

SAN TELESFORO JONICO

FAUSTO VITALIANO  
**LA MEZZALUNA  
DI SABBIA**

LE ULTIME INDAGINI  
DI GORI MISTICÒ

ROMANZO  BOMPIANI



FAUSTO VITALIANO  
THE HALF-MOON BAY  
GORI MISTICO'S LAST INVESTIGATIONS

translated from the Italian  
by Julia MacGibbon

**SAMPLE COPY**

BOMPIANI

AEROPLANE  
37,000ft above everything

On an evening flight south from Milan it might not be the first thing you see, but it's certainly the first thing you notice: those lights are Leghorn harbour. Always assuming the plane is routed over La Spezia; if, for some reason, the pilot or anyone else should instead decide to point the plane inland, the passengers won't see anything at all from Parma onwards. Pitch black. Until, in the left-hand window, up pop the blurry, quivering lights of the Lamezia Terme runway. At that point the plane will tack ninety degrees to the east to line itself up, and the plane's windows will all turn inky black again, because in this part of the world it gets dark early.

Somewhere below the belly of the Easyjet Airbus A319 lay the Tyrrhenian sea, but Gori Misticò couldn't see it nor, to tell the whole truth, was he interested. He had dozed for most of the journey, and despite the hostess having gently shaken him awake, he still wasn't fully conscious. As the undercarriage came down, they had heard the clatter of the gears in the central wheel well and the less obtrusive sound of the wheels at the front of the plane. Then, a few minutes before landing, the cabin lights had been switched off – at which point there was inevitably at least one passenger who pricked up their ears

and, unaware that this is nothing more than the normal routine, began to throw alarmed looks around the cabin in search of reassurance.

*Maresciallo* (currently on leave of absence) Gori Misticò could understand and could bring himself to forgive all fears, with the lone exception of that of flying. Let's get this straight: if you're frightened of planes, don't get on one. And if you do eventually talk yourself into it, can you tell me what sense there is in still being afraid? Do you think that, if you're afraid, the plane won't fall out of the sky? That your desperate prayers will ensure you land safely? That you'll convince the pilot to turn back? Given that you're already up there, you might as well enjoy it, right? These could be the final hours of your life, so is it really worth ruining them by agonising over the fact that any minute now you might slam into the sea or a mountain? Look out of the window, enjoy the view. In any case, whether it's an air accident or old age, a phone call while driving in the wrong lane, or a vagrant bullet, sooner or later it'll be heading your way.

Oh yes... sooner or later we all kick the bucket, Gori Misticò thought fleetingly (a very fleeting thought that swept across the surface of his consciousness like a puff of wind across a lawn). We're all dead men who, for the time being, still happen to be walking, and that's the sum of it. All the passengers on this plane, and on the plane before it, and on the plane after it, and the public at a concert or at a match, and the other shoppers in the supermarket and the other patients waiting for their blood results. There's barely enough time to get out of the birth canal before you catch a disease that'll take you right back where you came from. It's going to happen, one way or another. Maybe suddenly or maybe after a long agony; it might be an accident, it might be an illness; perhaps it'll be a common cold, or perhaps, as in his case, a prostate cancer which – after two years of ups and downs, hopes and disappointments, invasive

examinations and other unpleasant inspections, false positives and negatives, promising new treatment plans and others tried in vain – was possibly beginning the downhill slide into metastases. Is it worth beating yourself up? And, more generally, was it worth being born? Or so Gori Misticò asked himself while the cabin lights stubbornly refused to come back on.

'Excuse me, but d'you reckon everything's alright?' asked his neighbour, an elderly man not much over five foot tall who for the entire length of the journey had kept his hat on – a flat cap in thick dark tweed, like a commercial for mid-century southern Italian migrants. 'The lights have gone out. Is it something we should worry about?'

Gori Misticò raised his eyes from the comic he'd bought at departures at Linate and looked carefully at his companion; he took the measure of him and smiled. He decided that the little guy must have been visiting his daughter up north and was now on his way home. It had probably been the best part of a year since he'd last seen her and he had brought her a couple of cheeses, and perhaps some salami and dried tomatoes. Oh yes, and a bottle of olive oil. He'd been happy to see her, but then he also couldn't wait to get back home to the village, because on the Lombardy plains, with all that flatness, he lost his sense of direction. Back in the village it only takes an instant to work out where you are, there's no need for maps and compasses: on one side there's the mountain and on the other there's the marina. Besides, what with his son-in-law being a northerner, it wasn't especially convivial, and the stares of the people who lived next door suggested he reminded them of something they'd seen in a documentary. One in black and white about the dying world of hill farming.

Ever since he'd begun taking planes to get to specialist appointments and treatment sessions, Gori Misticò had enjoyed fantasising about the lives of his fellow travellers. It helped pass the time.

He smiled again. 'Definitely not, don't worry yourself, it's all ok,' he answered. 'It's something they have to do. It's mandatory.'

'And why would it be mandatory?' asked his neighbour, charily.

'I don't remember exactly. But I think it's because if the plane makes an emergency landing when it's dark, the passengers can see the lights better and find their way to the emergency exits.'

'Holymadonnamotherofgod,' said the old man, choking back panic. 'Then we've to make an emergency landing.'

'No, no. You've no need to worry,' the Maresciallo replied patiently. 'We're landing normally. Everything's fine.'

'It's just it seems to me we're flying a touch too low,' said his neighbour, peering out of the window and, somehow or other, making a quick visual estimate of their altitude.

'Better low than high,' Gori Misticò reassured him. 'Like blood pressure.'

'Do you mind?' the elderly man asked shyly. And held out his hand.

'Help yourself,' replied Gori, somewhat reluctantly. 'Just don't squeeze too hard.'

The old man held his hand for the entire duration of the descent. Every so often he proffered a tight smile, and then, altitude reading confirmed, turned back to look out of the window. It was only after the wheels had touched the runway and the effects of the reverse thrust had pressed his lower abdomen into the seatbelt, forcing him to release a little air, that he finally succeeded in relaxing. He thanked Gori silently for the moral support, after which, all terror now fled, he pointedly ignored him, and in fact quite honestly couldn't wait to see the back of the stranger in front of whom he'd made a total pillock of himself. He made such a swift exit towards the door of the plane that his cap almost fell off in the corridor.

It was a very good thing he hadn't known that the man he'd been sitting next to was a Carabinieri warrant officer (currently on leave of absence), or that the warrant officer was suffering from cancer. Although, who knows, perhaps this second piece of information might have helped put his fear of flying into some perspective, given that at the end of the day all human calculations are comparative. Including suffering, which of all units of measurement is possibly the most relative. And the unavoidable fact of sooner or later having to depart this vale of tears is not just painful. The problem, as Gori Misticò saw it, is a very simple one, for which there is an equally simple explanation: the fact of the matter is that, when you die, those who survive you get to tell your story whatever which way they please. And you have no chance of getting a word in edgeways. Even if you've left an unblemished and lasting track record, even if you were the salt of the earth and donated half your annual salary to charity and helped old ladies across the road, nothing guarantees some windbag won't wake up one morning and start spreading terrible rumours about you. Maybe zeroing in on one isolated episode – an error of your youth, the blandest of minor crimes, a tiny flaw in your otherwise impeccable career as a human being. It might even be mere hearsay. And you, who are lying six feet under, just have to learn to live with it. There's nothing you can do to defend yourself or disprove it.

And that's the ball-aching sum of it.

This time round, including the journey there and back and the chemo session, Gori Misticò had spent a total of twenty-two hours in Milan. It wasn't a record. On the previous occasion, fifteen days earlier, he'd got it all done and dusted in just over ten hours. This time he'd taken it easy.

‘Do you miss Calabria, Maresciallo?’ had asked Nicola Strangio, his doctor at the oncology institute in Via Ripamonti, as he pumped away at the sphygmomanometer’s rubber bulb and his reading glasses slid down his nose. The question was intended to sound genuine but in reality was simply one of many attempts to suggest that his old friend was a southern bumpkin, which for some obscure reason amused him. The surgery window overlooked a broad expanse of uncultivated land which was waiting for a building permit that had yet to arrive – a vista that aroused thoughts of the past and opportunities lost.

‘What are you getting at Doc?’ Gori Misticò had replied, without rising to the bait. ‘I got here last night and I’m off again this evening. I don’t even notice I’ve left the house.’

There was a sound of air escaping as Dr Strangio, who had finished taking his blood pressure, deflated the arm cuff. It was hard to read the expression on the smooth but slightly yellow face that was the result of decades of exposure to hospital strip lighting. It could have been disappointment or scepticism. Or worry. Strangio favoured the old-fashioned manual kit over electronic monitors because he wanted to gauge for himself what the maximum and minimum were, not read the stuff on some bloody digital display which could, theoretically, be measuring any damn thing. The hands on the dial never lie, especially when they’re being read by an expert eye. And then there’s the issue of batteries and cadmium pollution, and a whole raft of flapdoodle not worth getting into here.

‘What’s it like? High or low?’ Misticò had asked him.

Strangio was deliberately evasive. ‘Better low than high.’

‘And what the hell kind of an answer is that?’ Gori had replied.

‘It’s a vague answer to a silly question. So, do you miss Calabria?’

‘And that would be an intelligent question?’ said Gori, feigning disdain.

‘Answer it. Do you miss home?’

‘And what if I do?’

‘You know how it is,’ said the doctor, carefully packing away his equipment with gestures as solemn as those of a parish priest slowly disrobing after mass. ‘You southerners feel homesick the minute you leave the street you live on. And you, Gregorio Misticò, are living proof that you guys rush straight home to your villages the minute the chance presents itself. You get here in the morning and you’re back off home the very same evening.’

‘Oh yes, because you’re a northern Italian now, aren’t you,’ had retorted Gori Misticò, unrolling his shirt sleeves. ‘Listen here, oh revered doctor. You reckon twenty years of this foggy weather are long enough for you to have integrated? They didn’t want you here to start with, they still don’t and they never will. As far as they’re concerned, you are and always will be a southern hick, even if you do cure and comfort them.’

‘For a start, it’s been twenty-two years,’ replied the medic, moving round to sit down behind his desk with its pearly white laminate top. ‘And I’ve never pined for the mother country, not even when I first arrived. I got out of Calabria as fast as I could and, unlike you, it never crossed my mind to go back. I’ve always been perfectly happy in Milan and I have every intention of dying here.’

‘Amen,’ said Misticò, miming an anticipatory blessing of the corpse of the man who was, admittedly, in the current context, the doctor trying to save him from cancer, but also, more generally, one of his childhood friends, and therefore not really in any position to pass himself off as a northern whizzkid. ‘Let me know when they’ve booked the funeral and I’ll send you a nice wreath,’ he concluded.

Strangio shook his head. ‘You never lose your taste for acting the jerk. Even in the state you’re in right now.’

‘I meant it seriously, Prof. So, are you going to tell me how I’m doing and let me out of here? I’ve got things to get on with.’

‘You are how you are, and you are what you are,’ the medic intoned portentously, as though that were the official result of the tests. And while he was at it, he appended a rapidly scrawled signature to an incomprehensible piece of paper.

‘And this is supposed to be a usable medical report?’ said Gori Misticò, sceptically. ‘And the health service actually pays you for doing this?’

‘Use it whatever damn way you please, Maresciallo.’

‘And stop calling me maresciallo. I’ve been a civilian for nearly a year, and you know it.’

‘I know they haven’t accepted your resignation yet. So, as far as I’m concerned, you were and remain a *carabiniere*.’

‘For your information, my resignation was accepted. They found it very acceptable. It just needs to be signed off at the Ministry and then my pay-off should come through.’

‘Are you sure it’ll arrive in time?’

‘What the hell should I know. You’re the doctor. If it doesn’t arrive in time it’ll be because you haven’t cured me properly, and in that case, even if I am dead, I’ll be suing you for negligence.’

‘How was the journey?’ asked Dr Strangio in a different tone of voice. And this time the question really was genuine, and pertinent. So much so that he finally looked up from the paperwork.

‘Where does the sodding journey come into it?’ Gori Misticò asked in turn, suddenly suspicious.

‘Was it comfortable?’

‘The ticket cost nineteen euros, Doctor,’ sighed Gori. ‘I can hardly expect the air hostess to start fanning me cool with a bunch of baby peacock feathers.’

Strangio made a vaguely incredulous face. ‘Nineteen euros?’

‘Yes indeed. But does it seem normal to you that flights from Lamezia Terme to Milan should cost less than forty-thousand old liras?’

Strangio wiped his spectacles with the edge of his white coat. ‘Why?’ he asked, as though he were interested. ‘Is that too little? Or way too much?’

‘If I came by car it would take me two days and cost half my salary. Always supposing I avoid driving into the back of a lorry.’

‘If you think it’s too cheap, you could always pay them a bit extra,’ said the doctor, putting his glasses back on. ‘Write them a nice blank cheque and say: *You fill in the amount. Whatever you think’s right. I don’t like the idea of you making a loss.* In any case, that wasn’t what I meant to ask. I want to know if the journey tired you.’

‘As if! I do up my seatbelt and doze off as soon as I get to my seat. I don’t even hear the instructions telling you what to do when the plane crashes. Anyroad, if the plane does crash, am I really going to be following the blooming instructions? They wake me up when we’re about to land.’

‘And once you’ve landed?’

‘Ah, yes, in effect that’s a whole other journey,’ answered Gori Misticò, finally grasping what the other man was getting at. ‘That bit does leave me slightly tired. I have to catch the number 73 as far as the first metro station, which is on the red line. Then I have to change and take the yellow line. Then I get the number 24 tram. And then I’ve arrived. It only costs one euro fifty, but it does take half an hour even when the traffic’s not too bad.’

‘See. That’s exactly what I wanted to know,’ said Strangio, rising to his feet and placing his hands firmly on the desk as though he were the emperor of all tumours and that was his throne. ‘Next time, grab a taxi. Do you realise how close we are to the airport, as the crow flies?’

It's barely six kilometres. You'll be here in under ten minutes.'

'Well of course. You'll pay for the taxi, won't you?' answered Gori, pushing one arm, and then the other, into the sleeves of his jacket.

'You've just finished telling me that you think the plane ticket's too cheap. But seeing as you're such a tight-arse, I'll pay for it, if that's what you want. Seriously. Besides, I earn much more than you do; it's no skin off my nose.'

'And why should I be taking a taxi, now?' Gori Misticò had asked dismissively. 'Let's hear the great expert's grand theory.'

'Because you turn up here exhausted and then have to do the chemo, that's why,' was the medic's fierce reply, to which – in disbelief – he added a muttered aside, 'The knucklehead even expects me to trot out justifications.'

'I'll think about it, for next time,' conceded Misticò. 'But now get a move on and give me that prescription, or you'll have to pay for a plane ticket too, because you're about to make me miss my flight.'

'I almost hope it crashes,' said Strangio as he finished filling out the form.

Gori snatched it out of his hands. 'You've more probability of smashing your car up on your way home,' he retorted.

His friend accompanied him to the door of the clinic. 'Try to be less of a prat, and next time make sure you're not late for your appointment. I have other patients too, you know,' he admonished.

'The ones that are still alive. You're seeing them off one-by-one, Professor.'

Then they embraced, as if both men suspected there might not be too many more occasions for it. They made an appointment for a further session in a week's time. Shorter and milder. Or so the doctor promised.

## LAMEZIA TERME

### The Airport

WELCOME TO CALABRIA said a bleached poster featuring an aerial view of Tropea on what must have been a gloriously sunny day, but which the yellowing of the photograph had since turned murky and rather dusty, as though someone had begun importing fog along the Tyrrhenian coast.

The homepage of the Calabrian airport's website maintained that Lamezia Terme's barycentric position at the heart of the region was particularly favourable from the point of view of intermodal transportation.

Firstly, thought Maresciallo (currently on leave of absence) Gori Misticò, someone should start by explaining what the heck barycentric means. And then perhaps also intermodal transportation.

According to the same website, the airport could be easily reached by car, train and bus. That's as maybe, Gori Misticò replied mentally, but they've forgotten to mention donkeys. Apart from anything else, as a means of locomotive transport they're a hundred times more efficient than the alternatives. Donkeys clamber up mountains much better than a 4x4.

The truth was, if you didn't have a car of your own or a relative waiting for you at arrivals, especially after ten o'clock at night, you could take the airport's intermodality and shove it into a comfortably



barycentric position up where the sun doesn't shine. Or, as a last resort, get yourself roundly fleeced by an unlicensed taxi driver.

'Where are we off to, your Lordship?' he was asked with typical southern courtesy by the illegal minicab driver who, as a demonstration of how well he had slipped into the role of chauffeur, had even doffed his flat cap.

Gori Misticò would never have dreamt of bringing up the question of his own profession. And what would be the point? Arrest for unlawful exercise of a profession as per art. 348 of the penal code, six months to three years' imprisonment and a fine of anywhere between ten thousand and fifty thousand euros? Or, more ignominiously, wave his warrant card around and get himself driven home for free, taking advantage of a poor sod who's just trying to earn an honest crust, hanging around in his diesel-powered Fiat Panda and waiting for the last flight of the evening to arrive, at a time of night when all the local buses and legally registered taxis had limped off home a while back?

Subsidiarity, you might call it. Wherever the State – in the broadest sense of the term – can't be arsed to pull its finger out, the private sector intervenes to plug the gaps.

'San Telesforo,' replied Gori Misticò.

'Marina or Upper, your Lordship?'

'Upper. Come on, let's get a move on. And give all the lordships a break. How much do you cost?'

The little fellow arranged his face into a benevolent smile. 'Eighty euros. But for your Lordship, I'll fundamentally make it sixty.'

In addition to art. 348, Gori Misticò mentally listed articles 640 (fraud) and 629 (extortion), and he even flirted with the idea of 643 (financial exploitation or abuse of persons unsound of mind or otherwise incapacitated), but only as an aggravating factor.

'A hundred and twenty thousand old liras for thirty kilometres?' he asked, gently amazed and also quietly admiring the bare-faced cheek of it. 'Not even if you were about to pedal me all the way up there in a rickshaw.'

'Ah well, but you see, it's thirty kilometres there, but it's also fundamentally thirty kilometres back, your Lordship,' retorted the other man, as though appealing to his common sense. 'That makes sixty.'

'In this car you can do sixty kilometres with a gallon of diesel, which at today's prices will cost you all of seven euros, give or take. The rest's all profit.'

'Yes, but you also have to factor in wear and tear to the vehicle. In addition to which, it's gone ten o'clock at night,' the man objected, in an attempt to hold his ground without losing his fare. 'At this time of night all the other guys are fundamentally back home with the missus, while I'm out on the streets with your honourable self. Anyroad, you give me a number and we'll see what we can do.'

Gori Misticò offered thirty. They settled on forty, but the driver threw him out at San Telesforo Marina, insisting that that was the agreed destination. If his passenger wanted to be taken all the way up to San Telesforo Superiore it would cost an extra five euros, which Gori Misticò found himself forced to cough up.

It was only after they'd got to the door of his house, and once the unauthorised taxi driver had handed him an oblong piece of card that looked like something with which you'd normally express your deepest sympathy, on which he'd written out his name, surname and mobile phone number, that Gori pulled out his warrant card and drained the other man's face of colour. 'Lower your fares. Fundamentally,' he advised. 'Understood?'

The driver made to hand back the extra fiver, but Gori Misticò already had his key in the front door.

[...]

## SAN TELESFORO JONICO SUPERIORE

Bar Centrale

The next morning

The morning after, Gori Misticò walked, as he did almost every day, down Via Roma in the direction of Rosarino Piscopo's delicatessen and rotisserie, to place his order for a takeaway lunch. Halfway across the square – the only flat spot anywhere in San Telesforo Superiore – he encountered, well would you look at that, the very same unlicensed minicab driver from the night before. One thing should be pointed out at this point, namely that the chemo and all the rest of it had lowered Gori Misticò's appetite, and his sense of taste seemed to be diminishing, too. Yet in spite of that, more or less every morning he walked down to Rosarino's and bought himself lunch, even if it then remained untouched. Basically, he just liked having it in the fridge. Knowing it was there. We may well come back to that later.

It's the unauthorized taxi driver, he said to himself. And he was conversing intently with the three Prodigies of San Telesforo Jonico – in other words Mario Corasaniti, aka 'Socrates', Peppa Caldazzo, otherwise known as Einstein, and finally Ciccio De Septis, who was universally referred to as Golden Boy. All three were of an age at which the normal thing to do would be to stay at home and perhaps help out with the grandchildren, not loaf around shooting the breeze

in the bar or the village square. The maresciallo (on leave of absence) moved in just close enough to overhear the topics of today's discussion: the debate apparently regarded migrants, the automation of the workplace and unemployment.

'The Africans got here too late,' Einstein was saying, with his usual sober solemnity. 'There's no work left for anyone, here. Only machines get work now. No one needs manual labourers.'

'Which is exactly precisely what I was saying,' retorted Socrates. 'Look at the supermarkets, for instance. Nowadays they don't even have check-out girls. You go in, you do your shopping and you come out again, and you don't even have to give them any money.'

'What are you talking about?' challenged Golden Boy. 'They let you shop for free, now?'

'There are machines that ring up the bill and you pay with your phone,' Mario Corasaniti explained patiently, but also slightly prissily.

'It's fundamentally the same at the airport. You'll not find a single unauthorised porter these days,' intervened the unauthorised minicab driver.

He was back in San Telesforo to pick up a client who needed to be taken to the regional government offices where he was hoping to disentangle certain questions relating to a plot of state-owned land, the unauthorised subdivision of which had spawned a degree of family discord culminating in a rather unfortunate gun battle between cousins. The unlicensed taxi driver had urged the three prodigies of San Telesforo to keep it to themselves: his client had insisted on the utmost discretion.

'It was when they invented those blooming wheelie suitcases,' he continued. 'Nowadays who needs to cough up a thousand liras to get some poor sod to carry your cases out to the car, fundamentally?'

‘And tennis linesmen, what about them?’ intervened Einstein, unexpectedly.

For a few ponderous seconds, a reflective silence descended.

‘Where the buggery heck do tennis umpires come into it?’ Golden Boy then said.

‘In the old days there was a linesman who put his hand on the net and told you if the ball had touched it, or not touched it,’ Caldazzo clarified rather expertly. ‘Now there’s a machine that whistles.’

‘Because, in your opinion, the Africans are sailing over to Italy in the hope of becoming tennis linesmen?’ intervened Socrates, scornfully. ‘What the blooming Ada are you on about, Peppinùzzu?’

‘I am sketching out a general picture,’ replied the other man, affronted. ‘The Africans aren’t directly affected, I agree. But if you’ll hear me out, I am offering you another example of technology stealing work from Christian souls. Wheelie suitcases or little tennis machine thingies, the principle’s the same.’

‘In any event, the Africans arrive here by boat to go and pick oranges and tomatoes,’ concluded De Septis. ‘For them, there’ll always be work.’

‘Why, has another boatload of immigrants arrived?’ asked Gori Misticò, joining the group and nodding in response to various half bows. Not that he had any particular interest in the subject; he really just wanted to know if this toe-curling debate was in some way connected to current events.

‘Esteemed Maresciallo,’ said the taxi driver immediately, tipping his cap and attempting to contain his surprise and a sudden sinking feeling.

‘You take it easy now,’ replied Gori Misticò, menacingly.

‘Fundamentally, I’ve to be getting off,’ said the other man, sniffing trouble. ‘Goodday to you all. Maresciallo, you’ve a shot of liqueur waiting for you at the bar. On me.’

‘I’m no longer a maresciallo and I don’t drink liqueurs,’ replied Gori, without looking at him.

‘The maresciallo only drinks Brasilena,’ explained Corasaniti.

‘The world-famous coffee-flavoured fizzy pop,’ added Caldazzo.

‘Typical of our beloved Calabria,’ clarified De Septis.

‘So, have a fizzy pop, or whatever else you fancy,’ the driver shot back without skipping a beat. ‘As soon as I’m next passing through, I’ll pop in and make up the difference,’ he added, addressing the barman, Saverio Cozzetta, who’d come out to clear away some plates and cups.

In the time it took for the taxi driver to remain but a vague memory, Mario Corasaniti began to reply to Gori Misticò’s question, which still hung waiting in the air. ‘There are refugees arriving every other day now, dear Maresciallo,’ he observed with equanimity.

‘And they knock on your shutters in the dark of the night,’ intervened Cozzetta, wiping a sponge across one of the little bar tables, without any of them having the faintest idea what he was talking about.

Misticò, meanwhile, had entirely forgotten what it was he had asked them (a side-effect of the cabazitaxel, as clearly explained in the package insert provided by the pharmaceutical company: *may cause brief episodes of transient global amnesia*) and so he gazed at Corasaniti the way you would stare at someone strolling across the village square in his pyjamas.

‘We were talking about the refugee boats, Maresciallo,’ said the other man, perplexedly. ‘It was you who asked, just now. The refugees.’

Gori gestured to confirm that he now remembered.

‘Between Crotone and Gioia Tauro, hereabouts it’s been one boatload after another, lately,’ continued Socrates. ‘But the news on the

telly only talks about Lampedusa and the Sicilians. No one ever mentions this beloved Calabria of ours. The birthplace of classical philosophy.’

‘Last week, on the beach at Turra, almost a hundred of them turned up, piled into a sailing boat that by my reckoning couldn’t fit more than fifty,’ added Peppa Caldazzo, aka Einstein. ‘The chief brigadier, the one who’s standing in for you, is in the papers this morning. On that account.’

This final piece of information was something of a surprise to Gori Misticò. ‘Costantino?’ he said. ‘In the papers? And why? Was he disembarking, too?’

‘There’s even a photo,’ said Ciccio De Septis alias Golden Boy. ‘Look at this, Commander. He looks quite the saint.’

What had happened, it seemed, was that Chief Brigadier Federico Costantino, who for the past year had been Gori Misticò’s clearly-not-temporary replacement at the local Carabinieri station, had personally coordinated the rescue operation involving a sailboat carrying eighty-six migrants which had run aground on a stretch of beach in an area, just beyond San Telesforo Jonico’s municipal boundary, known as Località Turrastorta. In reality, the acting station commander did not hold territorial responsibility for the area in which the episode occurred, but seeing as they couldn’t find anyone else who was prepared to deal with it, in the end it fell to him. A daredevil operation necessitating acts of heroism and humanitarianism, in the course of which the brigadier had apprehended and arrested the Russian people-smuggler, earning himself an official commendation from none other than Lieutenant Colonel Sacripanti himself, of the force’s provincial command, no less. Not to mention the interview in the inner pages of the *Gazzetta di Calabria* with the alluring Annamarialuìsa Codiloti, a

journalist known throughout the region for a rumoured but unconfirmed liaison with an actor who had appeared in more than one miniseries. All of this had taken place while Gori Misticò was undergoing a spur-of-the-moment attempt at brachytherapy treatment, on the advice of Nicola Strangio, at a clinic in Catanzaro. The treatment session achieved nothing, but there had been a few after-effects. As a result, he had been entirely unaware both of the landing and of the feats of his stand-in, the brigadier.

Misticò was still halfway through reading the article when all three prodigies began squirming and looked to their left, like desert foxes picking up the scent of a vixen, or food, or a predator. From afar, closing in on them, there appeared the long silhouette of Federico Costantino, the tallest, thinnest brigadier ever to have served at the local garrison.

‘And here he is, our youthful hero,’ exulted the first of the prodigies.

‘Leonine and lionised,’ added the second, admiringly.

‘San Telesforo goes global,’ concluded, inexplicably, the third.

The barman came out from behind his bar to extend the kind of welcome that not even Wanda Osiris had enjoyed on her way through San Telesforo after the war, when touring the theatres of Southern Italy, as soon as the Americans had liberated them. ‘My sincerest compliments for your achievements and new-won fame, Brigadier,’ said Saverio, solemnly. ‘May I offer you something? An ice-cream? An aperitif?’

Mein host was already picturing the swarm of television crews which, with the excuse of a local celebrity, would generate free publicity for his bar and tobacconists.

‘Thanks all the same,’ the carabinieri replied brusquely, slightly embarrassed. Then he turned towards Gori Misticò, who had just tipped a white sweet out of a box of mints and into the palm of his

hand. 'Commander, I've found you at last. Have you got a second? Can we talk?' he added, *sotto voce*.

'I'm not your commander anymore, Brigadier,' replied Gori Misticò, dropping the sweet into his mouth. The tone was more one of indifference than of irritation. 'It's you who's in charge now. The sooner you come to terms with the idea, the better it'll be for all of us.'

'Alright, but I'd like to talk to you all the same, if you can spare a minute.'

'Look, Costantino, I haven't read the interview,' Gori Mistico said curtly. 'So if it's compliments you're after, you've come to the wrong place.'

'It's not about the interview.'

'What is it, then?'

The brigadier lowered his voice even further and moved his mouth closer to the ear of the man who, for the past five years, had been his station commander, his mentor, the closest thing he'd ever really had to a father. 'There's something very strange going on round here,' he said. 'Have you noticed all the vehicles coming and going?'

The *maresciallo* instinctively stepped back a couple of inches. 'What vehicles?' he asked, in turn.

'Construction machinery. Diggers, bulldozers. For days, now, they've been trundling up round the hill on the provincial highway, and back again.'

'I hadn't noticed,' replied Gori Misticò, unexcitedly. 'I've been away.'

'And in fact, I did come to look for you, but Catena told me you'd gone off somewhere. Am I allowed to ask where you went?'

'No, you're not,' replied Gori Misticò. 'Get to the point Costantino. You're making me nervous. What the bugger are you wittering on about?'

'I told you. Earthmoving machinery. There's even an excavator.'

'So, they obviously need to do some excavating. They're building something. Where's the problem?'

'The problem is that, as far as I'm aware, no building work has been authorised. And in fact, the machinery comes and goes but they're not doing any work. They drive round and round and then return to the depot. I followed one of the diggers. They're Tassone's vehicles. Cono Tassone, the builder. Do you know him?'

'Ok, so Cono Tassone's vehicles are coming and going and aren't actually building diddly-squat. Perhaps Cono Tassone gets a kick out of running through diesel. Why are you telling me, of all people, Brigadier?'

'It just seemed strange,' poor Costantino tried to explain, disappointed and slightly intimidated. 'Like maybe it was something that should be looked into.'

'If you think it needs to be looked into, go and look into it,' retorted Gori Misticò, coldly. 'That's your affair. I have worries of my own.'

That said, and without waiting for a reply, he wheeled round and walked off in the direction of the *rotisserie*, hoping that Rosarino had made oven-baked pasta, which he hadn't eaten for ages, although at the same time he wasn't entirely sure he really felt up to enjoying it. And in effect, having gone a few yards, he changed course and, instead of taking the short route downhill, went back home to change his shoes and grab what he needed. He had decided to head to the beach at Pàparo, his bridge to the past, a little crescent of sandy silence, in the hope of muting some of the world's excess noise.

[...]

## SAN TELESFORO MARINA

### Pàparo Beach

History relates that the local population peaked just prior to the war, when San Telesforo Superiore and San Telesforo Marina (which, at the time, amounted to four fishermen's huts) were home to over two thousand souls. Since when, it had never stopped plummeting. At the start of the 1970s the number of inhabitants had halved, and twenty years later a further half of them had vanished.

The last recession had delivered the coup de grâce – almost an entire generation had fled in the space of two or three years, and the few remaining youngsters kept their suitcases packed and ready in the hallway. No babies were born – the last one had been the pharmacist's son, born in 2011, at the hospital in Catanzaro. The pharmacy had closed the same year, so these days, if you needed an aspirin or a laxative, you had to hop on the regional bus.

Those who left didn't come back. And those who remained shielded themselves from the sadness of it the way all human beings always have done, ever since Adam was a boy: they stopped remembering. The memories of every last one of them – of their children, and of their children's children – slowly evaporated, until it seemed the village's entire memory had blown away on the wind and disappeared

into the thick chestnut woods that cloaked the sides of the hills. Theoretically, San Telesforo might equally well have ceased to exist, or never have existed. It could just as well have been an abstract concept, an idea dreamed up by its imaginary inhabitants, who had convinced themselves that the village was there, and that they were there, but without any solid proof of it.

Luckily, at this point high technology stepped in to lend a hand: if you sat down at the computer and wrote San Telesforo, up popped a map and some photographs of the provincial highway which ran all the way around the edge of the village. You clicked on your mouse and the photo moved forwards and showed you another bit of the A-road, and so on. There weren't any photos of the village itself, it's true, but you could at least get an idea.

From a certain point of view, this business of lost memories was also affecting Gori Misticò. Within the confines of San Telesforo he was still the ex-maresciallo, formerly in command of the local Carabinieri station, a position he had held since the spring of 2013, when he had returned to Calabria having left the anti-crime division in Milan, almost five years earlier. In no time at all his name had become one of those names everyone knew, as with the mayor and the local doctor – who, in this particular case, both happened to be Dr Gianantonio Passacantando – or the parish priest, Father Giacinto Formaggio, who had recently retired and had been replaced by young Father Marco Vavassori, who hailed from the diocese of Bergamo.

On 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2013, his very first day as the new maresciallo *comandante*, the procession had begun just after midday and had continued for the following twenty-four hours, uninterrupted apart from a short nocturnal intermission. Gori Misticò had received no fewer than sixty callers, almost all of them men, several of them wid-

owers. Many remembered the son of Maria Maddelena – they could still picture the sweet face and the melancholy eyes of that lovely and lonely young woman, even though she had been all of seventeen when she left San Telesforo, and had returned only sporadically and always briefly. So within a matter of hours he was once again, and to all effects and purposes, a full-fledged Santelesforian.

There were those who turned up at the station to say hello and to bring their own best wishes along with those of the rest of the family, including the children who had emigrated, some to the north of Italy and some all the way to Belgium. There were those who went further, bringing with them not only kind words but also basic necessities such as fried chili peppers or stuffed aubergines, baskets of doughnuts, and chests of figs and grapes. There were even some who brought him *cuzzupe* – Easter cakes with whole eggs nestling in them –, despite the fact that the summer had already drawn to a close. There was no shortage of unlabelled dark green screw-top bottles containing red wine, olive oil and homemade tomato sauce.

There were those who expressed their satisfaction at the arrival in little San Telesforo Jonico of a Carabinieri warrant officer, and those who were certain that this petty officer – from Milan, no less – would finally put an end to the long-standing injustices to which they had, until now, been subjected.

Gori remembered the first case he had been asked to handle.

‘For years and years and years, that dreadful villain Florestano Scarpàro, who goes by the name of Zorro and is at present my little brother, has been robbing peaches and apples and pears from my lawful trees, which are planted on my land, even albeit some of the branches hang into the ’forementioned’s garden,’ narrated Catello Scarpàro, aka Tubby, presenting a complaint regarding a matter of ownership and legal title to which no one – neither the mayor nor the

municipal police – had yet been able to furnish a solution. It was only the advanced age of the two Scarpàro brothers and the intervention of their respective wives, who were themselves also siblings, that had thus far prevented the issue from degenerating into open warfare.

‘I understand, Signor Scarpàro,’ had said Gori Mistico, having listened to the verbal complaint. The maresciallo demonstrated a patience which, as his stare underlined, was nonetheless better not taken for granted. ‘Bear in mind, however, that I’ve only been here for thirty-six hours. I can’t start investigating cases of stolen fruit straight away. You’ll need to pay me the courtesy of giving me time to get my bearings and find my way around.’

‘I’ll be ’mmensely honoured to pay you the courtesy, esteemed Maresciallo,’ had replied the elder Scarpàro brother. ‘In any event, I’m not asking you to neither investigate nor interrogate.’

‘Ah, no? And so what should I do, in your opinion?’

‘Start by arresting the bugger,’ the man replied composedly. ‘Then ’ventually you can interrogate him at your pleasure.’

Gori had thanked him for the suggestion, after which he had taken his leave of the fellow, pushing him out of the station’s front door, where the queue of people waiting to be received looked, roughly speaking, unlikely to break up before seven o’clock that evening.

Over the years Maresciallo Gori Misticò had become part of the glue and sense of identity holding the community together, someone to turn to for advice and protection, support and defence. Over time he had done a great deal more than patch up arguments between brothers or settle disputes between neighbours – after all, the Santelesforians were, on the whole, peaceable souls who lived and let live. His talents had often also been employed in very complex investigations, and his experience as an undercover operative had permitted judges and investigating magistrates to exploit those talents without always

needing to acknowledge their owner. It could have been worse: Gori Misticò had grown used to not taking the credit long ago. It hadn't been medals he'd wanted.

Until he put in his request for indefinite leave of absence. From that moment onwards a lot of things had changed, starting with the fact that he had only to stroll down to the marina and memories of his years of service immediately began to fade. Having put in for leave – but without explaining why, seeing as that was his own bloody business – his name seemed to mean increasingly little even to his fellow villagers. Perhaps, in this case too, the amnesia acted as an analgesic – another one of them was leaving, forsaking them, abandoning them to their fate. Well, be off with you then, they seemed to say. Godspeed, go where you need to go, we'll promptly forget you, we promise. Or perhaps it was simply that, out of uniform, he was no longer remotely intimidating, and they all felt authorised to demonstrate their legitimate indifference in whatsoever way they pleased.

Mickey, they're all avoiding me. It's as though someone had been spreading rumours that I've become a poof, he thought, addressing his distant friend.

And would that be a problem? answered Michele, in a voice that only Gori Misticò could hear.

No, for heaven's sake, of course not, he answered himself. Although, as far as I'm aware, I'm not homosexual, yet. And anyway, that wouldn't be such a bad thing, even for a carabinieri.

And so what are you worried about? asked his friend's voice. If they're ignoring you, there must be some other reason.

Perhaps it's the illness, thought Gori Misticò. I haven't mentioned it to anyone, but it's possible someone's noticed all the same, and has spread the news. And we all know the effect illnesses have.

What effect, Gori?

They create a vacuum around you, thought Misticò.

Illness has its own unmistakable odour. For animals it's a very clear signal, a silent alarm that all members of the herd pick up on when there's something not quite right with one of their number. That stench might attract a predator, might put the community at risk.

When someone blathers on about how beautiful nature is, and the magic and marvels of this life on earth, they should be forced to watch some of the documentaries that Gori Misticò watches when he can't get off to sleep – in other words, and especially lately, almost every night, thanks to the docetaxel, the side-effects of which sometimes include insomnia. They should have to watch the poor buffalo, after a lion has bitten off half of its buttock, forced to hide in a thicket because its fellow buffaloes, including its parents, wife and childhood friends, don't want it around anymore. They should have to watch the hippopotamuses who won't let one of their fellow hippopotamuses cool down in the watering hole they're using, even if, theoretically, there's plenty of room, and instead of shoving up a bit to make space for him, leave him to die of thirst or mauled by the hyenas, and don't give a flying flamingo.

And human beings aren't all that different. Actually, sometimes their behaviour's almost identical. One of the last cases Gori Misticò had handled, just after having discovered he had cancer, involved a young kid who had kicked and punched to death the daughter of the woman he was going out with. The little girl wasn't even two years old.

'She never fucking stopped crying,' had said the child-killer, in the tone of someone who expected sympathy for what was, all things considered, a very understandable snapping of nerves.

He was unemployed and it had eventually emerged that he also took drugs and therefore wasn't quite right in the head – so there were mitigating circumstances, for which allowance had been made.



But those were *ancillary* circumstances. The truth was blunter, namely that the little girl wasn't his own daughter. And that grim little bastard had behaved the way all males behave when they join a herd: first things first, get rid of your rivals' offspring. Lions eat other males' cubs. And zebras kick their skulls in.

But the most terrible aspect of the whole affair, if that's what you'd call it, was not even that: That the male of the species is, to varying degrees, a violent retard – lions, zebras or human beings, it makes relatively little difference – is a well-known fact. What hits you is the reaction of the females. Of the mothers. They make an initial attempt to defend their pups, but then they give in and let the males do what they were planning to. And afterwards, they let the dominant specimen re-impregnate them.

'He did a bad thing,' said the mother of the murdered toddler. 'But I know he's not evil, I love him and I want us to make another go of it.'

Life, as a whole, is a senseless business. The earthly version, at any rate. Gori Misticò had got to the point of asking himself whether somewhere in the immensity of the universe there might not exist at least one place – a planet, a satellite, a blinking asteroid – where things *didn't* function quite so shittily. A place, for example, where it wasn't necessary to rip each other to shreds in order to obtain the energy that served to keep life and limb together. A place where living creatures had discovered some mechanism for survival that didn't involve shedding blood. Somewhere, therefore, where it wasn't fear that governed collective activities, but some other emotion.

Lately, Gori Misticò's thoughts had been taking him on very long voyages; they flew him over territories that not even he knew how to locate, giving him the impression that he had lost all control over them. This, too, was one of the normal side-effects of the chemotherapy. 'Every now and then you'll feel like your head's gone off on busi-

ness of its own,' Dr Nicola Strangio had explained to him. 'It's just alterations in the dopamine receptors. You're not going mad, Gregorio. Don't shit yourself.'

Arriving at Pàparo beach, he encountered a pair of fishermen laying their nets out in the sun and a group of women gathering kindling at the edge of the dry bed of a torrent which, later in the season, would throw itself eagerly into the sea. No one greeted him or nodded to acknowledge his presence. It appeared they hadn't even noticed him.

Better that way, thought Gori Misticò, because I'm in no great mood for a chat.

He laid the towel he'd brought with him onto the sand, swallowed a couple of white peppermints and sat down to look at the sea which, on cold late-winter days like this one, seemed to be made of bright chips of light. He sat there, unmoving, for an unquantifiable length of time, until he heard the roar of a powerful engine somewhere behind him. He spun round to see an excavator trundling off along the unmetalled road that led in the direction of the provincial highway, where a group of other vehicles sat waiting for it – a digger, a bulldozer and a Bobcat. They looked like the trucks the fascists used to use. They set off again in unison, tooting their horns as though they were on their way to a wedding, or a punitive raid.

# Fausto Vitaliano

## The Half-Moon Bay

### Gori Mistico's Last Investigations

LA MEZZALUNA DI SABBIA. LE ULTIME INDAGINI DI GORI MISTICO

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*An inspector torn between the temptation to let evil triumph and the love for his beautiful land, Calabria.*

Gregorio Misticò, known as Gori, is chief inspector of the Carabinieri on leave. Forty years old, he has a twenty-centimetre scar over his heart. After working with the Anti-Terrorism Unit in Milan he returns to San Telesforo Jonico, his hometown in the South, and goes on leave. No one knows why, except his friend Nicola Strangio, an oncologist working in Milan. Gori has cancer, probably incurable. He travels to the north of Italy for medication, but without much conviction.

Gori Misticò doesn't want to be bothered in this crucial time of his life. But a heinous murder followed by another very elegant but no less suspicious death will disrupt San Telesforo. The Vice Brigadier Federico Costantino asks for his help. Gori refuses, but...

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**FAUSTO VITALIANO** was born in Calabria, but has been living in Milan for most of his life. He is a screenwriter for Disney Italia and has written comic storylines for Sergio Bonelli, for Edizioni BD/Corriere della Sera, and the French publisher BD Music. He has also worked in radio, TV and newspapers, has translated books, and edited anthologies by Beppe Grillo and Michele Serra. Together with Serra he wrote the monologue *Tutti i santi giorni* (produced by Teatro dei Filodrammatici in Milan). Among his books, the novels *Era solo una promessa*, *Lorenzo Segreto* and *La grammatica della corsa*, and the children's non-fiction books *La Repubblica a piccoli passi* and *La musica a piccoli passi*.

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