

BOOKS BY ITALO CALVINO

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Cosmicomics
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Difficult Loves
Mr. Palomar
The Uses of Literature
Under the Jaguar Sun
Six Memos for the Next Millennium
Road to San Giovanni

Italo Calvino

MARCOVALDO

OR

The seasons in the city

Translated from the Italian by
William Weaver

A Harvest Book
A Helen and Kurt Wolf Book
Harcourt, Inc.
Orlando Austin New York San Diego Toronto London

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www.HarcourtBooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Calvino, Italo.

Marcovaldo, or The seasons in the city.

Translation of: Marcovaldo, ovvero, Le stagioni in città.

"A Helen and Kurt Wolff book."

I. Title.

PQ4809.A45M313 1983 853'.9'14 83-4372

ISBN-13 978-0-15-157081-2 ISBN-10 0-15-157081-7

ISBN-13 978-0-15-657204-0 (pb) ISBN-10 0-15-657204-4 (pb)

Printed in the United States of America

U T S R O P O N M

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.

SPRING

1. Mushrooms in the city

The wind, coming to the city from far away, brings it unusual gifts, noticed by only a few sensitive souls, such as hay-fever victims, who sneeze at the pollen from flowers of other lands.

One day, to the narrow strip of ground flanking a city avenue came a gust of spores from God knows where; and some mushrooms germinated. Nobody noticed them except Marcovaldo, the worker who caught his tram just there every morning.

This Marcovaldo possessed an eye ill-suited to city life: billboards, traffic-lights, shop-windows, neon signs, posters, no matter how carefully devised to catch the attention, never arrested his gaze, which might have been running over the desert sands. Instead, he would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-hole in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence.

Thus, one morning, as he was waiting for the tram that would take him to Shav and Co., where he was employed as an unskilled laborer, he noticed something unusual near the stop, in the sterile, encrusted strip of earth beneath the

avenue's line of trees: at certain points, near the tree trunks, some bumps seemed to rise and, here and there, they had opened, allowing roundish subterranean bodies to peep out.

Bending to tie his shoes, he took a better look: they were mushrooms, real mushrooms, sprouting right in the heart of the city! To Marcovaldo the gray and wretched world surrounding him seemed suddenly generous with hidden riches; something could still be expected of life, beyond the hourly wage of his stipulated salary, with inflation index, family grant, and cost-of-living allowance.

On the job he was more absent-minded than usual: he kept thinking that while he was there unloading cases and boxes, in the darkness of the earth the slow, silent mushrooms, known only to him, were ripening their porous flesh, were assimilating underground humors, breaking the crust of clods. "One night's rain would be enough," he said to himself, "then they would be ready to pick." And he couldn't wait to share his discovery with his wife and his six children.

"I'm telling you!" he announced during their scant supper. "In a week's time we'll be eating mushrooms! A great fry! That's a promise!"

And to the smaller children, who did not know what mushrooms were, he explained ecstatically the beauty of the numerous species, the delicacy of their flavor, the way they should be cooked; and so he also drew into the discussion his wife, Domitilla, who until then had appeared rather incredulous and distracted.

"Where are these mushrooms?" the children asked. "Tell us where they grow!"

At this question Marcovaldo's enthusiasm was curbed by a suspicious thought: Now if I tell them the place, they'll go and hunt for them with the usual gang of kids, word will spread through the neighborhood, and the mushrooms will end up in somebody else's pan! And so that discovery, which had promptly filled his heart with universal love,

now made him wildly possessive, surrounded him with jealous and distrustful fear.

"I know where the mushrooms are, and I'm the only one who knows," he said to his children, "and God help you if you breathe a word to anybody."

The next morning, as he approached the tram stop, Marcovaldo was filled with apprehension. He bent to look at the ground and, to his relief, saw that the mushrooms had grown a little, but not much, and were still almost completely hidden by the earth.

He was bent in this position when he realized there was someone behind him. He straightened up at once and tried to act indifferent. It was the street-cleaner, leaning on his broom and looking at him.

This street-cleaner, whose jurisdiction included the place where the mushrooms grew, was a lanky youth with eyeglasses. His name was Amadigi, and Marcovaldo had long harbored a dislike of him, perhaps because of those eyeglasses that examined the pavement of the streets, seeking any trace of nature, to be eradicated by his broom.

It was Saturday; and Marcovaldo spent his free half-day circling the bed of dirt with an absent air, keeping an eye on the street-cleaner in the distance and on the mushrooms, and calculating how much time they needed to ripen.

That night it rained: like peasants who, after months of drought, wake up and leap with joy at the sound of the first drops, so Marcovaldo, alone in all the city, sat up in bed and called to his family: "It's raining! It's raining!" and breathed in the smell of moistened dust and fresh mold that came from outside.

At dawn — it was Sunday — with the children and a borrowed basket, he ran immediately to the patch. There were the mushrooms, erect on their stems, their caps high over the still-soaked earth. "Hurrah!" — and they fell to gathering them.

"Papà! Look how many that man over there has found," Michelino said, and his father, raising his eyes, saw Amadigi

standing beside them, also with a basket full of mushrooms under his arm.

"Ah, you're gathering them, too?" the street-cleaner said. "Then they're edible? I picked a few, but I wasn't sure . . . Farther down the avenue some others have sprouted, even bigger ones . . . Well, now that I know, I'll tell my relatives; they're down there arguing whether it's a good idea to pick them or not . . ." And he walked off in a hurry.

Marcovaldo was speechless: even bigger mushrooms, which he hadn't noticed, an unhoped-for harvest, being taken from him like this, before his very eyes. For a moment he was almost frozen with anger, fury, then – as sometimes happens – the collapse of individual passion led to a generous impulse. At that hour, many people were waiting for the tram, umbrellas over their arms, because the weather was still damp and uncertain. "Hey, you! Do you want to eat fried mushrooms tonight?" Marcovaldo shouted to the crowd of people at the stop. "Mushrooms are growing here by the street! Come along! There's plenty for all!" And he walked off after Amadigi, with a string of people behind him.

They all found plenty of mushrooms, and lacking baskets, they used their open umbrellas. Somebody said: "It would be nice to have a big feast, all of us together!" But, instead, each took his own share and went home.

They saw one another again soon, however; that very evening, in fact, in the same ward of the hospital, after the stomach-pump had saved them all from poisoning. It was not serious, because the number of mushrooms eaten by each person was quite small.

Marcovaldo and Amadigi had adjacent beds; they glared at each other.

SUMMER

2. Park-bench vacation

On his way to work each morning, Marcovaldo walked beneath the green foliage of a square with trees, a bit of public garden, isolated in the junction of four streets. He raised his eyes among the boughs of the horse-chestnuts, where they were at their thickest and allowed yellow rays only to glint in the shade transparent with sap; and he listened to the racket of the sparrows, tone-deaf, invisible on the branches. To him they seemed nightingales, and he said to himself: "Oh, if I could wake just once at the twitter of birds and not at the sound of the alarm and the crying of little Paolino and the yelling of my wife, Domitilla!" or else: "Oh, if I could sleep here, alone, in the midst of this cool green shade and not in my cramped, hot room; here amid the silence, not amid the snoring and sleep-talking of my whole family and the racing of trams down below in the street; here in the natural darkness of the night, not in the artificial darkness of closed blinds, streaked by the glare of headlights; oh, if I could see leaves and sky on opening my eyes!" With these thoughts every day Marcovaldo began his eight daily hours – plus overtime – as an unskilled laborer.

In one corner of the square, under a dome of horse-chestnuts, there was a remote, half-hidden bench. And Marcovaldo had picked it as his own. On those summer nights, in the room where five of them slept, when he

couldn't get to sleep, he would dream of the bench as a vagabond dreams of a bed in a palace. One night, quietly, while his wife snored and the children kicked in their sleep, he got out of bed, dressed, tucked his pillow under his arm, left the house and went to the square.

There it was cool, peaceful. He was already savoring the contact of those planks, whose wood – he knew – was soft and cozy, preferable in every respect to the flattened mattress of his bed; he would look for a moment at the stars, then close his eyes in a sleep that would compensate him for all the insults of the day.

Cool and peace he found, but not the empty bench. A couple of lovers were sitting there, looking into each other's eyes. Discreetly, Marcovaldo withdrew. "It's late," he thought, "they surely won't spend the whole night outdoors! They'll come to an end of their billing and cooing."

But the two were not billing or cooing: they were quarreling. And when lovers start to quarrel there's no telling how long it will go on.

He was saying: "Why don't you admit that when you said what you said you knew you were going to hurt me and not make me happy the way you were pretending you thought?"

Marcovaldo realized it was going to last quite a while.

"No, I will not admit it," she answered, as Marcovaldo had already expected.

"Why won't you admit it?"

"I'll never admit it."

Damn, Marcovaldo thought. His pillow clutched under his arm, he went for a stroll. He went and looked at the moon, which was full, big above trees and roofs. He came back towards the bench, giving it a fairly wide berth out of fear of disturbing them, but actually hoping to irritate them a little and persuade them to go away. But they were too caught up in the argument to notice him.

"You admit it then?"

"No, no, I don't admit it in the least!"

"But what if you did admit it?"

"Even if I did admit something, I wouldn't admit what you want me to admit!"

Marcovaldo went back to look at the moon, then he went to look at a traffic-light, a bit farther on. The light flashed yellow, yellow, yellow, constantly blinking on and off. Marcovaldo compared the moon with the traffic-light. The moon with her mysterious pallor, also yellow, but also green, in its depths, and even blue; the traffic-light with its common little yellow. And the moon, all calm, casting her light without haste, streaked now and then by fine wisps of clouds, which she majestically allowed to fall around her shoulders; and the traffic-light meanwhile, always there, on and off, on and off, throbbing with a false vitality, but actually weary and enslaved.

He went back to see if the girl had admitted anything. Not on your life: no admission from her. In fact, she wasn't now the one who refused to admit; he was. The situation had changed completely, and it was she who kept saying to him: "Then you admit it?", and he kept saying no. A half hour went by like this. In the end, he admitted, or she did; anyway, Marcovaldo saw them get up and walk off, hand in hand.

He ran to the bench, flung himself on it; but meanwhile, in his waiting, he had lost some of his propensity to feel the sweetness he had been expecting to find there, and his bed at home, as he now remembered it, wasn't as hard as it had been. But these were minor points; his determination to enjoy the night in the open air remained firm. He struck his face in the pillow and prepared for sleep, the kind of sleep to which he had long become unaccustomed.

Now he had found the most comfortable position. He wouldn't have shifted a fraction of an inch for anything in the world. Too bad, though, that when he lay like this, his gaze didn't fall on a prospect of trees and sky alone, so that in sleep his eyes would close on a view of absolute natural serenity. Before him, foreshortened, a tree was followed by

the sword of a general from the height of his monument, then another tree, a notice-board, a third tree, and then, a bit farther, that false, flashing moon, the traffic-light, still ticking off its yellow, yellow, yellow.

It must be said that Marcovaldo's nervous system had been in such poor shape lately that even when he was dead tired a trifle sufficed to keep him awake; he had only to think something was annoying him, and sleep was out of the question. And now he was annoyed by that traffic-light blinking on and off. It was there in the distance, a yellow eye, winking, alone: it was nothing to bother about. But Marcovaldo must have been suffering from nervous exhaustion: he stared at that blinking and repeated to himself: "How I would sleep if that thing wasn't there! How I would sleep!" He closed his eyes and seemed to feel, under his eyelids, that silly yellow blinking; he screwed his eyes shut and he could see dozens of traffic-lights; he reopened his eyes, it was the same thing all over again.

He got up. He had to put some screen between himself and the traffic-light. He went as far as the general's monument and looked around. At the foot of the monument there was a laurel wreath, nice and thick, but now dry and coming apart, standing on props, with a broad, faded ribbon: "*The 15th Lancers on the Anniversary of The Glorious Victory.*" Marcovaldo climbed up on the pedestal, raised the wreath, and hung it on the general's sabre.

Tornaguinci, the night watchman, making his rounds, crossed the square on his bicycle; Marcovaldo hid behind the statue. Tornaguinci saw the shadow of the monument move on the ground: he stopped, filled with suspicion. He studied that wreath on the sabre: he realized something was out of place, but didn't know quite what. He aimed the beam of his flashlight up there; he read: "*The 15th Lancers on the Anniversary of The Glorious Victory.*" He nodded approvingly and went away.

To give him time to go off, Marcovaldo made another turn around the square. In a nearby street, a team of

workmen was repairing a switch of the tram-track. At night, in the deserted streets, those little groups of men huddling in the glow of the welding torches, their voices ringing, then dying immediately, have a secret look, as of people preparing things the inhabitants of the daytime must never know. Marcovaldo approached, stood looking at the flame, the workmen's movements, with a somewhat embarrassed attention, his eyes growing smaller and smaller with sleepiness. He hunted for a cigarette in his pocket, to keep himself awake; but he had no matches. "Who'll give me a light?" he asked the workmen. "With this?" the man with the torch said, spraying a flurry of sparks.

Another workman stood up, handed him a lighted cigarette. "Do you work nights, too?"

"No, I work days," Marcovaldo said.

"Then what are you doing up at this time of night? We're about to quit."

He went back to the bench. He stretched out. Now the traffic-light was hidden from his eyes; he could fall asleep, at last.

He hadn't noticed the noise, before. Now, that buzz, like a grim, inhaling breath and an endless scraping and also a scratching, filled his ears completely. There is no sound more heart-rending than that of a welding torch, a kind of muffled scream. Without moving, huddled as he was on the bench, his face against the crumpled pillow, Marcovaldo could find no escape, and the noise continued to conjure up the scene illuminated by the gray flame scattering golden sparks all around, the men hunkered on the ground, smoked-glass vizors over their faces, the torch grasped in the hand shaken by a rapid tremor, the halo of shadow around the tool cart, at the tall trellis-like apparatus that reached the wires. He opened his eyes, turned on the bench, looked at the stars among the boughs. The insensitive sparrows continued sleeping up there among the leaves.

To fall asleep like a bird, to have a wing you could stick

your head under, a world of branches suspended above the earthy world, barely glimpsed down below, muffled and remote. Once you begin rejecting your present state, there is no knowing where you can arrive. Now Marcovaldo, in order to sleep, needed something; but he himself didn't know quite what; at this point not even a genuine silence would have been enough. He had to have a basis of sound, softer than silence, a faint wind passing through the thick undergrowth of a forest, a murmur of water bubbling up and disappearing in a meadow.

He had an idea and he rose to his feet. It wasn't exactly an idea, because half-dazed by the sleepiness that filled him, he couldn't form any thought properly; but it was like a recollection that somewhere around there was something connected with the idea of water, with its loquacious and subdued flow.

In fact, there was a fountain, nearby, a distinguished work of sculpture and hydraulics, with nymphs, fauns, river gods, who enlaced jets, cascades, a play of water. Only it was dry: at night, in summer, since the aqueduct was functioning less, they turned it off. Marcovaldo wandered around for a little while like a sleep-walker, more by instinct than by reason he knew that a tub must have a tap. A man who has a good eye can find what he is looking for even with his eyes closed. He turned on the tap: from the conch-shells, from the beards, from the nostrils of the horses, great jets rose, the feigned caverns were cloaked in glistening mantles, and all this water resounded like the organ of a choir loft in the great empty square, with all the rustling and turbulence that water can create. The night watchman, Tornaguinci, was coming along again on his coal-black bicycle, thrusting his tickets under doorways, when he suddenly saw the whole fountain explode before his eyes like a liquid firework. He nearly fell off his seat.

Trying to open his eyes as little as possible, to retain that shred of sleep he felt he had grasped, Marcovaldo ran and flung himself again on the bench. There, now it was as if he

lay on the bank of a stream, with the woods above him; he slept.

He dreamed of a dinner, the dish was covered as if to keep the pasta warm. He uncovered it and there was a dead mouse, which stank. He looked into his wife's plate: another dead mouse. Before his children, more mice, smaller, but also rotting. He uncovered the tureen and found a cat, belly in the air; and the sink woke him.

Not far away there was the garbage truck that passes at night to empty the garbage cans. He could make out in the dim glow from the headlights, the crane, cackling and jerking, the shadows of men standing on the top of the mountain of refuse, their hands guiding the receptacle attached to the pulley, emptying it into the truck, pounding it with blows of their shovels, their voices grim and jerky like the movement of the crane: "Higher . . . let it go . . . to hell with you . . ." with metallic clashes like opaque gongs, and then the engine picking up, slowly, only to stop a bit farther on, as the maneuver began all over again.

But by now Marcovaldo's sleep had reached a zone where sounds no longer arrived, and these, even so graceless and rasping, came as if muffled in a soft halo, perhaps because of the very consistency of the garbage packed into the trucks. It was the stink that kept him awake, the stink sharpened by an unbearable idea of stink, whereby even the sounds, those dampened and remote sounds, and the image, outlined against the light, of the truck with the crane didn't reach his mind as sound and sight but only as stink. And Marcovaldo was delicious, vainly pursuing with his nostrils' imagination the fragrance of a rose arbor.

The night watchman, Tornaguinci, felt sweat bathe his forehead as he glimpsed a human form running on all fours along a flower-bed, then saw it angrily rip up some buttercups, then disappear. But he thought it must have been either a dog, the responsibility of dog-catchers, or a hallucination, the responsibility of the alienist, or a

were-wolf, the responsibility of God knows who but preferably not him; and he turned the corner.

Meanwhile, having gone back to his sleeping place, Marcovaldo pressed the bedraggled clump of buttercups to his nose, trying to fill his sense of smell to the brim with their perfume: but he could press very little from those almost odorless flowers. Still the fragrance of dew, of earth, and of trampled grass was already a great balm. He dispelled the obsession of garbage and slept. It was dawn.

His waking was a sudden explosion of sun-filled sky above his head, a sun that virtually obliterated the leaves, then restored them gradually to his half-blinded sight. But Marcovaldo could not stay because a shiver had made him jump up: the spatter of a hydrant, which the city gardeners use for watering the flowerbeds, made cold streams trickle down his clothes. And all around there were trams clanking, trucks going to market, hand-carts, pickups, workers on motorbikes rushing to factories, and the blinds being rolled up at house windows whose panes were glittering. His mouth and eyes sticky, his back stiff and one hip bruised, bewildered, Marcovaldo rushed to work.

AUTUMN

3. *The municipal pigeon*

The routes birds follow, as they migrate southwards or northwards, in autumn or in spring, rarely cross the city. Their flights cleave the heavens high above the striped humps of fields and along the edge of woods: at one point they seem to follow the curving line of a river or the furrow of a valley; at another, the invisible paths of the wind. But they sheer off as soon as the range of a city's rooftops looms up before them.

And yet, once, a flight of autumn woodcock appeared in a street's slice of sky. And the only person to notice was Marcovaldo, who always walked with his nose in the air. He was on a little tricycle-truck, and seeing the birds he pedaled harder, as if he were chasing them, in the grip of a hunter's fantasy, though the only gun he had ever held was an army rifle.

And as he proceeded, his eyes on the flying birds, he found himself at an intersection, the light red, in the midst of the automobiles; and he came within a hair's breadth of being run over. As a traffic cop, his face purple, wrote name and address in a notebook, Marcovaldo sought again with his eyes those wings in the sky; but they had vanished.

At work, his fine brought him harsh reproaches.
 "Can't you even get traffic-lights straight?" his foreman,

Signor Viligelmo, shouted at him. "What were you looking at anyway, knuckle-head?"

"I was looking at a flight of woodcock . . ." he said.

"What?" Signor Viligelmo was an old man; his eyes glistened. And Marcovaldo told him the story.

"Saturday I'm going out with dog and gun!" the foreman said, full of vigor, now forgetting his outburst. "The migration's begun, up in the hills. Those birds were certainly scared off by the hunters up there, and they flew over the city . . ."

All that day Marcovaldo's brain ground and ground, like a mill. "Saturday, if the hills are full of hunters, as is quite likely, God knows how many woodcock will fly over the city. If I handle it right, Sunday I'll eat roast woodcock."

The building where Marcovaldo lived had a flat roof, with wires strung for drying laundry. Marcovaldo climbed up there with three of his children, carrying a can of birdlime, a brush, and a sack of corn. While the children scattered kernels of corn everywhere, he spread birdlime on the parapets, the wires, the frames of the chimneypots. He put so much on that Filippetto, while he was playing, almost got stuck fast.

That night Marcovaldo dreamed of the roof dotted with fluttering, trapped woodcock. His wife, Domitilla, more greedy and lazy, dreamed of ducks already roasted, lying on the chimneys. His daughter Isolina, romantic, dreamed of humming-birds to decorate her hat. Michelino dreamed of finding a stork up there.

The next day, every hour one of the children went up to inspect the roof: he would just peek out from the trap-door so, if they were about to alight, they wouldn't be scared; then he would come down and report. The reports were not good. But then, towards noon, Pietruccio came back, shouting: "They're here! Papà! Come and see!"

Marcovaldo went up with a sack. Trapped in the birdlime there was a poor pigeon, one of those gray urban doves,

used to the crowds and racket of the squares. Fluttering around, other pigeons contemplated him sadly, as he tried to unstuck his wings from the mess on which he had unwisely lighted.

Marcovaldo and his family were sucking the little bones of that thin and stringy pigeon, which had been roasted, when they heard a knocking at the door.

It was the landlady's maid. "The Signora wants you! Come at once!"

Very concerned, because he was six months behind with the rent and feared eviction, Marcovaldo went to the Signora's apartment, on the main floor. As he entered the living room, he saw that there was already a visitor: the purple-faced cop.

"Come in, Marcovaldo," the Signora said. "I am informed that on our roof someone is trapping the city's pigeons. Do you know anything about it?"

Marcovaldo felt himself freeze.

"Signora! Signora!" a woman's voice cried at that moment.

"What is it, Guendalina?"

The landlady came in. "I went up to hang out the laundry, and all the wash is stuck to the lines. I pulled on it, to get it loose, but it tore. Everything's ruined. What can it be?"

Marcovaldo rubbed his hand over his stomach, as if his digestion were giving him trouble.

WINTER

* 4. *The city lost in the snow*

That morning the silence woke him. Marcovaldo pulled himself out of bed with the sensation there was something strange in the air. He couldn't figure out what time it was, the light between the slats of the blinds was different from all other hours of day and night. He opened the window: the city was gone; it had been replaced by a white sheet of paper. Narrowing his eyes, he could make out, in the whiteness, some almost-erased lines, which corresponded to those of the familiar view: the windows and the roofs and the lamp-posts all around, but they were lost under all the snow that had settled over them during the night.

"Snow!" Marcovaldo cried to his wife; that is, he meant to cry, but his voice came out muffled. As it had fallen on lines and colors and views, the snow had fallen on noises, or rather on the very possibility of making noise; sounds, in a padded space, did not vibrate.

He went to work on foot; the trams were blocked by the snow. Along the street, making his own path, he felt free as he had never felt before. In the city all differences between sidewalk and street had vanished; vehicles could not pass, and Marcovaldo, even if he sank up to his thighs at every step and felt the snow get inside his socks, had become master, free to walk in the middle of the street, to trample on flower-beds, to cross outside the prescribed lines, to proceed in a zig-zag.

Streets and avenues stretched out, endless and deserted, like blanched chasms between mountainous cliffs. There was no telling whether the city hidden under that mantle was still the same or whether, in the night, another had taken its place. Who could say if under those white mounds there were still gasoline pumps, news-stands, tram stops, or if there were only sack upon sack of snow? As he walked along, Marcovaldo dreamed of getting lost in a different city: instead, his footsteps were taking him straight to his everyday place of work, the usual shipping department, and, once he had crossed the threshold, the worker was amazed at finding himself among those walls, the same as ever, as if the change that had cancelled the outside world had spared only his firm.

There, waiting for him, was a shovel, taller than he was. The department foreman, Signor Viligelmo, handing it to him, said: "Shoveling the snow off the sidewalk in front of the building is up to us. To you, that is." Marcovaldo took the shovel and went outside again.

Shoveling snow is no game, especially on an empty stomach; but Marcovaldo felt the snow was a friend, an element that erased the cage of walls which imprisoned his life. And he set to work with a will, sending great shovelfuls of snow flying from the sidewalk to the center of the street.

The jobless Sigismondo was also filled with gratitude for the snow, because having enrolled in the ranks of the municipal snow-shovelers that morning, he now had before him a few days of guaranteed employment. But this feeling, instead of inspiring in him vague fantasies like Marcovaldo's, led him to quite specific calculations, to determine how many cubic feet of snow had to be shoveled to clear so many square feet. In other words, he aimed at impressing the captain of his team; and thus — his secret ambition — at getting ahead in the world.

Now Sigismondo turned, and what did he see? The stretch of road he had just cleared was being covered again with

snow, by the helter-skelter shoveling of a character panting there on the sidewalk. Sigismondo almost had a fit. He ran and confronted the other man, thrusting at the stranger's chest his shovel piled high with snow. "Hey, you! Are you the one who's been throwing that snow there?"

"Eh? What?" Marcovaldo started, but admitted, "Ah, maybe I am."

"Well, either you take it right back with your shovel, or I'll make you eat it, down to the last flake."

"But I have to clear the sidewalk."

"And I have to clear the street. So?"

"Where'll I put it?"

"Do you work for the City?"

"No. For Sbav and Co."

Sigismondo taught him how to pile up the snow along the edge of the sidewalk, and Marcovaldo cleared his whole stretch. Content, sticking their shovels into the snow, the two men stood and contemplated their achievement.

"Got a butt?" Sigismondo asked.

They were lighting half a cigarette apiece, when a snow-plow came along the street, raising two big white waves that fell at either side. Every sound that morning was a mere rustle: by the time the men raised their heads, the whole section they had shoveled was again covered with snow. "What happened? Has it started snowing again?" And they looked up at the sky. The machine, spinning its huge brushes, was already turning at the corner.

Marcovaldo learned to pile the snow into a compact little wall. If he went on making little walls like that, he could build some streets for himself alone: only he would know where those streets led, and everybody else would be lost there. He could remake the city, pile up mountains high as houses, which no one would be able to tell from real houses. But perhaps by now all the houses had turned to snow, inside and out; a whole city of snow with monuments and spires and trees, a city that could be unmade by shovel and remade in a different way.

On the edge of the sidewalk at a certain point there was a considerable heap of snow. Marcovaldo was about to level it to the height of his little walls when he realized it was an automobile: the de-luxe car of Commendatore Alboino, chairman of the board, all covered with snow. Since the difference between an automobile and a pile of snow was so slight, Marcovaldo began creating the form of an automobile with his shovel. It came out well: you really couldn't tell which of the two was real. To put the final touches on his work Marcovaldo used some rubbish that had turned up in his shovel: a rusted tin served to model the shape of a headlight; an old tap gave the door its handle.

A great bowing and scraping of doormen, attendants and flunkies, and the chairman, Commendatore Alboino, came out of the main entrance. Short-sighted and efficient, he strode straight to his car, grasped the protruding tap, pulled it down, bowed his head, and stepped into the pile of snow up to his neck.

Marcovaldo had already turned the corner and was shoveling in the courtyard.

The boys in the yard had made a snow man. "He needs a nose!" one of them said. "What'll we use? A carrot!" And they ran to their various kitchens to hunt among the vegetables.

Marcovaldo contemplated the snow man. "There, under the snow you can't tell what is snow and what is only covered. Except in one case: man; because it's obvious I am I and not this man here."

Absorbed in his meditations, he didn't hear two men shouting from the rooftop: "Hey, mister, get out of the way!" They were the men responsible for pushing the snow off the roof-tiles. And all of a sudden, about three hundred-weight of snow fell right on top of him.

The children returned with their looted carrots. "Oh, they've made another snow man!" In the courtyard there were two identical dummies, side by side.

"We'll give them each a nose!" And they thrust carrots into the heads of the two snow men.

More dead than alive, Marcovaldo, through the sheath in which he was buried and frozen, felt some nourishment reach him. And he chewed on it.

"Hey, look! The carrot's gone!" The children were very frightened.

The bravest of the boys didn't lose heart. He had a spare nose: a pepper, and he stuck it into the snow man. The snow man ate that, too.

Then they tried giving him a nose made out of coal, a big lump. Marcovaldo spat it out with all his might. "Help! He's alive! He's alive!" The children ran away.

In a corner of the courtyard there was a grille from which a cloud of warmth emerged. With the heavy tread of a snow man, Marcovaldo went and stood there. The snow melted over him, trickled in rivulets down his clothes: a Marcovaldo reappeared, all swollen and stuffed up with a cold.

He took the shovel, mostly to warm himself, and began to work in the courtyard. There was a sneeze blocked at the top of his nose, all ready and waiting, but refusing to make up its mind and burst forth. Marcovaldo shoved, his eyes half-closed, and the sneeze remained nested in the top of his nose. All of a sudden: the "Aaaaah . . ." was almost a roar, and the "choo!" was louder than the explosion of a mine. The blast flung Marcovaldo against the wall.

Blast, indeed: that sneeze had caused a genuine tornado. All the snow in the courtyard rose and whirled in a blizzard, drawn upwards, pulverized in the sky.

When Marcovaldo reopened his eyes, after being stunned, the courtyard was completely cleared, with not even one flake of snow. And to his gaze there appeared the familiar courtyard, the gray walls, the boxes from the warehouse, the things of every day, sharp and hostile.

SPRING

5. *The wasp treatment*

Winter departed and left rheumatic aches behind. A faint noontday sun came to cheer the days, and Marcovaldo would spend a few hours watching the leaves sprout, as he sat on a bench, waiting to go back to work. Near him a little old man would come and sit, hunched in his overcoat, all patches: he was a certain Signor Rizieri, retired, all alone in the world, and also a regular visitor of sunny park benches. From time to time this Signor Rizieri would jerk and cry – "Ow!" – and hunch even deeper into his coat. He was a mass of rheumatism, arthritis, lumbago, collected during the damp, cold winter, which continued to pursue him for the rest of the year. To console him, Marcovaldo would explain the various stages of his own rheumatic pains, as well as those of his wife and of his oldest daughter, Isolina, who, poor thing, was turning out to be rather delicate.

Every day Marcovaldo carried his lunch wrapped in newspaper; seated on the bench he would unwrap it and give the crumpled piece of newspaper to Signor Rizieri, who would hold out his hand impatiently, saying: "Let's see what the news is." He always read it with the same interest, even if it was two years old.

And so one day he came upon an article about a method of curing rheumatism with bee venom.

"They must mean honey," Marcovaldo said, always inclined to be optimistic.

"No," Rizieri said, "venom, it says here: the poison in the sting." And he read a few passages aloud. The two of them discussed bees at length, their virtues, attributes, and also the possible cost of this treatment.

After that, as he walked along the avenues, Marcovaldo pricked up his ears at every buzz, his gaze followed every insect that flew around him. And so, observing the circling of a wasp with a big black-and-yellow-striped belly, he saw it burrow into the hollow of a tree, where other wasps then came out: a thrumming, a bustle that announced the presence of a whole wasp-nest inside the trunk. Marcovaldo promptly began his hunt. He had a glass jar, in the bottom of which there was still a thick layer of jam. He placed it, open, near the tree. Soon a wasp buzzed around it, then went inside, attracted by the sugary smell. Marcovaldo was quick to cover the jar with a paper lid.

And the moment he saw Signor Rizieri, he could say to him: "Come, I'll give you the injection!", showing him the jar with the infuriated wasp trapped inside.

The old man hesitated, but Marcovaldo refused to postpone the experiment for any reason, and insisted on performing it right there, on their bench: the patient didn't even have to undress. With a mixture of fear and hope, Signor Rizieri raised the hem of his overcoat, his jacket, his shirt; and opening a space through his tattered undershirts, he uncovered a part of his loins where he ached. Marcovaldo struck the top of the jar there and slipped away the paper that was acting as a lid. At first nothing happened; the wasp didn't move. Had he gone to sleep? To waken him, Marcovaldo gave the bottom of the jar a whack. That whack was just what was needed: the insect darted forward and jabbed his sting into Signor Rizieri's loins. The old man let out a yell, jumped to his feet, and began walking like a soldier on parade, rubbing the stung part and emitting a string of confused curses.

Marcovaldo was all content; the old man had never been so erect, so martial. But a policeman had stopped nearby,

and was staring wide-eyed; Marcovaldo took Rizieri by the arm and went off, whistling.

He came home with another wasp in the jar. To convince his wife to allow the sting was no easy matter, but in the end he succeeded. For a while, at least Domitilla complained only of the wasp sting.

Marcovaldo started catching wasps full tilt. He gave Isolina an injection, and Domitilla a second one, because only systematic treatment could bring about an improvement. Then he decided to have a shot himself. The children, you know how they are, were saying: "Me, too; me, too," but Marcovaldo preferred to equip them with jars and set them to catching more wasps, to supply the daily requirements.

Signor Rizieri came to Marcovaldo's house looking for him; he had another old man with him, Cavalier Uffico, who dragged one leg and wanted to start the treatment at once.

Word spread; Marcovaldo now had an assembly-line set up: he always kept half a dozen wasps in stock, each in its glass jar, lined up on a shelf. He applied the jar to the patient's behind as if it were a syringe, he pulled away the paper lid, and when the wasp had stung, he rubbed the place with alcohol-soaked cotton, with the nonchalant hand of an experienced physician. His house consisted of a single room, in which the whole family slept; they divided it with a makeshift screen, waiting-room on one side, doctor's office on the other. In the waiting-room Marcovaldo's wife received the clients and collected the fees. The children took the empty jars and ran off towards the wasps' nest for refills. Sometimes a wasp would sting them, but they hardly cried any more, because they knew it was good for their health.

That year rheumatic aches and pains twisted among the population like the tentacles of an octopus; Marcovaldo's cure acquired great renown; and on Saturday afternoon he saw his poor garret invaded by a little throng of suffering

men and women, pressing a hand to their back or hip, some with the tattered aspect of beggars, others looking like well-off people, drawn by the novelty of this treatment.

"Hurry," Marcovaldo said to his three boys, "take the jars, go and catch as many wasps as you can." The boys went off.

It was a sunny day, many wasps were buzzing along the avenue. The boys usually hunted them at a certain distance from the tree where their nest was, trying to catch isolated insects. But that day, Michelino, to save time and catch more, began hunting right at the entrance to the nest. "This is the way to do it," he said to his brothers, and he tried to catch a wasp by putting the jar over it the moment it landed. But, every time, that wasp flew away and came back to light closer and closer to the nest. Now it was at the very edge of the hollow in the trunk, and Michelino was about to lower the jar on it, when he felt two other big wasps fling themselves on him as if they wanted to sting him on the head. He shielded himself, but he felt the prick of the stings and, crying out in pain, he dropped the jar. Immediately, dismay at what he had done erased his pain: the jar had fallen into the mouth of the nest. No further buzzing was heard, no more wasps came out; Michelino, without even the strength to yell, took a step backwards. Then from the nest a thick, black cloud burst out, with a deafening hum: all the wasps were advancing at once in an enraged swarm!

His brothers heard Michelino let out a scream as he began running as he had never run in his life. He seemed steam-driven, as that cloud he trailed after him seemed the smoke from a chimney.

Where does a child run when he is being chased? He runs home! And that's what Michelino did.

The passers-by didn't have time to realize what that sight was, something between a cloud and a human being, darting along the streets with a roar mixed with a loud buzz.

Marcovaldo was saying to his patients: "Just one moment,

the wasps will soon be here," when the door opened and the swarm invaded the room. They didn't even see Michelino, who went to stick his head in a basin of water: the whole room was full of wasps and the patients flapped their arms in the futile effort to drive them away, and the rheumatics performed wonders of agility and the benumbed limbs were released in furious movements.

The fire department came, and then the Red Cross. Lying on his cot in the hospital, swollen beyond recognition by the stings, Marcovaldo didn't dare react to the curses that were hurled at him from the other cots of the ward by his patients.