

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice--they won't hear you otherwise--"I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!" Maybe they haven't heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell; "I'm beginning to read Italo Calvino's new novel!" Or if you prefer, don't say anything; just hope they'll leave you alone.

Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. On top of your bed, of course, or in the bed. You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upside down, naturally.

Of course, the ideal position for reading is something you can never find. In the old days they used to read standing up, at a lectern. People were accustomed to standing on their feet, without moving. They rested like that when they were tired of horseback riding. Nobody ever thought of reading on horseback; and yet now, the idea of sitting in the saddle, the book propped against the horse's mane, or maybe tied to the horse's ear with a special harness, seems attractive to you. With your feet in the stirrups, you should feel quite comfortable for reading; having your feet up is the first condition for enjoying a read.

Well, what are you waiting for? Stretch your legs, go ahead and put your feet on a cushion, or two cushions, on the arms of the sofa, on the wings of the chair, on the coffee table, on the desk, on the piano, on the globe. Take your shoes off first. If you want to, put your feet up; if not, put them back. Now don't stand there with your shoes in one hand and the book in the other.

Adjust the light so you won't strain your eyes. Do it now, because once you're absorbed in reading there will be no budging you. Make sure the page isn't in shadow, a clotting of black letters on a gray background, uniform as a pack of mice; but be careful that the light cast on it isn't too strong, doesn't glare on the cruel white of the paper gnawing at the shadows of the letters as in a southern noonday. Try to foresee now everything that might make you interrupt your reading. Cigarettes within reach, if you smoke, and the ashtray. Anything else? Do you have to pee? All right, you know best.

It's not that you expect anything in particular from this particular book. You're the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. There are plenty, younger than you or less young, who live in the expectation of extraordinary experiences: from books, from people, from journeys, from events, from what tomorrow has in store. But not you. You know that the best you can expect is to avoid the worst. This is the conclusion you have reached, in your personal life and also in general matters, even international affairs. What about books? Well, precisely because you have denied it in every other field, you believe you may still grant yourself legitimately this youthful

pleasure of expectation in a carefully circumscribed area like the field of books, where you can be lucky or unlucky, but the risk of disappointment isn't serious.

So, then, you noticed in a newspaper that If on a winter's night a traveler had appeared, the new book by Italo Calvino, who hadn't published for several years. You went to the bookshop and bought the volume. Good for you.

In the shop window you have promptly identified the cover with the title you were looking for. Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop past the thick barricade of Books You Haven't Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among them there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid maneuver you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean To Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You'll Wait Till They're Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out In Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody's Read So It's As If You Had Read Them, Too. Eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out:

the Books You've Been Planning Top Read For Ages,

the Books You've Been Hunting For Years Without Success,

the Books Dealing With Something You're Working On At The Moment,

the Books You Want To Own So They'll Be Handy Just In Case,

the Books You Could Put Aside Maybe To Read This Summer,

the Books You Need To Go With Other Books On Your Shelves,

the Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily Justified,

Now you have been able to reduce the countless embattled troops to an array that is, to be sure, very large but still calculable in a finite number; but this relative relief is then undermined by the ambush of the Books Read Long Ago Which It's Now Time To Reread and the Books You've Always Pretended To Have Read And Now It's Time To Sit Down And Really Read Them.

With a zigzag dash you shake them off and leap straight into the citadel of the New Books Whose Author Or Subject Appeals To You. Even inside this stronghold you can

make some breaches in the ranks of the defenders, dividing them into New Books by Authors Or On Subjects Not New (for you or in general) and New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Completely Unknown (at least to you), and defining the attraction they have for you on the basis of your desires and needs for the new and the not new (for the new you seek in the not new and for the not new you seek in the new).

All this simply means that, having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of *If on a winter's night* a traveler fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier so that your right to own it can be established.

You cast another bewildered look at the books around you (or, rather: it was the books that looked at you, with the bewildered gaze of dogs who, from their cages in the city pound, see a former companion go off on the leash of his master, come to rescue him), and out you went.

You derive a special pleasure from a just-published book, and it isn't only a book you are taking with you but its novelty as well, which could also be merely that of an object fresh from the factory, the youthful bloom of new books, which lasts until the dust jacket begins to yellow, until a veil of smog settles on the top edge, until the binding becomes dog-eared, in the rapid autumn of libraries. No, you hope always to encounter true newness, which, having been new once, will continue to be so. Having read the freshly published book, you will take possession of this newness at the first moment, without having to pursue it, to chase it. Will it happen this time? You never can tell. Let's see how it begins.

Perhaps you started leafing through the book already in the shop. Or were you unable to, because it was wrapped in its cocoon of cellophane? Now you are on the bus, standing in the crowd, hanging from a strap by your arm, and you begin undoing the package with your free hand, making movements something like a monkey, a monkey who wants to peel a banana and at the same time cling to the bough. Watch out, you're elbowing your neighbors; apologize, at least.

Or perhaps the bookseller didn't wrap the volume; he gave it to you in a bag. This simplifies matters. You are at the wheel of your car, waiting at a traffic light, you take the book out of the bag, rip off the transparent wrapping, start reading the first lines. A storm of honking breaks over you; the light is green, you're blocking traffic.

You are at your desk, you have set the book among your business papers as if by chance; at a certain moment you shift a file and you find the book before your eyes, you open it absently, you rest your elbows on the desk, you rest your temples against your hands, curled into fists, you seem to be concentrating on an examination of the papers and instead you are exploring the first pages of the novel. Gradually you settle back in the chair, you raise the book to the level of your nose, you tilt the chair, poised on its rear legs, you pull out a side drawer of the desk to prop your feet on it; the position of the feet

during reading is of maximum importance, you stretch your legs out on the top of the desk, on the files to be expedited.

But doesn't this seem to show a lack of respect? Of respect, that is, for your job (nobody claims to pass judgment on your professional capacities: we assume that your duties are a normal element in the system of unproductive activities that occupies such a large part of the national and international economy), but for the book. Worse still if you belong--willingly or unwillingly--to the number of those for whom working means really working, performing, whether deliberately or without premeditation, something necessary or at least not useless for others as well as for oneself; then the book you have brought with you to your place of employment like a kind of amulet or talisman exposes you to intermittent temptations, a few seconds at a time subtracted from the principal object of your attention, whether it is the perforations of electronic cards, the burners of a kitchen stove, the controls of a bulldozer, a patient stretched out on the operating table with his guts exposed.

In other words, it's better for you to restrain your impatience and wait to open the book at home. Now. Yes, you are in your room, calm; you open the book to page one, no, to the last page, first you want to see how long it is. It's not too long, fortunately. Long novels written today are perhaps a contradiction: the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can rediscover the continuity of time only in the novels of that period when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded, a period that lasted no more than a hundred years.

You turn the book over in your hands, you scan the sentences on the back of the jacket, generic phrases that don't say a great deal. So much the better, there is no message that indiscreetly outshouts the message that the book itself must communicate directly, that you must extract from the book, however much or little it may be. Of course, this circling of the book, too, this reading around it before reading inside it, is a part of the pleasure in a new book, but like all preliminary pleasures, it has its optimal duration if you want it to serve as a thirst toward the more substantial pleasure of the consummation of the act, namely the reading of the book.

So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page. You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don't recognize it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone? On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself. Here, however, he seems to have absolutely no connection with all the rest he has written, at least as far as you can recall. Are you disappointed? Let's see. Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost, as when a person appears who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and it won't work. But then you go on and realize that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author. It's the book in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober

reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is.

—*from Italo Calvino, If on a winter's night a traveler*