Never Work: The Autobiography of Salvatore Messana

by Gianni Giovannelli

Translated from the French, with recourse to the Italian original,
by Bill Brown
New York City
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Contents

Translator's Introduction

No, let's us rather choose,
Arm'd with hell-flames and fury, all at once
O'er heaven's high towers to force resistless way,
Turning our tortures into horrid arms
Against the Torturer: when to meet the noise
Of his Almighty engine he shall hear
Infernal thunder; and, for lightning, see
Black fire and horror shot with equal rage
Among his angels: and his throne itself
Mix'd with Tartarean sulphur, and strange fire,
His own invented torments.

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, lines 60-70.)

When the Scriblerus Club of Verona, Italy first published *Il segreto è dirlo* ("The secret is to tell it") in 1983, it was an anonymous work. In the words of the very brief text on its back cover, this novel is the story of the "life and adventures of Salvatore Messana," who is "a thief, sinner, adulterer, sailor, bank robber, militant of the extreme left, swindler and, finally, a 'specialist in getting sacked' who amassed a large fortune."

Before going any further, allow me to remark that, though I can certainly understand why someone would want the story of downtrodden Salvatore Messana (a kind of Savior Messiah) to have a happy ending, that last statement is incorrect. Though this novel's narrator may have "earned" money by being such an intentionally bad worker (a saboteur, in fact) that his employers were forced to buy him out of his work contracts, he certainly didn't "amass a large fortune." His various scams only netted him enough money (no more than $10,000 at a time) to be able to live without having to have a steady job.

Normally, such people – scam-artists, con men and the like – do not reveal their secrets. As Guy Debord says in *Panegyrique* (1989), which is the story of his own life and adventures, "The gypsies rightly believe that one must never speak the truth except in one's own language; in the enemy's language, the lie must reign." But Salvatore Messana – this is the name adopted by someone who tells us in his narrative that his real name is Upim – is not a typical scam-artist or con man. Unlike his friend Piras, who chose "to take the money and disappear," he is dedicated to the education of his fellow proletarians, who, thanks to him, "learned

more in an instant than they had learned their whole lives." To educate as many people as possible, Messana/Upim (or, rather, his creator) opens *Il segreto è dirlo* with a short statement entitled "Preliminary Points." In it, he explains that the secret (the secret of how to launch successful campaigns against capitalist society and the institution of work) is not to keep anything a secret. Telling one's secrets is a very good way to piss off "the prudent cowards, who are always ready to whisper appeals to stay silent, and the muddled minds that get bogged down in the details, murmuring that the secret is to say nothing," as well as his own "asshole of an attorney […] who immediately advised me to not divulge the systems that have allowed me to increase my revenues at the expense of the bosses."

Unlike his friends in the extreme Left, Messana knows – and wants it generally known – that engaging in militant class struggle isn't simply incumbent upon or a necessity for proletarians and that such struggles don't require one to renounce the acquisition of money and the good things that it can buy. If done in a certain way, *class struggle pays*. "If you went through the necessary negotiations," Messana says, "this accursed modern society was able to provide even the outcasts with a salary."

In 1989, *Il segreto è dirlo* was translated into French as *Le Secret c'est de tout dire!* ("The Secret is to Tell Everything!") by Monique Baccelli and published by Éditions Allia. Informed of the existence of this translation, and involved in its preparation (the translator says that "the majority of the footnotes were created following the author's indications"), the creator of Salvatore Messana – allegedly someone named Gianni Giovannelli – decided that the time had come to identify himself.

"My book [originally] appeared anonymously," Giovannelli explains in his preface to the French edition, "so as to avoid confusion with the bands of little opportunists who published ambiguous and insidious chronicles of the Italian struggles [of the 1960s and '70s] in the obvious hope of obtaining some crummy job." A genuine revolutionary, not an opportunistic jobseeker, Giovannelli intended his novel to be an inspiration to and guidebook for other Italian revolutionaries.

In the words of a short text that appears on the back cover of the French edition,

> Gianni Giovannelli was born in Ferrara in 1949. An attorney, he lives and works in Milan. He has published *Svaraj Gandharva* (Bianca e Volta, Milan, 1982; second edition: Tranchida, Milan, 1986); *Confessioni di un uomo malvagio* (Tranchida, 1988); and, under the pseudonym Palmiro, *Lettera al Giudice Forno* (Machina Libri, Milan, 1981) and *Poesie dalla latitanza* (C.T.A., Milan, 1982).

According to Worldcat.org and other trusted online resources, all of these books exist and are in fact credited to either Gianni Giovannelli or Palmiro. But these facts do not rule out the possibility that, in the same way that "Palmiro" is a pseudonym for Gianni Giovanni, "Gianni Giovannelli" is a pseudonym for someone else.

I say this in part because there is a well-known Italian politician by that name, and he is closely affiliated with the notorious right-wing crook Silvio Berlusconi. And so, the real author of *Il segreto è dirlo*, by falsely attributing his or her novel to "Gianni Giovannelli," might have been trying to create a scandal, which is precisely what Pier Franco Ghisleni tried to do when he falsely attributed his own *Lettere agli eretici* (1977) to Enrico Berlinguier, the head of the Italian Communist Party.

Note as well that Jérôme Delclos, when he reviewed the paperback edition of *Le Secret c'est de tout dire!* that Éditions Allia published in 2021 (cf. "De 'l'art de foutre le bordel,'" *Le Matricule des Anges*, No. 220, Fevrier 2021, p. 46), reminded his readers that, despite the book's title, the true identity of its author had still not been definitively established. "We note that this 'Gianni Giovannelli,' who is certainly still writing, in our time, for the extreme left blog *Effimera*, claims to be his incarnation." But Delclos insists that "his signature, if it is not a collective one, tells us nothing about the one who hides behind the mask."

There is other evidence that Giovannelli's book is close to what Delclos calls "a fake passing itself off as true, a 'hoax,' as one says in English." The alleged author's Preface to *Le Secret c'est de tout dire!* refers to "the adventures of a strange client of my services, the worker Stabile Fioravante," who would presumably be the real-life model upon whom Salvatore Messana was based. But online searches come up with nothing about "Stabile Fioravante" (whom Giovannelli sometimes calls "Fioravante Stabile"), which is very odd, given that the Preface says that this fellow won, "in less than twenty months, seventeen court cases against seventeen different companies from which he had managed to be fired." The Preface also refers to "Professor Lapo Meneghetti," who is thanked "for having the patience to correct my manuscript, which was written haphazardly, for having respected its spirit, and for having been happy to translate it into good Italian," but who also doesn't seem to exist, at least according to every search engine that I have consulted.

Perhaps it was these suspicious lacunae – and/or the book's publication by Éditions Allia, which had at that point published several situationist-related titles – that caused Guy Debord to believe that he recognized the ex-situationist Gianfranco Sanguinetti behind the name Gianni Giovannelli. "Do you know the recent book by Gianfranco?" he asked Charles Vincent on the back of a postcard

dated 25 February 1991. “There are pleasing things in it.” A footnote that Alice Becker-Ho (aka “Alice Debord”) affixed to this short but positive comment when the text of this postcard was published in *Guy Debord, Correspondance, Vol. 7 (janvier 1988-novembre 1994)* refers the reader to “*Le secret c’est de tout dire,* by a [*sic*] Gianni Giovannelli (published by Allia)” and explains that *Le secret* is a “fraud that, in a picaresque mode, mixes real facts with the ‘adventures’ of a known informer.”

It is obvious that the writer of this calumny never read the book in question (it is certainly not a fraud nor is there any reason to believe that either its narrator or its author is “a known informer” [*un indicateur avéré*]) and that she clearly wishes that her readers to think the worst of Gianni Giovannelli, that is to say, Gianfranco Sanguinetti, who, ever since 1981, had been on Guy Debord’s shit list. Note well that the identification of “Giovannelli” as a pseudonym used by Sanguinetti – which is something that Gianfranco himself denied – is repeated by the index included in the very last volume of *Guy Debord Correspondance,* published by Librairie Artheme Fayard in 2010. Under “Giovannelli, Giovanni” it says, “see Sanguinetti, Gianfranco.”

Whoever Gianni Giovannelli is, he (or she) knows a great deal about Gianfranco Sanguinetti, indeed, more than anyone else seems to know. On 5 October 2025, two days after Gianfranco’s death at the age of 77, effimera.org published “Per Gianfranco Sanguinetti – di Gianni Giovannelli.” More than half of this strange, very gossipy tribute concerned the scandalous circumstances of Gianfranco’s birth.

> In 1948, divorce did not exist in Italy; Bruno Sanguinetti, Gianfranco’s father, was married, but not to his partner, Teresa (Chicchi) Mattei. However, they were expecting the birth of their first child. Bruno was a prominent member of the Communist Party; Teresa was the youngest member of the Constituent Assembly and also affiliated with the Communist Party. In those days, a stable relationship between a single woman and a married man was defined by criminal law as an *affair*, a crime punishable by up to one year in prison (for him) and/or up to two years in prison (for her). Children born from these unions were considered *adulterous*; it was forbidden to recognize them, and anyone who did so faced criminal prosecution and ended up in prison. For this reason, the couple took up residence in Budapest, in Soviet-bloc Hungary, which was willing to welcome them for political reasons.
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> The pregnancy was proceeding in defiance of Italian law and, by July, there was no longer any time to wait. To avoid bureaucratic

> problems, which meant excluding Italy and Hungary, their choice was to go to Switzerland. They chartered a small aircraft to pass through the Iron Curtain. But . . . the Hungarian authorities imposed a condition upon takeoff: the couple had to fly with a strange passenger on board, a confirmed lunatic who was to be handed over to the Swiss authorities. They were provided with a syringe to inject a sedative in case the mentally ill man had a seizure. The aircraft landed in Zurich without incident; the strange passengers were thoroughly searched by suspicious Swiss customs officials, but everything went well. Teresa, an extraordinary woman of wit, told me that they declared that there were *three and a half* lunatics when they disembarked. Knowing her [as I did], it's likely that that was exactly what she said!
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> The half-lunatic was Gianfranco Sanguinetti. He was born on July 16, 1948, in the Clinique de Chamblades, in Pully (Lausanne), in the midst of the riots that shook Italy following the assassination attempt on Togliatti two days earlier, on the 14th. A few months later, the baby was clandestinely smuggled into Italy, using a Hungarian passport. Later on, because bureaucracy has its flaws (as is well known), he was officially recognized, thanks to the wise advice of skilled lawyers. This adventurous birth was the first step in a life consistently lived always outside of every rule and every reasonable expectation.

So, this Gianni Giovannelli would appear to be a very close friend of the Sanguinetti family. But at no point does this fellow takes pains to correct the impression that he is actually Gianfranco Sanguinetti in disguise; he doesn't even mention the fact that over the years some people have thought so – which is odd. Why did he not take this opportunity to clear things up once and for all?

No further light was cast on the question of Giovannelli's exact identity – indeed, this question was darkened even further – when another homage to Sanguinetti was published under the woefully misleading title "Le Secret, C'est De Tout Dire!" by *Lundi Matin*.[1] Someone identifying himself as Salvatore (Turi) Palidda (a search of the internet reveals that he is a real person) wrote the following to *Lundi Matin*'s editorial board, which immediately published it as an

[1] https://lundi.am/Le-Secret-c-est-de-tout-dire. According to the introduction to this article, there is "a novel that Sanguinetti published under a pseudonym in 1983 and that everyone should read at least once: *Le Secret, c'est de tout dire!*"

erratum.

> I published *Il segreto è dirlo* anonymously. I still possess the correspondence with the printer Mardersteig de Valdonega (an excellent printer), who had printed the first edition in Monotype characters. The publisher was the Scriblerus Club, a company registered in the name of a German worker who had no assets that could be seized by creditors. Then someone attributed it to Sanguinetti, and Debord (who in 1983 no longer had stable relations with Gianfranco) believed this for a while (then he learned that I existed). But Gérard [Berréby], the French publisher at Allia, knew that I was the author and published it under my name. In 2021, he also published a paperback edition [of it]. The very talented Monique Baccelli worked on the French version in close collaboration with me (she has also translated Cristina Campo and Primo Levi). The book was dedicated to Gianfranco, his then-partner Kathrine (Caterina) and his son Bruno. The title was the handwritten biography of Fioravante Stabile [*sic*], originally from Lecce and a member of the *Comitato Cattivi Operai* (the Committee of Bad Workers); I still possess it, accompanied by my signature, completed in Luxor before mass tourism devastated the place. The Scriblerus Club publishing house was registered in the name of a certain Giuseppe Russo. No one had bothered to register it with the Chamber of Commerce, even if it had effectively ceased to exist some time before. But several years earlier, poor Russo (a life of disarray), left without any means of support, had applied for one of those grants for people without income that governments sometimes distribute. His application was rejected because he was listed as a contractor, and it was only then that Scriblerus officially closed its doors!

Here there is *no mention whatsoever* of someone calling himself Gianni Giovannelli, no attempt to clear up the ongoing and even worsening confusion about his identity. Is G.G. is pseudonym for Salvatore Palidda or not? If it is, why did Salvatore Palidda continue to use that pseudonym for all those years, when, back in 1989, he could have cleared things up? Why did he choose to come forward now?

His testimony is not trustworthy. When the reader clicks the link to the website of Éditions Allia that was provided by the publishers of *Lundi Matin*,[2] she

[2] https://www.editions-allia.com/fr/livre/896/le-secret-c-est-de-tout-dire

finds that the book called *Le Secret, c'est de tout dire!* is in fact *still* attributed to Gianni Giovannelli and not to Salvatore Palidda! And when the reader searches the internet for the *Comitato Cattivi Operai* – surprise! – nothing comes up. Just like Fioravante Stabile and/or Stabile Fioravante, this organization doesn't seem to have actually existed.

Somebody, or some group of people, is clearly playing some kind of game here, and, at the very least, he or she or they are doing nothing to encourage people to read the novel itself, the merits of which are being obscured by a (fake) controversy concerning its true author.

Well, maybe it doesn't matter who the real author of this book is. After all, we trust the tale, not the teller, and the story of Upim/Salvatore Messana/Stabile Fioravante is a great tale, as the reader will see when she finally gets down to reading it. Part Two – in which the narrator's various jobs, scams and legal victories are described in humorous, lively detail – is highly entertaining, as is Part One, in which he recounts his family history, the effects of World War II on his village, his early experiences with crime as a *scugnizzo* (street urchin), the circumstances in which he met his future wife Maria, and, most memorably, his eight-year-long career as a sailor, which brings him to Romania, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil and Senegal. It is also in this last section that he recounts being arrested and transported back to Italy in a "chain locker," an inhuman device that was usually used to restrain African slaves while aboard ships bound for North and South America. There is a close relationship between these two parts: in the first, the narrator is tortured and, in the second, he turns his tortures into horrid arms against his torturers.

My translation of *Le Secret, c'est de tout dire!* was published by Colossal Books (Brooklyn, New York) in 2013 under the title *Never Work: The Autobiography of Salvatore Messana*. (The original cover art appears at the end of this volume.) Though I have some misgivings about this title, which deliberately puts aside the whole business of whether one should or should not tell one's secrets, I have chosen to retain it for this second edition because it is a concise and accurate summary of what the book is about. I have also chosen to continue to identify Giovanni Giovannelli as its author.

As the reader will see from the footnotes (all of which are mine, as are all the phrases that appear within brackets [thus] and the titles given to the six sections of Part One), there were a good number of discrepancies between the Italian original and its translation into French. Sometimes whole passages were left out; other times, new passages were inserted. Since these changes were supposedly made in accordance with the wishes of the author, I have retained them all.

Finally, despite all the confusion concerning the true identity of its author, I firmly believe that this novel remains a vital work, one that is still relevant, still

compelling, despite the passage of time, the differences between Europe and America, and the text's transposition from Italian into French and then from French into English.

Preface to the French Edition

In 1983, the Veronese printer Marino Mardersteig delivered the first copies of *Il segreto è dirlo*, and *La Repubblica,* one of the biggest daily newspapers in Italy, dedicated a long article to the adventures of a strange client of my services, the worker Stabile Fioravante. The inquest was signed by Giorgio Bocca, the best-paid journalist among those who were ready to write about any subject, possibly to order. Stabile Fioravante had not killed his wife with a hammer nor been the most recent fiancé of Caroline of Monaco, but no less merited the honors of the press by winning, in less than twenty months, seventeen court cases against seventeen different companies from which he had managed to be fired.

The judges had awarded him damages of a total of 700,000 new francs. Not content with his success, Fioravante had insolently threatened to continue along this road, inciting others to do the same.

This had taken place in Italy at the moment that proletarian revolt, which had begun softly in 1966 and 1967, seemed to be endless. For more than sixteen years, this revolt had been reborn, each time under new forms, skillfully beating the repression and never giving in to the temptation to accept under-handed offers of peace. Young people had flown to recruiters to seek any job on offer, eager to create havoc and receive nice sums of money in exchange for their departure.

It would be ridiculous to ponder at great length whether this legal banditry must be considered as subversive. Such banditry was unquestionably scandalous and the unions were quite obligated to tolerate it by hypocritically hiding its existence in the hope of seeing it cease on its own. The brazen exploitation of the law fed radical behavior and constituted a veritable farce at the expense of those who were obligated to respect the law, since they were the ones who created and imposed it. It was in this climate that the joyous and provocative adventures of Salvatore Messana were conceived; and it would be impossible to understand them without granting them the reality, if not the realism, in which they swim. My book appeared anonymously so as to avoid confusion with the bands of little opportunists who published ambiguous and insidious chronicles of the Italian struggles in the obvious hope of obtaining some crummy job.

Today, when everything appears suddenly and inexplicably calm, I can finally sign my name to it. – Gianni Giovannelli

Preliminary Points

I must first of all thank Professor Lapo Meneghetti for having the patience to correct my manuscript, which was written haphazardly, for having respected its spirit, and for having been happy to translate it into good Italian. In fact, the reader can appreciate in this book a prose style that certainly isn't mine.

I have decided to publish it following a violent quarrel with an asshole of an attorney (supported by three even more asshole-ish union members) who immediately advised me to not divulge the systems that have allowed me to increase my revenues at the expense of the bosses.

In any case, my thefts have not attempted to define a "line of political conduct," nor do I claim to be a "militant." But I have absolutely no shame about my existence, and I estimate that there is much more criminality in the foundation of a stock company than is related in these pages. At least they have the merit of being true. It is the prudent cowards, who are always ready to whisper appeals to stay silent, and the muddled minds who get bogged down in the details, murmuring that the secret is to say nothing, whom I want to attack. It hardly matters if the game stops here for me: a rebellious spirit will always find a kindred one.

My dear readers, the secret is to tell everything!

Dedicated to Gianfranco, Caterina and Bruno

Part One

The War

I was born on 6 February 1937 in _____, a small Apulian city hardly bigger than a market town, destitute and constantly covered in dust. Good Christians that they were, my parents immediately had me baptized, inscribing me in the parish register under the name Salvatore Messana: a name that circumstances would force me to change quite often, and if I still use a pseudonym (which the reader will pardon me for), this is precisely because I have decided to find my true identity. I still have a yellowed photo of this ceremony: a fascist in a black shirt, thrusting his chest out, is smiling besides me, having given a small sum to my family. The State in fact distributed money on every happy occasion, so as to make the Empire popular and thus increase the number of future bayonets. This was a very bad allocation of resources by the regime, if one considers what took place later; but it doesn't displease me to consider this contribution as my first swindle at the expense of the government, as a kind of involuntary baptism by fire.

We all lived in a single room, with a floor of heavy stones continually covered by earthen dust. At nightfall, we slept, all twelve of us, distributed according to a quite precise hierarchy, some in a bed, the others on a straw mattress. During the day, the light came in through a window that had been made smaller to limit (or, more exactly, to block) the inconveniences of wintertime frosts and heat waves [during the summer].

Under the staircase, right next to the door to our room, a kind of dark tunnel opened. At its entrance, a group of terra cotta receptacles were lined up. We would enter the tunnel in turn and, by the weak light of a candle, fill the receptacles with our excrement. At the sound of a trumpet that announced the passage of a cart carrying barrels, my mother had the onerous task of hurrying to meet it and empty the receptacles. The public authorities had in fact created this strange service so that the absence of sewers did not become intolerable, and so it was always ready to collect all of the small community's shit.

My father – a day laborer who did not find it abnormal to exhaust himself to the sole profit of a few landowners – left [for the war] quickly, summoned by flags, despite his responsibilities to his family and especially despite the fact that he had naively entrusted his modest income to a liar who had promised him an exemption without having the least ability to obtain one.

He was among the first to be sent to the combat zones. I saw him again (no

doubt it would be more accurate to write that “he was presented to me”) in 1942.

He wore a wretched uniform, the gray-green colors of an infantryman; he stank of grease and the barracks, which was more repugnant than when he came back from the fields, sweaty like a workhorse. He had hardly passed through the threshold when I got the sudden impression of death, clear and deep although rationally inexplicable. Despite the passage of so many years, I can still perfectly recall having the certainty that this would be his last return home.

Everyone thought as I did, and he seemed to be aware of it. He kept quiet, as if he had missed the peacefulness of home; he smoked one cigarette after another, without caring that he was violating the religion of parsimony to which he had devoted his entire existence. He observed things and people with the small eyes of an Arab, very black, excessively sunken; he scrutinized everything attentively, but with an infinite sadness. At the end of his leave, resigned to his fate, he embraced us without particular emotion and went off to get himself killed in Russia, carefully avoiding to ask himself why.

We were poor, but we were able to eat. All told, I do not have very bad memories of these first encounters with the world. I even feel a tender nostalgia for that noisy group of children and the desperate affection born of a promiscuity that, today, I find intolerable and pitiful.

There was the war. At first it came in the form of a communiqué from the government that officially made me an orphan; then it came in all of its violence. We moved to Lecce, and stayed in an even smaller room, living with the daily anguish of hunger and the continual fear of some misfortune. The only distraction from the boredom that was mixed with terror was represented by the impromptu trips to the anti-aircraft shelters in which we spent interminable hours awaiting the signal that announced the end of the danger. Too small and too unaware to really be afraid, I was only worried about being forgotten when food was given out. I had even acquired a certain indifference concerning dead bodies, which were frequently robbed by those whom the people called “the jackals.”

They were the first criminals I ever saw. They went into homes, using sticks upon or even killing people who were wounded; then they stole the most improbable objects, without scruples accumulating commodities that they then re-sold, thus winning the esteem and respect of the “good people.” This was also the reign of the black market: even rationed foodstuffs, as if by magic, ended up in the hands of speculators (thanks to the complicity of corrupt bureaucrats) without ever or almost never directly reaching their proper destinations. Cats were no longer considered domesticated animals, having become game that was sought out to the point of disappearing. Some people even affirmed that they cooked rats. In all sincerity, I have never had the occasion to eat one.

The founders of the Empire had declared war without at all bothering to

explain to the population how it should behave during the bombardments or, in a more general fashion, in case of difficulty. With the result that, after a short time, finding shelter, a piece of soap or medicine became quasi-impossible. Each person worsened the situation by egotistically seeking to disentangle himself in the midst of the confusion. One day, a woman who had gone crazy – she'd taken me for her dead son several days previously – brought me into her place by force, without paying any attention to my protests, and soaked my head in gasoline under the pretext of killing the lice, which did indeed swarm upon it. Disagreeable but very useful, this operation was then repeated more and more often by my own family. Alas, they did nothing to try to impede the bugs that were attracted by the fresh blood of children and were left to truly run wild. I became used to their bites, and I observed the particular arrogance of the large flies, reigning everywhere as sovereigns and transmitting all kinds of diseases.

The aerial attacks allowed me to get to know Saverio, a very enterprising boy my age with brushed hair and very dark skin. His grandfather – a cynical drunkard who inexplicably succeeded in cultivating his vice in the midst of all that mayhem – sent him to steal candles from a large church whose name I have forgotten, but whose rich decorations and immense painted murals greatly impressed me. I contented myself with accompanying Saverio. By pretending to pray, I witnessed – without believing my eyes – the ease with which he made disappear, not only what he had been "ordered" to take, but also a small amount of money that, after having shared it with me, he made use of. I do not know if I should remember him for his undeniable generosity or his curses for the remorse that invariably gnawed at me the following day, but what is certain is the fact that, although I am a hater of priests, I have never had the courage to steal money from a church! Saverio, on the other hand, never had such reservations; nothing intimidated him. I admired him and this admiration was, at least in part, at the origin of the misfortunes that I would come to know in his company.

The war ended as mysteriously as it had begun, but a great deal of time was necessary before a normal situation returned. In fact, it never returned because everything had definitively changed. The agricultural communities that had seen my birth had no future and were swept away by the events. We did not return to _____, but stayed in Lecce, where my uncle and cousin had found work.

The Americans circulated throughout the town, their pockets full of money, as victors or colonizers, no doubt naïve, but no less annoying for that. Among the people who had kept their self-respect, there were few who liked or supported them. The majority of the others coveted their money with whorish smiles; the bosses, hoping to avoid riots, used them unscrupulously to discourage socialist and Communist agitators; the combative sub-proletarians fleeced them every time they had the opportunity to do so. It was towards these crooks that Saverio led me with

a steady hand.

Street Urchin

Whether they were white, yellow or black, the soldiers from the United States of America addressed themselves to us, the children, by gesturing or expressing themselves in a labored Italian that seemed so much harder to understand because we were used to speaking a dialect. They asked us about everything: from the prices at the restaurants to the names of the streets. But they most often asked us about "the thing," waving banknotes and rewarding us with complicit smiles. Saverio and I looked at them in perplexity and, at the beginning, we could not manage to figure out what they meant. Nevertheless, so that we lost nothing, we pocketed what they gave us and trotted off – without heading in any precise direction – through the small streets of the town, very sure of ourselves, hoping that chance would come to our aid. At the first distraction of those who followed us, we'd take off and hide in a friend's house, leaving them with open mouths. But one day, a large, skinny guy, red-headed, covered with boils and with a mouth full of rotten teeth, recognized us and grabbed hold of my friend and told us off in English, using obviously insulting words.

Several idlers who had bivouacked at the tables of a bar intervened by suggesting that he stop immediately. After a lively exchange of points of view (half in Apulian dialect and half in a foreign language) that no one understood, they all sprang into action, and a furious brawl broke out, as was common at the time.

We were bandaging our injuries, evoking the different stages of the fight and already beginning to exaggerate the details, when the adults explained to us that "the thing" mean prostitutes and that the soldiers were always seeking pimps or kids to take them to them. In fact, the whorehouses were available and legal; one could even recognize them thanks to small painted signs at the two ends of certain streets. But the majority of the women preferred not to be in a file, keeping alive the hope of abandoning as soon as possible the profession that they had chosen for the moment, pushed by hunger. On the other hand, in the official bordellos, the military police could easily stage a raid. The solitude of the clients and the misery of the women were materialized in a veritable mob of people, which characterized the neighborhood, but this was not our scene. Before abandoning these little games, we guided several groups of marines, dropping them off (this time advisedly) at the most infamous streets, where, without great difficulty, they could find what they desired and thus export venereal diseases of Italian origin.

The years passed, and the bigwigs once again took complete control of the

situation. The Popular Front was dismantled, the Communists were marginalized, and the old fascists were returned to their posts, amidst the indifference of a people accustomed to being screwed. In 1949, Saverio and I were already real men, even if we were only twelve years old. Prematurely matured by circumstances, we were able to take the wheels off of any car without difficulty, to make off with small suitcases at the train station, and even (our hearts beating fast) slide a watch off the wrist of a distracted person. We had acquired a profound aversion to work, despite our families, which had no intention of supporting two layabouts and didn't hesitate to entrust us – after brief negotiations about salaries that they would collect directly – to our first boss, for work off the books.

He was a very fat person (at the limits of obesity) who used us as warehousemen and paid us in mere pennies. We had to load sweaters, *tee shirts*[3] and shirts into a medium-size truck, sweating like beasts and without a moment of rest. In fact, if we even looked like we were going to stop, that bastard hastened to knock us down with powerful kicks (to straighten our backs, he would say), and thus accelerate our speed. At the end of two or three months, if we hadn't earned any money, we had at least accumulated sufficient rage and hatred to want to see our torturer die in some kind of automobile accident. But he always returned and very promptly. He also tended to increase the number of his trips (and thus our fatigue) so that his business would prosper. He would send us to buy him drinks but he never offered us any; then he would spit on the ground and laugh at his own idiotic jokes, ceaselessly repeating them in the hope of making us appreciate them. We had had enough and decided to put an end to this situation.

One day, after we'd set a plan and carefully studied the workings of the business, I leaped into the truck at the moment that it pulled off. I balanced upon two boxes in the pile, chosen at random, and then I descended at the first red light to rejoin Saverio, who awaited me with my plunder. The torturer noticed nothing until the delivery of his goods; he contented himself with doubting our honesty and ceased to call upon us. We had killed two birds with one stone: on the one hand, we were delivered from that sad drudgery; on the other hand, we even earned several bucks by selling what we'd taken.

The fear of some new "placement" incited me to flee more and more often from a household where I was less and less desired. I slept in the train station, where it wasn't difficult to install myself comfortably, but I was often nabbed and, willingly or by force, returned to my "place of residence" where I regularly received a good number of beatings dispensed by the [older] males of my family. In the course of my wanderings, I had the occasion to meet people used to living by shady deals and expedients. Saverio was enthusiastic about this and succeeded

[3] English in original.

in proving to me that the moment had come to put into practice all that we had learned. Under very precise directions, we stole soldiers' uniforms from a laundry and sold them for three bucks each. We were obviously soon found out, but, as we were children, the owners contented themselves with slapping us around for two or three hours.

They had us under their eyes in our neighborhood, and so it became necessary to change our zone of operation. Thus we transported ourselves to a large place with intense traffic, a veritable strategic point. Six streets met there, frequently creating traffic jams around the obelisk that marked the center. The vehicles that passed through there (and the trucks that resupplied the American barracks were among them) were obligated to stop. At Saverio's signal, we threw ourselves upon the cargo like hawks upon their prey, plundering all that was possible to grab in a few seconds. Before the drivers had time to react, we had already disappeared into the crowd, into a myriad of inextricable and apparently similar alleys. It was almost always rice and bottles of preserves, but from time to time choice morsels fell into our hands, and we had a festival. Our little enterprise prospered, and we were very proud of becoming real hooligans. Saverio was decidedly a very daring kid, but he knew how to defeat criticism with a smile and the natural sympathy that he inspired, with the result that we both lost our sense of limits and bragged in public, in loud voices, of our illegal exploits. Our band was composed of six effective members and one or two sympathizers who were only involved on certain occasions. We got together during the evenings between the columns of the Santa Croce Church. It was rare that someone was missing because everyone loved to stroll through and play in the gardens, where we nabbed fruit from the trees. Then we bought ices, smoked Kent and Pall Mall cigarettes on the sly, and recounted our first shots to the old, coarse whores of the neighborhood. There was no talk of work, except when we went as a group to laugh at a friend who ended up becoming a salesman in some shop.

Things couldn't go on like this, if only because other groups of little hoodlums had followed our example, and the thefts increased beyond the limits set by the authorities. The people had quickly forgotten fascism and the war, deprivation and misery. In the countryside, chaos had begun again, the Cold War reigned over the world, and, in the factories, strikes broke out in a continuous stream. The Democratic Christians hoped to make dramatic changes and even provided instructions to the police, but, finding it impossible to attack the local Mafiosi, found an excellent target in the thieving kids: "this scandal" had to end! One accursed day, they encircled half the town and began to stage very focused raids. We were obviously taken in, our loot and us, and our careers as *scugnizzi*[4]

[4] Neapolitan dialect for street urchins.

were brutally ended. We were unceremoniously locked up in a reformatory where, at night, we slept in huge army camps that had fortified doors and solid locks. There were more than a hundred of us, and the newspapers poured out praises for public safety and the government minister who resolved this serious urban problem so brilliantly.

Saverio – who was left all alone in the world by a series of misfortunes – succeeded so well in selling his own loot that he was adopted by a rich Italian-American family. He left for overseas; I never saw him again and know nothing more about him. It is not impossible that he once again fell into a tight spot. We, the ones who were "responsible," were all carefully listed and entered into police files. Two weeks later, our jailers divided us into groups and washed, sheared, and disinfected us. They attained their objective, which in short was punishment and redemption: that is to say, they forced us to go to work, and those who didn't go along received slaps. Mornings and afternoons, they reunited us and gave us long speeches about our respective futures and the necessity of changing our lives, but the orators themselves knew perfectly well that they were wasting their time. In any case, I felt a desire for adventure that was too powerful to be extinguished by sermons from obtuse bureaucrats whose only care was tranquilly reaching retirement.

My mother and my entire family were delighted by my confinement, the legal justifications for which I still don't know. They had one less mouth to feed and could hope that my virulence would end up calmed. I, on the other hand, had had more than enough of being locked up and washing floors for the commander of a barracks located near the port. I was quite decided to change the atmosphere, no matter what the cost. And so I didn't hesitate to accept a place that no one wanted and became the jack-of-all-trades (the fifth wheel) at a psychiatric hospital. This truly thankless task was an unforgettable experience and, subsequently, no workplace appeared as bad to me as this fortress transformed into a living hell. When I indicated my intention to accept, they made me sign an already drafted declaration, which I did not bother to read, as I was almost illiterate. In its great lines it was stipulated that I had volunteered, that I was engaged for a certain period of time, of my own free will, and that I knew all the rules. When I arrived at my destination, they gave me a work shirt, no doubt white long ago, but now dirty and smelly.

The facilities were very modern. As was the case during the war, they made use of gasoline to combat the prosperous colonies of lice (I could write a treatise on the habits and behaviors of bugs!). The unfortunate mentally ill patients and even the epileptics were, willingly or unwillingly, attached by chains to rings on the walls. And when this wasn't sufficient (and sometimes it wasn't), the old "nurses," who were completely worn out by their work, thrashed them pitilessly

with sticks. But their victims, weakened by deprivation and moral distress, didn't even think of revenge. The food surpassed anything that a sadist could imagine. It will suffice to say that I myself was assigned to cut up old, leathery, skeletal meat, including [the animals'] heads. The bureaucrats, who possessed an honesty that was above all suspicion, model citizens, who were certainly irreproachable, pocketed the difference between their real costs and the ones they declared. This was watched by their poor employees, who bow down today due to fear and tomorrow will perhaps cry out between their [employers'] claws.

Thus, I went from the frying pan into the fire. At the end of three months, I was truly fed up with this horrible asylum, the fetid odor of urine and excrement, the unpunished maliciousness of my colleagues, and especially the continual whimpering coming from the rooms, which I could hear while I slept and which resonated in my ears as soon as I woke up. Comparison with a snake pit truly doesn't seem excessive to me. Fortunately, upon my arrival, I gave them a false name, close to my real one, but made-up. This precaution proved useful; it permitted me a strategic escape without suffering any adverse consequences. Nevertheless, before I took off, I decided to commit an act that was, no doubt, crazy, but necessary to be able to live without the disagreeable company of repressed anger. I am not ashamed to affirm that I acted upon a whim, but it didn't lack grandeur. I audaciously started a fire that destroyed, among other things, the brand-new car of that bastard, the under-director, but that wasn't my only victim (not counting an almost-human, age-old tree). Thanks to the panic that ensued, I cleverly reached the exit and ran out without my stuff. It was September 1954: I had finally regained my freedom.

Maria

Experience has taught me that, to live with dignity, one cannot count on the favors of another, but one must use one's own ingenuity and intelligence, without lowering one's head like the herds of sheep. Instead of returning to my old friends in Lecce (and be immediately arrested by the Cartesian meeting of delinquency and juridical abstractions), I traveled north up the coast on foot, dressed like a vagrant. I carried with me few things and meager provisions (black bread and boiled rice). After two days of forced march and I don't know how many kilometers, I arrived, completely exhausted, in a small port village, inhabited by fishermen and characterized by many small anchored boats and a certain animation.

For an entire day, from dawn to dusk, I remained sprawled out beside a

gigantic block of granite, as if I were a ghost, without the least energy to continue on my way. The people went by without saying anything to me and I was in no state to say a word to anyone. During the night, thinking I was not being watched, I ate several pieces of fruit that I pinched from the garden of a house along the way, then I set myself up to sleep on the deck of a motor boat that was moored on the shore and left unwatched. The first glimmers of the dawn came upon me before I had truly rested, but I wanted to refresh myself with the water from a public washhouse, graciously offered to the population by some noble family.

I washed all my clothes and, in particular, my shirt, then I returned to my rock, without budging from it for the rest of the day, as I was decided to conduct a veritable test of strength against public distrust. My behavior, which was really bizarre, had intrigued everyone, but I did not judge it opportune to take the first step (this is what my instincts would have suggested to me) and no one decided to stop ignoring me. To help myself survive, there was the usual fruit, enriched by a fish that had been overlooked (perhaps intentionally) on the deck of a boat and, in the shadows, I clandestinely boiled it.

News – as everyone knows – always arrives on the third day. In the end, a brave man, who was named Ferdinando Cavaliere, approached me and stated that he knew my situation. To break the ice, he asked me if I needed anything.

"I was not born here," he said. "We came to this village twenty-two years ago, but I can tell you that the people here are good."

"I would like to work," I said. "Is that possible? I do not like remaining here without anything to do."

"When one wants to work, one always ends up finding something to do, my boy. You are young and alone. Don't you have a family?"

"All of my family died during the war, and I no longer know which way to turn. I would like to become a sailor; in this town, I can't resist. Could you help me?"

"You are too skinny to be a sailor. You are truly as skinny as a nail. Come eat at my place and we will talk about it. Are you in good health? Do you know how to swim? Do you know how to row?"

"Of course . . . and since long ago."

In this single response, I succeeded in telling two big lies, but they changed my life. When they understood – almost immediately – that I knew nothing of the sea, I had already become a part of the community, and it had not regretted it. I spent five very happy years there; I believed that I had forever buried the young hoodlum who was inside me and, at the same time, had ended my vocation as an adventurer. I slaved away without it weighing on me; everyone liked me; and, little by little, I learned all the tricks of the trade. At the start, I received board and lodging as my payment, but I subsequently received a small salary that allowed me

to buy a small Vespa [motorcycle]. I was happy.

Cavaliere's trawler could accommodate a dozen men and brought a lot back to him. It was equipped with a kind of refrigerating chamber, which was chilled by blocks of ice and stank more than any fish market. We went out with fishing lamps, accompanied by pimp boats that attracted the prey with groups of powerful lights. Seeing the way I climbed aboard that first time, my companions realized – without a shadow of a doubt – that I had never gone fishing, not even with a hook and line, but they didn't say anything and showed me how, obtaining much more with their silence than they would have with a hundred reprimands. Cavaliere – boss and patriarch – told me that my lack of experience stirred distant memories in him and revived his nostalgia for his homeland.

The winter was very long, almost interminable. We rarely went out and, like the others, I spent my evenings in the only cheap restaurant in the neighborhood, listening to the tales of the sailors who, before stopping there, had traveled the world. Truth and fabrication were continually mixed together in their tales; it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. The passage of time had created a strange confusion, even in the minds of those who told them.

Judges always seek (with their idiotic distortions) to control the exact development of the useless fragments of reality, thus losing the meaning of the events in question (I subsequently noticed this, in the course of the many encounters I had with them). On the other hand, I loved to hear about sunken ships, distant and strange lands, immense octopi, whales – and why not? – even winged monsters, dragons and mermaids. And my cunning as a hooligan raised among the alleyways of Lecce did not constitute a brake on my naïve passion for such tales. I only regretted not having heard them when I was a child.

There was a lot of talk about the Center-Left government when the spell [of the tall tales] was broken, but I'm not sure by what. More modestly, a certain Giuseppe, an unlikeable and brutal drunkard, decided to take me home with him, without allowing for the least reply; he obviously did not intend to release me if I did not accept. Pulled by the arm, I reluctantly followed this person who staggered along, and thus I ended up meeting his wife, Maria. I was immediately struck by the beauty of this young woman, who was obligated to serve her husband without receiving the least affection or material comfort in return. Scarcely upon entering, Giuseppe collapsed on the ground, snickering at and awakening the two children whom he'd had from a previous marriage. When the young woman returned from putting to bed the children who weren't hers, the brute was already snoring, but I hesitated to go inside. I was young and alone, and she surely could not be satisfied with a marriage that had been imposed on her. It was almost natural that we would become lovers, and my motorbike proved very useful in protecting our liaison from prying eyes. Despite the worry (it wasn't rare in those times to take a pistol shot or

a hammer blow from a well-informed cuckold), we had a lot of fun together and fucked like rabbits. For hours and hours we wracked our brains trying to find reasons to get together for a few minutes, and any excuse was a good one to justify the gratification of our urges.

Feeling desired, Maria became even more desirable, and her availability was in some way the midwife of my natural state, which took the upper hand. I quite quickly began to pretend to be sick so that I could be ready to see her again every time that an occasion arose, and I succeeded, without too much difficulty, in passing the test of Ferdinando Cavaliere's first visits, though he was particularly skilled in the analysis of the human spirit.

I worked less and less, and with less and less enthusiasm, especially after gaining the complicity of a mother named Rose, who was keen to favor our relationship, not only because of the small sums that I periodically gave her, but also because of an old hatred that she had for Giuseppe. Quite often, intuition precedes perception and, if no one could say that they had seen me with Maria, everyone was certain that I was hiding something. The initial balance was altered, and the community reacted by conducting an investigation. The cord, quite tenuous, risked breaking at any moment, and I felt that I was being followed all the time, and both of us understood that we did not have long before we were discovered, with all the consequences that this would involve.

As we didn't have the strength to revolt, we decided to part ways and never see each other again. Such a decision cost both of us a lot, but we had the impression that there was no other solution, and no doubt this was truly the case. It seemed preferable to us to break up dramatically, and I found myself in a trap in which I was willingly condemned to exile. In fact, a sailor had arranged for me to embark upon a very big ship, the *Mar della Plata,* which was to leave the port of Genoa for the East, and that's all I knew. In my life (slightly more than twenty years), I had only gone a few kilometers, and suddenly one was speaking of distances that my mind could not place among comprehensible concepts.

In the middle of the morning, before the bus stopped to pick me up, I awaited Ferdinando Cavaliere, who embraced me with the affection of someone who understood that I had made a very human error and that my departure was the only decision worthy of a man whom he esteemed. "I regret this," he told me simply, and I was very moved. When I sought news about him – quite a few years later – I learned that he had died from a very painful tumor, which saddened me very much. Of all my shams, my absenteeism at his expense was the one that cost me the most effort and was the most difficult.

The *Sultana*

At exactly the scheduled time, the *Mar della Plata* raised its anchor at the Port of Genoa, but without Salvatore Messana onboard. Your friend had dashed off at the last moment, because he – lazy and fascinated by the new things that were passing before his eyes – had preferred to remain on solid ground with Marcella. Ignoring all half-measures, as was always the case with me, I was immediately convinced that it was impossible for me to live without this little, timid and fragile brunette (a true volcano in private!). I was crazy in love with her and, at the end of three weeks, I found it natural to ask her to marry me. This was a disaster; one could no longer speak to me ironically about the [southern] Mediterranean mentality! Though I found myself in the capital of "Nordic" Liguria, the reactions that my proposal unleashed were easily the equal of those that would have poured out if I had made it in my native town. First of all, it was deemed unacceptable that – to remain in the vicinity of this flower – I had left my navigation pass on the ship, without me caring at all, and that I had failed to stay aboard, that is to say, stay at my job and receive my salary; and then one judged very unfavorably the obvious serenity with which I accommodated myself to a completely precarious situation in which there were no future guarantees.

Yet I had decided to surmount all these obstacles by getting married and by speaking of it with Marcella's mother, who was the only arbiter since her father had long ago rejoined his Creator. This respectable woman had me sit in a wooden armchair covered in damask velvet that was in as bad taste as the rest of the room. I felt oppressed, surrounded, as I was, by stuffed parrots,[5] Venetian mosaics, and useless pieces of furniture – all of it a mess without any value, acquired at high prices from skillful merchants. I couldn't manage to detach my gaze from a voluminous wart that ornamented the greater part of the lady's lips, and made her smile even more unpleasant. The swollen little growth, scarred and callous, moved to the rhythm of the movements caused by her clucking voice (in fact she was trying, in vain, to hide a strong Ligurian accent) that proposed to me that I have a drink of walnut liquor. Without waiting for my polite refusal, Marcella's mother poured out for me a big swig in a small silver-painted glass. The sickly sweet and nauseating taste quickly incited me to drink very slowly, in a way to avoid a second portion, which would have probably been fatal to any non-alcoholic person.

"I have esteem for you," she said, "and I know that you are a good boy. I could even have affection for you, because you are likeable, but you must forget

[5] An allusion to "La Signora Felicita," a famous poem by Guido Gozzano (1883-1916), published in *La via del rifugio* ("The Way of the Refugee").

about my daughter, whom you will not marry. I immediately understood that you do not like to work and, on top of that, you are not from around here."

Concerning my desire to work, I thought that she must have been clairvoyant or a witch, but I didn't protest by trying to convince her of the contrary with an impassioned speech about the manner in which an idler can be redeemed by love. She was unshakeable and concluded in a touching tone:

"Marcella and I have suffered too much. You must give up seeing her, because I have already found her a good husband: very calm, completely of her character. But, as I want to help you, I have arranged a new navigation pass for you: here it is, it's yours! If you are agreed, go to this address and, in three days, you will embark on the *Sultana.* Are you happy, Salvatore?"

She had thought of everything, that battle-axe. With the help of my rival, who was an officer in the merchant marines, she had succeeded in eliminating me. I received a stab in the back, but I wasn't any less thankful for it! I understood immediately that Marcella would never rebel against such a mother and, without any further ado, I went to the navigation company to sign an embarkation contract for work on the 12,000-ton ship bound for America. While shaving, I looked at myself in the mirror, and it didn't displease me to think that I was a hero for sacrificing myself for the good of others, but I foresaw that there wouldn't be a happy ending for me, as there is at the end of a comic strip. Marcella was destined to become a neurotic housewife and I to plod like a donkey.

An invitation to melancholy! I went off to realize a long-held dream, and I already considered myself to be a real sailor. I reached the ship in Marseille, crossing the border with some emotion. I wanted to laugh when I heard everyone speaking French. As for the ship, it seemed to me to be the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I couldn't stop examining and touching the cabin, the shower, the washbasin, the comfortable and proper bunk, the meticulous finishing and the upholstery installed by expert hands. In the common rooms, the partitions were completely covered with photographs of women, along with their names and the dates and places of the meetings with them. During the first few days, they kept me company, with their eternal, kindly smiling faces that were so different from the [faces in the] portraits that dominate peasants' homes.

I do not want to bore the reader with a narrative that is too detailed. Having spent almost eight years as a sailor, a hundred books wouldn't be enough to describe all my impressions and my little adventures. I learned my trade, and wandering the world made me forget my fatigue.

Little by little, I became a sea-worker, always a bit rebellious but never dissatisfied. The salary was nothing extraordinary, contrary to what anyone might believe, but it was good enough. Having no family, I could dispose of the entirety of that small sum; I squandered a good part of it and placed the rest in an account

that I opened with La Spezia, with which the ship-owner had an agreement. Knowledge of the system of deposits and credit would be very useful to me, as we well see later on.

Shipping made us dream of other things than hasty sexual relations, but the sirens who waited on solid ground could cost a fortune. I must remark that, to be an authentic lover of women, one must have pockets full of money and a natural propensity to spend it. For those who refuse to exhaust themselves in whorehouses or lock themselves into squalid retirement homes with crumbling plaster, there is no other choice. Dinners, taxis, hotels and dancing are the costs a true Romeo must pay for his happy hours with an available Juliette – not forgetting gifts that leave behind a memory that isn't fleeting. We were all aware of being vagabonds, and it seemed indispensible to us to at least remain anchored in the memories of the people we knew. It is not by chance that sailors and truckers are proletarians who have open hands and, when they stop over somewhere, do not tolerate the wise parsimony of the metalworkers or the innate prudence of the factory worker.

At the ports of call, the money we spent to entice women would incite us to live the high life and, to live the high life, one must have more and more money. A vicious circle, in sum, like gambling or drugs. Quickly discarding the idea of limiting myself, I realized that I had to do more than one thing to get by. I remember that I, along with two of my buddies, created a veritable clandestine distillery aboard the *Sultana.* After numerous failed attempts, we succeeded in preparing a recipe that was appreciated by our clients. We assembled all the leftover fruits and vegetables, the peels and the other refuse, and we filled small bottles with it. When the upper half of this mixture began to become moldy, we mixed the whole thing with a diabolical paste that consisted of flour, sugar and everything else our imaginations suggested from among the different ingredients that were available to us. We passed the concoction through the coil a few times (to reduce the methyl alcohol), and the liquor was born. While in Spain, Toto, one of my associates, had purchased a label that bore the inscription "*Aguardiente de Torre Vega*," or something like that. This drink was vaguely similar to grappa, with a slightly bitter taste. Whatever it was, in Finland we weren't able to meet the demand, while in South America all the restaurants we supplied passed off this strange product at high prices. The sums we earned – naturally filled out by the different forms of contraband – were all used, by common agreement, to go on binges, but in such a way that didn't arouse suspicions about the excessive increase of our revenues. This arrangement, which I personally elaborated and, without too much difficulty, imposed on my comrades, served to keep our consciences clear by justifying our crazy expenditures to ourselves and permitted us to amuse ourselves without superfluous remorse. My formidable ability to find good excuses for all kinds of roguery has always elicited a favorable reception for your Salvatore

Messana among all those who love to become scoundrels with no restraint.

One fine day, we were en route to the Black Sea, with many stops along the way for loading and unloading, but the return trip with a shipment of Romanian goods was a direct one. Once we passed through the strait, we came to Constantinople, in Turkey, the last stop before our final destination.

Istanbul . . . I recently returned there. It has now become a city stripped of personality, with long lines of apartments blocks and many tourists. A few years earlier, it had not yet been subjected to the violent aggression of the progress that makes everything uniform; it still possessed a kind of charm that was difficult to explain, because it induced the impressions of fear and beauty at the same time. If the tortuous alleys and many delinquents who circulated within them intimidated even the most hardened travelers, no one could prevent himself from admiring this picture-postcard country made up of mosques, short houses, sky and sea.

The port to the East was also open to the most pleasing vices that the human mind could imagine and, to permit you to pay for them, it was open, even wide open, to all illegal activity. All the currencies of the world were accepted and exchanged by even the poorest of the merchants; any object could only be sold after long negotiations (I remember that, one day, someone wanted to sell me a half-eaten sandwich); there was no commodity that couldn't be found in that constantly moving human tide, and one could procure drugs with the same ease as a pack of cigarettes. Given that the few students who were there smoked but didn't think – as they would later – to speculate on this paradise and become dealers, the sailors were the ones to be suspected of drug-trafficking.

Because of an unwritten but still functional international agreement, all the ships in the area were thoroughly searched. And so, when the *Sultana* arrived in the Romanian port of Constanta (if I am not mistaken), the crew was assailed by murderous bureaucrats. We were all accustomed to the ambience of the whorehouses (for only twenty Turkish dollars, young women were available for the whole night and they were not passive), and so the encounter was disastrous. Nothing came of our immediate offers of dollars, clothing and liquor. The soldiers immediately looked upon us with fanatical eyes, and I believe I have never encountered servants of the State (as one calls them today) who were so meticulous and surly. They behaved very harshly with us, as if they had nabbed the strategic leadership of an anti-socialist conspiracy; they nervously searched all the cabins and the baggage compartments, grumbling to each other, without any human sympathy. They did not succeed in finding any accursed drugs, although the officer who commanded them had declared several times that he was convinced that he would, inviting us to confess and promising clemency to those who "collaborated." I believe that they were mistaken and that there really weren't any drugs onboard, because, if there had been any, snitches would not have been lacking (solidarity is

a myth, at least when it comes to sailors). On the other hand, they were hardly mistaken when they considered us to be outlaws and brigands. In the course of the search, they confiscated everything that was subject to seizure: from liquor to pornographic magazines, from packs of cigarettes to prayer rugs. They also found (and this is what caused the scandal) forty-five automatic Remington pistols, with scopes, destined (according to reliable information) for a North African merchant who was ready to pay an astronomical price for them. They confiscated all the objects that had not been properly declared, even pepper and coffee, which were commodities towards which the customs officials of the entire world turned a blind eye. The captain explained to us that this was a settling of accounts due to political schemes. Whatever the cause, they ended up arresting everyone, and then started secret negotiations with the [shipping] company that ended with our release and a very steep fine.

There followed twenty days of rest: the head of the shipping company plotted from afar to not pay anything and get away without too much damage. We didn't care at all, because we had regained our freedom and were assured of being paid our salaries. We hunted for pretty girls [*di fate slave*] and discovered that the population was more receptive to our enticements than the government was. The young women of the country were not used to the presence of Westerners, and they almost jumped on us. Involved in various little affairs, I ended up spending all my money, selling my spare clothes and even my ballpoint pens, which, for some mysterious reason, were particularly sought there.

The consulate of Italy (the homeland of the crew) and that of Liberia (the origin of the ship) got together and found a solution that put an end to a presence that bothered the Socialist authorities and caused the decay of healthy [local] customs. We left with a full hold and a new name, the *Kirta.* That son-of-a-whore owner had been able to find a way to use legal means to cheat the tough Romanians! In fact, I never knew if the fine was ever paid, but I doubt it was.

If the shareholders could breathe a sigh of relief and start counting their profits again, Salvatore Messana, on the other hand, was in the midst of an economic crisis. My salary wasn't enough for me (due to the many vices that I had picked up), and I no longer had the clandestine distillery or other illegal resources to draw upon. In desperation, I decided to sell parts of the ship itself. To begin, I contented myself with hanging rubber washers from my neck and then, once on land, I sought out potential buyers. Then, without restraint, as usual, I brought onboard shady characters, pretending that they were neighbors or relatives who had emigrated: I showed them the merchandise and took their orders. The business moved as if it was on wheels, and I had a small commercial network at each port of call. Not being able to transport the objects on my own (they were either too numerous or too big), I organized nocturnal withdrawals with an external helper.

Although it was a complicated and risky system, no one ever saw anything. This could have gone on a long time, either because one life wouldn't have been enough to dismantle a ship of that size or because the insurance paid more than the real value of the material that had gone missing, and there was never enough time – the duration of a stopover – to conduct a serious investigation.

Because of my fear of loose lips and because I didn't want to share the profits with anyone, I did all this by myself. I had always taken care to not reveal anything to my fellow workers, even simulating a real astonishment when informed of these mysterious disappearances. But if I had fooled my colleagues, I hadn't managed to escape the attentive, wily and porcine eyes of our commander, who received a large cut of all the illegal activities that took place on his ship and who intended to keep this privilege. One evening, after dinner, before heading to Buenos Aires, he called me to his cabin and had me sit facing him, with a sly air that promised nothing good. He opened his little cabinet, set two glasses on his desk and filled them with apple brandy, my favorite drink.

In the Chain Locker

"Upim," he said, brusquely showing that he knew my surname very well. "Upim, I expect my share . . . including the interest. When will you give it to me? Today is already too late, don't you think so?"

His tone didn't leave room for a reply. He wasn't joking. He was sure of himself, perfectly at ease in his courteous threats, used to the terror with which he exercised the frightening power of a commander. He fixed his hard but almost patient glare on me, chewing on a filtered cigarette. His uniform was impeccable, regulation as always, worn by a man able to remain himself in honesty as well as in the most shameful illegality. I felt myself trembling; I cried with rage and, at the same time, I desperately struggled to try to save face. He enjoyed my difficulty and my discomfort. He scrutinized me while snickering and expecting a response, while I tried in vain to kill him with the force of my thoughts in the manner of the natives of Haiti. Nothing doing . . . this wouldn't work for a native of Apulia!

"I have money set aside, sir," I said. "When we have disembarked, I will find the means of paying you."

"Are you sure of that?" he asked. "It is a good thing for you that you are sure of it, young man . . . because we don't have much time together left."

"Yes, I am sure of it, sir. The last . . . how shall I say? . . . the last *supply* hasn't been paid for. I can find credit in Buenos Aires and this sum will be yours."

The idea was a little idiotic, but I had to stall for time. Nevertheless, it

displeased me to give in without a fight, without trying to get out of the situation without too much of a loss. All the effort and risk would have been to the profit of this brute: I could not absorb the blow dealt by an evil and hostile destiny. This expert swine dismissed me by saying, "Don't try to be clever. Respect your commitment, and remember that I hate being teased."

When the unloading procedures and the police formalities were concluded, I flew by taxi to the neighborhood in Baires[6] called Boga, a kind of *Spaccanapoli*[7] where all the shadiest types in Argentina can be found. I did not have much difficulty catching up with my associates, and I announced to them that our business had come to an end and told them why. They had earned a lot due to me, and they became mad with anger, swearing and cursing my persecutor. I was seeking from them the best way of getting out of this trap, when a skinny guy with brown hair assured me that he would take care of it. He had a mustache like a Sicilian nobleman; he was picking his fingernails with switchblade; and every thirty seconds he readjusted his odd striped costume (a double-breasted jacket and pants that stopped above the ankles). "Don't worry," he told me, calling me "*amigo*," giving me great whacks on the shoulders and laughing uproariously, which is typical of lucid madness.

Indeed, he took charge of the matter personally and in his own way. That very evening, the commander was assaulted leaving a restaurant. While two guys held him firmly, a third broke a leg and then an arm. And to leave no doubts or uncertainty about the meaning of the operation, the little brown-haired guy informed him that this was his payment, plus interest.

"If you want more, you bastard son of a whore, you have only to ask and you will be immediately served. . . . You cannot imagine the number of bones that a surgeon like me can break. . . . *adios*." They put him into a taxi and had him transported to a good hospital, where the doctors prescribed him two months of care.

Either out of a desire for revenge or due to the help of some God (if there's a God of bastards), that damned soul got back on his feet ahead of schedule, and he rejoined us by plane at Santos in Brazil, where the ship had gone in the meantime. As for me, completely unaware, as always, I had effaced the event from my memory, and I only thought about spending time in pleasant company. I'd engaged in tourism and, stealing a car for the occasion, drove several kilometers to admire the immense statue of Christ that dominated the town, and sought out luxurious restaurants in which to dine by candlelight (one of my little manias). I became

[6] Short for Buenos Aires.

[7] The name of both a poor neighborhood in Naples and the street that splits that city in half (in Italian, *spacca* means "split").

engaged to the daughter of a German merchant (an ex-Nazi? who knows?), and, between two marriage proposals, I isolated myself with her in a room with a balcony at a colonial-style hotel. I spent my last night in Brazil looking at the sea from the balcony, happy, without a care, without even having a suspicion of what would happen to me the next day. But such is exactly what characterizes misfortunes.

When I saw on deck the one whom I had too quickly forgotten, I managed to not appear too tense. “Long time no see,” I said with great cordiality, as if nothing had happened. Anger seemed to have momentarily blinded this man, who was little used to jokes made by other people or attitudes that weren’t respectful. Nevertheless, he regained control of himself, and this was the calm that, to me, presaged the storm ahead.

“Upim,” he murmured before withdrawing, “ask around about the dish that is best served cold. Perhaps you already know.”

It was clear that I was done for; I expected a punishment that I judged to be inescapable. With melancholy, I thought that I would probably never again see the people I knew in Santos and that they would await me in vain when the *Kirta* returned four months later. Since the ship was moving off, there was no hope of escape.

I was certain that I couldn’t find a way out, but I decided to fall with dignity, if only for the sake of authoring a well-acted tragedy. I didn’t have long to wait: hardly two hours later, I received an urgent summons. No question of apple brandy this time! Without further ado, the great hulking brute demanded “his” money and announced to me the restitution of what he ironically called the “payments received.”

“I have 1,437 dollars,” I said humbly. “I will immediately go get them.” Several ass-kissers had discreetly lined up and threatened to spoil the show. I heard a vague murmur when I returned with the pack of bills in full view.

“It didn’t enter my mind to not respect our agreement, sir,” I said. “As you can see, I have kept what I owe you. Even if it has no legal value, an agreement is an agreement: one must always respect it.”

As I finished speaking, he started laughing loudly, as if I were a coward. He wanted to reaffirm his authority as cruelly as possible.

“You have taken it into your head to be clever, you half-pint!” he said. “But I’m the one who has swindled you. My dear old Upim, now that you have settled your account, you are due interest, for which you won’t have to wait long: I swore it to myself in the hospital.”

The ass-kissers posted outside, looking through the open door, didn’t lose a minute. They showed their satisfaction, and my humiliation was the compensation for their sloth.

"Asshole," one of them said. "You will stop passing yourself off as a fox! Now you will pay a heavy price and learn respect for people who are bigger than you."

In close proximity to their cowardly expressions, my last doubts melted away. It took but a moment. I pulled out of the sleeve of my coat a dark and strong stick that I'd hidden there, and began with lucidly reckless calm to beat the head and back of the commander, using all of my strength, becoming a furious, incontrollable animal, until I felt dozens of hands, feet and objects of all kinds fall on my body at the same time. Then everything went black and I no longer saw anything.

When I awoke, I felt an unpleasant sensation in my bones. But all attempts to touch the most painful places were useless because I was chained up. I found myself on the piece of sheet metal with holes in it known by the sad name "chain locker," and I was destined to remain on it until we reached Dakar in Senegal. By a strange twist of fate, I, a white worker, traveled along the same route (only backwards) and in the same conditions as [African] slaves. The equatorial sun made the metal white-hot, and so I endured infernal pain all day. At night, it was fever that kept me company, causing nightmares and making my teeth chatter without respite. Perfected over the course of centuries, this torture included giving me just enough food and water to keep me just barely alive. The man who was charged with feeding me had extinguished his sense of pity and, out of fear of the tyrant, didn't dare exchange a single word with me. The perfect executor of a formula that had proven itself effective, the commander decided to pass me off as wildly crazy and prepared me very well to play this role in his scenario. The solitude was so terrible that, after two days, I fell into an anguished half-sleep, from which I only awoke when they freed one of my hands to allow me to eat. That was my only connection with external reality. In the course of my hallucinations, I often recalled images from a film that takes place in antiquity: *Barabbas*,[8] I believe. I identified with the hero, who miraculously emerged safe and sound from the mines in which all his companions died. But, alas, this wasn't a dream; I lost all sense of time and all irony failed me.

If I did not die, I believe it was out of spite or perhaps due to my instinct for self-preservation. I was certainly helped by the weakness that prevented me from thinking about the fate reserved for poor Salvatore Messana. The repugnant odor of bodily wastes, deposited all around my human shell since the departure of the ship, became stronger and stronger. What was also not very pleasant was the permanent contact of my skin with the steel, which produced large blisters at several places. I

[8] Directed by Richard Fleischer and released in 1961, *Barabbas* was filmed in Rome.

also knew that, in the not unlikely event of collapse, I would have been unceremoniously thrown to the sharks and no one would ever have known anything about me.

According to the reconstruction that I subsequently made, my ordeal lasted – it seems – seventeen days and sixteen nights. When the ship was within sight of the African port, they signaled, using a special flag,[9] the presence onboard of a dangerous lunatic, with the implicit request for immediate medical assistance and emergency hospitalization. As for me, I managed to understand that we had arrived at our destination (without knowing what awaited me) due to the noise of the anchor being lowered, which resonated atrociously in my chain locker. This was agony within an agony: a long series of interminable moments between one sound and the next. Nevertheless, I could not manage to organize or distinguish anything in my mind. The fear of becoming incurably mentally ill seized hold of me and, even today, I would be lying if I said that I completely survived that upsetting test.

When they took me out of that overheated half-light, my eyes burned because of the direct light that I had been deprived of for so long. If my memory is good (and the tour guide did not lie), someone died in similar circumstances when being taken out of a prison in the Loire Valley, where, many years later, I once took a certain Marinella, an outdated student and a militant in *Lotta Continua*.[10] I came out better: by making an immense effort, I succeeded in glimpsing three black giants with shaved heads and white shirts approaching me. They grabbed me brutally, but all the same they appeared to me as liberators from a distant galaxy: their arrival coincided with the end of my nightmare. After a sad, appropriate smile (I do not know if it was appreciated or not), I lost consciousness and then awoke, tied to a bed in the Dakar psychiatric hospital. The *Kirta* departed shortly thereafter, without me aboard, and I had no news about it until my return to Europe.

Return to Liguria

They disinfected me from head to toe, but I couldn't manage to resist for more than several seconds before moaning loudly because of the burning sensation in my healing wounds. Nevertheless, I understood that I was in the process of getting better and, although I was still solidly attached to my bed, I got a little better every day. The continual coming and going of the personnel and those who were curious about me wasn't displeasing; at bottom, the isolation that had been

[9] The Wiskey flag, part of the International Code of Signals.
[10] A Maoist ultra-left group active in Italy between 1969 and 1976.

reserved for me as a dangerous lunatic materialized into the advantage of being exempt from the daily activities of the wing and permitted me to progressively reestablish contact with reality. The personnel even had a certain respect for their sole European patient. I must also say that my prior Italian experience had seemed much more terrifying and that the crazy people of Senegal certainly enjoyed a much greater respect than those of our very civilized country.

From the day that I was cleaned up and partially restored (I thank God or whatever holds his place for having given me a robust nature), the doctors, the infirmary workers and the various other authorities noted that the monster who came from the high seas was not as terrible as they had been told. I was finally detached and, walking about, my injuries began to heal rapidly. Words and gestures created a human connection between me and the people who lived a very different life from mine. I must also say that, in Dakar, all the people shake hands about everything and that this amused me a great deal. This sort of behavior penetrates into the mind and contributes to the creation of a certain optimism, no doubt irrational but no less profound for that. I must also say that the Blacks of the Atlantic coast are, perhaps, primitive and savage, but to me they were truly adorable, and the inhabitants of the industrialized suburbs (places certainly less desirable for defenseless people than Northeast Africa) would do well to acquire some of their character traits and thus improve the quality, if not of their lives, then at least their sense of community. I confess that, up to that period, I had solidly rooted racist prejudices (for example, I categorically refused to have sex with women of color, believing that they stank), but this adventure ended with me recovering from those stupidities, of which I am ashamed today.

Despite the pleasant climate, the joy of my first strolls through the gardens and the warmth of the people, I remained apathetic. Professor Xavier Bonghor did not think that this was right. This clinician – about 50 years old, ironic, an evolved native and a skeptical supporter of National Socialism – had sympathy for me, spoke to me at length and wanted to see me forget the atrocities to which I had been subjected. I explained to him my terror at the idea of returning home; it didn't make any sense to reestablish myself, only to then find myself back in prison or, after so many years, on trial for attempted murder. And even if they didn't put me on trial, I could always expect the vengeance of some sailor, and I would also remain at the mercy of the torturers in white shirts.

The unending patience of my protector allowed me to discover that, in the final analysis, I was lucky (everything is relative, of course). The "incident" had in fact taken place in international waters, onboard a Liberian ship. The government of this caricature of the United States would have no interest in pursuing a poor fellow such as myself, and thus risking, among other things, the acquisition of one more mouth to feed in one of its rare prisons; and, in any event, it truly wasn't part

of my plans to remain in that distant location, which was totally lacking in appeal for me. Moreover, since everyone thought that they had inflicted on me a sufficient punishment (they weren't mistaken!), I once again found myself unexpectedly freed from any obligation and master of my own destiny. Thus I accepted being released and repatriated, in good spirits and with high hopes. For the first time in my life, I prepared myself, among other things, to take a plane, which was paid for by the Italian embassy, which was headquartered in that ramshackle.

My departure was marked by a small ceremony. I bade farewell to a large number of people and, in particular, the doctor with black skin who had saved my life twice. I believe I owe him a great deal, and I have never forgotten his wry look or his bursts of laughter every time I recounted the episode of the beating of the ship's commander, which he always accompanied with unequivocal hand gestures.

I returned to Liguria seeking a new embarkation and I again saw Marcella – my failed bride-to-be – with her husband and small daughter. She appeared so beautiful and available to me that I ran like hell before I committed adultery, and, instead of wreaking new havoc, I choose to work again. After eleven months spent on the gigantic *Butterfly*[11] (it had an Apulian crew and sailed under the Panamanian flag), your narrator, who was no longer young, went to Naples, enticed by the high pay offered by a Greek freighter. Once aboard the deck, I immediately realized that it was the *Cayenne,* a ship fit for deportees only (the crew was in fact forced to be there). Every single sailor onboard was missing something: a finger, an ear, teeth or hair.

After a few seconds of reflection, I skillfully began to show symptoms of the mumps (which elicited ill-concealed terror when I touched my balls), thus succeeding in obtaining my discharge plus a small compensatory sum. I understood that my maritime career ended there; my mind and body could no longer tolerate that extravagant life. But the demon of vengeance kept watch over me. Using my funds, I committed the imprudence of going to Stockholm for what seemed to me to be my last duty before leaving the high seas. I did not have too much difficulty finding three accomplices to help execute my plan concerning the torturers aboard the *Kirta.* After having rented a car, we descended upon the enemy's base in Finland and caused serious damages by ingenuously setting fire to its stores. Alas, that same night, as I was feasting in a tavern, I was denounced to the ship's commander by one of my rotten accomplices, and I was immediately arrested.

At my trial, all the judges were convinced that they were dealing with a lunatic, and my behavior did not do anything to make them change their minds. Not knowing the language of the country, I had no idea what my defense attorney

[11] English in original.

was saying, nor did I know the applicable penal code. And so it falls to the well-informed reader of these pages to decide if the penalty of seven months in prison was light or not. Whatever it was, I served it without great difficulty and thus did not regret my actions.

Perhaps I really became crazy in the chain locker. Could I have remained unaffected after being subjected to that torture? Could I keep my self-esteem without proving to my torturers that I was still capable of struggling?

I understand nothing of politics, but what hurt me the most was being betrayed by a fellow sailor who had been happy to strike against the ship-owner. My mind might falter, but I am certain that I will never be able to sell out a friend, no matter what he did. If you learn otherwise, wring my neck: I will have deserved it!

Part Two

Living in Milan

After my prison sentence was over, I went several months without working. I amused myself by traveling the length of the coast, up to Nervi, sometimes in the company of friends that I'd made, but most often by myself. Like the great lords of the past, I also dedicated a certain amount of time to making visits – in different Italian towns – to the people I knew or relatives whose addresses I'd carefully noted. My funds decreased in the blink of an eye, and I then made the decision, always delayed until then, to settle in Milan and seek out work and adventures there. In Liguria, I obtained my driver's license, and my scorn for prudence had rapidly made me a skillful and reckless driver. I even had the feeling of being a kind of knight in the marionette theater, fearless if not blameless, when I got behind the wheel and pushed my old BMW to the maximum speed (its motor was in perfect condition). I bought it from a Swiss smuggler who had retired.

Winter approached; it was already October. As a good impoverished southerner with a police record, I could find nothing better than an exorbitantly priced room on the Via Gaudenzio Ferrari. It was a traditional furnished room that a little woman rented illegally, without posing any questions to anyone who could pay her in advance, to any tenant willing to increase her pension and help her survive. The gloomy weather and the eternally clouded sky made an unpleasant impression on me, and the metropolis did not, at first glance, seem to be a golden Mecca dreamed about by emigrants. Rather, it was the city of the dead! Everyone bustled about in that gray madhouse, blemished by smog,[12] and conditioning themselves to work frenetically so as to avoid being overwhelmed by solitude, to justify their endless suffering as individuals condemned to sell their time to a boss.

Milan is not an easy place, and it doesn't allow half-measures. One loves it or hates it violently. Even today, this town in which the majority of my friends and those who are dear to me live, and of which I have learned to appreciate all its aspects and its spirit (to the point of not wanting to dislodge myself from it); even today, I understand the degree to which it can appear to a newcomer as cold, oppressive, compartmentalized and implacable, despite its apparently good organization.

The first few days I was there, I surveyed the Corso Buenos Aires without

[12] English in original.

managing to gauge the atmosphere, and I fared no better when I disappeared into the spider's web of streets with dilapidated houses that were just off of the main artery, and I got nothing more than superficial and distracted cordiality from the shop workers and the sticky conversations of the old people who were seated in the last remaining bars below the apartments ornamented with balconies. These empty but exhausting days ended at the restaurants. I still remember the price of the subscription tickets: a dozen meals, a quarter of a liter of red wine included: [a mere] ten thousand lire.[13] In the club of aspiring suicides (though suicides were rare), one thought oneself in paradise when one exchanged two words with the person who occasionally shared one's table and, when someone managed to laugh heartily, it was as if one had won the lottery! And work? Ah . . . yes . . . work. . . . I looked for it, but despite my skillful lies, I was offered nothing better than a job unloading crates at one of the covered markets, which I did not accept. I spoke very little and listened a lot. I floundered like a piglet in shit, without ever expecting to get out of the pigsty, and I once again found myself in my cell, invariably pissed off.

One night, a police siren woke me up. The cops were in the process of encircling the building (one has the habit of using this phrase, though, in Milan, they block the exit and don't bother to encircle the house). Whatever they were doing, I got to the window just in time to see an impressive number of cops rally themselves with their customary and useless cinematic staging at the entryway (which was open, because the lock had been broken for the last seven years). Some of them had their pistols drawn; others had their Beretta submachine guns in their hands. Perplexed, I was gaping at the scene when they banged like maniacs on my door, while I heard from the stairs down to the lower floors the cries of those who had been unable to escape the raid. They only act this way with poor people and the defenseless. Have you ever heard of such a racket at the property of Calogero Vizzini?[14] When I sleep, my mouth gets dry, and my problem is producing enough saliva to relieve that inconvenience. I was making an effort to do this when, the door being open, I found myself dragged into the hall, dressed only in my pajamas.

The cops had information from a spy in need of money, and they were searching for stolen goods. As they didn't find any (they would eventually), all the suspects, that is to say, all the men in good health between the ages of 15 and 60, had to face the wall with their hands held high. An officer with a nose as long as Pinocchio's – I pity his poor mother when she first saw it – held the barrel of his

[13] Approximately $20.

[14] Head of the mafia in Palermo, extremely famous in Italy between 1945 and 1965. Though a drug trafficker and allegedly a murderer of hundreds of people, he died in his bed, rich and "innocent."

gun against my back, causing my mouth to become perfectly moist and giving me a very bad headache. Nevertheless, I didn't judge it necessary to express my gratitude to him. A quarter of an hour later, they decided to leave with two poor guys whom they'd handcuffed. I was absolutely amazed to see the others disperse without a word, as they do at the end of celebrations sponsored by *L'Unita*.[15] I allowed myself to make a comment.

"You might have excused yourselves," I said, "for having disturbed those who didn't do anything, the so-called innocents, at this time of night."

"There are no innocent people here," a commissioner in civilian clothes stated dryly. He was big and fat, with a shaggy beard. He was named Voltolin, as I learned later.

"Your response isn't very funny, and I believe that excuses are in order," I said, looking him straight in the eyes.

He was unmoved by this. Voltolin was known in the underworld as a bastard who had no great respect for the rules and, as compensation for it, a polished nastiness.

"Are you talking to me, you tramp?" he asked in turn.

"Who else?" I ventured, quite determined but slightly worried.

That mountain of fat and muscles kept his sardonic expression and appeared to not be paying any attention to me. He calmly lit a cigarette, and then he added, "Handcuff him and take him away, too . . . for an identity check. . . . He doesn't have any identification and surely he doesn't live here in Milan. . . . Tomorrow we'll send him back to his village."

He was going to fuck with me, the bastard. Given that I had no job, my deportation was assured. I was about to be placed in a police van when a decent guy with an open and likeable face, in his late forties, intervened. His robust and stocky look was spoiled by a belly that betrayed a long familiarity with barbera.[16] He spoke in a pure Milanese dialect and grabbed the bearded cop to speak to him confidentially.

"Come on . . . let him go. . . . He barely has the strength to speak, that dumb southerner. . . . Don't lock him up, don't break his balls or he'll die. You see that he's got the jitters. . . ."[17]

"Are you in a good mood, Didi? Don't be. . . . If you don't end up in San Vittore[18] tonight, you will next time, you rogue of a thief!"

My impromptu defender was not at all offended.

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[15] The official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party.
[16] Wine from the Lombardy region.
[17] Milanese dialect in original.
[18] Prison in Milan.

"Cut off my hands, illustrious one, if I've ever stole five bucks," he said.[19] Then, laughing, he hid his hands in the pockets of his jacket, as if the curse had come true. He continued. "Let him go . . . inspector. . . . Listen.[20] If you take him away in his pajamas, *L'Unita* will say that you're fucking little boys at police headquarters."[21]

I followed their strange conversation, handcuffed, silent and cold. Finally, they let me out of the van, rewarded me with several insults and sent me off with "Goodbye, pig."

It was three o'clock in the morning. Didi turned towards one of the bystanders (the owner of a dive) and asked him to bring a bottle of wine, specifying that the one to pay for it would be me (or, rather, that "*bavar d'un barlafus d'un bicciolan d'un teron*"[22]). As one "thank you" followed another, the empty bottles piled up, and dawn found us drunk; we'd chatted at great length, and most of it had been nonsense. Around noon, I accompanied my savior to Bersgliera, a restaurant on the Piazza Tirana, where he introduced me to one of his friends, a man named Tarzan, who directed an employment office for petty criminals. First he gave me an oral examination and then a practice test. Eventually I was hired as the chauffeur for an illegal gambling house. My duties were basically very simple. I had to stay parked nearby, and then – if the Panthers[23] arrived – get the respectable clients in fast and give the cops the slip.

I'd finally found a job, and I saw open before me a completely different Milan, a more human one, a vintage and peaceful underworld that was settled in the working-class districts of Ticino, Giambellino and Barona. Strange people: on the one hand, they were very attached to their families, but unable to accept the rules and therefore ready to binge for an entire week, kept awake by cocaine, on the other. There were no other drugs, and no one sought them or dealt them. A parallel world to the one of slightly fanatical, lower-level Mafiosi of the Corso Buenos Aires; less likely to kill and more disposed to overlook missteps and even betrayals . . . perhaps more specialized in small, skillful crimes and certainly less attentive to accumulating profits. In fact, they earned very little, but at least

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[19] Milanese dialect in original.

[20] An allusion to a poem in Milanese dialect by Carlo Porta (1775-1821) entitled "*Lament Del Marchionn Di Gamb Avert*."

[21] Milanese dialect in original: *che fate i balletti verdi* ("performing green ballet dances").

[22] Milanese dialect in original, not translated or even included as untranslated Milanese in the French translation.

[23] A reference to the *Squadra volante,* a division of the Italian State police, who drove high-speed cars and whose insignia included a black panther.

enjoyed themselves often, from the miserable bars on Naviglio to the little inns on Brera, where it was not impossible to chat up a rich girl who was in heat. Sometimes things turned out badly, as when Didi used his strong hand to strike a marquise in the back (bent over, she'd shouted "hit me!") and was surprised to see her run out of his car, without her panties, half-fucked. Tarzan, on the other hand, had a special liking for fights. As soon as the amount of wine that had been drunk passed a certain level, he sought trouble with everyone, involving us in a continuous seesaw of blows and flights all across town.

The gambling den paid me pretty well, and I had a good reputation. Thus the cops began to keep an eye on me, until one day – after safely discharging my passengers – they managed to nab me. A second police car had come to the scene, and I found myself trapped on the via Colletta, near the Porta Romana. At the time, it was a dark, very isolated street. Commissioner Voltolin got out of an [Alfa Romeo] Giulia, and he recognized me immediately.

"It's our innocent man," he said sarcastically.

"I don't think it's illegal to drive a car," I said, boldly, as usual. And I added, "If you have something against me, charge me. But I must call my lawyer right away."

Of course I didn't have a lawyer, and I didn't even know how I came up with a stunt like that. It is certain that the effect was lethal, throwing the cops into a black hole of consternation. Their leader, however, had a solution to unexpected problems and a certain expertise in overcoming a scoundrel's technicalities. He stroked his beard, scratched his belly and struck me in the face with the back of his hand.

"So we have a lawyer," he hissed. "Do you think that I don't know that they can't prove anything? I know, dear Messana, I know . . . and I don't give a fuck." He gave me another slap in the face and continued.

"You've already had your trial, and you've been found guilty, even extremely guilty. So, to avoid you bullshitting the people in court, instead of charging you, we are going to go straight to your sentence."

Cued by Voltolin, they started beating me, all six of them, and it was like a punishment from God. First they used wet rags, so as to hurt me without leaving any marks; then, more and more excited, they did without this precaution. It lasted a good ten minutes. That does not seem like a long time, but it felt like an eternity. They shouted that I should defend myself, to show that I was a man; and that I should try to escape. But I did not fall for it; I knew that would have been an excuse to arrest or even shoot me. I realized that it was useless to fight back and so I chose to throw myself on the ground, like I was dead; I pretended to be unconscious and resisted the temptation to complain once the last kick rained down. I heard them leave and immediately decided to change professions: small-

time criminals only collect crumbs and a lot of trouble.

The next morning, at the bar called Wanda, I met "Professor Stamp," a small man, around 50 years old, rubicund, with a white mustache, a specialist in the fabrication of counterfeit money and papers (from whence came his nickname). It was to him whom perfectionist criminals turned, and he was proud to be considered the best; he ceaselessly recalled the day when the police found one of "his" driver's licenses on the ground and returned it to the person whose name was on it, without noticing that anything was amiss.

"Mine are better than those of the prefecture," he loved to say. The Professor attached great importance to his own education (he knew by heart hundreds of Milanese poems by the famous poet Carlo Porta) and to the education of his son, who was forced to attend the University of Milan and became part of the student movement. His son was also present at Wanda, and this provided an opportunity for me to let go of my old milieu, to once more change identity, and to associate with that troop of crazies who had no means but an infinite number of projects.

I then participated in a series of five or six meetings during which they talked about the Chinese Revolution and Mao Tse-Tung (it was incomprehensible to me, but they were nice), and we ended up drinking Apulian wine at Strippoli. Shortly thereafter, we decided to occupy a large abandoned hotel in the center of the city: the famous Hotel Commercio. I am still amazed by the simplicity with which this very complicated plan was carried out. In the final analysis, all we had to do was break the lock on a door and enter as a group, right before the eyes of the uncertain and perplexed cops. The luxurious rooms therein were requisitioned without too many formalities in the name and to the profit of the working classes, of which I was a member with full title. I was delighted to leave behind my squalid furnished room at the Porta Genova and the agonizing loneliness of that concentration camp. Waiting for me was a marvelous and new adventure among the political people, who at that time asked you nothing about your past nor thought in terms of gray tranquility.[24]

I conquered a single room on the third floor. I furnished it with the essential furniture, but according to my tastes: it almost resembled a cabin in the *Kirta*! Looking out of my window, I could see the center of Milan, and I was filled with joy when I realized I could live for free in the temple of the most important bourgeoisie in Italy.[25]

There was an incredible bustle on the stairs and in the rooms of the

[24] Instead of translating *di grigia tranquillita,* as I have done, the French translation replaces this phrase with *de sécurité* ("of security").

[25] The French translation renders this line as *le plus grand temple de la bourgeoisie italienne* ("the greatest temple of the Italian bourgeoisie").

Commercio: fugitive girls, students from the suburbs, the offspring of illustrious families, and sub-proletarians, not forgetting, of course, the spies and unscrupulous thieves who didn't hesitate to steal what little there was, slipping into every corner of the building. There abounded portraits of Che Guevara with his cigar and beret, and Ho Chi Minh with his goatee. The Feltrinelli bookstore[26] never had enough books to satisfy the sudden explosion of requests. I did not go to the demonstrations because they were terribly boring, and you had to walk for hours, until you were exhausted. But I often helped to mimeograph flyers and collaborated on the distribution of propaganda to the various college departments: I was left with a rather ill-concealed passion for [speaking through] megaphones and for all the tools of the printing press! However, the unbridled individuality of my character clashed with the mania for collectivism that spread throughout the tribe, especially since I had the habit of distrusting the apparently sincere altruism of the ringleaders of the movement.

In the assemblies of the occupiers of the Commercio (participation was obligatory and people from the outside could get involved), they often spoke of Cavallero and Notarnicola,[27] especially the latter, a veritable idol of the masses and even the author of a book. I preferred the former for the genius with which he had organized the robberies, especially the double-shot, in which the second robbery came so soon after the first one that the police had no time to organize their defenses. If his accomplices had listened to him, they never would have gotten caught, I guess. Cavallero (unlike his accomplices) despised the underworld and constantly moved to avoid being noticed, patiently studying the objective like a gambler on the stock exchange studying the economy. At his trial, he dominated the dock with more force than Curcio or Moretti,[28] won the complete respect of the

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[26] Operated by *Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore* (the Giangiacomo Feltrinelli publishing house), which was founded in 1954 by Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, a Communist and political activist.

[27] Pietro Cavallero (date of birth unknown) and Sante Notarnicola (born 1938) – as well as Donato Lopez and Adriano Rovoletto – were members of the Cavallero Band, which carried out a series of bank robberies in Milan between 1963 and 1967. Inspired by Bresci and Ravachol, their motives were political. Tried in 1968, they were sentenced to life in prison. Cavallero was released in 1988 and Notarnicola, the author of several books, including *L'evasione impossible* (Feltrinelli, 1972), was paroled in 1995.

[28] The French translator identifies these men as "leaders of the Red Brigades," and says, "Moretti carried out the abduction of Aldo Moro, President of the Council, and killed him." In point of fact, while Renate Curcio and Mario Moretti were the historical founders of the Red Brigades, the abduction and murder of Aldo Moro

court, and even demonstrated generosity to that asshole Lopez, who had spoiled everything with his lack of experience. Cavallero got me thinking, and I decided to use his shrewd techniques. I chose to direct my attacks on objectives that were of secondary importance to power (at least from the symbolic perspective), but well provided with cash: small post offices, delivery men on pay days, cooperative porters, supermarkets and toll booths on isolated highways. My wallet was empty, and I searched for guys who would be able to help me in the realization of my own wicked schemes. It isn't easy to secure board and lodging without subjecting oneself to a steady job. Given the weak propensity for toil in the entire scene that surrounded me, it didn't take much time to assemble an effective trio. The two other guys were Antonio, a fellow villager whom I'd met at Strippoli (where I never paid, always with good excuses, which unleashed the fury of the owner), and Roberto, an anarchist who was as crazy as a young horse, a protester even in his appearance: a beard, a long scarf that went down to his feet, a kind of black caftan and army boots. It was Roberto who decided that a quarter of the loot should be given, anonymously and in secret, to our political organization.

"There are four of us," he said; "us three and the Revolution. Thus it is fitting to share it four ways." No one objected, though it seemed stupid for us to set aside not-yet-stolen money for others.

I tasked myself with finding two pistols; Antonio took care of the car, but didn't find anything better than an old and completely fucked Fiat 500. After we fought for an hour about the pathetic vehicle that our band of oddballs[29] was equipped with, we finally robbed the post office near the Piazza Frattini. Result: two million, three hundred thousand lire.[30] I would never have believed that it would be so easy. Roberto waited behind the wheel; Antonio and I calmly entered the middle of the line of retirees, and I suddenly called out, "The first one to move will get a bullet in the skull and, if you do not remain calm, we will massacre you all without pity." My stomach was in a nervous commotion, but the terrorized stupor of the people reassured me. As in a dream, I saw Antonio take hold of the plastic sack containing the money, with the result that I remained still a moment, dazed, with my pistol leveled at an employee who didn't know what else I could possibly want. My associate whistled, and we fled in our pitiful car, driven by

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were ordered by enemies of the "historic compromise" and carried out by Italy's secret services. See Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *Del terrorismo e dello stato* (Milan, 1979), translated into English by Bill Brown as *On Terrorism and the State* (Brooklyn: Colossal Books, 2013).

[29] The untranslatable Italian word (possibly dialect) used here is *strapelata,* for which the French translator used the word *farfelu.*

[30] Approximately $4,000.

Roberto, who was very excited. It was a miracle that we arrived back at the house without having an accident with another helmsman.

In forty minutes, I had pocketed the equivalent of three months' salary of a worker at Pirelli,[31] and I had also helped to finance a political movement, contributing to the chaos, if not changing society. We celebrated this success in *Il toro bravo,* a typical Spanish restaurant on the Porta Garibaldi, ordering the most costly specialties without minding the tally, happy as children who had stolen plums. Fresh wine, straight from the cask, flowed like water, and it didn't seem necessary to us to stop gulping down tequila with lemon until the bottle was empty. In the end, we were completely drunk and, on orders from Roberto, we intoned the song "*Figli dell'Officina*"[32] at the top of our lungs, watched by the amused night owls of the Moscatelli brigade. (Not Moscatelli, a member of the Resistance, but simply the regulars at a restaurant of the same name that was open until very late at night.)

The extreme Left grew day by day, and became a presence that even the most distracted observer couldn't ignore. The confrontations with the police, the strike pickets in front of the factories, the occupations of buildings and schools became part of everyday life. Antonio and I lived at the margins of this experience, distrustful of all the Northerners. Roberto, on the other hand, threw himself into it completely, even trying to convince us that the moment for a general uprising was near. Carried away by this obsession, he rather suddenly announced to us that it was essential to build a Marxist-Leninist party (he estimated that anarchism had been surpassed). To prove the seriousness of his intentions, he shaved his beard and cut his hair. In the motley community of the Commercio, there were many who thought as Roberto did, but before there were real fights the authorities evacuated the building by force, and our protests didn't do much to stop it. Despite indignant and bloodthirsty declarations, we all found ourselves in the street again.

After five successful robberies and under the weight of the events and individual choices, our trio broke up. Roberto got into trouble because of a bastard who had mentioned him in a story about explosives, though Roberto wasn't involved. His arrest put an end to our collaboration, and he spent a year in prison before his innocence was recognized. Antonio was no longer happy robbing post offices, and he tried to drag me into bigger heists, but I refused and we fought about it. Several months later, he was arrested in a bank in Varese, in the company of a Venetian, both of them armed with machine guns and bombs. I once again found myself all alone, and the police were watching me. I knew that the cops

[31] A manufacturer of tires based in Milan.

[32] "Children of the Workshop," an anarchist song from 1921, written by Giuseppe Raffaelli and Giuseppe De Feo.

knew and were waiting me to make for a false move. Moreover, I wanted to marry a Sicilian woman who seemed well suited to share my life with me. Having no other opportunities, I took my courage in hand, jumped into the ditch and, in the hope being forgotten, I took work for three months as a seasonal worker at the Motta [cake] factory.

Milan changed before my eyes, but I didn't realize it. I had lived as rebel outcast during a hot autumn,[33] and I wasn't even aware that I'd actively participated, not only in the profound transformation of society, but of myself, as well. I did not realize the decisive influence that the joyous carnival of the Hotel Commercio had exerted on me or that Roberto's style had marked my character. Damaging the mechanisms of power possessed a discreet charm that had conquered me; it was impossible for me to once again become a simple petty crook, as my break with Antonio had demonstrated.

The day that I headed to a factory for the first time in my life, spring exploded. The intense odor of the linden tress filled the entire city, especially during the early hours of the morning, when the air was still light. As it would have been in bad taste to go to the factory in my old BMW, I used public transportation to go from Baggio, where I slept at the house of some friends, to the Viale Corsica. The three cars of the train I took were packed full; I did not know my way around crowds of workers nor how they found the energy to reciprocally exchange such elbow jabs. My senses were oppressed to the point of nausea by all that human flesh crammed into such a small space, and I had a powerful desire to cry out that we were all slaves.

I sought refuge by putting my nose close to the neck of an employee who was intent upon reading the sports pages of the *Corriere* and by breathing in the smell of his plentiful aftershave. I was certainly bothering him, but he didn't dare protest. I got off two stops before mine, not only to regain a little energy, but also to have the feeling of still being able to be my own boss, to not be completely automated. I continued strolling until I reached my little-desired destination.

A small crowd waited at the entrance. Mixed among the workers were sellers of cigarettes, watches and even encyclopedias on credit. This might appear unbelievable, but some of these street peddlers managed to sell these monumental works by using their nerve and angelic smiles to get signatures on contracts that reduced the workers' salaries for several months. When the signal was sounded, everyone moved towards the doors, with the mass thinning out as it crossed through them and retook its original size immediately afterwards. To me we looked like foot soldiers from the First World War mounting an assault on the trenches,

[33] The autumn of 1969 was considered "hot" due to the intensity of the Left's political and economic agitation.

and our objective was hardly more sensible than theirs. The first to arrive punched in with such speed that it was useless to hope to receive any information from them. I was among the last and was thus assigned the most unpleasant task, stationed right next to the oven and under the nose of the boss. The work was not difficult: we simply repeated the same motions for eight hours, increasing their frequency to reach what was called the "average." Those who did not reach it were dismissed; at least that is what I was told. Some of us managed to make ourselves a little more comfortable by appearing stupid or simply insolent, but the essence of our fate remained unchanged. It wasn't fatigue that oppressed us or, rather, not only fatigue. I had done a lot worse in the past. What really made us suffer everyday were the ass-kissers paid to watch us sweat and report on us like spies in the midst of those dirty rooms: proletarians who were around fifty years old and had no futures, smoking cigarettes in the bathrooms, deluding themselves by stealing two minutes from bosses who were stealing our lives. I thought of the speeches I'd heard at the Hotel Commercio, and I could not manage to understand how all the students who cried "Workers' power!"[34] in the streets could work without protest instead of creating havoc and putting their theories into practice. There were at least fifty of them among the seasonal workers, all dressed alike (parkas and scarves), slaving away without a word, even if they'd just distributed some bullshit about the "Third World."

I spent a week baking doves[35] like an asshole. I could no longer stand the smell, I wanted to bake them into round or square shapes, to make them look like hammers-and-sickles, 38-caliber handguns, cocks stuck up asses. I laughed to myself, imagining the face on some old upper-class woman after she opened the package while celebrating Holy Easter with her family. I waited like manna from heaven the outbreak of a unionized struggle, the rupture of that absurd monotony, in sum, revolt against the entirety of the obligatory motions that only had meaning for the boss (that pig). When you're at the station, awaiting a train that hasn't arrived on time, you will ask just about anyone for information, just to relieve the stress of the situation, knowing full well that it is useless to do so. It was in such a fashion that I confided my boredom to Maurizio, someone in the student movement whom I knew by sight and who had been a friend of Roberto (both of them had been obsessed with the idea of the Party). I approached him in the cafeteria, but he didn't seem delighted to see me; he even looked at me suspiciously and interrogatively. As soon as I mentioned the name of our mutual friend – to refresh his memory – he responded brusquely that I was a

[34] *Potere operaio* was also the name of an ultra-Left group.

[35] *Colombe* ("doves") were a kind of brioche shaped in the form of a bird. Specially made for Easter, they were generally sold in boxes.

"provocateur." I endured this humiliation, and I restrained myself from giving him a smack. Several months earlier, that son of a whore had accepted money from Roberto and was now scared shitless, without having enough intelligence to understand that Roberto was innocent. To get to the bottom of this character, I suggested to him we go out on a classic strike, but he didn't say anything, hard as a marble statue.

"This isn't a game, my friend," he said [at last,] sententiously. "The struggle must not come from above; it must have the support of the rank and file; it must have an organization."

"Okay," I said, "but if we only distribute moldy nonsense to the rank and file, and if they see us working like donkeys, how the fuck will they understand? We must set an example, show them that we aren't full of shit."

"Listen," he cut in. "I have this job thanks to a friend of my father. The money I get here allows me to take vacations, and I don't intend to give this up just to please some sub-prole who doesn't have a bit of political awareness. So leave me alone!"

"You piece of shit," I shouted at him. "You want a revolution in Korea and Uganda, everywhere, but not here. And to top it off, you don't even take care of your friend who is in prison. I'm only a sub-prole, there's no doubt about that, but you disgust me, and I'd be happy to break your nose, you dirty strike-breaking spy."

There followed a good discussion, with all the elements of a brawl. A guy named Pietro – also a student – was absolutely in agreement with me and, as he was good with words, he managed to convince twenty of the hottest heads not to return to work. He took a large marker from his pocket and wrote the following on the back of a poster from ENAL,[36] which would come in from Venice in exchange for mere peanuts.

> Workers, all that we have to lose is a shit job; what we have to gain is the entire world. Kick out the shop stewards, block production, piss on the cakes. Let's make ourselves respected: throw cakes in the face of the boss! An immediate wage increase of 50,000 lire,[37] with no negotiations. Fight tough without fear. [Signed] A group of workers.

He stood on a table while I hung the proclamation up, and then he made a speech

[36] *Ente Nazionale Assistenza Lavoratori* (National Body for Workers Assistance), which offered workers goods for purchase, interesting vacations, trips, etc. between 1945 and 2011.
[37] Approximately $100.

that made people stop in their tracks. The union members tried to make him come down, but he screeched like a polecat and defended his position with kicks. Such a commotion: most of the workers were dumbstruck; they lowered their eyes, but groups of seasonal workers ran through the factory shouting. I followed Pietro into the workshop to help him stop the machinery until calm returned (two hours later). They fired us both without pity for "insubordination" and expelled us from that circle of hell. Once on the street, Pietro smiled at me.

"We went strong, didn't we?" he asked me.

"We wanted to, we wanted to," I said, "but now I'm fucking broke, although many of the guys were with us."

We discussed things a little more, and he explained to me that his group had organized an occupation of newly constructed working-class houses for the following day. I told him that I would be there: I was truly happy with having left Motta by slamming the door. Everything ended up in a joyful mood, eating and drinking at the home of my new friend, and we laughed at all those people who had turned around and tried to restart the machines.

The next morning, there were more than two hundred of us in front of the apartment buildings on the Via Lope de Vega, which was a very large boulevard near the Milan-Genoa highway, specially designed to allow the hurried motorists to run down the unwary pedestrians who tried to cross the double lanes. In fact, the cars went by at an average speed of 90 to 100 kilometers an hour, without regard for the crosswalk or the people in it. Fortunately for us, the architects of the IACP[38] had left sufficient green space for us to assemble without us losing our lives in an inglorious fashion. We didn't even need the intervention of the guys armed with Molotovs[39] who were posted at strategic points to block movement by the public and private police forces. Exasperated by the interminable wait to obtain lodging, the families in question couldn't wait to get in, and many of them were organized, their trucks loaded with mattresses, beds, kitchen sets, televisions and cabinets. As soon as the lock on the principal door gave way under the blows of chisels and hammers, the gold rush began, and there was a mighty surge down the stairs to see who could occupy the biggest and best-situated premises. The so-called "group leaders" soon realized they need not lead anything and retired en masse to a nearby bar and surveyed from there the situation, which would be determined after the usual scene of fighting, screaming matches, touching appeals and threats that people use in such circumstances.

Thanks to my long strides, I took possession of a decent three-room place on

[38] *Istituto Autonomo per le Case Popolari* (Independent Agency for Working-Class Housing).

[39] Molotov cocktails; English in original.

the third floor, and I integrated myself into the hive. Above me were the Salemi brothers (Giovanni, Giuseppe, Vito, Michele and Rocco) with their two wives, nine children and an elderly father. They'd hardly arrived before they took down two partitions to allow the three apartments they'd conquered to communicate with each other, and they wrote their name upon the door. I noticed that they had a van, and I sought them out to ask them to help me furnish my new residence. It was Giovanni who opened the door. He was a very funny guy who walked with a limp and expressed himself in a kind of Sicilian-Italian that a slight stammer rendered even more incomprehensible. Giuseppe soon got involved in the conversation and, with his handsome and knowing air, accompanied me to a second-hand dealer. Thanks to his selfless kindness, I was able to buy the basic necessities for living at the cost of a few thousand lire. That same evening I was able to return the favor. Two political hacks claimed to have seen the family load materials from the construction firm (rolls of metal and a small cement-mixer) on to their van so as to re-sell them. Giuseppe had desperately tried to show that he didn't know what they were talking about, but was not able to lie and found himself in obvious difficulty. His accusers spoke of throwing them out because he had "discredited the occupation" and other lies of that sort. I was happy to be able to defend him.

"None of us has a clean record," I said, "and it would be useless to try to pass ourselves off as something we are not and will never be. The important thing is to not trick each other and to respect each other reciprocally. It was the construction company, comrades, that stole it – we all saw it – to get reimbursed by its insurance company without losing anything!"

There was nothing to fear: the companies that get contracts were not angels; such tricks were played all the time; and they couldn't withstand the testimony of a hundred witnesses! There was a compromise, and it was even accepted by the hacks (obviously not enthusiastically). The affair ended with several warnings, and the clan of Sicilians expressed its recognition with primitive cries of gratitude.

The next day, we went as a delegation to establish our gas and electrical connections. Frightened by our ugly faces, the ENEL[40] granted the hook-ups even though we had no lease. After that, I went to Rosaria, my girlfriend, and told her that I'd found a place, reassuring her by showing her a fake rent-receipt from a nonexistent owner. Several weeks later, we were married, and she immediately became pregnant. My child, I thought, would surely have a better existence than mine: without the perpetual fight to survive!

The apartment on the Via Lope de Vega was a very entertaining and odd place. If all the medical certificates that came out of that agglomerate had been real, it would have been appropriate to put a big sign on it that said "Hospital for

[40] *Ente Nazionale per l'Energia Elettrica* (National Electricity Board).

the Chronically Ill." The inhabitants exchanged amongst themselves – like on a stock exchange – information about the different doctors who could help them get paid sick days, and those among them who could deliver those precious orders were considered to be manna from heaven. The Salemi family, in particular, accepted all offers of seasonal employment and, when their respective trial periods had ended, they were overtaken by acute headaches, depressive syndromes and toothaches. And so the companies that had hired them didn't see them again for the rest of their contracts. They supplemented their income with several small jobs off the books[41] or the unauthorized sale of balloons on the Piazza Duomo. I was really good in that little modern world in which one borrowed money without ever giving it back and in which you cheated each other affectionately. Who scams who?

The Hunt for Money

> I asked you, Phoebus, for a hundred thousand sesterces on loan,
> seeing that you had said to me, "Do you then beg for nothing?"
> You enquire, hesitate, delay, and for ten days
> you torture both yourself and me. I now ask you, Phoebus, to say no.[42]
>
> Valerio Martial, VI, XX.

Once more money – accursed money, essential for survival – was in short supply. But I didn't have the least desire to return to the factory, that absurd place that is similar to a prison. We had already passed our days in a ghetto that was no better than a penitentiary; thus there was nothing surprising in my preemptory refusal to justify my existence by selling my time every day for a miserable salary. I did not want to go to the gates, day after day, subjected to the control and blackmail of a company, without even knowing the face of the boss whom I hated. I no longer had the strength to once again undertake an interminable series of little robberies, especially in a period marked by increasing difficulties and a diffuse despair that incited one to shoot with an impressive frequency. And then, at the age of thirty-four, with the years beginning to weigh upon me, I took stock of things, and I found I didn't always have enough energy to confront the risks.

Thus I spent long hours in reflection, without doing anything, unconcerned

[41] The Italian here is *qualche ora in carovana*: literally a few hours in the caravan.
[42] Latin in original. Translated into English by Walter C. A. Ker, *Martial: Epigrams* (1919).

with the recriminations of my wife, to whom I had imprecisely promised a "normal" life. I listened a lot to the others so as to understand how they managed to live, and, without immediate results, I meditated upon the hundred solutions that might be a remedy for the economic crisis that brave Salvatore Messana was going through. One evening, I met up with Giuseppe Salemi and Pietro (the student from Motta) for no particular reason. After talking about this and that, we decided to dine together and chose Prospero, a restaurant on the Porta Vittoria, perhaps a little pretentious, but not unpleasant. Pietro was very relaxed, which compensated for the Mafioso aspect Giuseppe and I had taken on to give ourselves character. The meat and drinks put us in a good mood. When it came time to pay the bill (too steep for our wallets), there was a moment of discomfort, but with perfect indifference our young friend pulled a checkbook out of his pocket and paid it, even leaving a tip of a thousand lire. When we'd left the place, he explained that they were stolen checks, backed up by fake papers, and that we'd eaten for free.

This was an illumination, like the one experienced by Saint Paul on the road to Damascus: the lighthouse for ships in distress: the idea! I was so pleased that I proposed to pay for pie and champagne. I was dying of impatience to put my plan into action. When I returned home, I couldn't sleep and, terribly excited, I spent the entire night perfecting the scam. I didn't intend to imitate Pietro's small schemes, with the stakes hardly worth the trouble. To get some lire, I would be risking serious charges for possessing stolen goods, fake papers, swindling and God knows what else a prosecutor might imagine. I wanted instead to make good use of my knowledge of credit systems and my unquestionable talent as an actor. With the last two million lire[43] that I had (in truth, one of them belonged to my wife, whom I didn't inform of my plans because she was painstakingly honest), I opened four bank accounts. I audaciously resolved the problem of references, which were summarily verified at that time, thanks to the credibility I had acquired from my old savings account at La Spezia, which I'd never closed. For a month I calmed everyone by withdrawing money from one account and depositing it in another; thus I used the first ten checks from each bank without dipping into my capital, but gave the impression of circulating a lot of money.

Everything was ready. After having made several inquiries, I went to a factory that made pants and shirts, where I ordered around twelve million lire[44] worth of merchandise to be delivered rapidly. From the beginning, the owner – a horrible man, colorfully pockmarked – declared himself to be in complete agreement with me concerning the heavy responsibility of the unions in the general disaster that had struck the country. He shared my thesis about the absolute

[43] Approximately $3,000.
[44] Approximately $18,000.

necessity for a strong man in power, one capable of putting things into order. He enthusiastically approved of my hatred of all people with hair that was too long and of homosexuals, in particular. Following that was an animated discussion of the criteria that allowed one to define the best whores in Lombardy, with a meticulous examination of their different prices. As soon as the conversation turned to financial questions, the Italian lira was the object of shared, pitiless criticism: it was valueless paper rejected by all individuals of good sense. At this point of the discussion, it was easy for me to propose a payment in US dollars, in exchange, obviously, for a discount of 10 percent, which was accepted after harsh discussion. I paid him with a wad of fake greenbacks printed by Professor Stamp and remarkably well made. Only a very great expert would have been able to discern his little masterpiece of craftsmanship. I received a receipt for payment in lire, loaded the merchandise on a truck and immediately re-sold it to a previously contacted wholesaler for the agreed upon price of seven million lire.[45] Everything was by the rules, with proper invoices; everything was in perfect agreement with the law. Only one piece of this perfect puzzle was missing.

"Hello? Mister Salvatore Messana from Milan here. I'd like to speak to the director. Tell him it is urgent, very urgent."

"One moment," the receptionist responded in a smooth voice. "Remain on the line . . . I will connect you to his personal secretary."

"Hello? Mister Salvatore Messana from Milan here. I'd like to speak to your boss. We saw each other this morning. Tell him there's a problem of the greatest importance."

"Don't hang up, please," said the slave, who was no doubt the boss's mistress. "I will connect you."

The pockmarked one got on the line, his conscience not very calm, no doubt fearing that I was going to complain about the price and/or the quality.

"Good day, my dear sir. Is there something wrong? I am at your service. . . ."

"No, no, please excuse me, I am dismayed, I do not know where to begin. . . . My dear friend, I have been given – one has sold me fake dollars, I've learned just now. What a catastrophe! Do you still have them?"

"Yes, yes, of course," my prey responded, very agitated. "What a mess."

"I am going to come see you immediately, in Arcisate. We will take care of it then. For the moment, the important thing is to not circulate those dollars, it will send you straight to prison. Excuse my agitation: I have lost almost thirty million lire![46] But you will not be affected, I give you my word. . . ."

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[45] Approximately $10,000.

[46] Approximately $40,000.

"I will expect you," he said, almost reassured.

I calmly entered my BMW, turned on the stereo, slid in an old cassette by Celetano,[47] and headed off towards that dirty pirate for the last act. Expert Germans: 160 kilometers an hour and it was hardly noticeable. After a moment on line at the tollbooth and several kilometers on the national highway at a slower speed, I was once again at the parking lot of the *villetta-Lager*.[48] "*Arbeit mach frei*."[49] It was here that this honest man sucked the blood of forty-five free men, only twenty-four of whom were officially declared (he himself had told me this with undisguised enthusiasm, unashamed about treating his victims like assholes). I was expected; I was immediately brought to his office. I looked at the face of that worm and saw that he was covered with sweat, cooked just right. Terrified at the idea of having to share the loss, that old moneygrubber struggled to find a lifeline.

"Good day . . . excuse me again," I said. "I have aged five years in the last few hours. Quickly, show me the dollars."

"Here they are, Mister Messana," he said. "Are they counterfeit?"

I made a few gestures, then showed him the subtle differences between the real ones and the counterfeits.

"There is no doubt!" he exclaimed, and he agreed with me that it was fortunate that we had noticed it.

"You have nothing to fear, my dear friend. The situation is under control. I have already spoken to the people in question. As for me, I will immediately settle my debts." After a well-studied pause, I struck. "I will write you a check."

The idiot sighed with relief and smiled. With the style of an artist, I asked him to wait several days before cashing it: in the panic, I had forgotten my personal checkbook, and the account didn't have more than ten million lire in it.[50] He refused my offer of two separate checks; he would only have had to delay the cashing of the second one.

"No, if you please; there's no problem," he said. "I am truly unhappy for you. What a bad business! The discount will obviously be retained, and will be renewed upon the next order. . . ."

I went off, leaving him with a rubber check, with seven million lire in my pocket. I returned the fake dollars to Professor Stamp, quite happy with the perfection of his work. I had everything worked out: the condemnation for a worthless check, and the fine that I would not pay because those who have nothing cannot pay anything. Besides, a pardon seemed unavoidable to me (it indeed was

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[47] Adriano Celentano (born 1938), the single most popular singer in Italy.

[48] German in original: villa-camp.

[49] German in original: Work makes you free.

[50] Approximately $15,000.

granted) because that idiot from Arcisate couldn't very well reveal the affair of the [fake] dollars, which he no longer possessed, unless he wanted to risk new trouble for violating monetary regulations and making himself into a rather sad figure.

The first target of my solitary naval battle had been hit, if not sunk. Not only did I have no remorse but, on the contrary, I had a powerful desire to reveal to all the workers that a fool who pretended to be clever was exploiting them. Summer was approaching, and I used my second bank account to pay for (so to speak) a room in the best hotel in Camogli, which had generously welcomed my little family between 3 and 28 June. Rosaria managed to be happy – though she disapproved of my methods – because she had finally been freed from the thankless tasks of domestic life. The tip that I left for the personnel made a very good impression and, when we went on holiday, they begged us to return next summer.

I took the following precautions.

1) I complained about the noise and obtained apologies from the management;
2) I refused a bottle of wine and asked to have it replaced by another, of a more prestigious vintage;
3) I reserved our room by paying two days in advance, with a check backed up by the seven million lire I had pocketed;
4) I let myself to convinced to prolong my stay by the manager, an evasive fellow whom I hope was fired after the blow of my insolvency;
5) Once assured by the arrival of good banking references, I emptied my account, leaving only thirty thousand lire[51] in it;
6) From that moment on, I had arranged things so that none of us lacked anything.

The third and fourth steps were taken at the expense of a fabricator of Tuscan shoes who was guilty of environmental pollution (five million lire[52]) and a wholesaler who was well placed in the sector of exquisite alcoholic spirits (six million, three hundred thousand lire). Having attained these results, the "campaign" could be considered completed, if only because I no longer had access to a bank that was ready to place its confidence in me or deal with me in any way, and I didn't manage to surmount this obstacle, despite desperate attempts to do so.

At the Lope de Vega, injunctions and summons arrived; given the amounts

[51] Approximately $45.
[52] Approximately $8,000.

of the sums involved, turmoil broke out among the scoundrels who lived there. In different ways, I tried to explain my technique to good Giuseppe Salemi, without managing to get him to understand the mechanisms of the swindle, because as soon as he saw someone with a frowning face, he would prudently get out his wallet, as that seemed advisable! In any case, at least thirty of the occupants started signing rubber checks and distributed them all over the place, most often content with modest sums. Very soon none of us were accepted as clients by the credit bureaus, and it was enough for their functionaries to see the address for them to immediately become suspicious. In the meantime, the bailiff became a familiar figure at our condominium.

Criminal charges (for illegal occupation, uninsured vehicles, thefts from supermarkets, passing bad checks and so forth) obviously did not come to any concrete outcome, as everyone knew how to fight against them and how to appeal their convictions, in the expectation of pardons, which were considered inevitable due to the lack of space in the prisons and the need to keep the increasing numbers of powerful men who had been caught red-handed out of trouble. Basically, a Welfare State existed, and its passivity could be considered as an unexpected intervention in favor of the dispossessed, and the complaints of the extra-parliamentary Left were unfounded on this point (nothing important), and one couldn't be surprised by the perplexity of its militants concerning the calm but rampant lawlessness of the proletarian masses. On the other hand, these young people didn't always see their efforts rewarded. I recall one day when one of them came to visit – I don't know if he was a municipal or provincial councilor – and enthusiastically announced that we had won. The Independent Institute for Working-Class Housing had agreed to sign our leases, and there was no longer the threat of us being evicted. We obviously agreed to become full-fledged tenants, but when they asked us for two months of back rent, there was an outcry and no one paid a penny. Despite the acceptance of long leases, which that councilor, poor man, had managed to extract with great difficulty, the tenants slipped away at the moment when payment was due and even had a tendency to accumulate debts. Our defender ended up tired of the behavior of his clients and probably preferred to occupy himself with a mob that was less difficult and ungrateful.

During the negotiations with the Institute, the rumor spread that a steady job was obligatory and that, lacking one, a tenant could be evicted. I had pulled off the rubber check scam and was resigned to this requirement. With difficulty, I tried to make the best of a bad situation, and the Salemi brothers and I became seasonal workers for two months at Allemagna, the maker of *panettoni*.[53] Fate was against this initiative because, three days later, I became ill (this time actually ill: viral

[53] Christmas cakes.

hepatitis), and thus I had to spend the entire time in bed. Yet I had the pleasant surprise to discover that they were going to pay me anyway. But that wasn't the end of it. About forty days after the completion of my contract, by which time I'd recovered, Giuseppe came to my door and asked me to go with him to his lawyer, believing that we had to make common cause so that each of us could obtain a steady job. I rebelled and protested strongly against this idea, declaring that I was ready to pay a sum to avoid such a wretched fate. But the Sicilian was unshakeable and, despite my legitimate demands, brought me to the courthouse and the office of a professional who specialized in employment disputes. There were at least fifty people in that tiny space, and they all smoked like chimneys: the air was not breathable. A half an hour later, a small, bad-tempered and determined man entered the room and explained to us that our short-term contracts were illegal and that, consequently, we had the right to full-time jobs at Allemagna. He asked to see our employment contracts and, as soon as I told him that they had neglected to give us any, his eyes glowed with enthusiasm. Without hesitation, he affirmed that my case was one of the simplest and that a positive outcome would no doubt be obtained.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that my presence there was only pure courtesy, my inability to do wrong to a friend when doing right cost me nothing. I only just avoided him putting me on a list of those who "urgently" wanted to resume such monstrous activity. I was struck by the active participation of Giuseppe Piras, an old Sardinian bandit whom I knew wasn't engaged in proper business affairs. Out of curiosity, I engaged in a few words with him, and he tried to get me to share his enthusiasm. Gesticulating, he told me that he wanted to return to the factory to make the bosses pay dearly, and that essentially it would be a pleasure to return. I listened to him without believing a word, but the others around us seemed to think as he did, and this made what he was saying more convincing. I signed the power-of-attorney form, certain that nothing would come of it. This was certainly reinforced when it was communicated to all those who were present that the consultation to which we were entitled was free! But what kind of attorney did we have, if he worked for free? I approached our defender, who was nervously arranging his papers, surrounded by two young employees who were bearded and poorly dressed. He raised with eyes and observed me for a moment with a weary look.

"I don't know why," he said, smiling. "I frankly don't know. Sometimes the simplest questions elicit the most difficult answers." Then he put his glasses on his forehead and added, "The important thing is to win. Afterwards we will have plenty of time to reflect upon the motivations. And winning this battle, my friend, won't be easy. We must try with all necessary energy." His words revealed great ambition, supported by his robust fighting spirit. His balance was perhaps fragile,

but he seemed stubborn like a Jew who was used to crossing deserts to attain unknown goals. The present wasn't satisfying to him.

Later on, I had completely forgotten this episode and didn't even recall having tasked someone with summoning Allemagna to court to obtain a job, which, for me, obviously aroused more revulsion than interest. Two months had gone by when Giuseppe Salemi informed me that I had to go to court to attend the first trial in a series of them, a kind of test case, with Piras at the head of a cast of characters that included six of his comrades. The spectacle was less theatrical than I would have imagined; none of the attorneys wore robes in the small hall where the discussions took place. Since a large audience for this event had not been foreseen, we had to wait in the corridor. We hung around for two solid hours, coming and going from the gallery to a bar, where we nibbled sandwiches and drank beer, without knowing what was going on. A strange Calabrese lawyer, in his forties, elegant and from a good family, stopped by to keep us company and talked to us with clumsy cordiality about his freewheeling idea to turn the courthouse into a vegetable market: the produce would be displayed in the large corridors and the merchants would transact their business in the small offices. At one point, they all went out – the bosses, the workers and the lawyers, tense and sweaty – announcing that the verdict would soon be rendered. It was like making predictions about a boxing match without having seen it.

It was a total victory for us. The powerful chief of staff at Allemagna walked away, humiliated, while we applauded with joy. The seasonal workers were to be rehired and, what's more, given five months of salary, which made me think. That same evening, Piras explained to me what had transpired, and I paid the greatest attention to what he said, considering our victory in a different and more attractive light, given that, if everything went well, twenty-fours later I would have a thick wad of cash and satisfaction.

A month later, to learn more, I went to visit Piras at his house on the Viale Fulvio Testi. He was about to leave for Sardinia, having quit his job in exchange for twice the five months' salary that the court had awarded him. He had purchased a small farm with several sheep.

"I've gotten married, Salvatore," he said. "This annoyed my comrades, but I hope they will understand. This might be my last chance. Do you know when I realized it? Just yesterday. The cops came to my place out of the blue, under the pretext of keeping tabs on squatters. They were looking for victims. They looked everywhere, throwing things into the air and eventually found my money from Allemagna hidden under the mattress. They demanded to know what robbery it came from. . . . I told them that I'd earned it, and they slapped me around mercilessly. Then they took me in for a second helping, trying to make me confess. I'd been repeating the same song for hours, but they screamed at me to not take

them for fools, since they knew me so well. A real mess! In the end, my brother Gavino arrived with a photocopy of the judgment, and they released me. Grudgingly, they released me. Salvatore, how long will this money last with a petty criminal like me? How long could I endure in a factory, in a uniform, with them always breaking my balls? I went to the director and signed off, instinctively. I would rather be a shepherd in Nuoro, even if it's harder work, because in that trap I would die of melancholy."

I understood him like I never did before. He didn't seem like a son of a whore any longer. We weren't "workers," but uprooted people from whom civilization had taken everything. We had not left our villages willingly; we'd been forced off. Now we were too old to become city dwellers (one never forgets the wandering, the idleness or the relationship to the land) and too young to live in the past. But Piras was quite naïve to believe that he could stop time, move backwards in it, and hide himself in a fetid and dirty hole in the impossible hope of escaping from department stores and toxic fumes. Asshole! He took himself for an American Indian and did not understand that he would only be provisionally free, that he would live with his neck under the sword of the first town planner to come along or a builder who wanted to put a pretty power plant next to his home. Asshole! But how many times had I dreamed of returning to Lecce, to a field of *my own,* in comfort, but also with a vineyard and plenty of space? We ended up staying silent a long time, each one of us absorbed in our own thoughts.

"Have you told the others?" I asked him eventually. "The lawyer? The members of your group?"

"No," he replied. "I'm afraid that they will persuade me to stay. Now I'm sure that I won't be able to come back if I want to."

"You're wrong. But there's plenty of time to fix that. It doesn't seem like you to escape secretly and allow the boss to use that against your friends. It would be cowardly, and you know it, too. . . . If you explain it to them, they will understand, because most of them feel the same need you do and want to spit in the faces of those vampires."

"I don't think that they will understand," Piras said, pessimistic like all Sardinians. But he went on: "Let's try, all the same. You have no sense of shame after you've stolen, gone to jail and spat blood here and there because you refused to bow your head. Let's go find the boys. If they understand, good; otherwise, amen. I will leave calmly and without my tail between my legs. *Vamos*!"

We went to three or four cheap restaurants and finally found most of his comrades in a greasy spoon called Morimondo. They were seated behind big bottles of what was supposed to be barbera and eating cooked salami sandwiches, commenting on yet another meeting that had come to a close. Projects sprang from intersecting discussions, and the scene made me think of a clever wax

reconstruction – for use in a specialized museum – of a gathering of 19th century socialists.

In fact, they did not understand Piras' explanations; they could not see that, between the strict rules that they had imposed on themselves and the betrayal of those rules, there could be a banal but adamant decision to return to one's origins. What they could especially not tolerate was what should have made them think: the struggle had been profitable; the boss had had to pay up to satisfy the mania of a poor man only because that man had annoyed him. And when Uncle Crook had maneuvered in the same way, they'd been happy to keep silent! The mood became heavy. The Sardinian reacted quickly and began to get worked up; the others attacked him without letting him breathe, and accused him of having exploited "worker fury," but did so without convincing anyone, not even themselves. They preferred (they would have preferred) that Piras had hypocritically furnished excuses concerning his private life, because these would not have shaken that little, well-ordered universe of the champions of disorder. Personally, I was persuaded that the thousands of employees at Allemagna would have been more understanding than these so-called revolutionaries, because the affair had demonstrated that the bosses were uniquely generous with those who escape their claws and succeed in making them fearful. I also noted that, if each person had demanded ten months of salary, the establishment would have gone bankrupt, and it would have been up to the bosses to explain the size of the sum paid to Piras.

"Let us shout it from the rooftops," I said. "Let us say that we were the ones who won!"

We ended up arguing and each person had his own opinion. On the way home, Piras began to cry, in part because of the wine that he'd guzzled in his excitement, and in part because that evening marked the end of a long period in his life. With his voice still thick, he continued to rave on about organic cheese, horses and mountains, mixing his remarks with curses (in a much more sincere tone of voice) against the factory and work: in the final analysis, against everything that he was escaping from. It wasn't very easy, but I managed to get him into his bed, while his wife, worried and disapproving, watched. He did everything to keep me from leaving, bothering me with old memories, which he brought up one at a time – smuggling, thefts, sabotage, spectacular fires – without deciding that it was time to go to sleep. When he finally did, snoring like a bear, I headed back to the Lope de Vega, without quite managing to define how people like Piras and I differed from the militants of the extreme Left, with whom we had so often marched side by side. In fact, if the manner in which the Sardinian had let go of us didn't please me very much (we must have been idiots not to see it coming), I was even more shocked by the moralizing of the others, by their proud assurances that explained nothing and especially not why it was necessary for any of us to remain on the

assembly line when all the normal people had rejected it.

Another month went by, and I received a letter from the attorney. An agreement had been signed and approved by everyone; but it seemed pure madness to me. We did not win compensation for the damage, but won what I considered to be the real damage: the right to work. I had the strong desire to laugh. I had not done anything and didn't feel like staking my claim; but out of malice I accepted this decision anyway, even though it didn't suit me personally. The Salemi brothers, on the other hand, were delighted, since they only envisioned employment from the perspective of sick leave. Their father exulted, considering his sons to be "set up" and hoped that his children would "set him up." I was forced (so I wouldn't spoil the victory, of course) to go back to work, where I received two months of salary for the period of inactivity. These concessions by the bosses were suspicious: they sought culprits who could be blamed for their troubles, and we had arrived at just the right moment. The pie of State bailouts was very big! They bosses ate it all and left only crumbs for the workers, and they used the newspapers to accuse us of causing the disaster: shameless people! I wanted them to fire me immediately, so, as soon as I crossed the threshold, I diligently devoted myself to fighting back and for trivial reasons, shouting at the boss that I wanted to speak to the general manager. The answer was "no," and so I threatened to go on a hunger strike if I wasn't assigned duties that were compatible with the state of my health. Thank God, I was taken to an office, and one of the managers gave me a check for two million lire.[54]

"I know, I know," he muttered. "Sign this letter of resignation and we'll be done."

"Actually," I said, perplexed, because I'd been caught off guard, "I would prefer to be fired, for reasons of my own."

"Don't be clever, my friend. We know all about that trick and won't fall for it." I was confused: what trick did they suspect me of? Two million lire made my mouth water, but I did not want to become Piras II. I suggested a way out: they would fire me, and I would sign the letter of resignation, so that we would both be covered. This went smoothly and no one bothered me. I know that I had failed a good experiment, but you cannot ask people to repudiate themselves, and I could not see Salvatore Messana in some quagmire, waiting around for layoffs.[55] That might alright for youngsters, people with two jobs or old people, but I was in too much of a rush, and a steady job did not interest me.

Thus I began a career as a street peddler, selling toys, necklaces and various

[54] Approximately $3,000.

[55] And thus receiving unemployment payments over a limited period of time (approximately two to three years) from *la Cassa Integrazione*.

goods on the streets of Lombardy and Liguria, and had no real adventures for the next four years.

To make you smile, my dear reader, I will confess that I devised a personal system by which the bureaucracy, with its long, intolerable lines, would be totally eliminated, and that, encouraged by my taste for illegality, I fabricated my own licenses. But I never had any trouble, as I was always careful to not overdo it when I sensed the presence of petulant bureaucrats. In fact, I allowed them the joy of giving me a fine, without making a fuss.

If I managed to get along, lazily, Milan once again changed rapidly. As if by magic, the big parades, the cheerful chaos and the public protesters against authority disappeared. Most of them gave up their search for the promised land, settled for miniscule improvements, and returned to industrious productivity, far from the assembly lines, but locked up in the small mines of domestic workshops, converted basements and little, hidden factories. Some headed for the southern parts of the city (as I did); others lived the best they could at its edges or pursued their own destinies and ended up in jail. From time to time, I met [former] left-wing militants, and they were worse off than I was. Some had softened up in government jobs; some pretended to be managers; some, not knowing what else to do, fell back upon political parties and unions;[56] some shot up [drugs] without restraint.

One day, in fact, I saw Pietro, my old friend from Motta, sitting on a bench, a veritable wreck, thin and dejected, with his good old syringe. Without even leaving me time to say hello, he asked me, with desperate eyes, for ten thousand lire.[57] He wanted to get the money from me with the inevitable declaration, learned by heart, that he was "firmly decided to quit," but I preferred to pay him immediately and do without the bullshit. It was heartbreaking to see him try to smile, pathetic, emaciated, exhausted, already dead. He would in fact die shortly afterwards, which earned him the posthumous luxury of four columns in the *Corriere.*

Then there were the Red Brigades, or terrorists, or whatever you want to call them. They continued to fight in their own way, and, if they did not cause terror due to their numbers, they did so due to their methods. They acted clandestinely, believing they were hunting down the bosses, without realizing that they were the targets! From time to time, one of them was knocked down like a bowling pin, but no one protested, no one knew them; it was as if they'd fallen from the sky. It was a kind of suicide in installments, a game of Russian roulette, and those who

[56] The French translation of this passage insists that the ones who joined unions were *les meilleurs* ("the best ones").
[57] Approximately $15.

survived it became more and more defiant, isolated and always at the mercy of internecine struggles. They weren't capable of taking precautions. I had the occasion to meet three or four of them; they were convinced that they could militarily beat the Army with the four old pistols that they possessed. How pissed off they got if you doubted their assumptions! They would look at you with a kind of pity and begin to explain, meticulously, how increasing costs were going to result in a general uprising, etc. etc.

In short, good people to say "you're right" to and go off to the movies, happily avoiding such dangerous bores. But three nights later, you might see one of them again and be unable to refuse your hospitality for two or three days. Your undesirable guest would begin to make insane revelations and remain at your place for two solid weeks. Not only would he have taken root, but he would have begun to invite other militants in the group (a small armed band) over for meetings, dinners and various conspiracies. Unwillingly involved, you might not know how to extricate yourself, until you perhaps struck upon a brilliant idea and pretended you were being evicted: you hired a dozen friends, each assigned his own part (bailiff, porter, lawyer), and that was the only way you could get a bit of peace.

As for me, I had no doubt that they would all end up in the Republic's prisons.

Return to the Factory

Thanks to what I earned as a street peddler, we got by, and, plus the little extra I picked up, I bought a small piece of land on the shore, near Otranto, without heeding the protests of my family. In the middle of the brambles and fallow fields, there was a small abandoned farmhouse with a collapsed roof, but its stone walls appeared to be solid. With great difficulty and a few payoffs, I managed to obtain water service and, redoubling my efforts, electricity. Then, having arranged two weeks of freedom, I undertook to rebuild it, either by myself or, when necessary, with the help of hourly workers, and in around three years, I rendered it habitable.

I must explain to the reader, who is no doubt a bit surprised, that I felt a never completely extinguished nostalgia for the naps I took as a child, outside the house, on straw, sheltered from the sun, but not in so much shade that I couldn't feel the intense warmth of its rays. I went to sleep, pursuing childhood dreams, and slept without being bothered by horseflies. In the course of my long trips around the world, I had often been surprised by the evocation of certain fragments of my life, of completely secondary importance, without understanding why no other key gave access to such sweet and powerful memories. Nestled in a corner, I nodded my head, my chin on the palm of my hand, and lost all interest in what was going

on around me, my eyes staring into space, paying tribute to having too hastily cut myself off from my roots. And nothing could stop the procession of images from my childhood, full of dusty roads, miserable parents and crumbling walls. If someone asked me what I was thinking, I would respond, "I'm sleeping," and I would enjoy the surprise that my mysterious answer provoked. In sum, in that abandoned place, a certain Salvatore Messana, tired of misery, could reconcile his various souls, tranquilly lazing about without having to give explanations to his wife or son, who spent the afternoon watching him.

My lovely wife (the official owner of the place so that it could be sheltered from my always vigilant creditors) followed me around, and never failed to petulantly propose that I sell those ruins and replace them with a modern terraced villa. Although I had no precise reasons for not following her wise advice, I always tried to please her. I never ventured to figure out why she, in complete serenity, could have taken a wretched guy like me for her husband.

Thus I had settled down and had no reason to change my way of life, but embers must still have burned under the ashes, because I didn't stop being interested in what took place on the archipelago of the crooks, benefiting from contacts that I had kept with many friends who lived at the Lope de Vega. In fact . . . well, let's take first things first.

It must have been around 11:30 pm on some night. Dead tired, I returned from the Pizzighettone market with my van full of toys. After parking and installing the various anti-theft devices, I headed towards the door and saw Giuseppe Salemi and his brothers Vito and Giovanni taking in the cool air. They were drinking champagne and in a good mood because all three had just won a court action against the same company. I was tired of my loneliness and, after the other two departed, I helped Giuseppe finish the bottle. This was the moment to discuss things and, as everyone knows, nighttime favors confidences.

He told me the story of his wife, from whom he was separated and about whom there was a lot of crude gossip. In truth, one never really knows other people! This woman, named Rosaria, had been raped at sixteen by her uncle and had become pregnant. Giuseppe had married her and, to avoid scandal, they were brought to Milan without their input. He was madly in love with her and wanted to stay with her, but the more he raised his voice, the wider the gulf between them grew. Rosaria certainly didn't have the soul of a homemaker and, moreover, she felt she was forever dishonored. She ended up fleeing with a pimp to walk the streets near the Porta Venezia. Mad with rage, our friend pursued her and denounced her for abandoning their home, but the pimp, who was much cleverer, turned the situation around by exploiting Rosaria's accusation that it was Giuseppe who was her pimp and that was precisely why she'd fled! Giuseppe obviously went to jail and spent six months there before he was able to prove his innocence. In the

meantime, she'd given birth to another son, of dubious paternity, and to be sure of not making a mistake, the court stuck both children in an institution. That's justice for poor people: if they tell the truth, they aren't believed and all of them get punished, no matter who they are.

We drank another glass and, to change the subject and cheer Giuseppe up, I asked him to tell me about his case. His mood quickly changed, and he told me how twenty of them had been hired to be bottlers during the summer, and they had immediately created havoc, instigated by the kids from the Quarto Oggiario,[58] who amused themselves by damaging the machines for the sheer pleasure of it. He immediately went to the usual lawyer, after convincing his comrades that they had to demand a steady job to get money. This apparently simple-minded plan was a success. The boss stupidly fell into the trap and had to pay three million lire[59] to each person. What a party!

We both laughed and Giuseppe, thrown like a sled down a hill, evoked the day on which Vito and he had to keep watch over Giovanni, who wanted to flee the factory because they made him turn his head to watch the bottles go by; he pretended to go to the bathroom but, in fact, fearful of his brothers, tried to hit the road by going through a window, without a care about his debts or his money, of which he didn't know the value. Then, thanks to their vigilance, as well as illness, strikes and misdeeds, Giovanni managed to reach the finish line. The more I listened, the more I wanted to be mixed up in similar things, to create havoc. Industrial establishments have a positive aspect and, in that sense, they were less disgusting to me. Giuseppe and his brothers managed to make ends meet by systematically getting themselves fired. If you went through the necessary negotiations, this accursed modern society was able to provide even the outcasts with a salary. And so I decided to get the rust off and once again become a scoundrel worker.

Satisfied with my decision, I headed to bed, while wild Giuseppe, gesticulating, continued to fool around. We separated by evoking Giovanni, who had vanished: he had resigned from Rinascente[60] after only four hours of work, leaving behind (for different reasons) both his relatives and the personnel department. Sending that small man to work must not have been easy! Around thirty hours later, I was on line in front of the offices of Rinascente on the Via Duccio da Bonisegna, not very far from the fairgrounds.

I presented my work pass and all the crap demanded by the bureaucracy, and

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[58] Fourth Ward of Milan, mostly populated by poor immigrants from southern Italy.

[59] Approximately $4,500.

[60] Italian department store chain, founded in Milan in 1865.

although each step was slowed down by the absurdity of the formalities, I finished them all in a single morning. Thus I was allowed to participate in the auction of the following morning, because things had really changed. Frightened by assaults from the magistracy and constrained by the shortage of laborers who were adaptable to menial tasks, the business now simply specified the number of employees that it needed and took the first ones on the list. The best positions (IBM operators or insurance agents) were filled through direct appointments or the recruitment of qualified people, but there was work for everyone and, in that chaos, they gave out plentiful numbers of short-term contracts for the cleaning of toilets, washing dishes, heavy work or other biblical punishments. That Thursday, I had before me a veritable court of miracles, a gathering of those in despair: drug addicts, young students, alcoholics, hippies, women deformed by past pregnancies or currently pregnant, social agitators, lunatics and simpletons. They were gathered together by the hundreds in a squalid basement, and they would have delighted any journalist who had a mania for marginalized city dwellers. Except for a few dozen normal faces, all the others would have terrified the most accepting heads of personnel. I wanted to laugh, thinking of the resigned disgust of the assholes in ties when these people entered their offices. The boss would be a veritable King Midas, I thought, if he managed – by sucking their blood – to transform these people into gold, and he might even be surprised when he saw so many people willing to undertake such unappetizing tasks fall into his snare.

With the help of Giuseppe, I joined a platoon of people to be deported to a firm in Segrate with a German name (*Kitzchemie*, I believe, but I'm not sure) that needed us for twenty days. The offices were far away, but a saint rescued us and we finally arrived. The guy in charge observed us, immediately judged us to be derelicts, then made us sign a one-sided contract: a month-long trial period (in addition to the contractual period!), the lowest possible salary, and work starting at six in the morning. This watchdog announced to us that there would be two hours of mandatory overtime, and that our job would consist of refilling boxes of detergent at maximum speed. And then, with a smile, he made clear to us the fate reserved for slackers and those who became ill: he didn't say a word; he simply made a chopping gesture with his right hand. After the stick, the carrot: those who proved themselves to be "capable" could aspire to a steady job. Personally, I could not see how anyone could want such a misfortune and, while he was talking, I noted how this guy corresponded to my idea of a Nazi sub-commandant, characterized by a barracks mentality, a purely formal courtesy, and a lack of humanity. During lunch (alas . . . the food was horrible), Giuseppe telephoned the lawyer and returned relieved: the contract was illegal, and we could sue. Nevertheless, it was very difficult to endure the orders, to sacrifice our Saturdays, and to trot like donkeys behind vegetable rewards. The last day was truly the end

of Lent.

On that day, our Hitler was overjoyed to see us, happy to have squeezed the maximum out of us (he meant us idiots), and said that he would call for us again as soon as possible. Recalling the promise of a steady job that had been made to us at the moment we were hired, I had instinctively slowed the pace down to avoid bad ideas from entering the head of the enemy, and I deliberately damaged the enterprise on the last day. As the finishing touch, I confided to the ass-kissing stock controller at the warehouse that I was a Marxist-Leninist Communist and, in great secrecy, offered to bring him into the party. He winked at me and ran off, surely to tell management. There was no danger of being definitively hired, and I plotted my revenge while filling the last cartons of detergent packages. Revenge is a dish best served cold, as is well known, so I limited myself with saluting our S.S. officer with an ambiguous goodbye, full of bad omens. I also refused to give further explanations to the phrase "with reservations," which I added to my signature, except that it was my father who taught me to do so and, at the risk of displeasing the company, I didn't mean to offend his memory.

It was a simple, little job – clean, clean – that ended ten weeks later with four million lire[61] paid out to each one of us. While the Nazi frothed with rage, we let ourselves be convinced to leave that fucking place, after appearing hesitant, which we attributed to our fear of unemployment but actually aimed at increasing the size of the buyout. Giuseppe Salemi, the cicada, ate his share in the blink of an eye, but Salvatore Messana, the ant, thought of his future, and not only entrusted a part of his earnings to his wife, the administrator, but also and especially reflected on the manner in which he could improve the scam. Indeed, if a minimum of effort could earn someone five months of salary, then what fabulous sum could be attained with determined intelligence and roguish imagination? At bottom, a single day of production could bring in several million lire for the boss, and so being able to conduct business in complete tranquility had an incalculable value. Thus shrewdly disturbing that tranquility would put one in a strong position to negotiate.

With a crazy rigor, I applied myself to conducting a meticulous inquiry into the possibilities of "monetization," trying (this was not easy) to separate the true from the false, the legend from the reality. As a general rule, the incentive to resign arose in long periods of work, while the amounts of the payout varied considerably. The minimum was offered to simply unpleasant people; an average sum to inveterate absentees and very fertile women; and the maximum to authentic disruptors. Those who succeeded in accumulating more than one of these faults could hope to receive considerable sums, around fifteen or twenty million lire. Curiously, the companies surpassed all the limits of indemnification in cases of

[61] Approximately $6,000.

presumed terrorists; even if there was no proof that justified their discharge, the bosses trembled at the idea that these serpents were among them: those insiders who took measurements for the bosses' coffins or made an inventory of all the possibilities for fire. Thus it happened that it was the Italian State itself (under the auspices of Breda, Marelli, Unidal, Ansaldo,[62] etc.) that financed future guerrillas, pushing into clandestinity people who had hesitated to take the final steps, either through a lack of means or a fear of changing their ways of life.

In essence, the difficult thing was to make oneself undesirable or, even better, feared, in a very short period of time (I certainly wasn't going to wait ten years to increase my funds) without getting oneself sent to prison. If I was successful in getting myself classified among the last, I would be among the first to be called, as in the Gospel.[63]

Like a general, I began to prepare my campaigns (which I called "operations," following the jargon used by those in charge), each time engaging an army capable of opening a breach in the enemy's fortress, without forgetting to attach the greatest importance to the diplomatic point of view: the attorneys had to be competent, well regarded in their field, capable of working in ignorance of our [true] plans, being sufficiently flexible to not be angry if they came to know them. Technically, they had to be the mirror image, equal but opposite, of the professionals to whom the bosses turned, skilled at making sleaze sound elegant. It is intuitive that the role of the attorney is very important (especially because of the precious advice they furnish to those who know how to ask for it tactfully).

As you have already been able to guess from my rare references to my current feelings, I am a traditional rebel, and I respect the custom that one doesn't say a word of this aspect of things: noblemen, gangsters, politicians and businessmen, all of whom can claim to have made more serious studies than I have, systematically ignore this question, and I do as they do. Thus I leave to the reader the task of filling in this void as he wishes, hoping that such an exercise will put his intelligence and imagination to good use.

Operation Super-Cleaning

When I stopped my friend Cosimo in front of the Racing Hall on the Via Fiamma to propose to him that we go to work, he looked at me, stupefied, thinking it was a joke. And when I explained to him that it was to be the most miserable and

[62] State-owned companies.
[63] Matthew 20:16.

poorly paid jobs, a frightened look came over his face, and he mechanically began repeating, "Why me exactly . . . among millions of other people?" It was only his great trust in me that the little devil, who had just been released from the Novare prison,[64] decided to go along with my plan, but not without some perplexity. Otherwise, he had no other destiny than going back to prison, especially because he easily lost his temper.

"I have developed an astrological system," I said facetiously, "that allows us to have the law on our side while we punish the bosses and extract advantages from them."

With my friend Rocco, on the other hand, it was much easier. He grasped my proposition in mid-air; he was very clever and, if he didn't have a mania (or, rather, the vice) for gambling, he would have made his way in life instead of accumulating mishaps. Together, we three would be able to move mountains. In case of a fight, Cosimo would handle the defense, but his thug's face dissuaded all possible aggressors right away. In his desire to make himself appear taller, because he was very short, he wore high-heeled shoes and improbable striped clothes. He inspired sympathy and embarrassment because he looked like the strings on a violin. Rocco, on the other hand, had a perpetually reassuring air, with his inseparable bag, and no one could suspect his determination to grab all the cash that fell into his hands at gunpoint and place bets on the horses. Imperturbable, like all those devoted to gambling, he accepted this new adventure without batting an eyelid, dignified like a count concluding a marriage for money: courteous but without enthusiasm.

After the customary procedures at the employment office, we were "initiated" into a dreadful *Cayenne*:[65] the Super-Cleaning Company (the reader will excuse me for modifying the name of this firm and substituting for it a made-up one, but I can guarantee the absolute truthfulness of what follows). We had to work nights, starting at 8 pm, in the huge open-air garage of the municipal tram company. We had to wash, sweep out and polish – until they returned to their original colors – the interiors and exteriors of a string of public vehicles, some simply large, others truly enormous. We obviously declared ourselves satisfied with the salary and proposed to work overtime, even on Sundays. This gimmick was highly effective. We were assigned to an extraordinarily ugly man with a big beard and almost no hair who limped terribly, was never clean, and possessed an aggressive stupidity that showed through his yellowish smile.

"If this is the guy in charge," I murmured to my friends, "imagine what the

[64] In Milan.

[65] As the reader will recall from Chapter VI: Return to Liguria, the *Cayenne* was "a ship fit for deportees only (the crew was in fact forced to be there)."

others are like!"

The locker room was a stall that was large enough to contain several automobiles. There were a number of nails on which we hung our clothes and, when we had finished, our gray work clothes. Rocco immediately wanted to plunge his hands into the tempting pockets but managed to control himself. We looked at each other in our new getups, and we laughed about the small adhesive labels that clumsily designated us as workers at Super-Cleaning. The very large jackets allowed us to keep sweaters on underneath to protect us from the bitter cold of the winter nights. We took our equipment that dispensed acids and solvents (noxious, despite the already lenient laws concerning them), and we went to work. Teams of ghostly robots entered the empty vehicles to clean them of wastes of all kinds. Try to imagine all that a trolley car could swallow in twenty-four hours: everything from children's urine to drunkards' vomit, from old people's spit to snot from noses . . . without forgetting the atrocious chewing gum [*gomme americane*] that collected in the most unexpected places.

Humanity is dirty, the pessimists say. But the segment of humanity that uses public transportation seems to have decided, out of vengeance, to leave behind a quantity of debris that surpasses the hypothetical average, with the peaks coming in the first and last trips of the day.

The head of the team (a certain Ottavio, no last name, lost eight years previously, on the night he was hired) assigned us to a line of buses and told us, with refined humor, that he wanted to see them new again. And we responded with an enthusiastic "yes" and called him "sir" because we noticed that this pleased him and that flattery was his weak point. We were ready to tolerate everything and anything to be able to reach the end of the fateful trial period. We threw ourselves into the mist and, to give each other encouragement, we called out to each other whenever we saw our silhouettes.

Like Hercules, we had to complete seven tasks that were hardly less terrible than his: such were the many obstacles placed along our way during the two-week-long probationary period. The boss hired little bastards who were ready to spy on our behavior and thoughts: guys who insisted on knowing where you had worked so that you could be controlled better. We calmed them by saying that we had just returned from France, where we had been employed: one of us in the wine-producing industry; the others in unloading grain silos. That was enough to satisfy the interested curiosity of the spies but without arousing embarrassing new questions. Once or twice we were at the point of collapse because he had frozen hands, heavy heads and broken bones, but we revived each other's morale and continued, hating a little more each day our enemy, the unknown owner, who perhaps was at a casino making bets with the money earned from the labor of his employees (I was the one who came up with this image to excite Rocco, as one

does with the bull at the start of a bullfight).

Our torture came to an end when a so-called inspector arrived: he was well-dressed, with an overcoat made of camel hair, a fur hat worthy of a Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, and an expensive wool scarf. Ottavio, that monster, scurried along behind him, limping terribly and informing him of our abilities. The inspector grabbed a rag and then, with military authority, he inspected the vehicles cleaned by the seven recently hired employees. He complimented the three of us, expressing his joy at having "valuable people" in his employ; he judged suitable the work of the two fearful Venetians, but was pissed off by the work of the two other workers. He waved at them the rag that proved the insufficiency of their efforts. Upon a signal from the inspector, the gimpy guy displayed these workers' employment cards, which indicated three late arrivals in two weeks. The guy in the camel hair no longer had any doubts.

"We don't want scroungers here," he said. "We are not a charity. Tomorrow you will receive your money, your letters of dismissal and then you will get the fuck out of here. I hope that this lesson will teach you how to live in this world!"

I expected a reaction from the unions, but there wasn't any. None of the established unions – the CGIL, the CISL and the UIL[66] – covered such jobs. Workers in our field were still in the times of the textile workers of the 19th century. We could only get back at those bastards if our plan worked out.

Finally we could grab the knife by the handle. They could no longer throw us out, at least not without "good reason," and the sheep could now become ferocious wolves. It was payday, but, as usual, management was two days behind, so that it could get some more fucking money by way of the interest on their accounts.

"My dear Ottavio," I said. "No money? No work. I have slaved away, I must have my money: it's my right."

This scene foreshadowed other interventions: first by Rocco, and then by Cosimo, who appeared as if by chance, hollering about his debts. He commanded respect with his loud voice, which was made to say "Put your hands up!" He intimidated his audience, and we were there to support him. Thanks to the support of Verter (that's right: not Werther) Mola, one of the full-time employees, half of the workers voted to strike, since problems with getting paid was a very sensitive topic.

In front of the locker room, just before leaving, I said, "My dear Ottavio, good flunkey that you are, go tell your boss that, from now on, he will want to be

[66] Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro ("Italian General Confederation of Labor"), Confederazione Italiana Sindicati Lavoratori ("Italian Confederation of Trade Unions") and Unione Italiana del Lavoro ("Italian Labor Union").

punctual and that, in addition, he must personally come here to give us his excuses, otherwise we going to go to his house to get them." The gimp looked at me, shocked; this had never happened to him before; he opened his big sad eyes as if I had beaten up his mother.

The following night, there was tension. The inspector in camel's hair arrived with the money and gave a lecture. To be irritating, I called him Mister Green instead of Mister White (his real name), and, annoyed, he corrected me. In the middle of the discussion, Rocco had a stroke of genius.

"Hey, Doc," he said. "Don't pretend to be an idiot. We have the money, but not the pay sheets! They are a specific obligation of yours, and I want mine right away. So get in your car, dash off to the tobacco store or wherever you need to go, and bring me the pay sheets so that I can check them item by item, line by line. As for your smiles, save them for your boss."

It was as if the inspector had received a smack right in the face. He said that we were crazy and that, at that hour, everything was closed. He finally promised to give us the sheets the next day, and then left, pissed off like a wild panther at the zoo, shaking with nervous tics. No one had ever treated him that way, and he plotted his revenge, without even bothering to try to hide his intentions. As for us, we slowed our pace down and, instead of fifty cleaned buses, there were only twenty-five, exactly half. We were sure that after two days of such bad service, the Municipal Tramways Company would tell the manager off, thus assisting our plan. We explained to everyone the reasons for our strange behavior, which was supported by Verter and Pasquale Forcella, a Neapolitan earthquake-stricken wreck[67] who was used to sleeping in a school that hadn't been ruined. Together, we placed a truly gigantic poster on the wall. It said:

> Workers, they pay us 250 lire[68] per train, starting with the fiftieth one, and we must bust our asses to reach that number. But the company invariably receives 25,000 lire. At this rate, the bosses will get richer, and we will remain assholes. This is why we want a minimum of 5,000 lire for each additional car and, if we don't get it, the inspector can wash them himself. Until then, for good measure, we will remain men, and we will not wash more than twenty-five vehicles a night. We will see who blinks first!

Each of the five rebels received a registered letter a half-mile long that accused them of poor performance and peremptorily demanded written

[67] An earthquake struck the Irpina region of Southern Italy on 23 November 1980.
[68] Approximately 40 cents.

justifications. That very afternoon, we got together and, taking the opposite tact, we went to the administrative headquarters, where we declared to the secretary that the boss was expecting us. This trick worked and, for the first time, we found ourselves in front of the mysterious enemy, whose colleagues had only seen on postcards.

"Here are my justifications," I declared with military crispness and gave him the following text.

> We have the right to not work ourselves to death in a train car; the pace of work is absurd. Moreover, we demand detoxifying milk, as required by law, plus a real locker room, located far from the trash. Mister Boss, you should also immediately hire a carpenter, because you will need to build a bulletin board for the communications from the union that we are forming. Sincere salutations.

But the guy was clever. We could see that he was green with rage, but he continued smiling, smoothing his silver mustache between the thumb and index finger of his left hand, while conscientiously masturbating a provocatively pricey pen from top to bottom with his right.

"If you have finished, you can go. . . ." he said. "And next time, make an appointment. You will receive news within the prescribed period. Goodbye, gentlemen."

He had a very pronounced Lombard accent and the photogenic image of a good father, but you could feel his dagger ready to strike you in the back.

In fact, that very evening Verter Mola disappeared. He wasn't fired: he was promoted. He'd sold himself for the proverbial plate of lentils and did not respond when we telephoned his home. A very well-aimed blow: for twenty thousand lire a month, officially justified by a change of job title, our strike against hackwork was neutralized. As for us, we were each given three-day-long suspensions.

As you must know, if you seek arbitration at the Employment Office, the sanctions are suspended until an official decision can be made, and that takes at least four months. We proceeded in that fashion, and the penalties were eventually blocked, which increased our prestige and allowed us to resume the struggle without losing face.[69] Our work slow-down was beginning to take its toll, and two replacements had to be hired to pick up the slack. Then I called Mola at his new office and got through. I recorded him whining about having a family and pleading to be left alone, because his promotion had been granted on the condition that he had nothing to do with us. I let all of the workers listen to it.

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[69] The next three sentences do not appear in the French translation.

"See? The boss is terrified! You have never been given raises, and now he immediately tries to avoid trouble. Which means that you get what you want by rebelling, and by obeying you continue to get treated like donkeys."

The maneuver had been turned against the enemy; we had acquired an unprecedented insolence, and we had unrestrainedly wrecked havoc. Ottavio and the inspector in camel's hair were subjected to the shame of having failed to neutralize us, and they seemed much less intimidating.

Over the course of the next month, we collected four sanctions, all of which we submitted to arbitration by the Employment Office. And we had an ace up our sleeves. Management had not posted the collective contract in the garage, thus violating the law that required it to do so. As a result, the judges nullified all of the sanctions. We had taken care to inform management of its violation of the law and so were able to deal them a blow to the gut at the right moment. To needle the adversary, we all spent four sick days at home, and we didn't have much difficulty finding a doctor who could diagnose our "depressive syndromes." After all those nights spent in the cold, we needed a bit of rest! After recovering our strength by sleeping, we spent the last of those four days of freedom in Calmogli,[70] strolling around and benefiting from the winter sun.

We went by boat to Punta Chiappa and, at the seaside terraces in Drin, we sampled the healthy Ligurian cuisine. Pasquale was fascinated; he almost forgot his misery. He drank fresh vermentino[71] (he was our guest, obviously) and thanked God for the catastrophe that had chased him from the streets of his old neighborhood. With the help of the wine, we elaborated our plans with joy. After that, it seemed necessary for us to go stretch out in the sun . . . and, asleep, we took on colors that gave us the look of good health, thus putting a final arrogant touch on our provocations!

Upon our return to Milan and work, Ottavio tried to bribe me by offering me a position as team leader. I laughed in his face as I explained to him that I didn't give a fuck, and I experienced a particular joy by indirectly inflicting this slap on the boss. A half-hour later, the inspector in camel's hair showed up, wanting to know if I'd fallen into his claws or if we were creating havoc as usual. Cosimo lunged towards him, pulled on his wool scarf and confronted him.

"You are a worm, and you hope to buy people off with a bowl of soup. But we are luxury items and our price is expensive. Get the fuck out of here or I will break your jaw."

The inspector was really pissed off, but he didn't say a word. All those present rejoiced at seeing their torturer finally treated as he deserved, and the men

[70] A seaside tourist resort on the Italian Riviera.
[71] A Ligurian wine.

in blue overalls regarded the inspector a long time as he walked away with his head down, full of fear. At that moment, we all came together in a line, at attention like an honor guard for an unknown soldier. Rocco called out to him in a soft and persuasive voice, "Mister White . . ." The inspector turned around just in time to see us, in perfect synchronicity, raising our thumbs to our noses, accompanied by a loud choir of farting sounds.

The letter, a single one for everyone concerned, was not unexpected.

> Dear Mister Messana, through this letter we take action against the disrespectful behavior that you and three other employees engaged in on 12 February at 10 pm with respect to our inspector, Mister White. For no reason and in the presence of workers, he was insulted with unspeakable words and seriously threatened.
>
> According to Article 7, I. 20/5/70 n. 300, and the CCNL in force concerning Cleaning Companies, we call upon you to present any possible justifications for this behavior, and we warn you that, after this deadline, sanctions foreseen in such cases can be taken against you.
>
> Sincere salutations.

Twenty-four hours later, the Rinaldi Agency[72] used express mail to send four responses [one for each one of us].

> Dear Mister Businessman,
>
> Article 7, which you cite, requires that the list of infractions and sanctions is posted in a place accessible to all. As you are used to doing whatever you please, you have not judged it necessary to respect this obligation. Thus it is useless for you to threaten sanctions that would be null and void. In any case, everything that you have stated is false. We are workers who respect the law and do not allow ourselves to be bothersome. We will take this opportunity to indicate to you the absence of fire extinguishers in the stall that you call a locker room, and we ask you to remedy this situation, otherwise we will have to inform the Fire Department.

The enemy suffered a terrible blow. In sixty seconds, we destroyed one month's work that had aimed at our dismissal. They all had long faces, those guard dogs, reflecting the mood of their sovereign. While they were still licking their

[72] A law firm.

salted wounds, we introduced another novelty: the assembly. According to the law, the union had ten hours per year to speak to its member-workers; it could even (if it wanted) send a delegate. And the company had to pay wages for the hours devoted to those meetings. That's what the statute specified, because the government preferred to strengthen the three existing union confederations instead of seeing new groups form spontaneously. Thus it preferred to choose the lesser of two evils. When they first arrive, the unions always promise the workers mountains and marvels, and a nice slice of the pie. It is only after the workers become members that they have power and can get something in return. But naïve Super-Cleaning did not know this. The four of us went to the headquarters of the CISL on the Via Tadino, and we explained that, faced with so many problems, we were beat. Since we had paid our dues, they promised us that someone would come. In fact, someone telephoned Rocco, asking him a bunch of questions, going into all the details, and then sent a letter to management that demanded the convocation of an assembly.

Everyone – even Inspector White, without his camel's hair jacket, no doubt to mix with the proletarians better – came to one of the many halls owned by the company and placed solely at our disposition. We immediately began to shout, "Get out! Get out!" and White responded, "I am an employee, just like you . . ." quite forgetting the fact he had jumped the barriers of the hierarchy and was in the process of prostituting himself. Rocco asked the delegate if specialists in dismissals were authorized to attend union meetings, and the room exploded in laughter. The union delegate signaled to us that we should stop making trouble and began to explain to us what raises and sums were due us but hadn't been paid: indemnities for this, additional payments for that. . . . No one understood the reasons, but, totaling them up, we discovered that, over the course of the last two years, management had stolen thirty thousand lire per month from each one of us. This explained why they had not provided us with a salary bulletin! By plebiscite, we all agreed to initiate a grievance. First, a warning letter, and then a strike or, rather, legal action because the result was so assured that it wouldn't be necessary for us to use work stoppages to put the pressure on. I took out my pocket calculator: 30,000 lire x 47 employees spread over different garages but in the same situation = 1,410,000 lire x 12 months = 16,920,000 lire annually + benefits = 24,000,000 lire.[73] "A nice win at the racetrack," Rocco said, always thinking of his horses with nostalgia. We had come to the seventy-second day of our military campaign: a battering ram had opened the main door of the enemy's fortress.

The boss called us to his office. With a weary air, he asked us how much we wanted to "fuck off." Cosimo demanded ten million lire before I had time to

[73] Approximately $40,000.

demand twenty. He had calculated what an average bank heist would have netted us and announced the equivalent. Pasquale almost passed out: he couldn't believe his ears; he would've been happy with nine hundred thousand lire. The Lombard removed his hand from his silver mustache and blurted out, "But that's extortion!"

"Do not forget that you called us here, Doctor," Rocco snickered, his face like ice, as if he were playing poker.

I went even further: "Today it is ten million, sir. Next week, it will be twelve. And it will increase like that, two million every week, because we have accumulated quite a bit of anger while cleaning your trams. If we do not manage to let off steam, we will suffer from a nervous breakdown."

He went to the telephone in another room, then returned and offered us five million each. We stuck to our position and did so for the next twenty minutes, impassioned by this mind-blowing discussion. Out of habit, workers usually do everything they can so that their bosses consider them to be good people. We, on the other hand, sought all possible arguments to make him think the opposite and to even appear worse than we were. In brief, it was an exhilarating reversal of logic, and it amused us greatly. We were especially amused by the Parthenopean[74] responses of our earthquake survivor, who was now on the same wavelength as we were.

We came to agree on eight million lire for each one of us, with an end-of-employment bonus and our last month's salaries not included, obviously.

At that moment, I gave the boss the telephone number of our attorney so that they could work out the agreement together. The enemy trembled with rage.

"Why would your attorney need to get involved?" he asked.

"He would need to get involved," I said, "because he followed the affair of the disciplinary actions, and because we want everything to be legal, approved by the courts, and not done in secret so that it might all be denied one day, perhaps even tomorrow."

He could not go back, and it was him, obviously, who would have to pay all the court fees. We had organized a false dismissal for official reasons, and the agreement would be drafted in black and white. In the corridor, they gave each one of us a check for 8,734,415 lire. Victory!

But the vampire's ordeal wasn't over yet. The checks, laid out one next to the other, with our names legible, were photocopied 50 times, with the following text printed at the bottom: "Wake up! Struggle pays. It *pays*." Instead of choosing to take the money and disappear, as old Piras did, we distributed these copies to our colleagues, who were astonished and said that, thanks to them, they had

[74] Supported by the French Army, the Parthenopean Republic existed in Naples for the first six months of 1799.

learned more in an instant than they had learned their whole lives. It was quite obvious that a good number of them had to take a step back, but Super-Cleaning certainly never returned to its previous tranquility. As for Verter Mola, who had sold himself for an increase in misery, he kicked himself and begged us to take him along on the next operation.

The photocopies of the checks were the straws that broke the camel's back. When we went to renew our work permits, the Lombard insulted us and sought to provoke us by every means he could think of. It was wasted effort on me, but Cosimo gave him a smack that made him stagger. We took off, fearing that he would denounce us, but fortunately he did not. If he'd kept quiet, this was in part to keep us from filing a grievance concerning the insults that he'd hurled at us and in part (and especially) because he didn't want to look like an asshole by recounting the whole story.

Operation Splendor

"Appetite comes from eating," my mother used to say, evoking the old proverb like it was a prayer. After the success with Super-Cleaning, I didn't intend to stop my operations, and I soon decided to organize a second, even more audacious one within the fertile sector of cleaning services, in which it was very easy to find work. Rocco, that lazy soul, was convinced with great difficulty to take part because he lived blissfully when his wallet was full, and he was more inclined to spend than to save. To avoid temptation, I obligated him – good general that I was – to acquire treasury bonds with quarterly due dates (two bonds of five million lire each). By artificially depriving him of liquid assets, I provided him with an incentive to take action. Verter, the deserter from the previous campaign, was allowed to make a second try but, as tangible proof of the seriousness of his intentions, we required that he immediately quit his job at Super-Cleaning. Having undertaken a trip to Calabria, Cosimo was replaced by Angelo, a young electrician from Barona who was in his twenties. He had a long black mustache and a ready wit. This new recruit associated with people at the Lope de Vega and was the sworn enemy of all forms of paid employment.

Thanks to a substantial bribe (300,000 lire)[75] given to a willing guy at the Employment Office, it wasn't difficult for all four of us to be assigned to the same company. Allow me to say again that all these jobs had the least interest, and it occurred to no one to protest this change in the procedure concerning the waiting list, which in principle prohibited it. The target, SPA Splendor, prospered in the

[75] Approximately $400.

business of cleaning bank offices using rags and modern equipment. It increased its profits by doing business with a certain number of other firms. The boss began by sending us to a small metallurgic factory, where we acted like honest idiots, washing and polishing the floors and doors, even the door handles. Having passed our first test with merit, we managed to get in good with the usual team leader who, wanting to compensate us for our good will, sent us to a subsidiary of the Bank of _____, which was located in the historical center of the town. He told us a thousand times to polish the place until it looked a mirror, because this bank was Splendor's best customer.

We did the worst of the work, which – though boring – did not present particular difficulties because credit offices are quasi-antiseptic places in which the employees customarily walk on tiptoe, do not eat sandwiches and tolerate their unhappiness in silence. After the doors had closed, the five of us entered and went to work under the vigilant eyes of the uniformed guards, all of whom were called sheriff. We typically only spent four hours in such establishments, after having worked the preceding four hours in apartment blocks where we were separated from each other and assigned to an entire floor. Although we studied the situation carefully, we didn't come up with many ideas, because each envisioned maneuver faced an easy counter-maneuver. In fact, to strike against Splendor, we would have to attack its relations with the bank, without forgetting that, as soon as the company understood our intentions, it would hasten to isolate and disperse us.

After some black-hearted reflection, we hit upon an idea,[76] and we decided to provoke a gigantic disturbance that would stay in people's memories. Just after arriving at work, the cleaning crew transformed itself into a veritable team of saboteurs [*guastatori*], benefiting from the unexpected absence of its fifth member (on sick leave), in whom we did not have great confidence, although he had the air of being a good guy (that is to say, a scoundrel like the rest of us).

With unscrupulous determination, we began by diligently plugging up the toilets with a good quantity of plaster-coated sanitary napkins, which caused all of the shit-containers to overflow. Verter, who knew a bit about plumbing, sabotaged two toilets so that they leaked steadily.

Thanks to a fortunate set of circumstances, I was able to add a final touch:[77] a gigantic turd in one of the sabotaged toilets. Meanwhile, Angelo worked upon the electrical system and quite cunningly cut two wires in a spot that was impossible to

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[76] Though the Italian original speaks of *malvagie riflessioni* ("black-hearted reflection"), the French translation labels their idea as *machiavélique* ("Machiavellian").

[77] The French translation inserts the idea that the final touch was *digne d'un artiste* ("worthy of an artist").

find quickly. He momentarily maintained the broken contact thanks to a wooden chip that was balanced on a piece of ice, which was only set into place a moment before our departure. We laughed ourselves silly thinking of Rocco, who had spent more than twenty minutes in the bars trying to find the right piece of ice for the job, only to return and find all the door handles covered with shit.

The next day, we sent an observer over to the bank. The results had surpassed anything we could have hoped for. The bank had opened an hour late! The water had flooded the floors and ruined the carpeting. The guards had responded immediately, but there was no electricity to run the air pumps, and all efforts to re-engage the circuit breaker were unsuccessful because of the broken contact, the location of which could not be found. A team of specialized workers was summoned, and they managed to put things back into order, but the bank personnel were furious and couldn't understand what had happened.

At that moment, we prepared and sent off an anonymous letter, made out of newspaper clippings (like a ransom note), to the Super-Cleaning Company.

> Dear Sir: Messana and his band are working at Splendor and are making a career of it. They do not know them there and take them to be little angels. I am telling you this because I hate them. A friend.

As foreseen, the Lombard at Super-Cleaning telephoned his fellow torturer, who then had no doubts about the causes of the disaster. We had managed to get the message to Splendor without exposing ourselves, but they couldn't act on it because it is prohibited to transmit negative information about former employees. We were obviously transferred away from the bank, and the climate changed radically. They banished us to cleaning industrial boilers located faraway, hoping to wear us out. We reacted on two fronts: on the one hand, hoping to get our transfers annulled, we went before a judge and cited the people at the bank as witnesses to our transfer,[78] and, on the other hand, we distributed printed protests to the clients who came to the bank's doors. The bank did not appreciate the difficulties that we, enraged workers, caused them, especially after their clients saw us wearing sandwich-boards that bore this declaration: "They have chased us from our workplace without good reason."[79]

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[78] The French translation does not translate the phrase *indicando quelli della banca come testimoni.*

[79] In the French translation, this paragraph is followed by one that does not appear in the Italian original: "We didn't stay more than a week cleaning the boilers. We knew well that it couldn't last long, but we kept calm, except for staging a few delays, instances of insolence, and demands for tools and interventions by the

The boss at Splendor was almost completely cooked, assailed, as he was, by the bank, which wanted our heads, and surrounded by complaints from the little bosses whom we hadn't failed to ridicule in front of their colleagues. He went for broke, sending us to the last circle of hell that he had at his disposal: a little factory in Rozzano that manufactured chemicals. Pollution abounded there, and even the air in the offices was toxic. He didn't understand that this played into our hands, because it allowed us to take action. As soon as I was there, I immediately saw that the dates on three of the four fire extinguishers had expired and that one was completely empty.

"Gentlemen," I said, "it is time for another performance."

Calmly, I started to cry out that I refused to get to work: we were confronted by an attempt to kill us. Very surprised, the watchman frowned and responded that the manager had already left. I ordered him to get on the telephone, which he did, because we seemed very determined. On the other end of the line, that little tyrant ordered that we be thrown out. This message was relayed to us by the watchman, who spread his arms out wide.

I grabbed the receiver, redialed the number (which I'd seen and memorized) and, without hesitation, I said, "My dear sir: this is worker Salvatore Messana, from Splendor, sent here legally. If you want to send me away, you must call the police, because I will not budge."

"You're crazy," he said, disturbed. "But if you want to stay, then get to work. Otherwise get out, and tomorrow you will hear from me."

"I must hear from you today," I said, "to get the fire extinguishers back in working order. I am ready to get to work, but I refuse to do so in such dangerous conditions."

"Now I will treat you as you deserve. . . . If you do not leave immediately, I will come there with the police."

"Good," I said. "See you soon. Meanwhile, I'm calling the fire department."

The watchman was stunned. In all his years of service, he had never seen anything like it. When I called the fire department, at first they wanted nothing to do with the situation, and told me that such matters were someone else's responsibility, because their job was putting our fires and nothing more. But then, trying to not make any mistakes, they promised to send a functionary who was qualified to deal with such matters. But he only made this promise after I told him: "It's a real mess here. . . . We are all on strike. . . . There are even students with clubs, and the police will be here at any moment!" They feared getting into trouble, so, twenty minutes later, the functionary showed up, furious at having been

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authorities to verify that everything was being done by the rules (the factory owner was given, among other things, a fine for a reason that I've forgotten)."

disturbed at that hour.

Before he arrived, a curious assembly – a glimpse of a deformed Italy – formed. The police sergeant entered at the same time as the manager and, without knowing anything, he ordered us to leave.

"Excuse me," Rocco said, "I am the worker in charge here, along with my three colleagues.[80] Who is this man? Is he the owner?"

"I'm the manager," the guy muttered. He was the very incarnation of a young executive on the way up, dressed in a herringbone sports jacket.

"Perhaps you are the manager," my colleague continued sadistically. "But unfortunately for you, you aren't the boss. And so you have no right to block work contracts."

"But of course I do," he protested rashly, rather stung.

"Then either show me where it says that or put your tail between your legs and go back to watching television with your wife."

"You must leave and that's that," he hissed, humiliated.

The sergeant came to his aid. "I order you to follow me to the police station or clear out of here," he said.

Verter Mola began to weaken, but Angelo held firm. "Yes," he said, "let's go to the police station. We will follow you, crestfallen. It will allow us to make a verbal complaint. Like Garibaldi, we will obey, but you must be quite clear that you have fired our company. . . . In fact, you will owe us for the day's work. . . . We are willing to clean this place, but only when the fire extinguishers are in working order. And you must make a full report on this matter. So, sergeant: shall we go?"

Meanwhile, Rocco and I, paying no attention to the lamentable protests of the poor watchman (who was more and more amazed), used my miniature camera to take photos of the fire extinguishers, next to which we'd placed that day's newspaper to authenticate the date of the incident.

We were getting ready to go to the police station when the functionary from the fire department came in and asked what was going on, and so we had to start all over again. As soon as he realized that he'd been duped, he began to detest us: his expression one of pure hatred. We began with the matter of the fire extinguishers; then we demanded that he examine samples of the substances used in the production cycle and pay attention to the air, which burned the eyes. He told us to go to hell, barking that pollution wasn't his job and that we weren't in America. Nevertheless, he agreed to take note of the expired fire extinguishers and

[80] Here the French translation omits Rocco's claim that *io sono l'operaio addetto* ("I am the worker in charge") and says instead that he and his three colleagues are merely *les ouvriers préposés* ("the assigned workers").

the one that was completely empty, which (thanks to Rocco's prompting) justified his being called down there. The boss of the factory would have to pay to replace them.

He paid for the intervention, but not his bullshit!

At the police station, the manager in the sports jacket was present, and it took us a good hour to get the report drafted. We made sure to dot every "i," because our availability as cleaners had to be clear. When we left, after we'd signed all the respective declarations, the manager was frothing with rage.

To deliver the final blow, I said to him in a provocative manner, "We will see you tomorrow night, hoping that we can do our humble job in peace. And don't forget to tell the boss that we want to speak to him directly so that we can learn the precise limits of his powers. . . . In my opinion, you exaggerate . . ."

He didn't let me finish and left, slamming the door of his car. He accelerated so quickly that his tires squealed and left marks on the pavement.

The very next day, using Rinaldi, we sent a letter to Splendor.

> The undersigned, etc. etc, were unable to do the necessary cleaning work due to the fault of the client, who asked them to work without proper fire-protection. Please intervene to safeguard our interests. We will show up punctually, in the spirit of self-sacrifice, to our assigned posts. Distinguished salutations. We kiss your hands.

At the appointed hour, an individual sent by Splendor's boss was waiting for us. He invited us to follow him to see the manager and refused to give us any explanation, no doubt afraid of making a mistake. We obligated him to give us a written declaration that exempted us from service and guaranteed our pay; otherwise we'd go back to the factory due to receiving no orders to the contrary. He did this only after telephoning and receiving approval from the boss. This maneuver allowed us to dawdle and further annoy an already weakened enemy.

"Where are we headed?" our employer asked us in a polemical tone. "Here we take work seriously: there's no room for people who make trouble and do nothing else. Either it's war or we must resolve this annoying situation as soon as possible. Tell me what you want to get out of here."

"You should be more polite, dear sir," I said, "and keep in mind that certain words sound bad coming from you. We feel perfectly good taking your orders; we have great fun; and we would like to remain here until retirement . . . or at least as long as the company exists."

"In this statement," the vampire hissed at us, "there is a threat!"

Speaking calmly, I replied, "Nothing lasts forever, Knight Commander, and especially not a cleaning company. But if you can take it, we'll stay until

retirement. . . . I do not want to threaten anyone. Nevertheless, if we decide to leave on our own accord, keeping in mind the fact that steady employment with you seems certain, we would need to have twenty million lire,[81] at least, to set up our own firm. . . . This truly isn't due to malice, believe me, but because inflation is so high."

Walking around, he growled. He looked like one of those German shepherds that prowl back and forth behind the gates of houses when kids pretend to enter and tempt them by waving sticks.

"Out of the question," he said. "If you want twenty million, you must earn it with the sweat of your brow, and you can count on me to break your backs."

Angelo was sincere. "You have already drunk the blood of my grandfather and my father." he said. "I'm twenty years old, and I've done jobs that you can't even imagine. You're frightened by the very idea of cleaning toilets, but for me that's like drinking a cup of coffee. You say that, if we want twenty million, we must earn it. . . . Well, let's go, guys. Back to working hard!"

The guy didn't let us get out the door: we had done too much damage in record time. He began to negotiate and spoke of millions of lire as if they were peanuts. The back-and-forth sounded like bingo numbers being called out: four . . . nineteen . . . seven . . . eighteen . . . twelve . . . sixteen. In the end, we approached relatively close numbers. On his side, fourteen million; on ours, fifteen. Each side held to its position. After ten solid minutes of discussion, Rocco came up with a brilliant idea; it showed his longing for his preferred vice.

"Knight Commander," he said. "There's only one way of concluding this to our mutual benefit. Let's take the million lire at issue here and bet it on Cornisch Cris, the certain winner of the Arona Prize, at least according to my calculations. . . . We can't go wrong. . . . The jockey will be that devil Canzi and, on a 1800-meter track, no one can beat him. The odds are three to one; we will share the winnings. And I won't stop there! We'll take Brio di Valle to place at the Premio Prize, and – as winners at Trebbia – Tivorno, Quattrino and Alkan."

Amazed, we all looked at him, even the boss, who paused for a moment and thus betrayed a certain vague interest in the idea. But then he recovered.

"You keep on playing," he said, "but I wouldn't even play a hand of cards with you. My final offer is 14,500,000 lire. . . . If you want, bet your own money. . . . Moreover, Alkan is a nag."

The rest is obvious. The lawyers spoke by telephone and – to use the jargon of the court – we "spontaneously" went before the judge who was assigned to our case. The agreement was drafted in black and white, and signed. That was on a Monday. Getting out of court, we went to a bar to celebrate our victory with

[81] Approximately $30,000.

champagne and canapés. In the middle of the rejoicing, Rocco stood up, his eyes fixed upon the newspaper on the neighboring table, and he began to curse, raising his hands to the heavens.

"The bet would have been good. . . . Tivorno, Quattrino, Alkan. . . . We have lost a fortune. . . . There's still a chance, because I bet fifty thousand on Cornisch Cris. But keep in mind. . . . Alkan a nag?! Never listen to bosses, even when it comes to horses. . . . I have lost a fortune . . . a fortune!"

It was quite pleasant to be there, like gentlemen. But we still had a question to settle: the customary distribution to the other employees at Splendor of the photocopies of our checks.

The Blitz and Operation Salve

The echoes of our success, which was obtained by new methods of warfare, resounded, and all the people at Lope de Vega spoke of it, even Ignacio, the bartender, was impressed by the sums of money that proletarian optimism had inflated while being passed along by word of mouth. The first consequence of our actions was a spectacular decrease in absenteeism, which thus reached a level that no government in the world could hope to attain. Everyone wanted to take his or her chances with the new system, even if the results were often different and not always positive.

One person in particular became the focus of general attention as a negative hero, the object of all sorts of teasing and ironic jokes: poor Mimmo Capobianco. Always dressed like a scarecrow, with pants that were too short, he babbled by trying to transform his immigrant's dialect into Italian, and he had no shame about declaring that he was illiterate. He slaved away like a beast and was timid to the point of never daring to protest against anything; then he suddenly got worked up and demanded twenty million lire in exchange for his dismissal. But his employers explained to him that they had no reason to do so because they were very happy with his work!

As for Giuseppe Salemi, he rejected such operations because they didn't suit him, and he was incapable of working two months in a row. He didn't have patience and had no intention of acquiring it.

At the Employment Office, we worked out a new technique – quick and yielding high returns – that was tailored for individual actions. In fact, it wasn't always possible to assemble armies, and the cops, who were always ready to seize upon any misstep, were watching us. They often spoke of the "blitz" in the newspapers, and Michele, who had spent almost twenty years in Mannheim,

explained to us that this meant "in a flash." As a challenge, we adopted this term, because it seemed appropriate that we were able to steal faster than a policeman could slap the handcuffs on us!

In short, the game was based on the bullshit of the personnel services and their employees, brave little bastards who screeched at the weakest people, but were as stupid as donkeys. We sought out loopholes in the law: I will only provide a single example. The Labor Code mandates that any contract only has validity if it has been signed before the worker has begun his service. If not, the contract would be worth shit. Thus, one had to deftly avoid signing one and throw oneself into a job without asking or provoking any questions. Of course, such a gung-ho attitude pleased the bosses, and, without thinking of the consequences, they favored people who had it.

So many laughs. . . . I remember that, one time, as I led the way to the manager's office, I broke away and ran like hell away from a luxury hotel, after only working there five hours, thus leaving them all dumbfounded. The next morning I returned, stammered out pathetic excuses, and then, 110 minutes later, I ran out again. I sent them a registered letter, accompanied by a medical certificate that prescribed seven days of rest. Those yokels reacted by firing me, which netted me three-and-a-half million lire.[82] And I will never forget the day I landed at a cafeteria as a cook's helper. At the end of two days of work, I still hadn't been offered a contract, which was a real blessing. I amused myself by adding sugar to the stew of 70 people, and then angelically affirmed that I was right to do so because I liked my soup that way and that it was the best recipe in the world . . . so good that I hated to change it . . . which ended in a military expulsion rather than a simple dismissal. I pocketed four million lire from the episode.

There were several blitz-artists, and most loved their own performances. They were character actors, to use the jargon of the cinema. Giuseppe Salemi, for example, was able to hide in the most unlikely places in a department store and then unexpectedly pop out to give a helping hand to some less than diligent workers, whom he could spot with a flair worthy of a bloodhound. He would ask the worker for his name, which he took down in his dirty little notebook, and thus gained a witness for his future court cases. His simpleton's face prevented suspicions of bad faith, and so, as was customary with him, he benefited from his experience as a lazy seasonal worker who easily and frequently got sick.

As for Rocco, he and Cosimo pulled off a dangerous blitz, irresistibly funny, a real insult that could have gotten them arrested. With the permission of the Employment Office, he'd gone to the main headquarters of a huge supermarket chain and there had signed a perfectly legal contract. His job was to unload boxes

[82] Approximately $5,000.

and provisions at a faraway point of sale that apparently offered no possibilities for scams. But Rocco was not discouraged, and immediately proceeded to write a letter: "Dear _____, I have changed my mind and won't take this job in the hope of finding a better one. I return to you my hiring letter with my sincere greetings, and I ask you to please return to me my work permit."

As everyone knows, a registered letter ordinarily takes three days to arrive. During that time, Cosimo – calling himself Rocco – showed up at the subsidiary branch of the supermarket chain: he was expected, and all the formalities were taken care of, so there was no reason for him not to start work right away.

The consciences of the bosses are never clear and, even if they were, this wouldn't prevent them from not paying their taxes on work conducted off the books. In fact, at this particular place, three undeclared warehousemen worked in the basement; they had obtained their jobs because they were the relatives of an upper-level functionary. Generally speaking, one didn't ask for identity papers from workers at such low levels. Thus the boss was convinced that he'd hired a fourth warehouseman named Rocco, though it was actually Cosimo who showed up. This freebooter [*filibustiere*] presented himself to his colleagues by using his real name, and he did everything he could to get noticed. It was "Cosimo did this" and "Cosimo did that" – a high-quality laborer! When the letter finally arrived, several days later, no one understood it. The manager was obligated to go, in person, to the warehouse to clarify the situation and seek out the worker named Rocco, thus causing a great deal of surprise among the workers, who knew nothing about anyone by that name.

Flanked by the head of the subsidiary, the manager spotted Cosimo, who coldly stated that he didn't know what they were talking about: he'd received his work permit without anyone asking him any questions. Amazed and incredulous, the manager dryly commanded, "Get out!"

"Dear sir," the actor replied, "I will remain here, and you shouldn't pretend that you are stupid. If you want to fire me . . . you must do so in writing . . . otherwise I'll call the cops, and there will be a lot of laughs when they discover the undeclared workers who are unloading all the boxes here."

The threat was effective. The enemy went completely pale, knowing full well that it would be impossible for him to justify the irregularity of the staff. Anger and agitation are bad counselors, and the boss's servant piled mistake upon mistake, thoughtlessly giving Cosimo the following piece of paper, which used his real name and not that of Rocco: "We no longer desire to use your services, having never done the necessary paperwork to hire you," etc. A supermarket chain can't be taken seriously if it cries wolf, and each of the two scoundrels pocketed a tidy sum.

The risks were generally minimal with the blitz. The system also offered the

advantages of being quick and very amusing on occasion. One day, several moments before the arrival of a government minister, I was reading *Il Manifesto*,[83] with my feet up on a table and my ass in an armchair, in the lobby of one of the best hotels in Milan, where I was employed. By my side was a small carton, on which I'd awkwardly written in capital letters: "Please do not disturb. Salvatore Messana is resting and will not be available for a half-hour." Five guys rushed in to chase me out, rather brutally, with the help of the minister's entourage. I thanked them, and they, not understanding that I'd tricked them, took me for a lunatic [and not an employee who could file a grievance and receive compensation].

But the blitz didn't bring the same satisfactions one could get from a well-organized campaign. It didn't put into crisis the entire structure of a business, as one could do by attacking it on several fronts. Motivated by my nostalgia for previous campaigns or perhaps by the simple taste for adventure, I could not refuse the opportunity that chance offered me when the Salve[84] Restaurant opened its doors in Milan on the initiative of a real colossus in the food-service industry. The reader will once again forgive me for changing the company's name, but I fear I have no choice: it would be very imprudent to reveal everything in this confession.

Verter, Angelo and I seized the opportunity to be hired as dishwashers at Salve, for only four hours a day, knowing quite well (having collected very precise information) the manner in which this establishment exploited its workers.

Salve had spent a fortune on its publicity campaign, which announced a new formula in Italy: a *self-service*[85] restaurant with pretentions to good taste and luxury, open from morning until late at night. The place was decorated in the American style, with very bright colors, everything gleaming-clean and characterized – at least supposedly – by quick service and meticulous cuisine. But such modernity didn't prevent the management from exploiting the workers in a particularly old-fashioned way. Those who were "good," that is to say, slaved away in silence and submission, would be allowed the privilege to work eight hours a day and receive a full salary; those who weren't "good," who became ill frequently or demanded their full rights, never got more than part-time work and ended up leaving, because it was impossible to live on such a low wage. What a downright swindle!

During our trial period, we behaved with the humility of slaves who were satisfied with their condition, running everywhere they ordered us to go and even managing to work sixteen hours on a Sunday: it was more than *part-time*[86] work; it

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[83] A dissident Communist newspaper founded in 1969.
[84] In Italian, *Salve* means "Hello."
[85] English in original.
[86] English in original.

was worse than a Roman slave ship. We suffered in silence, and in silence we plotted our revenge, a real theatrical presentation, unexpectedly assisted by a strange character, who had made the art of wreaking havoc into his philosophy of life. He gave us wise advice and personally drafted the text of the tract we later distributed.

The hour of the attack fell on a Saturday evening, that is to say, at the precise moment that the crowds were the largest, and the chaos was such that no one would notice anything if something went wrong. We invited for a free dinner that started at 8:30 pm all of the brigands of Lope de Vega, plus their friends and relatives, as well as people from Barona, Gratosoglio and the new apartment blocks in Rozzano. There were also a dozen nostalgic extremists who were recruited from the squatters' milieu and, along with them, a French journalist armed with a video camera. In total, forty saboteurs, all of them ready to go to work, were mixed in among the normal clients. I brought a megaphone in my bag: it would serve for my waiting comrades as the trumpet that signaled the start of the hostilities: the signal for battle.

We didn't appear to be very numerous, but we made up a large share of the people in the restaurant's dining hall. We could also count on the snowball-effect that takes place at any mini-uprising, but the disturbance of service was assured, in any case. As soon as my horn sounded its laughable electronic signal, I went off to grab the amplifier that I'd left in the cloakroom, and then, when I reappeared, I read aloud the text of the irreverent tract, which I have copied out for you.

> HELLO, those who speak to you are employees at this canteen, and what we want to speak to you about are your interests and ours.
>
> Have you ever wondered what we are forced to serve you? Take a good look at your plate, and if that isn't enough, ask to see the kitchen. The company can soil its own name, if it wants, but it can't soil ours: it has only taken us a few days to discover things that it would be better not to speak about,[87] inasmuch as the smell is horrible.
>
> They have only hired us to work four hours a day, but sometimes we are here twelve or even sixteen hours, with the promise that, if we are "good," we might someday have the right to a full salary. The company seeks our complicity against you.
>
> We are not good: STRIKE!

[87] *cose che il tacere è bello*: a quotation from Dante Aligheri's *Inferno,* Canto IV, line 104.

Without saying a word, Verter and Angelo used a hammer and nails to affix to the wall a gigantic yellow and red banner that proclaimed "STRIKE!" Meanwhile, 500 copies of the tract were distributed to the curious customers and waiters, but the latter, too frightened by such an unusual action, didn't have the courage to join us.

It was pandemonium. Our invited guests didn't hesitate to encourage us and screamed out their complete solidarity. Forming small groups, they contributed the best they could to increase the general confusion, so much so that many people demanded to see the kitchens and refrigerators, despite the refusal of the restaurant's poor manager to allow it. The revelation of the systematic and clandestine deep-freezing of the supposedly fresh foodstuffs displeased even the most complacent of the diners, and, in the blink of an eye, there was complete chaos. Without heeding the useless lunges made by the cashiers, the most insolent of those in attendance began to drink up the wine, beer and spirits for free and in great quantities. The French journalist walked among the tables, videotaping the scene in all of its details, recording interviews and commentaries. Even a slightly gray Austrian tourist felt the need to intervene. In a voice slurred by drink, he defended our initiative. In fact, he fought with the headwaiter, who had refused to refund his money.

"I paid you for fresh meat . . . you gave me frozen . . . it's a swindle. . . . I want my ambassador," the sauerkraut-eater screamed into the megaphone, and then he chased after Salve's manager with this unequivocal judgment: "You poisoner . . . you [should be] in prison!"

We laughed when the cops arrived and were greeted by the drunk Austrian, who demanded that they arrest the restaurant's owners. The police sergeant didn't manage to bring the situation under control by giving the usually effective order to "shut up and clear out," without forgetting to add "otherwise, I will throw you in jail." With great effort, the police finally managed to empty the dining hall of both honest citizens (thus wiping out the evening's take) and crooks. The cameraman, carrying sixty minutes of tape, managed to get away clean.

This unexpected revolution aroused great interest in the press, and, the next day, all the newspapers used three or four columns to speak of the curious Committee of Bad Workers and the contested food. The restaurant could neither keep quiet about nor confront the merits of the controversy, because its profits were essentially founded on the art of presenting shit in beautiful crockery. On the counter-attack, the restaurant immediately dismissed us, assured by the support of the unions, which were always ready to badmouth "anarchy," and it issued a vague statement that assured the public of the good quality of their food: they could no longer tolerate our presence, but they couldn't offer us money without losing face. As for us, starting the next morning, we stationed ourselves outside the doors, without going in, with a folding seat and a megaphone to piss them off with a little

negative propaganda. We also displayed a banner on which we'd written with a large felt-tip pen: "Warning! The food here is radioactive." The cops returned and unceremoniously forced us to decamp. While we were retreating, Salve's manager, thoroughly out of breath, joined us, bearing freshly baked letters of dismissal (hot hot hot) that were full of nonsense that tried to justify our expulsion and to avoid an embarrassing investigation of our allegations. We have finally entered into a state of war in the courts, with the possibility of victory on our side, because the enemy had made a mistake: it had not followed the law that granted fired employees five days to prepare a defense, and thus it risked the nullification of its action.

I do not know how all this will end up, and it is likely that the State will do us wrong, since it cannot grant final victory to troublemakers like us: the poor district judge who accepted our original arguments will eventually be transferred to some unimportant place or at least will be in perpetual conflict with his superiors. In any event, there will be fetid humiliation for those [at Salve] who suffered incalculable damage, and the beautiful image that they spent a fortune to create will be burnt. Economic power has been forced to confront individuals who laugh at it and, to punish them, it will have to arrogantly break the law and upset the balance of justice. In court, the embarrassment cut like a knife, and when the Salve realized that it had lost the first round, there weren't smiles, but angry threats.

When they want to, the bosses can put justice in their pockets. I know it well, and it makes me laugh. Therefore allow me the pleasure of predicting that, by the time this book has been finished, our dismissal will have been upheld by the court of appeals, and that we will have concretely demonstrated the relativity and vanity of the Law without having experienced any other difficulty than a loss of earnings, and with the certainty of being able to do it again.

Conclusion

My story ends here, without a real ending, and I leave it to my readers to figure out why. I will, however, say this: when I have had the opportunity to throw the first stone at those who hold power, I haven't hesitated to do so, and I have aimed at their heads.

But it is time to stop my narrative and so avoid possible investigations into the real identity of your merry friend.

SALVATORE MESSANA

Italy, Fiction

NEVER WORK: The Autobiography of Salvatore Messana

NEVER WORK

The Autobiography of Salvatore Messana

Translated by Bill Brown, this book is the fictional autobiography of Salvatore Messana, a clever, determined and financially successful enemy of salaried work, bosses and bureaucrats. Written by Gianni Giovannelli, it was first published in Italian in 1983 & translated into French in 1989. This edition is the book's first translation into English.

"It was in this climate [proletarian revolt in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s] that the joyous and provocative adventures of Salvatore Messana were conceived; & it would be impossible to understand them without granting them the reality, if not the realism, in which they swim."

– Gianni Giovannelli
Preface to the French Edition

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