

UN PO' DI MARE  
NON HA MAI FATTO MALE  
A NESSUNO. PER ORA.

**LA STRATEGIA**

**DELLA**

**CLARISSA**

**CRISTIANO GOVERNA**

ROMANZO  
BOMPIANI





CRISTIANO GOVERNA  
THE CLARISSINE STRATEGY

translated from the Italian  
by Julia MacGibbon

**SAMPLE COPY**

BOMPIANI

FOR EVERY EVIL UNDER THE SUN /  
THERE IS A REMEDY, OR THERE IS NONE

This hitting the beach in winter bollocks has got to stop at some point.

There is nothing charming about a nasty thing that's ended up lonely and friendless. That goes for people and for thirty-mile-long strips of sand and water.

In winter months the coast resembles one of those old women who've never married: she hates youngsters, isn't over preoccupied with personal hygiene and, while waiting to die, she feeds on news of other people's woes. And all she has to do is wait: sooner or later summer will arrive and her ears will ring with all the misery of 'halcyon' days. The beach umbrellas are her listening devices, the hidden microphones with which she spies on our trials and tribulations.

Of all of them, the sea's the worst, because he knows he won't die alone and unvisited. Beachgoers are like the family members of a contagious patient: the more assiduously they go to see him in hospital, the more of them gradually bite the dust.

As is customary among gods, he (the sea) always demands the same one thing of the procession of humans who come to pay him homage: child sacrifice.

You go to the seaside for the sake of the kids.

Those little legs running into the water... That brief burst of happiness, with a shelf-life shorter than yoghurt and date-marked from birth.

The sea has an uncanny feeling for people. He seems to know every one of them personally. But there's a trick to that... Only he has known them all as happy children. And now that those children have grown up, he hears them, he feels them clinging to him, he senses when – during the winter – they begin to prepare.

They start in January, at uncleared tables still covered in supper plates. They begin doing the sums. Hotel or B&B or campsite? Or, in desperate cases, rented villa? They pull out last year's bathing suit and lay it on the bed, with the mirrored wardrobe doors half open. The hope that it'll still fit is even more fervid than that dream where they see their mothers again. For an instant, and God knows how, they are happy.

Nothing is more violent than the enthusiasm of tourists.

If you think about it, someone who loves travelling is really just saying that you're not good enough. That as "views" go, you're pretty crap.

It's important to remember that travelling and going to the seaside are two profoundly different things. The former, at most, ends up being an exercise in nosiness. The latter can turn out to be dangerous.

But nothing stops them. They can't wait to be on the move. They can't wait to start lining up so that they can be alone again, back in the middle of that 'welter of unfailing isolation.' (That's in *Breviary of Chaos* by Albert Caraco. I love that definition.)

So, all things considered, the fact that, on the coast, someone's decided to start killing off a few people seems to me almost physiological. A form of immune response.

Personally, when faced with an expanse of supine sunbathers, a stoical army of rissoles with limbs, I ask myself: What need is there to kill them? What could be worse than this?

Can you imagine a more sophisticated form of torture than what passes for happiness?

Something nasty's happening on the coast. A series of mundane deaths in curious circumstances. And when the mundane starts turning curious, you should always be afraid.

There's a murderer around. Oh, I'll catch him; that's not what worries me. And we may even catch him quickly, because you have no idea how easy it is to catch someone. The fact is that, this time round, catching the murderer and stopping him appear to be two different things.

At any rate, as I said, his days are numbered. Murderers improvise, just like the majority of human beings, and most of them are inept. They're a bit disappointing. Like lovers or old school friends.

I can't wait to get it over and done with and nab this pillock who's bumping people off beneath the parasols. I can't wait to be back in Bologna, under her lovely porticoes, luxuriating in the hallowed aroma of urine and late-August rain. Summer and the city were made for one another, and instead – thanks to this guy – I've got to go to Romagna and endure the enthusiasm of sunbathers.

He leaves them there on their loungers, stiff as boards. Roasting in the sun.

## DETECTIVES ON TELEVISION

Although from one point of view, rather than ‘criminal intent’, our murderer is simply displaying a spirit of collaboration. With Darwin. The nation will undoubtedly grit its teeth and cope with the loss of a handful of very tanned people.

Only, it’ll be my arse on the line, if I don’t catch him.

So let’s get on with it; the quicker we get started, the quicker it’ll all be over. As soon as I get off the khazi we’ll be on our way.

I’ll just have to be careful – while they’re leading him away – not to thank him. To keep my gratitude to myself.

But I went to Catholic school. I can handle farce.

*That we lived  
and that we touched these roads  
with carefree feet,  
no one will know.  
That we saw the sea  
from the windows of trains,  
and that we breathed the air  
that settles on chairs  
outside bars,  
no one will know.  
We were there  
on life’s terrace,  
until the others turned up.*

(*Non lo saprà nessuno*, Nino Pedretti)

I try to act the way the detectives do in the TV programmes. Messy, anguished and always hanging around apartment blocks, they’re the top models of a world without beauty, where fashion’s not so much an aura as a musky whiff. They haven’t got the right physique but they’ve got the right physique, if you see what I mean; they don’t care about clothes but they’re very meticulous and dress badly in just the right way. In a trendy way. I bet they smell.

I’ll never pull it off. I know I’ll never be one of them.

I can’t work out whether I don’t get laid because I don’t remind people of a TV detective or vice versa.

I’ve had girlfriends – like anyone, really – but they get bored. It doesn’t matter if the relationship lasts a year or a month, I only ever say the same four or five things.

About books, for example. What books to read. They’re always the same. *Bartleby the Scrivener* by Melville, Salinger’s *Nine Stories*, *The House of Others* by Silvio D’Arzo, Dürrenmatt’s crime novels, *The Three Musketeers* by Dumas and anything by Dino Buzzatti or Piero Chiara that’s ever hit the shelves.

And no, we don’t go to the cinema. The cinema’s in the can. You just need Sidney Lumet’s *12 Angry Men* on a shelf in the

living room, and David Lynch's *The Straight Story*, and Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*, and Carlo Mazzacurati's *The Bull*, and Pupo Avati's *The House with Laughing Windows*, and you're more or less good to go. More or less.

And music. The music died the night the talent shows were born. The freshest albums are all at least thirty or forty years old now. There are certain things that Lucio Dalla, Francesco Guccini, Sergio Caputo and Paolo Conte have tried to tell us. And him... Enzo Jannacci. Him, above all. And I try to bear those things in mind. And the Matia Bazar and the New Trolls, when it comes to bands. And the Pooh, if I'm trying to ingratiate myself with civil servants.

So I recite what basically amounts to a shopping list, and then I launch into the mantra about stuff that sounds clever, sure... But then I probably ought to give it a break.

For example, the curious thing is how all deaths are invariably connected with the shape things used to have.

Film died when the cinemas closed.

Literature died when books began to disappear.

Music died when they stopped making LPs.

Journalism died when we stopped using paper.

If you have a body and that body dies, your soul's up shit creek.

I don't think Paola would agree with that, but we'll leave it there for now. Paola will have plenty of time to stretch her legs and put in her two pennies' worth by the time this business is over. I guarantee.

I'm a creature of habit. What can I do? My idea of travelling involves persistently reproducing the same evening out, with all the same moves.

'Routine' is the sound the bells make in Paradise.

I reckon that's more or less where you'll end up finding happiness. She doesn't move around much. Always the same shop sign and neon lights. Happiness is a beautiful woman who happens to be paralytic and who sees and tells you all about the world without ever getting off the sofa. But my ex-girlfriends had functioning legs. All of them. And sooner or later they used them to get up and leave. If only I could find a woman who hates travelling and going for walks after dinner.

I've noticed that detectives on television either don't know how to cook, and eat junk food, or they're the total opposite and are health freaks, which is essentially the same thing. They all have ex-wives who are in love with them, it's never clear why they split up except that it helps with the plotlines, and they live in homes that are either heinous dumps or beachside villas.

Maybe it's rental housing. You can never tell. But whether they're rigged out in rags or designer suits, they are, all of them, always impecunious. 'Poor bastards,' you might say. If you don't mind sounding sententious.

The scene I'm sad I can't do is the one where your ex-wife turns up at your house and lays into you because the place is such a tip. She mutters stuff about what a mess your life is and then, while you collapse, exhausted, onto the sofa, she tidies everything up, throws together some baked seabass with artichokes and, once you've woken up, she lets you get your leg over a couple of times. The following morning she leaves you a message, written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror.

I once saw a film (dozens, actually) where a woman wrote *je t'aime* on the mirror in her lover's loo.

I tried it too, once. At my grandmother's house.

*Nonna, this afternoon after school Fabio and Maurizio are coming round for tea. Can you make us sfrappole? Or if you prefer you can just make us a nice surprise,* I wrote.

Brevity wasn't my forte.

I'd never heard Nonna Virginia swear before. I think that was the first time she ever did it. 'There are people round here who'd benefit from a spot of military service,' she mumbled as she rubbed the lipstick off the mirror. And for tea she made us diddly squat. A few months later she fell ill, and then she died.

If I think back to the period when she was in hospital I can cope, but the minute I remember the mirror episode I end up in tears. Until – strangely – I feel a bit like laughing. The dead are good at making themselves understood.

And anyway, that business of the message written on the mirror in lipstick is something the TV detective's ex-wife does because, like everyone else, she's seen them do it in films. And then she leaves. Then you leave, and you haven't shaved but you solve the homicide case they've given you, you hunt down the assassin, you chase him on foot, you have a punch up and it ends with you disarming him and slapping the cuffs on. At that point you crack a joke – any old joke will do as long as it makes everyone in your open-plan office laugh – and the episode comes to an end. You can relax now. Stop being alive for a bit. There's a whole week until the next one.

That's stuff I don't seem to be able to do.

My sister Paola says I should try prostitutes.

'I think it's your best option,' she says, patting my cheek with the back of her hand.

I don't seem to be up to that, either.

Once, when I was about sixteen, I phoned a number from the personal ads in the *Carlino*. The personal ads were our preferred choice of reading matter, as teenagers. I'd found an ad that read, 'Dwarf. If I do say so myself.' Together with a schoolmate who was just as much of a bastard as I was, we rang him. We had a plan, which fell apart as soon as we heard the guy's Sardinian accent. We laughed until we cried, in that telephone box. But only because we were utterly impervious to life's creative élan.

Then, almost twenty years later, I made a serious attempt. I called a girl who'd placed an ad. The voice I heard on the other end of the line belonged to an Italian woman who, sensing my embarrassment, began to ramp up the seductiveness. She called me 'Baby', which none of my girlfriends have ever done. It was all going swimmingly, until... That voice. I've never forgotten it.

Because of that voice, I clammed up, and then I hung up.

While the chick had been describing how much she wanted to meet me and promising she'd make me feel good, in the background I'd heard the voice of a kid who, from what I could make out, must have been five or six. He was doing his homework. Reciting a poem from memory, or maybe reading it aloud. I recognised it instantly because, thirty years earlier, I'd had to copy it into my own exercise book. It was Govoni's *The Little Trumpet*.

*A firefly's damp wick*

*Growing feeble...*

My sister Paola says I should have stayed on the phone and that poems are twaddle aimed at the terminally unattractive

and that, in any event, a telephone call should always take precedence.

‘Why should you give a sod whether or not the kid’s copying out a poem?’ said Paola. ‘The way you pompously dispense compassion and assume everyone else is worse off than you are vaguely sucks. You were a fat guy who wanted a shag, and on the rival team there was a kid absorbed in his exercise books and colouring pencils. Which of the two was more pathetic?’

My sister is a cloistered Clarissan nun. A Poor Clare.

Not unsurprisingly, from time to time the Order kicks her out on her arse and, while we wait for them to take her back, I find her kicking around the house.

Some evenings we kick up our heels and dance.

## WHERE’S MARTINA?

People always commit murder when it’s your day off.

I still haven’t worked out how they get the day right, but they always do. At work, we should probably organise our shifts in collaboration with the assassins.

Sergeant Fantini’s phone message is fairly agitated. I didn’t catch much of it. I’d just fallen asleep when the phone rang. What I do understand is that I need to get dressed in a hurry and get down to the *questura*.

‘I wouldn’t have disturbed you if it weren’t important.’

That’s how he talks. Fantini. My assistant.

He doesn’t reveal why he’s waking me up and why I have to rush down to headquarters.

He simply ‘has no alternative’, and I’m supposed to understand. He talks just like the girl you have a crush on at high school who lectures you on how life works as though she’s already lived a dozen of them.

At least nowadays they pay me to pretend I’m interested.

In Bologna there are queues at the traffic lights even at night.

The reason people come to live here is that there’s always someone around. Whatever time of night it is. And without getting too hung up on the question of who that someone might be.



I occasionally flirt with the idea of suicide for exactly the same reason: there's always someone around. Even in the middle of the night.

There are guys out there who work hard at looking unkempt, as long as it doesn't get them on the hook for something. The idea is to look like a rebel but basically inspire the same degree of trust you'd have in a cousin. Like Sandokan the pirate, but the version you'd happily ask to be your proxy at the tenants' association meeting. For the most part, they're doped up to their eyeballs, but they know when to stop. They cheat at that, too. The dopiest ones think it's a way of staving off solitude; they confuse bumping into people with human contact.

I liked it when the streets were empty.

When you have the street to yourself in the middle of the night, you never feel alone. Why is that?

Every time I climb the steps into the *commissariato* I feel cold. It doesn't make the slightest difference what the season is, it's always cold in here. Always.

'This is Signor and Signora Baruffetti. They sell stationary and they need to talk.'

That's how Fantini presents the couple to me. A normal middle-aged couple (he's forty-fiveish and she's a few years younger) who have turned up at the police station in the middle of the night.

Martina, their fifteen-year-old daughter, is missing.

My first impression is that I don't like them.

Which means I won't like them.

I'm a superficial guy; these are character flaws I can live with without fretting over the lack of a subtlety I never possessed.

He's a tall, hefty man. He exudes a vague air of efficiency: one of those men who always know what to do when there's a problem. Until the problem turns out to be serious. Usually they're the ones who, when their wives are pregnant, insist on organic vegetables, and start spending money on goat's milk and transvestite hookers.

She's wearing a tracksuit, but she's also wearing gladiator sandals (the ones with laces all the way up to the knee). The fetishists of central Italy would be in agonies of wild delight.

There's also a faint hint of sunbed tan, lending support to the effects of hillside outings spent harvesting dog poo. I recognise the yellow brown that goes with the syndrome, and – above all – the masticated face of whole afternoons spent upright and naked in a tanning booth while they play Mango's *Bella d'Estate* on the radio.

I couldn't swear to it, but I suspect Madam's mixed up in that new fashion for ambushing poor people and forcing them, at Christmastime, to attend dinners organised on their behalf.

It's a big thing in Bologna, this business of force-feeding the desperate one day a year. The scheduling of appetites.

Likewise, I may not know which particular civil-rights association she's joined, or which anti-something (anti-anything) citizens' committee she's involved in, but I'm 100% certain she's got a father out there somewhere, and that he's dying – alone – in a hospice. Poverty's trendy but solitude's uncool.

It's always the unattainable types that your heart skips a beat for. That's (the middle) class for you, Baby.

'She's disappeared,' he tells me.

'They've killed her,' she adds.

'I'll get the coffee,' comments my assistant.

Finally a cliché worthy of a TV detective: a missing girl, the worried parents, the coffee at police headquarters in the middle of the night.

I don't smoke, but I'm seriously tempted to light up a cigarette and loosen my tie.

## HAGAKURE

Sergeant Fantini is part of the office furniture, one of those colleagues who never leave the building. Or the archives. These are the people who save our collective arses.

Fantini's good, even if he doesn't know it. I've never worked out whether he's good because he doesn't know it or vice versa, but it's probably not that important.

He's a master of a dead art: the telephone call. Emails and texting have dulled our skills when it comes to asking questions of a disembodied voice rather than a disembodied screen. Voices and screens give different answers. It's worth bearing that in mind.

Fantini hates going out; whether it's a form of allergy to people or plain laziness, I couldn't say, but faced with going to someone's house to ask a few questions, he'd rather sell his soul to the devil. What works to his advantage is the fact that a guy like the Devil lacks the resources you need to understand Fantini.

No one can remember him ever popping out for a coffee or even to take a quick walk round the block. By some mysterious means he has convinced the world and his 'sources' that they have to make their way up to his desk on the second floor. Even in the middle of the night.

'I see,' he says, at some point during the phone call, and then suddenly falls quiet. For a few seconds. And that's when they crack and start spilling the beans. People can't cope with silence, and Fantini knows it.

Morning comes and there he is; in the evening we leave for home and there he still is. So when there's an investigation underway, he acts as my telephone. As my voice, talking to the people who don't know me.

I treat him badly; I'm often very patronising.

That's partly because I've never been any good at telling people who are precious to me that that's what they are, and partly because trendy TV detectives are supposed to be rude; it's the rule. That's how you break the trainee solicitors' hearts.

I know next to nothing about his private life. And I've asked him nothing. Ours isn't one of those professions where you develop any curiosity about people you're not investigating. We like having the odd secret in reserve, the luxury of knowing nothing about someone.

The one thing I do know is that he reads a book. Or, to be more precise, he comes with a book attached: *Hagakure*, the code of the Samurai. It's been sitting there for years now, on his desk. Every so often he opens it, skims a few pages, lifts his eyes heavenwards as though he's reflecting, and then puts it away. This little performance has been going on for years.

Taking advantage of one of Fantini's very rare days off on sick leave, I once went over to his desk and played a little game. It was a weird sort of ritual I'd seen two Germans act out on the beach when I was a kid: you let the book drop to the floor and read the page at which it falls open, and you look for something that describes your own life. A reference to yourself.

What I read there was quite enough to persuade me never to open it again.

When I was young, I kept a diary in which I made a daily note of my errors. Not a day went by without me having to open that diary twenty or thirty times.

# Cristiano Governa

## The Clarissine Stragegy

LA STRATEGIA DELLA CLARISSA

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*"My sister is 1.72 tall, 36 years old, natural blonde.  
And she's in a convent. What could a clarissine have found at five o'clock  
in the morning? Why does her voice seem frightened?"*

Carlo Vento, 45 years, is a detective and lives in Bologna. He is overweight, loves the shade under the arcades and Dürrenmatt's novels, while he hates TV series investigators: those successful colleagues who have beautiful ex-girlfriends ready to console them and solve the investigations under the shower. Carlo instead can count only on his beautiful and restless sister, Paola, who has held for years a nightly music broadcast on the radio and then decided to become a nun. A cloistered nun, a clarissa. But decidedly an anomalous one: she does not disdain cursing, wearing a bikini on the beach, and every week she secretly escapes from the convent to go to dinner at Carlo's. She reminds him: "You chase the Truth while I wait for it."

One evening Paola calls Carlo. She has noticed that someone wrote a message in a Book of Graces left in the church pleading Santa Caterina to kill people... In the same hours, Carlo is investigating on the disappearance of a young girl, which soon becomes an absurd puzzle. It will be a very hot summer...

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*Bologna in summer is the perfect place to disappear.  
And to kill. A caustic noir full of poetry.*



BOMPIANI  
RIGHTS LIST

FICTION

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