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ITALO CALVINO

Marcovaldo

or

The Seasons in the City

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
William Weaver

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Published by Vintage 2001

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English translation © Secker & Warburg 1983

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First published in Great Britain by Secker & Warburg in 1983

Vintage
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.vintage-classics.info

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited
can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

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

ISBN 9780099428541

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Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



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

Author's note:

These stories take place in an industrial city of northern Italy. The first in the series were written in the early 1950s and thus are set in a very poor Italy, the Italy of neo-realistic movies. The last stories date from the mid-60s, when the illusions of an economic boom flourished.

I.C.

ladies in straw hats, and dogs, dogs, dogs, from toy poodles to Saint Bernards: you couldn't see even an inch of the river's surface. And Marcovaldo, as he flew, was uncertain whether he would fall onto a rubber mattress or into the arms of a Junoesque matron, but of one thing he was certain: not even a drop of water would touch him.

AUTUMN

7. *The lunch-box*

The joys of that round and flat vessel, or lunch-box, known as the "pietanziera", consist first of all in its having a screw-on top. The action of unscrewing the cover already makes your mouth water, especially if you don't yet know what is inside, because, for example, it's your wife who prepares the vessel for you every morning. Once the box is uncovered, you see your food packed there: salami and lentils, or hard-boiled eggs and beets, or else polenta and codfish, all neatly arranged within that circumference as the continents and oceans are set on the maps of the globe; and even if the food is scant it gives the effect of being substantial and compact. The cover, once it has been removed, serves as a plate, and so there are two receptacles and you can begin to divide the contents.

Marcovaldo, the handyman, having unscrewed the lid of his box and swiftly inhaled its aroma, grabs the cutlery that he has always carried in his pocket, wrapped in a bundle, ever since he began eating his noon meal from the lunch-box instead of returning home. The fork's first jabs serve to rouse those benumbed victuals a bit, to give the prominence and attraction of a dish just set on the table to those foods that have been cramped inside there for so many hours. Then you begin to see that there isn't much, and you think:

Best to eat it slowly. But, rapid and ravenous, the first forkfuls have already been raised to the mouth.

The immediate sensation is the sadness of eating cold food, but the joys promptly begin again, as you find the flavors of the family board, transported to an unusual setting. Marcovaldo has now begun chewing slowly: he is seated on a bench by an avenue, near the place where he works; since his house is far away and to go there at noon costs time and tram tickets, he brings his lunch in the box, bought for the purpose, and he eats in the open air, watching the people go by, and then he refreshes himself at a drinking fountain. If it's autumn and the sun is out, he chooses places where an occasional ray strikes; the shiny red leaves that fall from the trees serve him as napkins; the salami skins go to stray dogs, who are quick to become his friends; and the sparrows collect the bread crumbs, at a moment when no one is going past in the avenue.

As he eats, he thinks: Why am I so happy to taste the flavor of my wife's cooking here, when at home, among the quarrels and tears, the debts that crop up in every conversation, I can't enjoy it? And then he thinks: Now I remember, these are the leftovers from last night's supper. And he is immediately seized again by discontent, perhaps because he has to eat leftovers, cold and a bit soured, perhaps because the aluminum of the lunch-box gives the food a metallic taste, but the notion lodged in his head is: The thought of Domitilla manages to spoil my meals even when I'm far away from her.

At that point, he realizes he has come almost to the end, and again this dish seems to him something very special and rare, and he eats with enthusiasm and devotion the final remains on the bottom of the plate, the ones that taste most of metal. Then, gazing at the empty, greasy receptacle, he is again overcome by sadness.

Then he wraps everything up and puts it in his pocket, stands; it's still early to go back to work; in the big pocket of his heavy jacket the cutlery drums against the empty

lunch-box. Marcovaldo goes to a wine-shop and has them pour him a glass, filled to the brim; or else to a café where he sips a little cup of coffee; then he looks at the pastries in the glass case, the boxes of candies and nougat, persuades himself that he doesn't want any, that he doesn't want anything at all; for a moment he watches the table-football to convince himself that he wants to kill time, not appetite. He goes back into the street. The trams are crowded again, it is almost the hour to return to work, and he heads in that direction.

It so happened that his wife Domitilla, for personal reasons, bought a great quantity of sausage and turnips. And for three evenings in a row, Marcovaldo found sausage and turnips for supper. Now, that sausage must have been made of dog meat; the smell alone was enough to kill your appetite. As for the turnips, this pale and shifty vegetable was the only one Marcovaldo had never been able to bear.

At noon, there they were again: his sausage and turnips, cold and greasy, in the lunch-box. Forgetful as he was, he always unscrewed the lid with curiosity and gluttony, never remembering what he had eaten for supper the previous night; and every day brought the same disappointment. The fourth day, he stuck his fork into it, sniffed once again, rose from the bench, and holding the open lunch-box in his hand, walked absently along the street. The passers-by saw this man carrying a fork in one hand and a plate of sausage in the other, apparently unable to bring himself to raise the first forkful to his mouth.

From a window a voice said: "Hey, mister!"

Marcovaldo raised his eyes. On the mezzanine floor of a grand villa, a boy was standing at a window, his elbows on the sill, where a dish had been set.

"Hey, mister! What are you eating?"

"Sausage and turnips!"

"Lucky you," the boy said.

"Mmm . . ." Marcovaldo replied, vaguely.

"Imagine! I'm supposed to eat fried brains . . ."

Marcovaldo looked at the dish on the sill. There were fried brains, soft and curly as a pile of clouds. His nostrils twitched.

"What? Don't you like brains?" he asked the little boy.

"No. They locked me up in here to punish me, because I wouldn't eat it. But I'll throw it out of the window."

"And you like sausage?"

"Oh, yes, it looks like a snake . . . We never eat it at our house . . ."

"Then you give me your plate and I'll give you mine."

"Hurrah!" The child was overjoyed. He held out to the man his porcelain plate with heavy silver fork, and the man gave him the lunch-box with the tin fork.

And so both fell to eating: the boy at the windowsill and Marcovaldo seated on a bench opposite, both licking their lips and declaring they had never tasted such good food.

But then, behind the boy, a governess appears, with her hands on her hips.

"Well, young man! My goodness! What are you eating?"

"Sausage!" the boy says.

"And who gave it to you?"

"That gentleman there," and he pointed to Marcovaldo, who interrupted his slow and earnest chewing of a morsel of brains.

"Throw it away! The smell! Throw it away!"

"But it's good . . ."

"And your plate? The fork?"

"The gentleman has them . . ." and he pointed again to Marcovaldo, who was holding the fork in the air with a bit of half-eaten brains stuck on it.

The woman began yelling. "Thief! Thief! The silver!"

Marcovaldo stood up, looked for another moment at the half-finished dish of fried brains, went to the window, set plate and fork on the sill, stared at the governess with contempt, and withdrew. He heard the clatter of the

lunch-box on the pavement, the boy's crying, the rude slam of the window. He bent to pick up the lunch-box and its cover. They were a bit dented; the cover no longer fitted properly. He jammed everything into his pocket and went off to work.

employed by 'Tomahawk Cognac', not by Spaak. I had come to examine the possibility of a sign on this roof. But do go on: I'm interested in what you're saying."

And so it was that Marcovaldo, half an hour later, concluded a deal with Tomahawk Cognac, Spaak's chief rival. The children should empty their slingshots at the GNAC every time the sign was turned on again.

"That should be the straw that will break the camel's back," Signor Godifredo said. He was not mistaken: already on the verge of bankruptcy because of its large advertising outlay, Spaak and Co. took the constant damaging of its most beautiful neon signs as a bad omen. The sign that now sometimes said COGAC and sometimes CONAC or CONC spread among the firm's creditors the impression of financial difficulties; at a certain point, the advertising agency refused to make further repairs if arrears were not paid; the turned-off sign increased the alarm among the creditors; and Spaak went out of business.

In the sky of Marcovaldo the full moon shone, round, in all its splendor.

It was in the last quarter when the electricians came back to clamber over the roof opposite. And that night, in letters of fire, letters twice as high and broad as before, they could read TOMAHAWK COGNAC, and there was no longer moon or firmament or sky or night, only TOMAHAWK COGNAC, TOMAHAWK COGNAC, TOMAHAWK COGNAC, which blinked on and off every two seconds.

The worst hit was Fiordaligi; the garret of the lunar girl had vanished behind an enormous, impenetrable W.

AUTUMN

15. *The rain and the leaves*

At his job, among his various other responsibilities, Marcovaldo had to water every morning the potted plant in the entrance hall. It was one of those green house-plants with an erect, thin stalk from which, on both sides, broad, long-stemmed, shiny leaves stick out: in other words, one of those plants that are so plant-shaped, with leaves so leaf-shaped, that they don't seem real. But still it was a plant, and as such it suffered, because staying there, between the curtain and the umbrella-stand, it lacked light, air, and dew. Every morning Marcovaldo discovered some nasty sign: the stem of one leaf drooped as if it could no longer support the weight, another leaf was becoming spotted like the cheek of a child with measles, the tip of a third leaf was turning yellow; until, one or the other, plop!, was found on the floor. Meanwhile (what most wrung his heart) the plant's stalk grew taller, taller, no longer making orderly fronds, but naked as a pole, with a clump at the top that made it resemble a palm-tree.

Marcovaldo cleared away the fallen leaves, dusted the healthy ones, poured at the foot of the plant (slowly, so the pot wouldn't spill over and dirty the tiles) half a watering-can of water, immediately absorbed by the earth in the pot. And to these simple actions he devoted an attention he gave no other task of his, almost like the compassion felt for the

troubles of a relative. And he sighed, whether for the plant or himself: because in that lanky, yellowing bush within the company walls he recognized a companion in misfortune.

The plant (this was how it was called, simply, as if any more specific name were useless in a setting where it alone had to represent the vegetable kingdom) had become such a part of Marcovaldo's life that it dominated his thoughts at every hour of the day and night. When he examined the gathering clouds in the sky, his gaze now was no longer that of a city-dweller, wondering whether or not he should wear his raincoat, but that of a farmer expecting from day to day the end of a drought. And the moment when he raised his head from his work and saw, against the light, beyond the little window of the warehouse, the curtain of rain that had begun to fall, thick and silent, he would drop everything, run to the plant, take the pot in his arms, and set it outside in the courtyard.

The plant, feeling the water run over its leaves, seemed to expand, to offer the greatest possible surface to the drops, and in its joy it seemed to don its most brilliant green: or at least so Marcovaldo thought, as he lingered to observe it, forgetting to take shelter.

They stayed there in the courtyard, man and plant, facing each other, the man almost feeling plant-sensations under the rain, the plant – no longer accustomed to the open air and to the phenomena of nature – amazed, much like a man who finds himself suddenly drenched from head to foot, his clothes soaked. Marcovaldo, his nose in the air, sniffed the smell of the rain, a smell – for him – already of woods and fields, and he pursued with his mind some vague memories. But among these memories there surfaced, clearer and closer, that of the rheumatic aches that afflicted him every year; and then, hastily, he went back inside.

When working hours were over, the place had to be locked up. Marcovaldo asked the warehouse foreman: "Can I leave the plant outside there, in the courtyard?"

The foreman, Signor Viligelmo, was the kind of man

who avoided burdensome responsibilities: "Are you crazy? What if somebody steals it? Who'll answer for that?"

But Marcovaldo, seeing how much good the rain did the plant, couldn't bring himself to put it back inside: it would mean wasting that gift of heaven. "I could keep it until tomorrow morning . . ." he suggested. "I'll load it on the rack of my bike and take it home . . . That way it'll get as much rain as possible."

Signor Viligelmo thought it over a moment, then concluded: "Then you're taking the responsibility." And he gave his consent.

Under the pouring rain, Marcovaldo crossed the city, bent over the handle-bars of his motorbike, bundled up in a rain-proof wind-breaker. Behind him, on the rack, he had tied the pot; and bike, man, and plant seemed a sole thing, indeed the hunched and bundled man disappeared, and you saw only a plant on a bicycle. Every now and then, from beneath his hood, Marcovaldo looked around until he could see a dripping leaf flapping behind him: and every time it seemed to him that the plant had become taller and more leafy.

At home, a garret with its window-sill on the roofs, the moment Marcovaldo arrived with the pot in his arms, the children started dancing around it.

"The Christmas tree! The Christmas tree!"

"No, no, what are you talking about? Christmas is a long way off yet!" Marcovaldo protested. "Watch out for those leaves, they're delicate!"

"We're already like sardines in a can, in this house," Domitilla grumbled. "If you bring a tree in, too, we'll have to move out . . ."

"It's only a plant! I'll put it on the window-sill . . ."

The shadowy form of the plant on the sill could be seen from the room. Marcovaldo, at supper, didn't look at his plate, but beyond the window-panes.

Ever since they had left the half-basement for the garret, the life of Marcovaldo and family had greatly improved.

However, living up under the roof also had its drawbacks: the ceiling, for example, leaked a little. The drops fell in four or five distinct places, at regular intervals; and Marcovaldo put basins under them, or pots. On rainy nights when all of them were in bed, they could hear the tic-toc-tuc of the various drips, which made him shudder as if at a premonition of rheumatism. That night, on the contrary, every time Marcovaldo woke from his restless sleep and pricked up his ears, the tic-toc-tuc seemed cheery music to him: it told him the rain was continuing, mild and steady, and was nourishing the plant, driving the sap up along its delicate stalks, unfolding the leaves like sails. Tomorrow, when I look out, I'll find it has grown! he thought.

But even though he had thought about this, when he opened the window in the morning, he couldn't believe his eyes: the plant now filled half the window, the leaves had at least doubled in number, and no longer drooped under their own weight, but were erect and sharp as swords. He climbed down the steps, with the pot clutched to him, tied it to the rack, and rushed to work.

The rain had stopped, but the weather was still uncertain. Marcovaldo hadn't even climbed out of his seat when a few drops started falling again. "Since the rain does it so much good, I'll leave it in the courtyard again," he thought.

In the warehouse, every now and then he went to peek out of the window onto the courtyard. His distraction from work did not please the foreman. "Well, what's wrong with you this morning? Always looking out of the window."

"It's growing! Come and see for yourself, Signor Viligelmo!" And Marcovaldo motioned to him, speaking almost in a whisper, as if the plant were not to overhear. "Look how it's growing! It really has grown, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it's grown quite a bit," the boss conceded, and for Marcovaldo this was one of those satisfactions that life on the job rarely grants the personnel.

It was Saturday. Work ended at one and they were all off until Monday. Marcovaldo would have liked to take the

plant home with him again, but now, since it was no longer raining, he couldn't think of any pretext. The sky, however, was not clear: black cumulus clouds were scattered here and there. He went to the foreman, who, a meteorology enthusiast, kept a barometer hanging over his desk. "What's the forecast, Signor Viligelmo?"

"Bad, still bad," he said. "For that matter, though it's not raining here, it is in the neighborhood where I live. I just telephoned my wife."

"In that case," Marcovaldo quickly proposed, "I'll take the plant on a little trip where it's raining," and, no sooner said than done, he fixed the pot again on the rack of his bike.

Saturday afternoon and Sunday Marcovaldo spent in this fashion: bouncing on the seat of his motorbike, the plant behind him, he studied the sky, seeking a cloud that seemed in the right mood, then he would race through the streets until he encountered rain. From time to time, turning around, he saw the plant a bit taller: high as the taxis, as the delivery trucks, as the trams! And with broader and broader leaves, from which the rain slid onto his rainproof hood like a shower.

By now it was a tree on two wheels, speeding through the city, bewildering traffic cops, drivers, pedestrians. And the clouds, at the same time, sped along the paths of the wind, spattering a neighborhood with rain, then abandoning it; and the passers-by, one after another, stuck out their hands and closed their umbrellas; and along streets and avenues and squares, Marcovaldo chased his cloud, bent over his handle-bars, bundled in his hood from which only his nose protruded, his little motor putt-putting along at full tilt, as he kept the plant in the trajectory of the drops, as if the trail of rain that the cloud drew after itself had got caught in the leaves and thus all rushed ahead, drawn by the same power: wind, cloud, rain, plant, wheels.

On Monday Marcovaldo presented himself, empty-handed, to Signor Viligelmo.

"Where's the plant?" the foreman asked at once.

"Outside. Come."

"Where?" Viligelmo said. "I don't see it."

"It's that one over there. It's grown a bit . . ." and he pointed to a tree that reached the third floor. It was no longer planted in its old pot but in a kind of barrel, and instead of using his bike Marcovaldo had had to borrow a little motor-truck.

"Now what?" the boss was infuriated. "How can we get it into the entrance hall? It won't go through the doors any more!"

Marcovaldo shrugged.

"The only thing," Viligelmo said, "is to give it back to the nursery, in exchange for a plant of the right size!"

Marcovaldo climbed onto his bike again. "I'll go."

He resumed his dash through the city. The tree filled the center of the streets with green. The cops, concerned about traffic, stopped him at every intersection; then – when Marcovaldo explained that he was taking the plant back to the nursery, to get rid of it – they let him go on. But, taking first this street then that, Marcovaldo couldn't bring himself to turn into the one to the nursery. He hadn't the heart to give up his creature, now that he had raised it with such success: nothing in his whole life, it seemed to him, had given him the satisfaction he had received from that plant.

And so he went on, to and fro among streets and squares and embankments and bridges. And foliage worthy of a tropical forest spread out until it covered his head, back, arms, until he had disappeared into the green. And all these leaves and stems of leaves and the stalk, too, (which had remained very slim) swayed and swayed as if in a constant trembling, whether a downpour of rain were still striking them, or whether the drops became rarer, or stopped altogether.

The rain ceased. It was the hour towards sunset. At the end of the streets, in the space between the houses, a light mixed with rainbow settled. The plant, after that impetuous effort of growth that had involved it as long as the rain

lasted, was virtually exhausted. Continuing his aimless race, Marcovaldo didn't notice that, behind him, the intense green of the leaves, one by one, was turning to yellow, a golden yellow.

For quite a while already, a procession of motorbikes and cars and bicycles and children had been following the tree that was moving about the city, without Marcovaldo's becoming aware of them, and they were shouting: "The baobab! The babobab!" and with great "Ooooh's!" of wonder they watched the yellowing of the leaves. When one leaf dropped and flew off, many hands were raised to catch it in flight.

A wind sprang up; the golden leaves, in gusts, darted off in midair, spinning. Marcovaldo still thought that, behind him, he had the green, thick tree, when all of a sudden – perhaps feeling himself unsheltered in the wind – he looked back. The tree was gone: there was only a thin stick, from which extended a monstrosity of bare stems, and one last yellow leaf at the top still. In the light of the rainbow everything else seemed black: the people on the sidewalks, the façades of the houses that served as backdrop; and over this black, in midair, the golden leaves twirled, shining, hundreds of them; and hundreds of hands, red and pink, rose from the darkness to grab them; and the wind lifted the golden leaves towards the rainbow there at the end of the street, and the hands, and the shouts; and it detached even the last leaf, which turned from yellow to orange, then red, violet, blue, green, then yellow again, and then vanished.