a 1928 Hispano-Suiza, called La Boulogne, and a bright red 1922 Lambda, a superb creation (suffice it to say that Mussolini had one). Not that the Hispano-Suiza was to be sneezed at; it was definitely elegant, with its bottle-green coupé body and long chrome hood. We were among the first to take off, at ten o'clock in the morning. It was a fine typically Atlantic day, with a cool breeze and clouds fitting across the sun. The Hispano-Suiza took off like a shot. "We'll let it go," I said to Miriam; "I refuse to let others set the pace; we'll catch up when I feel like it." The Lambda stayed quietly behind. It was driven by a fellow with a black moustache, accompanied by a young girl, probably rich Italians, who smiled at us and every now and then called out *ciao*. They remained behind us on all the curves until Saint-Jean-de-Luz, then they passed us at Hendaye, the border

town, and began to slow up on the straight, flat road to Domibane. I thought it was strange that they should linger at this particular point. We had passed the Hispano-Suiza before arriving at Irun; now I meant to step on the accelerator and I expected the driver of the Lambda to do likewise. Instead, he let us pass with the greatest of ease. For a hundred yards or so we were side by side; the girl waved and laughed. "They're out for a good time," I said to Miriam. They caught up with us at the end of the straight, at which point there were two nasty curves in rapid succession. We'd tried them out the evening before, and they were imprinted on my memory. Miriam cried out when she saw them coming at us, pushing us towards the precipice. Instinctively I braked and then accelerated, managing to hit the Lambda. It was a hard, quick blow, enough to throw the Lambda off the road, to the left, where it slithered along the inside embankment for about twenty yards. I was following the scene in the rear-view mirror as the Lambda lost a fender against a pole, skidded towards the centre of the road and then back to the left where, having run out of all impetus, it bogged down in a pile of dirt. Plainly the passengers were not injured. I was drenched with cold sweat. Miriam clasped my arm. "Don't stay," she said, "please, please don't stay," and I drove on. San Sebastian was directly below us; no one had witnessed the incident. After passing the finish line I made for the improvised, open-air garage, but I didn't get out of the car. "It was intentional," I said; "they did it on purpose." Miriam was very pale, and speechless, as if petrified. "I'm going to the police to report it," I said. "Please," she murmured. "But don't you see that they did it on purpose?" I shouted. "That they were trying to kill us?" She looked at me, with an expression half troubled, half imploring. "You can take care of the car," I said; "get the bumper straightened while I walk around." And I got out, slamming the door; there was nothing seriously wrong with the car and the whole thing could have been just a bad dream. I wandered around San Sebastian, especially along the sea. It's a fine city, with those white late nineteenth-century buildings. Then I went into an enormous café—the sort you find only in Spain, the walls lined with mirrors and a restaurant attached to it—and ate some fried fish.

Miriam was waiting in the car, near the garage. She had put on make-up and regained her composure and the fear was gone. Mechanics straightened the bumper, the rally was over and people were streaming away. I asked her if we'd won anything. "I don't know," she answered, "it doesn't matter, let's go back to the hotel." I didn't notice the time; it must have been around three. As far as Irun we didn't say a word. At the border, when they saw that we'd taken part in the rally they waved us by, and we were back in France. It was only then that I noticed. I noticed by pure chance, because we had the sun at our backs and its reflection on the radiator ornament bothered me, as if it were sparking in a mirror. Coming the other way, that morning, it hadn't been a bother because the wood had to some extent absorbed the chrome, leaving it opaque. I stopped the car, but I didn't get out and look more closely because I already knew. "They've changed the elephant," I said. "This one is in metal, steel or silver, I don't know which, but it's not the same." Then I thought of

something else, something absurd, but I voiced it: "I want to see what's inside." Miriam looked at me and paled. Once more she was ashen grey, as at the time of the incident, and seemed to be trembling. "I'll tell you about it this evening," she said; "please, my husband will be here in a few hours and I want to go." "Is he the one you're afraid of?" I asked. "When I first met you, you told me something, do you remember? Is he the one?" She squeezed my hand, trembling. "Let's go, please," she said, "don't let's waste any more time. I want to go back to the hotel."

We made love intensely, almost convulsively, as if it were a last act, dictated by an impulse of survival. I lay, dazed, between the sheets, without sleeping, in the sort of drowsy state that allows the mind to wander from image to image. Before my eyes there paraded Albert and the Pegasus body shop, the attic on the square in Pau, a small metal elephant, a ribbonlike road along a cliff overlooking the ocean, with Miriam standing at the edge of the precipice until the Count noiselessly crept up on her and pushed her over, and she fell, hugging the handbag which she never let go. That's how my mind was working when Miriam got up and went into the bathroom. My right arm travelled down the side of the bed to the floor, searching for the bag; my hand delicately opened it and felt the butt of a revolver. Unconsciously I took it; got quickly out of bed and dressed. I looked at my watch; there was plenty of time. When Miriam came out of the bathroom she grasped the situation but did not object. I told her to pack and wait for me. "No," she said, "I'll wait for you on the beach; I'm afraid to stay alone in a hotel room." "At half-past nine," I said. "Leave the car with me," she said; "It's wiser for you to go in a taxi." I went down to pay the bill and caught a cab. Mist was falling. I got out near the station and wandered about, wondering what I was going to do and knowing perfectly well that I hadn't the slightest notion. It seemed perfectly ridiculous to wait for a man I'd seen twice in my life, and what for? To threaten him, to say that I knew he meant to kill his wife? And what if he wouldn't give up the idea? What would I do if he reacted? I turned the little toylike revolver over and over in my pocket. There were a few people in the station, the loudspeaker announced the arrival of the train and I hid, trying to look casual, behind a column on the platform. After all, he already knew me. Shall I face up to him there, I wondered, or follow him along the street? The hand gripping the revolver was sweaty. At this point people began getting off the train: a group of carefree Spaniards, a nursemaid with two blond children, a newly-wed couple, a few tourists. Finally the railway attendants opened all the train doors and, armed with brooms and suction pumps, began to clean up. A few seconds went by before I realized that he hadn't been on the train at all. Suddenly I was stricken with panic; not exactly panic but tremendous anxiety. I raced through the station, hailed a taxi, and made for the Hôtel des Palais. I could have gone on foot, but I was in a hurry. The hotel was magnificent, one of the oldest in the city, a majestic yet airy white structure. The receptionist examined the register from start to finish and from finish to start, running his finger down the list of guests. "No," he said, "we've no guest by that name." "Perhaps he hasn't arrived yet; look at the reservations, will you?" He took his list and examined it

with the same care. "No, sir, I'm sorry, but there's nothing." I asked for the telephone and called the Hôtel d'Angleterre. "The lady left shortly after you," said the desk clerk. "Are you sure?" "Yes, she handed in the key and went off in the car; the porter loaded the luggage." I left the Hôtel des Palais and walked to the beach, which was only a few steps away. I went down the steps and walked slowly over the sand. It was half-past nine, a mist had fallen and the waves were high; summer nights at Biarritz can be chilly. At the place where we were to meet there was a bathhouse with a row of deck chairs. I sat down on one and looked out to sea. I heard a church bell ring out ten o'clock, then eleven and twelve. The revolver was still in my pocket; I was tempted to throw it into the ocean, but I couldn't do it, I don't know why.

Do you know, once I put an advertisement in *Le Figaro*: "Lost elephant looking for 1927 Bugatti." That's a good one, isn't it? But you've made me drink too much, Monsieur, although when it comes to drinking you're good company. Sometimes, when you've drunk a bit, reality is simplified; the gaps between one thing and another are closed, everything hangs together and you say to yourself: I've got it. Just like a dream.

But why are you interested in other people's stories? You too must be unable to fill in the gaps. Can't you be satisfied with your own dreams?

*Translated from the Italian by Frances Frenaye*



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for Books and Writers  
by *Bamber Gascoigne*

## Antonio Tabucchi (1943-2012)

Italian writer, a master of the short story and novella, professor of Portuguese language and literature. As a scholar and translator Tabucchi was especially known for his work on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. Although Tabucchi did not belong to a particular literary 'school' or current, his stories constantly play in line with postmodern narration techniques with the contradiction between author and reader.

**"He blew his nose again and went on: Besides, the one hundred *escudo* notes are cool, they've got a picture of Fernando Pessoa on them, and now let me ask *you* a question, do you like Pessoa? Very much, I replied, I could even tell you a good story about him, but it's not worth it"...** (from *Requiem: A Hallucination*, 1992)

Antonio Tabucchi was born in Pisa, in Tuscany, the son of Antonio Tabucchi, a horse trader, and Tina Pardella. He grew up in his maternal grandparents' home in Vecchiano, a village not far from Pisa, which was bombed the Allies during WW II. Tabucchi was educated at the University of Pisa and graduated in 1969 with the thesis *Surrealism in Portugal*. He then furthered his education at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. As a novelist Tabucchi made his debut in 1975 with *Piazza d'Italia*, which sought to chart "a short history of the last hundred years of Italy, in tragicomic style", as the author himself said. Although the work had some elements in common with Gabriel García Márquez's magical realist novel *Cien años de soledad*, beginning with the flexible time concept, Tabucchi dismissed similarities as superficial.

Tabucchi's first collection of short stories, *Il gioco del rovescio* (1981, Letter from Casablanca), won the Pozzale-Luigi Russo Prize. From 1978 to 1987 Tabucchi worked as a lecturer in literature at the University of Genoa. In 1991 he became Professor of Portuguese at the University of Sienna. His time Tabucchi divided between Lisbon, and Italy. He was also a staff member of the Italian Institute of Culture in Lisbon until 1991. Tabucchi's columns appeared in *Corriere della Sera*, the leading

Italian newspaper, and *El País*, the most influential Spanish newspaper.

After reading 'Tabacaria,' a poem by Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) on a trip to France, Tabucchi became fascinated by the Portuguese poet, sharing this interest with writers such as the Nobel laureate José Saramago (1922-2010) and the South-African poet Roy Campbell (1901-1957). Pessoa, who masqueraded behind literary alter egos, was relatively unknown during his life time, and died in obscurity. Tabucchi edited in Italian Pessoa's poems and published critical studies on him, some of which have been collected in *Un baule pieno di gente* (1990) and *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa* (1994), in which Tabucchi examined the last three days in the life of Pessoa. In *Sogni di sogni*, a collection of short stories of dreams of famous writers and artists, one of the dreamers is Pessoa, who meets his heteronym Alberto Caeiro in South-Africa on March 7, 1914. You must listen to my voice, Caeiro tells his visitor. (Next day, the 8th of March, 1914, Pessoa began to write poetry.)

The question of identity has been a central theme in Tabucchi's fiction. In *Il filo dell'orizzonte* (1986), written in the form of the detective novel, the protagonist is a former medical student, Spino. His name refers to the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), who argued that if reality is both thought and thing, anything whatever can be appropriately interpreted in two ways. Spino tries to solve the mystery around the death of Carlo Noboldi, whose identity is elusive. Thus, the body of Noboldi is a thing, but it also unlocks the philosophical dimensions of life and death. In *Notturmo indiano* (1984) the narrator travels to India to search his friend, Xavier, who starts to resemble the narrator's alter ego. Eventually Xavier becomes the narrator.

*Requiem; un'allucinazione* (1992) was originally written in Portuguese and later translated into Italian. It was Tabucchi's homage to Lisbon and the Portuguese language, and captured the melancholy mood called *saudade*, an inexplicable longing, a sense of the simultaneous beauty and inescapable sadness of life. In *Sostiene Pereira. Una testimonianza* (1994), set in Lisbon in 1938, a widowed and overweight cultural editor takes stand against Salazar's regime. The narrator relates Pereira's testimony of an era,



when freedom of expression was under attack. The book became a bestseller, and in Italy the figure of Peraira was adopted by the left-wing opposition in their parliamentary election campaign. The target was the media magnate, soon-to-be Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose right-wing coalition won the 1994 election.

*La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* (1997, The Missing Head of Damasceno Monteiro) partly drew on a report by the Council of Europe on police violence and prophetically denounced the involvement of the Portuguese National Guard. In the story of a murder investigation the guilty party, and the corrupt system, goes unpunished. Tabucchi was criticized by the Portuguese press for his portrayal of police brutality.

Tabucchi was one of the founders of the International Parliament of Writers, which among other activities maintains a network of refuge cities for writers and their families. *La gastrite di Platone* (1998), about the function of the intellectual, Tabucchi dedicated to the memory of Leonardo Sciascia and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Opposing Umberto Eco's view, that the intellectual must stand aloof from practical revolutionary activity, Tabucchi argued that the intellectual can contribute "to creating a state of crisis is he or she is convinced of his or her position."

*Si Sta facendo Sempre Più Tardi* (2001, It's Getting Later All the Time) renewed the traditional epistolary novel. The book consist of 17 letters composed by unidentified men, but the 18th letter, written by an oracular woman, responds to them all. Although Tabucchi's stories have surrealistic elements, they do not belong to the realm of fantasy, from which his countryman Italo Calvino drew a good deal of his ideas. Often Tabucchi deals with painful periods of European history, the Spanish Civil War, Fascism, the Red Brigades era. His writing is clear, but much is left unsaid, and the mood is often melancholic and dreamlike. "Literature for me isn't a workaday job," Tabucchi has said, "but something which involves desires, dreams and fantasy."

Tabucchi's awards include Inedito Prize in 1975, Pozzale Luigi Russo Prize in 1981, the French "Medicis Etranger" in 1987, Viareggio and Campiello Prizes in 1994, and the Nossack Prize from the Leibniz Academy in 1999. In 1989

Tabucchi was conferred the title of "Comendador da Ordem do Infante Dom Enrique", by the President of the Portuguese Republic, Mario Soares. In 1996 he was made "Officier des Arts et Lettres" in France. Tabucchi was married to María José Lancastre, a native of Lisbon; they had two children. With her Tabucchi also translated much of Pessoa's work into Italian.

After Roberto Saviano, the writer of *Gomorrah*, revealed that Naples-area mafia wants to kill him because of the book and he has to flee the country, Tabucchi said that the mafia have "Italy over a barrel, . . . this is proof of that". Renato Schifani, the president of the Italian senate, decided in 2009 to take Tabucchi to court for an article he wrote for *L'Unita*. Tabucchi had referred to his former connections to people condemned for mafia. A petition, 'Nous soutenons Antonio Tabucchi,' published in *Le Monde*, was signed by such well-known writers as Martin Amis, Stefano Benni, Yves Bonnefoy, Patrick Chamoiseau, Antonio Lobo Antunes, Claudio Magris, Orhan Pamuk, Philip Roth, and José Saramago. Tabucchi died of cancer on 25 March, 2012, in Lisbon.

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