

BOOKS BY ITALO CALVINO

The Baron in the Trees
The Nonexistent Knight and The Cloven Viscount
The Path to the Nest of Spiders
Cosmicomics
t zero
The Watcher and Other Stories
Invisible Cities
The Castle of Crossed Destinies
Italian Folktales
If on a winter's night a traveler
Marcovaldo, or The seasons in the city
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 Wolff Book
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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 Sbav 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 abstracted.

"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 distrusting 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

was particularly pleased to hear there were other people not far away; he advanced to join them, without asking further questions.

The mysteriously announced steps were a little stairway with comfortable steps and two railings, white in the darkness. Marcovaldo climbed up. On the threshold of a low doorway, a girl greeted him so cordially it seemed impossible she was actually addressing him.

Marcovaldo bowed and scraped. "My humble respects, Signorina." Steeped in cold and dampness as he was, he was dazed at finding refuge under a roof . . .

He entered, blinked, his eyes blinded by the light. He wasn't in a house. He was — where? In a bus, he thought, a long bus with many empty places. He sat down. As a rule, going home from work, he never took the bus, but chose the tram because the ticket cost a bit less. This time, however, he was lost in a neighborhood so remote that surely there was only a bus service. How lucky he was to have arrived in time to catch this one, no doubt the last! And what soft, comfortable seats! Marcovaldo, now that he had found out about it, would always take the bus, even if the passengers were obliged to obey some rules (" . . . Please," a loudspeaker was saying, "refrain from smoking and fasten your seatbelts . . ."), even if the roar of the motor, as it started, was excessive.

A man in uniform passed among the seats. "Excuse me, conductor," Marcovaldo said. "Do you know if there's a stop anywhere near Via Pancrazio Pancrazietti?"

"What are you talking about, sir? Our first stop is Bombay, then we go on to Calcutta and Singapore."

Marcovaldo looked around. In the other places were seated impassive Indians, with beards and turbans. There were also a few women, wrapped in embroidered saris, a painted spot on their brow. The night beyond the windows was full of stars, now that the plane had passed through the thick blanket of fog, and was flying in the limpid sky of the great altitudes.

SPRING

13. *Where the river is more blue?*

It was a time when the simplest foods contained threats, traps, and frauds. Not a day went by without some newspaper telling of ghastly discoveries in the housewife's shopping: cheese was made of plastic, butter from tallow candles; in fruit and vegetables the arsenic of insecticides was concentrated in percentages higher than the vitamin content; to fatten chickens they stuffed them with synthetic pills that could transform the man who ate a drumstick into a chicken himself. Fresh fish had been caught the previous year in Iceland and they put make-up on the eyes to make it seem yesterday's catch. Mice had been found in several milk-bottles, whether dead or alive was not made clear. From the tins of oil it was no longer the golden juice of the olive that flowed, but the fat of old mules, cleverly distilled.

At work or in the café Marcovaldo heard them discussing these things, and every time he felt something like a mule's kick in his stomach, or a mouse running down his esophagus. At home, when his wife, Domitilla, came back from the market, the sight of her shopping-bag, which once had given him such joy with its celery and eggplant, the rough, absorbent paper of the packages from the grocer or the delicatessen, now filled him with fear, as if hostile presences had infiltrated the walls of his house.

"I must bend all my efforts," he vowed to himself,

"towards providing my family with food that hasn't passed through the treacherous hands of speculators." In the morning, going to work, he sometimes encountered men with fishing-poles and rubber boots, heading for the river. "That's the way," Marcovaldo said to himself. But the river, there in the city, which collected garbage and waste and the emptying of sewers, filled him with deep repugnance. "I have to look for a place," he said to himself, "where the water is really water, and fish are really fish. There I'll drop my line."

The days were growing longer: with his motorbike, after work, Marcovaldo set to exploring the river along its course before the city, and the little streams, its tributaries. He was specially interested in the stretches where the water flowed farthest from the paved road. He proceeded along paths, among the clumps of willows, riding his motorbike as far as he could go, then – after leaving it in a bush – on foot, until he reached the stream. Once he got lost: he roamed among steep, overgrown slopes, and could find no trail, nor did he know in which direction the river lay. Then, all of a sudden, pushing some branches aside, he saw the silent water a few feet below him – it was a widening of the river, practically a calm little pool – of such a blue that it seemed a mountain lake.

His emotion didn't prevent him from peering down among the little ripples of the stream. And there, his stubbornness was rewarded! A flicker, the unmistakable flash of a fin at the surface, and then another, another still: such happiness, he could hardly believe his eyes. This was the place where the fish of the whole river assembled, the fisherman's paradise, perhaps still unknown to everyone but him. On his way home (it was already growing dark) he stopped and cut signs on the bark of the elms, and made piles of stones at certain spots, to be able to find the way again.

Now he had only to equip himself. Actually, he had already thought about it: among the neighbors and the

personnel of his firm he had already identified about ten dedicated fishermen. With hints and allusions, promising each to inform him, the moment he was really sure, of a place full of tench that only he knew about, he managed to borrow, a bit from one, a bit from another, the most complete fisherman's outfit ever seen.

Now he lacked nothing: pole, line, hooks, bait, net, boots, creel. One fine morning, in a couple of hours – from six to eight, before going to work, at the river with the tench – could he fail to catch some? And in fact, he had only to drop his line and he caught them; the tench bit, without any suspicion. Since it was so easy with hook and line, he tried with the net; the tench were so good-natured that they rushed headlong into the net, too.

When it was time to leave, his creel was already full. He looked for a path, moving up the river.

"Hey, you!" At a curve in the shore, among the poplars, there was a character wearing a guard's cap, and giving him an ugly stare.

"Me? What is it?" Marcovaldo asked, sensing an unknown threat to his tench.

"Where did you catch those fish there?" the guard asked.

"Eh? Why?" And Marcovaldo's heart was already in his mouth.

"If you caught them down below, throw them back right now: didn't you see the factory up there?" And the man pointed out a long, low building that now, having come around the bend of the river, Marcovaldo could discern, beyond the willows, throwing smoke into the air and, into the water, a dense cloud of an incredible color somewhere between turquoise and violet. "You must at least have seen the color of the water! A paint factory: the river's poisoned because of that blue, and the fish are poisoned, as well. Throw them back right now, or I'll confiscate them!"

Marcovaldo would have liked to fling them far away as fast as possible, get rid of them, as if the mere smell were enough to poison him. But in front of the guard, he didn't

want to humble himself. "What if I caught them farther up?"

"Then that's another story. I'll confiscate them and fine you, too. Above the factory there's a fishing preserve. Can't you see the sign?"

"Actually," Marcovaldo hastened to say, "I carry a fishing-pole just for looks, to fool my friends. I really bought the fish at the village shop nearby."

"Then everything's all right. You only have to pay the tax, to take them into the city: we're beyond the city limits here."

Marcovaldo had already opened the creel and was emptying it into the river. Some of the tench must have been still alive, because they darted off with great joy.

SUMMER

14. Moon and GNAC

The night lasted twenty seconds, then came twenty seconds of GNAC. For twenty seconds you could see the blue sky streaked with black clouds, the gilded sickle of the waxing moon, outlined by an impalpable halo, and stars that, the more you looked at them, the denser their poignant smallness became, to the sprinkle of the Milky Way: all this seen in great haste; every detail you dwelt on was something of the whole that you lost, because the twenty seconds quickly ended and the GNAC took over.

The GNAC was a part of the neon sign SPAAK-COGNAC on the roof opposite, which shone for twenty seconds then went off for twenty, and when it was lighted you couldn't see anything else. The moon suddenly faded, the sky became a flat, uniform black, the stars lost their radiance, and the cats, male and female, that for ten seconds had been letting out howls of love, moving languidly towards each other along the drainpipes and the roof-trees, squatted on the tiles, their fur bristling in the phosphorescent neon light.

Leaning out of the attic where they lived, Marcovaldo's family was traversed by conflicting trains of thought. It was night, and Isolina, a big girl by now, felt carried away by the moonlight; her heart yearned, and even the faintest croaking of a radio from the lower floors of the building came to her

WINTER

16. *Marcovaldo at the supermarket*

At six in the evening the city fell into the hands of the consumers. All during the day the big occupation of the productive public was to produce: they produced consumer goods. At a certain hour, as if a switch had been thrown, they stopped production and, away!, they were all off, to consume. Every day an impetuous flowering barely had time to blossom inside the lighted shop-windows, the red salamis to hang, the towers of porcelain dishes to rise to the ceiling, the rolls of fabric to unfurl folds like peacock's tails, when lo! the consuming throng burst in, to dismantle, to gnaw, to grope, to plunder. An uninterrupted line wound along all the sidewalks and under the arcades, extended through the glass doors of the shops to all the counters, nudged onwards by each individual's elbows in the ribs of the next, like the steady throb of pistons. Consume! And they touched the goods and put them back and picked them up again and tore them from one another's hands; consume! and they forced the pale salesladies to display on the counter linen and more linen; consume! and the spools of colored string spun like tops, the sheets of flowered paper fluttered their wings, enfolding purchases in little packages, and the little packages in big packages, bound, each, with its butterfly knot. And off went packages and bundles and wallets and bags; they whirled around the cashier's desk in a clutter,

hands digging into pocketbooks seeking change-purses, and fingers rummaging in change-purses for coins, and down below, in a forest of alien legs and hems of overcoats, children no longer held by the hand became lost and started crying.

One of these evenings Marcovaldo was taking his family out for a walk. Since they had no money, their entertainment was to watch others go shopping; for the more money circulates, the more those without any can hope — sooner or later a bit of it will come into my pockets. But, on the contrary, Marcovaldo's wages, because they were scant and the family was large, and there were instalments and debts to be paid, flowed away the moment he collected them. Anyhow, watching was always lovely, especially if you took a turn around the supermarket.

This was a self-service supermarket. It provided those carts, like iron baskets on wheels; and each customer pushed his cart along, filling it with every sort of delicacy. Marcovaldo, on entering, also took a cart; his wife, another; and his four children took one each. And so they marched in procession, their carts before them, among counters piled high with mountains of good things to eat, pointing out to one another the salamis and the cheeses, naming them, as if in a crowd they had recognized the faces of friends, or acquaintances, anyway.

"Papà, can we take this, at least?" the children asked every minute.

"No, hands off! Mustn't touch," Marcovaldo said, remembering that, at the end of this stroll, the check-out girl was waiting, to total up the sum.

"Then why is that lady taking one?" they insisted, seeing all these good housewives who, having come in to buy only a few carrots and a bunch of celery, couldn't resist the sight of a pyramid of jars and plonk plonk plonk! with a partly absent and partly resigned movement, they sent cans of tomatoes, peaches, anchovies, thudding into their carts.

In other words, if your cart is empty and the others are

full, you can hold out only so long: then you're overwhelmed by envy, heartbreak, and you can't stand it. So Marcovaldo, having told his wife and children not to touch anything, made a rapid turn at one of the intersections, eluded his family's gaze, and, having taken a box of dates from a shelf, put it in his cart. He wanted only to experience the pleasure of pushing it around for ten minutes, displaying his purchases like everyone else, and then replace it where he had taken it. This box, plus a red bottle of ketchup and a package of coffee and a blue pack of spaghetti. Marcovaldo was sure that, restraining himself for at least a quarter of an hour, and without spending a cent, he could savor the joy of those who know how to choose the product. But if the children were to see him, that would spell trouble! They would immediately start imitating him and God only knows the confusion that would lead to!

Marcovaldo tried to cover his tracks, moving along a zig-zag course through the departments, now following busy maidservants, now be-furred ladies. And as one or the other extended her hand to select a fragrant yellow squash or a box of triangular processed cheeses, he would imitate her. The loudspeakers were broadcasting gay little tunes: the consumers moved or paused, following the rhythm, and at the right moment they stretched out their arms, picked up an object and set it in their baskets, all to the sound of music.

Marcovaldo's cart was now filled with merchandise; his footsteps led him into the less frequented departments, where products with more and more undecipherable names were sealed in boxes with pictures from which it was not clear whether these were fertilizer for lettuce or lettuce seeds or actual lettuce or poison for lettuce-caterpillars or feed to attract the birds that eat those caterpillars or else seasoning for lettuce or for the roasted birds. In any case, Marcovaldo took two or three boxes.

And so he was proceeding between two high hedges of shelves. All at once the aisle ended and there was a long

space, empty and deserted, with neon lights that made the tiles gleam. Marcovaldo was there, alone with his cart full of things, and at the end of that empty space there was the exit with the cash-desk.

His first instinct was to break into a run, head down, pushing the cart before him like a tank, to escape from the supermarket with his booty before the check-out girl could give the alarm. But at that moment, from a nearby aisle, another cart appeared, even more loaded than his, and the person pushing it was his wife, Domitilla. And from somewhere else, yet another emerged, and Filippetto was pushing it with all his strength. At this area the aisles of many departments converged, and from each opening one of Marcovaldo's children appeared, all pushing carts laden like freighters. Each had had the same idea, and now, meeting, they realized they had assembled a complete sampling of all the supermarket's possibilities. "Papà, are we rich then?" Michelino asked. "Will we have food to eat for a year?"

"Go back! Hurry! Get away from the desk!" Marcovaldo cried, doing an about-face and hiding, himself and his victuals, behind the counters; and he began to dash, bent double as if under enemy fire, to become lost once more among the various departments. A rumble resounded behind him; he turned and saw the whole family, galloping at his heels, pushing their carts in line, like a train.

"They'll charge us a million for this!"

The supermarket was large and complex as a labyrinth: you could roam around it for hours and hours. With all these provisions at their disposal, Marcovaldo and family could have spent the winter there, never coming out. But the loudspeakers had already stopped their tunes, and were saying: "Attention, please! In fifteen minutes the supermarket will close! Please proceed to the check-out counters!"

It was time to get rid of their cargo: now or never. At the summons of the loudspeaker, the crowd of customers was gripped by a frantic haste, as if these were the last minutes in the last supermarket of the whole world, an urgency either

to grab everything there was or to leave it there – the motive wasn't clear – and there was a pushing and shoving around all the shelves. Marcovaldo, Domitilla and the children took advantage of it to replace goods on the counters or to slip things into other people's carts. The replacements were somewhat random: the flypaper ended on the ham shelf, a cabbage landed among the cakes. They didn't realise that, instead of a cart, one lady was pushing a baby carriage with an infant inside: they stuck a bottle of Barbera in with it.

Depriving themselves of things like this, without even having tasted them, was a torment that brought tears to the eyes. And so, at the very moment they abandoned a jar of mayonnaise, they came upon a bunch of bananas, and took it; or a roast chicken to substitute for a nylon broom; with this system the more they emptied their carts, the more they filled them.

The family with their provisions went up and down the escalators, and at every level, on all sides they found themselves facing obligatory routes that led to a check-out cashier, who aimed an adding machine, chattering like a machine gun, at all those who showed signs of leaving. The wandering of Marcovaldo and family resembled more and more that of caged animals or of prisoners in a luminous prison with walls of colored panels.

In one place, the panels of one wall had been dismantled; there was a ladder set there, hammers, carpenter's and mason's tools. A contractor was building an annex to the supermarket. Their working day over, the men had gone off, leaving everything where it was. Marcovaldo, his provisions before him, passed through the hole in the wall. Ahead there was darkness: he advanced. And his family, with their carts, came after him.

The rubber wheels of the carts jolted over the ground, sandy at times, as if cobbles had been removed, then on a floor of loose planks. Marcovaldo proceeded, poised, along a plank; the others followed him. All of a sudden they saw,

before and behind, above and below, many lights strewn in the darkness, and all around, the void.

They were on the wooden structure of a scaffolding, at the level of seven-storey houses. The city opened below them in a luminous sparkle of windows and signs and the electric spray from tram antennae; higher up, the sky was dotted with stars and red lights of radio stations' antennae. The scaffolding shook under the weight of all those goods teetering up there. Michelino said: "I'm scared!"

From the darkness a shadow advanced. It was an enormous mouth, toothless, that opened, stretching forward on a long metal neck: a crane. It descended on them, stopped at their level, the lower jaw against the edge of the scaffolding. Marcovaldo tilted the cart, emptied the goods into the iron maw, and moved forward. Domitilla did the same. The children imitated their parents. The crane closed its jaws, with all the supermarket loot inside, and, pulley creaking, drew back its neck and moved away. Below, the multicolored neon signs glowed and turned, inviting everyone to buy the products on sale in the great supermarket.