



call me by your name

a novel

NOW a
MAJOR
MOTION
PICTURE

ANDRÉ ACIMAN

author of *Out of Egypt*,
WINNER OF THE WHITING AWARD

“This novel is hot...a love letter, an invocation, and something of an epitaph.... An exceptionally beautiful book.”
— STACEY D’ERASMO, *The New York Times Book Review*

picador



Call Me by Your Name

A N D R É A C I M A N

F A R R A R , S T R A U S A N D G I R O U X

N E W Y O R K

*For Albio,
Alma de mi vida*

Contents

[Part 1 If Not Later, When?](#)

[Part 2 Monet's Berm](#)

[Part 3 The San Clemente Syndrome](#)

[Part 4 Ghost Spots](#)

Part 1

If Not Later, When?

“*Later!*” The word, the voice, the attitude.

I’d never heard anyone use “later” to say goodbye before. It sounded harsh, curt, and dismissive, spoken with the veiled indifference of people who may not care to see or hear from you again.

It is the first thing I remember about him, and I can hear it still today.

Later!

I shut my eyes, say the word, and I’m back in Italy, so many years ago, walking down the tree-lined driveway, watching him step out of the cab, billowy blue shirt, wide-open collar, sunglasses, straw hat, skin everywhere. Suddenly he’s shaking my hand, handing me his backpack, removing his suitcase from the trunk of the cab, asking if my father is home.

It might have started right there and then: the shirt, the rolled-up sleeves, the rounded balls of his heels slipping in and out of his frayed espadrilles, eager to test the hot gravel path that led to our house, every stride already asking, *Which way to the beach?*

This summer’s houseguest. Another bore.

Then, almost without thinking, and with his back already turned to the car, he waves the back of his free hand and utters a careless *Later!* to another passenger in the car who has probably split the fare from the station. No name added, no jest to smooth out the ruffled leave-taking, nothing. His one-word send-off: brisk, bold, and blunted—take your pick, he couldn’t be bothered which.

You watch, I thought, this is how he’ll say goodbye to us when the time comes. With a gruff, slapdash *Later!*

Meanwhile, we’d have to put up with him for six long weeks.

I was thoroughly intimidated. The unapproachable sort.

I could grow to like him, though. From rounded chin to rounded heel. Then, within days, I would learn to hate him.

This, the very person whose photo on the application form months earlier had leapt out with promises of instant affinities.

Taking in summer guests was my parents' way of helping young academics revise a manuscript before publication. For six weeks each summer I'd have to vacate my bedroom and move one room down the corridor into a much smaller room that had once belonged to my grandfather. During the winter months, when we were away in the city, it became a part-time toolshed, storage room, and attic where rumor had it my grandfather, my namesake, still ground his teeth in his eternal sleep. Summer residents didn't have to pay anything, were given the full run of the house, and could basically do anything they pleased, provided they spent an hour or so a day helping my father with his correspondence and assorted paperwork. They became part of the family, and after about fifteen years of doing this, we had gotten used to a shower of postcards and gift packages not only around Christmastime but all year long from people who were now totally devoted to our family and would go out of their way when they were in Europe to drop by B. for a day or two with their family and take a nostalgic tour of their old digs.

At meals there were frequently two or three other guests, sometimes neighbors or relatives, sometimes colleagues, lawyers, doctors, the rich and famous who'd drop by to see my father on their way to their own summer houses. Sometimes we'd even open our dining room to the occasional tourist couple who'd heard of the old villa and simply wanted to come by and take a peek and were totally enchanted when asked to eat with us and tell us all about themselves, while Mafalda, informed at the last minute, dished out her usual fare. My father, who was reserved and shy in private, loved nothing better than to have some precocious rising expert in a field keep the conversation going in a few languages while the hot summer sun, after a few glasses of *rosatello*, ushered in the unavoidable afternoon torpor. We named the task *dinner drudgery*—and, after a while, so did most of our six-week guests.

Maybe it started soon after his arrival during one of those grinding lunches when he sat next to me and it finally dawned on me that, despite a light tan acquired during his brief stay in Sicily earlier that summer, the color on the palms of his hands was the same as the pale, soft skin of his soles, of his throat, of the bottom of his forearms, which hadn't really been exposed to much sun. Almost a light pink, as glistening and smooth as the underside of a lizard's belly. Private, chaste, unfledged, like a blush on an athlete's face

or an instance of dawn on a stormy night. It told me things about him I never knew to ask.

It may have started during those endless hours after lunch when everybody lounged about in bathing suits inside and outside the house, bodies sprawled everywhere, killing time before someone finally suggested we head down to the rocks for a swim. Relatives, cousins, neighbors, friends, friends of friends, colleagues, or just about anyone who cared to knock at our gate and ask if they could use our tennis court—everyone was welcome to lounge and swim and eat and, if they stayed long enough, use the guesthouse.

Or perhaps it started on the beach. Or at the tennis court. Or during our first walk together on his very first day when I was asked to show him the house and its surrounding area and, one thing leading to the other, managed to take him past the very old forged-iron metal gate as far back as the endless empty lot in the hinterland toward the abandoned train tracks that used to connect B. to N. “Is there an abandoned station house somewhere?” he asked, looking through the trees under the scalding sun, probably trying to ask the right question of the owner’s son. “No, there was never a station house. The train simply stopped when you asked.” He was curious about the train; the rails seemed so narrow. It was a two-wagon train bearing the royal insignia, I explained. Gypsies lived in it now. They’d been living there ever since my mother used to summer here as a girl. The gypsies had hauled the two derailed cars farther inland. Did he want to see them? “Later. Maybe.” Polite indifference, as if he’d spotted my misplaced zeal to play up to him and was summarily pushing me away.

But it stung me.

Instead, he said he wanted to open an account in one of the banks in B., then pay a visit to his Italian translator, whom his Italian publisher had engaged for his book.

I decided to take him there by bike.

The conversation was no better on wheels than on foot. Along the way, we stopped for something to drink. The *bartabaccheria* was totally dark and empty. The owner was mopping the floor with a powerful ammonia solution. We stepped outside as soon as we could. A lonely blackbird,

sitting in a Mediterranean pine, sang a few notes that were immediately drowned out by the rattle of the cicadas.

I took a long swill from a large bottle of mineral water, passed it to him, then drank from it again. I spilled some on my hand and rubbed my face with it, running my wet fingers through my hair. The water was insufficiently cold, not fizzy enough, leaving behind an unslaked likeness of thirst.

What did one do around here?

Nothing. Wait for summer to end.

What did one do in the winter, then?

I smiled at the answer I was about to give. He got the gist and said, “Don’t tell me: wait for summer to come, right?”

I liked having my mind read. He’d pick up on *dinner drudgery* sooner than those before him.

“Actually, in the winter the place gets very gray and dark. We come for Christmas. Otherwise it’s a ghost town.”

“And what else do you do here at Christmas besides roast chestnuts and drink eggnog?”

He was teasing. I offered the same smile as before. He understood, said nothing, we laughed.

He asked what I did. I played tennis. Swam. Went out at night. Jogged. Transcribed music. Read.

He said he jogged too. Early in the morning. Where did one jog around here? Along the promenade, mostly. I could show him if he wanted.

It hit me in the face just when I was starting to like him again: “Later, maybe.”

I had put reading last on my list, thinking that, with the willful, brazen attitude he’d displayed so far, reading would figure last on his. A few hours later, when I remembered that he had just finished writing a book on Heraclitus and that “reading” was probably not an insignificant part of his life, I realized that I needed to perform some clever backpedaling and let him know that my real interests lay right alongside his. What unsettled me, though, was not the fancy footwork needed to redeem myself. It was the unwelcome misgivings with which it finally dawned on me, both then and during our casual conversation by the train tracks, that I had all along, without seeming to, without even admitting it, already been trying—and failing—to win him over.

When I did offer—because all visitors loved the idea—to take him to San Giacomo and walk up to the very top of the belfry we nicknamed To-die-for, I should have known better than to just stand there without a comeback. I thought I'd bring him around simply by taking him up there and letting him take in the view of the town, the sea, eternity. But no. *Later!*

But it might have started way later than I think without my noticing anything at all. You see someone, but you don't really see him, he's in the wings. Or you notice him, but nothing clicks, nothing "catches," and before you're even aware of a presence, or of something troubling you, the six weeks that were offered you have almost passed and he's either already gone or just about to leave, and you're basically scrambling to come to terms with something, which, unbeknownst to you, has been brewing for weeks under your very nose and bears all the symptoms of what you're forced to call *I want*. How couldn't I have known, you ask? I know desire when I see it—and yet, this time, it slipped by completely. I was going for the devious smile that would suddenly light up his face each time he'd read my mind, when all I really wanted was skin, just skin.

At dinner on his third evening, I sensed that he was staring at me as I was explaining Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ*, which I'd been transcribing. I was seventeen that year and, being the youngest at the table and the least likely to be listened to, I had developed the habit of smuggling as much information into the fewest possible words. I spoke fast, which gave people the impression that I was always flustered and muffling my words. After I had finished explaining my transcription, I became aware of the keenest glance coming from my left. It thrilled and flattered me; he was obviously interested—he liked me. It hadn't been as difficult as all that, then. But when, after taking my time, I finally turned to face him and take in his glance, I met a cold and icy glare—something at once hostile and vitrified that bordered on cruelty.

It undid me completely. What had I done to deserve this? I wanted him to be kind to me again, to laugh with me as he had done just a few days earlier on the abandoned train tracks, or when I'd explained to him that same afternoon that B. was the only town in Italy where the *corriera*, the regional bus line, carrying Christ, whisked by without ever stopping. He had immediately laughed and recognized the veiled allusion to Carlo Levi's

book. I liked how our minds seemed to travel in parallel, how we instantly inferred what words the other was toying with but at the last moment held back.

He was going to be a difficult neighbor. Better stay away from him, I thought. To think that I had almost fallen for the skin of his hands, his chest, his feet that had never touched a rough surface in their existence—and his eyes, which, when their other, kinder gaze fell on you, came like the miracle of the Resurrection. You could never stare long enough but needed to keep staring to find out why you couldn't.

I must have shot him a similarly wicked glance.

For two days our conversations came to a sudden halt.

On the long balcony that both our bedrooms shared, total avoidance: just a makeshift hello, good morning, nice weather, shallow chitchat.

Then, without explanation, things resumed.

Did I want to go jogging this morning? No, not really. Well, let's swim, then.

Today, the pain, the stoking, the thrill of someone new, the promise of so much bliss hovering a fingertip away, the fumbling around people I might misread and don't want to lose and must second-guess at every turn, the desperate cunning I bring to everyone I want and crave to be wanted by, the screens I put up as though between me and the world there were not just one but layers of rice-paper sliding doors, the urge to scramble and unscramble what was never really coded in the first place—all these started the summer Oliver came into our house. They are embossed on every song that was a hit that summer, in every novel I read during and after his stay, on anything from the smell of rosemary on hot days to the frantic rattle of the cicadas in the afternoon—smells and sounds I'd grown up with and known every year of my life until then but that had suddenly turned on me and acquired an inflection forever colored by the events of that summer.

Or perhaps it started after his first week, when I was thrilled to see he still remembered who I was, that he didn't ignore me, and that, therefore, I could allow myself the luxury of passing him on my way to the garden and not having to pretend I was unaware of him. We jogged early on the first morning—all the way up to B. and back. Early the next morning we swam. Then, the day after, we jogged again. I liked racing by the milk delivery van

when it was far from done with its rounds, or by the grocer and the baker as they were just getting ready for business, liked to run along the shore and the promenade when there wasn't a soul about yet and our house seemed a distant mirage. I liked it when our feet were aligned, left with left, and struck the ground at the same time, leaving footprints on the shore that I wished to return to and, in secret, place my foot where his had left its mark.

This alternation of running and swimming was simply his "routine" in graduate school. Did he run on the Sabbath? I joked. He always exercised, even when he was sick; he'd exercise in bed if he had to. Even when he'd slept with someone new the night before, he said, he'd still head out for a jog early in the morning. The only time he didn't exercise was when they operated on him. When I asked him what for, the answer I had promised never to incite in him came at me like the thwack of a jack-in-the-box wearing a baleful smirk. "Later."

Perhaps he was out of breath and didn't want to talk too much or just wanted to concentrate on his swimming or his running. Or perhaps it was his way of spurring me to do the same—totally harmless.

But there was something at once chilling and off-putting in the sudden distance that crept between us in the most unexpected moments. It was almost as though he were doing it on purpose; feeding me slack, and more slack, and then yanking away any semblance of fellowship.

The steely gaze always returned. One day, while I was practicing my guitar at what had become "my table" in the back garden by the pool and he was lying nearby on the grass, I recognized the gaze right away. He had been staring at me while I was focusing on the fingerboard, and when I suddenly raised my face to see if he liked what I was playing, there it was: cutting, cruel, like a glistening blade instantly retracted the moment its victim caught sight of it. He gave me a bland smile, as though to say, *No point hiding it now.*

Stay away from him.

He must have noticed I was shaken and in an effort to make it up to me began asking me questions about the guitar. I was too much on my guard to answer him with candor. Meanwhile, hearing me scramble for answers made him suspect that perhaps more was amiss than I was showing. "Don't bother explaining. Just play it again." But I thought you hated it. Hated it? Whatever gave you that idea? We argued back and forth. "Just play it, will you?" "The same one?" "The same one."

I stood up and walked into the living room, leaving the large French windows open so that he might hear me play it on the piano. He followed me halfway and, leaning on the windows' wooden frame, listened for a while.

“You changed it. It's not the same. What did you do to it?”

“I just played it the way Liszt would have played it had he jimmied around with it.”

“Just play it again, *please!*”

I liked the way he feigned exasperation. So I started playing the piece again.

After a while: “I can't believe you changed it again.”

“Well, not by much. This is just how Busoni would have played it if he had altered Liszt's version.”

“Can't you just play the Bach the way Bach wrote it?”

“But Bach never wrote it for guitar. He may not even have written it for the harpsichord. In fact, we're not even sure it's by Bach at all.”

“Forget I asked.”

“Okay, okay. No need to get so worked up,” I said. It was my turn to feign grudging acquiescence. “This is the Bach as transcribed by me without Busoni and Liszt. It's a very young Bach and it's dedicated to his brother.”

I knew exactly what phrase in the piece must have stirred him the first time, and each time I played it, I was sending it to him as a little gift, because it was really dedicated to him, as a token of something very beautiful in me that would take no genius to figure out and that urged me to throw in an extended cadenza. Just for him.

We were—and he must have recognized the signs long before I did—flirting.

Later that evening in my diary, I wrote: *I was exaggerating when I said I thought you hated the piece. What I meant to say was: I thought you hated me. I was hoping you'd persuade me of the opposite—and you did, for a while. Why won't I believe it tomorrow morning?*

So this is who he also is, I said to myself after seeing how he'd flipped from ice to sunshine.

I might as well have asked: Do I flip back and forth in just the same way?

P.S. We are not written for one instrument alone; I am not, neither are you.

I had been perfectly willing to brand him as difficult and unapproachable and have nothing more to do with him. Two words from him, and I had seen my pouting apathy change into I'll play anything for you till you ask me to stop, till it's time for lunch, till the skin on my fingers wears off layer after layer, because I like doing things for you, will do anything for you, just say the word, I liked you from day one, and even when you'll return ice for my renewed offers of friendship, I'll never forget that this conversation occurred between us and that there are easy ways to bring back summer in the snowstorm.

What I forgot to earmark in that promise was that ice and apathy have ways of instantly repealing all truces and resolutions signed in sunnier moments.

Then came that July Sunday afternoon when our house suddenly emptied, and we were the only ones there, and fire tore through my guts—because “fire” was the first and easiest word that came to me later that same evening when I tried to make sense of it in my diary. I'd waited and waited in my room pinioned to my bed in a trancelike state of terror and anticipation. Not a fire of passion, not a ravaging fire, but something paralyzing, like the fire of cluster bombs that suck up the oxygen around them and leave you panting because you've been kicked in the gut and a vacuum has ripped up every living lung tissue and dried your mouth, and you hope nobody speaks, because you can't talk, and you pray no one asks you to move, because your heart is clogged and beats so fast it would sooner spit out shards of glass than let anything else flow through its narrowed chambers. Fire like fear, like panic, like one more minute of this and I'll die if he doesn't knock at my door, but I'd sooner he never knock than knock now. I had learned to leave my French windows ajar, and I'd lie on my bed wearing only my bathing suit, my entire body on fire. Fire like a pleading that says, Please, please, tell me I'm wrong, tell me I've imagined all this, because it can't possibly be true for you as well, and if it's true for you too, then you're the cruelest man alive. This, the afternoon he did finally walk into my room without knocking as if summoned by my prayers and asked how come I wasn't with the others at the beach, and all I could