

Alberto Moravia

Roman Tales



Roman Tales

Hot weather tricks

In summer, perhaps because I am still young and have not yet adapted to the fact of being married and a father, I am often overtaken by a desire to run away. In summer in rich people's houses, they close the windows in the morning and the night's cool air stays in the spacious, darkened rooms where mirrors, marble tiles and wax-polished furniture gleam in the half-light. Everything is in its place, polished, restful, dark. If then you are thirsty, you will be brought a lovely iced drink on a tray; an orangeade or a lemonade, served in a crystal glass in which the ice cubes, when you stir them round make a cheerful sound which alone is enough to refresh you. In the homes of the poor, however, things happen differently. From the first hot day, the sultriness enters your poky little rooms and never goes away. You want to drink, but the tap in the kitchen gives out a water hot as soup. In the house, you can longer move around: it seems as if every object, furniture, clothes, utensils, has swollen up and is pressing down on your back. Everyone is in shirt sleeves, but the shirts are sweaty and reeking. If you close the windows you suffocate because the night air has not come into those two or three rooms where six people sleep. If you open them, the sun engulfs you and you feel as if you're in the street and everything smells of scalding metal, sweat and dust. With the heat, people also boil over, that is to say they become argumentative. The rich man, if he feels this way, goes deeper into his apartment, three rooms away. The poor, on the other hand, remain with the greasy dishes and the dirty glasses, nose to nose. The only other possibility is to leave the house.

One of those days, having had a good argument with the whole family; that is to say with my wife because the soup was salty and boiling, with my brother-in-law because he took my wife's side and, in my opinion, he had no right being unemployed and under my care, with my sister-in-law because she defended me and that annoyed me because I know that she does it to flirt because she's in love with me, with my mother because she tried to calm me down, with my father because he said he just wanted to eat in peace and finally with the baby because she had burst out crying, all of a sudden I got up, took my jacket from the back of the chair and simply said, "You know what? You've all got on my nerves, see you in October when it's cool" and I left the house. My poor wife ran after me and, leaning over the banister on the stairs, shouted that there was cucumber salad, my favourite. I told her to eat it herself and went out onto the street.

We live on the via Ostiense. Mechanically, I crossed the street and went towards the iron bridge next to the river port of Rome. It was two o'clock, the hottest time of the day with an

angry scirocco sky that looked like an eye that had taken a punch. At the bridge, I leaned on the bolted metal balustrade; it was scorching. The Tiber, confined between the wharves, down below by the uneven embankments, looked, not least from its muddy colour, like an open sewer. The gasometer which seemed like the skeleton frame of a building after a fire, the furnaces of the gas factory, the silo towers, the pipes of the oil tanks, the pointed roof of the Thermoelectric Power Station all filled the horizon so that you would think yourself not in Rome, but in some northern industrial city.

I stood a while gazing at the Tiber, yellow and small with a barge, full of sacks of cement, moored against the bank. I started to laugh thinking that that trickle was called a port just like the ports of Genoa and Naples crowded with ships of all sizes. If I had really wanted to flee, from that port I could more or less have arrived at Fiumicino in time to eat fried fish with a view over the sea. Finally I moved off, crossed the bridge and walked towards the land on the other side of the Tiber. Although I lived close by, I had never before been here and didn't know where to go. Initially, I walked along a regular, tarred road although between barren fields strewn with rubbish. Then the road became an earth track and the rubbish became tall piles, almost small hills. I thought that I had ended up in the place where they come to dump all of Rome's rubbish; there was not a blade of grass to be seen but only waste paper, rusty cans, vegetable stumps, rubbish, all under a blinding light with a putrid stench of things gone bad. I felt lost, like someone who no longer wanted to walk on but, on the other hand, did not want to turn back. All of a sudden I heard someone calling "pss ... psss" like you do for a dog.

I turned round to see where the dog could be. But there were no dogs, although, with all that broken up rubbish it could well have been a place for stray dogs. I thought someone could be calling me and I looked towards where the call was coming from. In that moment, right behind the piles of rubbish, I saw a small shack that I hadn't noticed before; tiny and rickety with a corrugated iron roof. A blond child, perhaps eight years old, was standing at the door and beckoning me to come in. I looked at her. She had a white, grimy face with eyes highlighted underneath with violet, like a woman. Her hair full of fescue, fluff and powder made her head seem puffed up and prickly like a kite. Her clothing was simple, a hemp sack with four holes, two for the legs and two for the arms. No sooner had I turned around, she asked, "Are you a doctor?"

"No", I replied. "Why? Do you need a doctor?"

"Because if you're a doctor", she continued, "come inside. Mamma is poorly."

I didn't feel like carrying on explaining to her that I wasn't a doctor so I went into the shack. Initially it seemed as if I had entered a junk shop on the Campo di Fiori. Everything was hanging from the ceiling, clothes, socks, shoes, utensils, dishes, rags. Then I realised that they were their things, hung on nails for lack of furniture. Whilst ducking my head under all these hangings, I was turning this way and that, looking for the mother. With an almost furtive gesture, the child pointed out a pile of rags in a corner. Looking more closely, I realised that that pile of rags was staring at me with one bright eye, the other being covered by a lock of grey hair. Her appearance struck me; although she seemed to be an old woman, you could see she was young. Seeing me, she suddenly exclaimed, "Those who don't die, you see again."

The child burst out laughing like at the start of an entertaining show and crouched on the ground playing with some open tins of conserves. I said, "I really don't know you ... what's wrong? ... Is this child your daughter?"

She replied, "Absolutely ... and also yours."

The child laughed again to herself with head bowed. Thinking it was a joke, I replied, "She could be my daughter, but also someone else's."

"No" she said, half getting up from the ground and pointing her finger at me, "she is your own daughter and only yours ... idle, a layabout, a loafer, insolent ... couldn't be anyone else's."

At these insults the child began to laugh heartily as if she had been waiting for them. Offended, I said, "Watch your tongue ... I've already told you I don't know you."

"You don't know me, eh .. you don't know me but you came back ... if you didn't know me how did you manage to find your way here?"

"Layabout, insolent", the child began to sing quietly. By now I was sweating, partly from the suffocating heat and partly from anguish. "I was passing by chance ...", I said.

"Oh, of course, you poor thing ..." She turned towards the child and said, "Give me the bag." Quick as a flash, the child detached from the ceiling a small black velvet handbag all dirty and cracked and gave it to her. The mother opened it, took out a sheet of paper and said, "Here is the marriage certificate ... Elvira Proietti marries Ernesto Rapelli ... do you still deny it, Ernesto Rapelli?"

It struck me that I was indeed called Ernesto but, a bit shaken, I said, "I'm not Rapelli."

"Oh no?" The child was singing softly "Ernesto, Ernesto". The woman stood up. I had guessed correctly. For all the grey hair, wrinkles and no teeth, you could see that she was no more than thirty. "Oh no, so you're not Rapelli?" Hands on her hips, she came towards me, looked at me then shouted. "You are Rapelli... before God and men, you are Rapelli."

"I've understood", I said. "I can see that you're not well ... if it's alright with you, I think I'll go."

"Easy, just a moment... not so fast." Meanwhile, the child, brimming over with joy, was dancing around. The woman resumed, sarcastically, "Ernesto, big Ernesto ... who abandons his wife, runs away from home and doesn't get in touch for a year ... but do you know how we've got by ... me and this small child, in the year you've been away?"

"I don't know", I said abruptly, "and I don't want to know. Just let me leave."

"You tell him", she shouted at the child. "You tell him how we've managed, tell your father!"

"From charity" said the child merrily in a singsong voice, she too now coming towards me.

To tell the truth, I was now starting to feel really worried. All these coincidences: the name Ernesto, the fact that I too had run away from home, the additional fact that I too had a wife and daughter were giving me the feeling that I was no longer myself and at the same time that I was, but in a different way from usual. The woman, meanwhile, seeing my confusion, screamed in my face: "Do you know what happens to those who abandon the marital home? Prison ... do you understand you scoundrel? Prison."

This time I was really frightened and without speaking, I turned towards the door to leave. But someone was watching us from the doorway; a small, thin woman, poor but cleanly dressed. Seeing me looking lost, she said, "Don't listen to her ... she has the fixation that every man is her husband ... and that bitch of a daughter deliberately lures passers by into the house for the entertainment of hearing her scream and get agitated ... wait till I get hold of you, you evil witch." She made a gesture as if to give the child a slap but the child, quick as you like, avoided it and began to dance around me repeating cheerfully, "You believed us, tell the truth, you believed us and you were scared, you were scared ... you were scared."

"Elvira, this man isn't your husband", said the woman calmly. Immediately, as if convinced, Elvira went back to crouching in the corner. The woman, no longer bothering with me, went to the back of the shack and stirred something on a burner. "It's me who makes them something to eat", she explained, "it's true they get by on charity but the husband didn't run away, he died..."

I had had enough. I took a hundred lire from my wallet and gave it to the child who took it without a word. Then I left and retraced my steps; from the track to the tarred road and then across the bridge to the via Ostiense. At home, in comparison to the heat in the shack it was like going into a cave. And, although our few pieces of furniture were modest belongings, they were infinitely better than the nails on which those two unfortunates hung their rags. In the kitchen, they had already cleared the table but my wife brought out the cucumber salad that she had put aside for me and I ate it with bread, watching her washing the plates and placing them upright on the drainer. Then I got up and surprised her with a kiss on the neck and so we made our peace.

A few days later, I told my wife the story about the shack and decided to go back to see if I could do something for the child. By now, I was no longer afraid of being mistaken for Ernesto Rapelli. But, would you believe it? I couldn't find the shack, nor the woman, nor the child, nor the other thin woman who made them something to eat. I walked around for an hour in the blinding sun, between the mounds of rubbish and then, defeated, returned home. Since then, I have never been able to find the way. My wife, on the other hand, says that I made the whole story up out of guilt for having considered leaving her.

Don't go into it too deeply

Agnese could have warned me instead of leaving like that without even mentioning a rift. I don't claim to be perfect and if she had told me what was wrong, we could have discussed it. Instead, no. For two years of marriage, not a word. Then, making use of a moment when I wasn't there, she left furtively like servant girls do when they find a better position. She went away and even now, six months after she left me, I still don't understand why.

That morning, after having done the shopping at the local market (I like to do the food shopping myself: I know the prices, know what I want, I enjoy haggling, chatting, sampling and handling the produce, I want to know from what animal my steak comes and my apples from what basket), I had gone out again to buy a metre and a half of curtain fringe to sew on the curtains in the dining room. As I didn't want to spend too much, I searched around before finding something suitable in a shop on the via dell'Umiltà. When I got

home it was twenty past eleven and I went into the dining room to check the colour of the fringe against the curtains and immediately saw on the table the ink pot, the fountain pen and a letter. To be truthful, the thing that struck me first was an ink stain on the table cloth. I thought, "Look what a clumsy thing she is, she's stained the table cloth." I lifted off the ink pot, the pen and the letter and took the table cloth into the kitchen. There, rubbing hard with lemon, I managed to get the stain out. Then I went back into the dining room, put the table cloth back and only then remembered the letter. It was addressed to me, Alfredo. I opened it and read: "I've done the housework. You can cook your own lunch, you're so used to it. Farewell! I'm going back to Mamma. Agnese".

For a moment, I didn't understand any of it. Then I reread the letter and finally understood: Agnese had gone. She had left me after two years of marriage. From force of habit, I put the letter in the drawer of the sideboard where I put bills and correspondence and sat down on a stool next to the window. I didn't know what to think, I hadn't prepared for this and almost didn't believe it. While I was mulling things over like this, my gaze fell on the floor and I saw a small, white feather that must have come from the quilt when Agnese was dusting. I picked up the feather, opened the window and threw it out. Then, I took my hat and went out.

Whilst walking, and only on every other slab of the pavement to indulge one of my weaknesses, I began to ask myself just what I could have done to Agnese to make her leave me so spitefully, almost with the intention of offending me. First of all, I thought, let's see if Agnese could blame me for some betrayal, however slight. Immediately, I realised that there was none. I had never had much to do with women; I didn't understand them and they didn't understand me. You could even say that from the day I got married, they ceased to exist for me, to the extent that Agnese herself sometimes teased me by asking, "What would you do if you fell in love with another women?" And I would reply, "That's not possible. I love you and that feeling will last my whole life." Now, thinking back, I seem to remember that that "my whole life" had not pleased her. On the contrary, she had made a long face and had fallen silent.

Passing on to a completely different sort of idea, I wanted to examine whether, by chance, Agnese had left me on account of money and, in short, the way I treated her. But here too, I realised that I had a clear conscience. It's true that I didn't used to give her money apart from in exceptional circumstances, but what need did she have of money? I, myself, was always there, ready to pay. As for her treatment, well that wasn't bad either. Just judge for yourself. Cinema twice a week, twice to a cafe - and it didn't matter if she wanted an ice

cream or just an espresso -, a couple of illustrated magazines a month and the newspaper every day. In winter perhaps also the opera and, in summer, to my father's house at the resort of Marino. So much for the leisure activities. Turning then to clothes, here Agnese had even less to complain about. When she needed something, whether it be a bra, a pair of stockings or a scarf, I was always ready. I would go with her to the shops, choose the article with her and pay without any fuss. It was the same for the dressmakers and the milliners. There was never a time when she would say to me, "I need a hat, I need a dress", when I didn't reply "Let's go. I'll come with you." Moreover, it needs to be said that Agnese was not demanding: after the first year she almost completely stopped making clothes. Actually, it was me, now I think about it, who used to remind her that she needed this or that garment. But she would reply that she had things from the previous year and that it wasn't important; so much so that I came to think that, in this respect, she was different from other women and didn't care about dressing well.

Affairs of the heart then, and money, not the problem. There remained that which lawyers call personality incompatibility. Now, I asked myself what possible personality incompatibility could there have been between us if in two years we had never had an argument, not a single one. We always stood together; if there had been any incompatibility, it would surely have come out. But Agnese never contradicted me, in fact, you could say she hardly spoke. Some evenings we spent at a cafe or at home, she scarcely opened her mouth, it was me who did the talking. I don't deny I enjoy talking and hearing myself talk especially when I'm with a person with whom I'm familiar. I have a calm, regular voice, not high or low, rational and fluid. When I confront a subject, I dissect it from top to bottom in all its aspects. The subjects which I prefer are household ones. I love talking about the price of things, about the arrangement of furniture, about cooking, about central heating, in fact about any old nonsense. I would never tire of talking about these things, so much so that often I realise that I have started again from the beginning with the same line of argument. But that's fine, with a woman, these are the sort of talks that they like. Otherwise, what are you supposed to talk about? Anyway, Agnese used to listen to me attentively, at least that's how it seemed. Just once, whilst I was explaining the workings of the hot water boiler, I realised that she had fallen asleep. Waking her up, I asked her, "Am I boring you?" She immediately replied, "No, no. I was tired. I didn't sleep very well last night."

Husbands usually have the office or the shop or perhaps if they have nothing, they go for a stroll with their friends. But for me, my office, my shop, my friends were Agnese. I didn't leave her alone for a moment. Perhaps you will be surprised, but I even stood beside her

when she was cooking. I'm passionate about cooking and, every day, before meals, I would slip on an apron and help Agnese in the kitchen. I did a bit of everything; I peeled the potatoes, cut up the beans, prepared the *battuto*, kept an eye on the pans. I helped her so well that often she would say to me, "Look ... you do it ... I've got a headache... I'm going to lie down." And I would then cook by myself and, with the help of a recipe book, I was even capable of trying out new dishes. It was a shame that Agnese wasn't a big eater; on the contrary in recent times her appetite seemed to have gone away and she hardly touched food. Once, as a joke, she said to me. "You made a mistake being born a man ... you're a woman ... no, you're a housewife." I have to admit that in this comment there is a grain of truth. In fact, as well as cooking, I enjoy washing, ironing, sewing and even, in idle times, hem-stitching the handkerchiefs. As I have said, I never left her, even when a girl friend or her mother came round, even when it came into her head, I don't know why, to take English lessons. Just to be with her, I also resigned myself to learning that most difficult of languages. I was so attached to her that sometimes, even I felt ridiculous. Like the day when, not having heard something she had said quietly to me in a cafe, I followed her as far as the the toilets and the intendant stopped me reminding me that it was the women's section and I couldn't go in. Yes, a husband like me isn't easy to find. Often, she would say to me, "I have to go to such a place or see such a person; you wouldn't be interested." But I would reply, "I'll come along too. I've got nothing else on." She would then reply , "As far as I'm concerned, come along, but I warn you, you'll be bored." But on the contrary no, I didn't get bored and afterwards I would say to her, "You see, I didn't get bored." In short, we were inseparable!

Thinking about these things and still wondering in vain why Agnese had left me, I was close to my father's shop. He sells religious articles in the area around piazza della Minerva. My father is still a young man; black curly hair, black moustache, under which there is a smile I have never understood. Perhaps, through the habit of dealing with priests and devout people, he became kind, gentle and calm and always so well-mannered. But Mamma, who knows him well, says his nerves are all kept inside. So, I passed between those display cases full of chasubles and communion cups and went right to the back of the shop where he had his writing desk. As usual, he was doing his accounts, chewing his moustache and thinking something over. Breathlessly I told him, "Papa, Agnese has left me."

He looked up and it seemed to me that under his moustache he was smiling; but perhaps it was just an impression. He said, "I'm sorry, really I'm sorry ... and how did it happen?"

I told him how things had gone and concluded, "Of course I'm upset ... but above all, I would like to know why she left me."

"Don't you understand?" he asked perplexed.

"No."

He stayed silent for a moment then said with a sigh: "Alfredo, I'm sorry but I don't know what to say to you ... you're my son, I stand by you, I love you ... but you must think of your wife."

"Yes, but why did she leave me?"

He shook his head. "In your place, I wouldn't go into it too deeply ... let it be ... what does it matter to you to know the motives?"

"It matters a lot ... more than anything."

At that moment two priests came in and my father got up and going towards them said to me, "Come back later ... we'll talk ... I've got things to do now." I understood I couldn't expect any more from him and left.

Agnese's mother's home wasn't far off, in Corso Vittorio. I thought that the only person who could explain to me the mystery of her departure was Agnese herself and so I went there. I ran up the stairs and was ushered into the drawing room. But, instead of Agnese, her mother came in, a woman I couldn't bear, also a shop owner with died black hair, florid cheeks, smiling, sly, false. She was in a dressing gown with a rose on the front. Seeing me, she said with fake cordiality, "Oh, Alfredo, we see you so rarely in these parts."

I replied, "You know why, Mamma. Agnese has left me."

She said calmly, "Yes, she is here... my son. What can you do? Things like this happen."

"How can you answer me like that?"

She considered me a moment then asked, "Have you told your family?"

"Yes, my father."

"And what did he say?"

What did it matter to her to know what my father had said? I replied grudgingly, "You know what Papa is like ... he said I shouldn't go into it too deeply."

"He's right, my son ... don't go into it too deeply."

"But after all", I said getting heated, "why did she leave me? What did I do to her? Why aren't you telling me?"

Whilst I was talking all angry, my eye went to the table. It was covered with a tablecloth and on the tablecloth was a white embroidered doily and on the doily was a vase filled with carnations. But the doily was off centre. Mechanically, without even knowing what I was doing, whilst she watched me, smiling, without replying, I lifted up the vase and put the doily in the right place. She then said, "Bravo ... now the doily is right in the middle... I hadn't noticed it but you saw it right away ... bravo ... and now it's better if you leave, my son."

She had stood up meanwhile, and now I too stood up. I wanted to ask if I could see Agnese but I understood it was pointless and then I was afraid that if I had seen her, I would have lost my head and said something stupid. So I left and from that day, I have not seen my wife. Perhaps, one day, she will come back, considering that you don't find husbands like me every day of the week. But she won't cross my threshold again until she has explained why she left me.

