

IL PIÙ GRANDE
CRIMINALE
DI ROMA
È STATO
AMICO MIO
AURELIO
PICCA

ROMANZO
BOMPIANI





AURELIO PICCA
THE GREATEST CRIMINAL IN ROME
WAS A FRIEND OF MINE

translated from the Italian
by Julia MacGibbon

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*I dedicate this to those who were murdered,
to those who were tortured,
to those who hadn't done anything wrong.
And to the vicious,
because this is a world in which chance and chaos reign.
They all deserve mercy.
They are in the lap of the gods.*

The act of creation is no trivial game.
The creator engages in a fearful enterprise:
that of embracing every risk his creations encounter,
to the bitter end.

Jean Genet

Dust on my freshly polished shoe vexes
me more than the death of a friend
or a nation's undoing.

Filippo De Pisis

KILL OR DIE

Today the water of the lake doesn't look much like water. There are patches where it's flat as a board, and little white and zebra-striped ducks. It's the currents that form the shivers of metal on liquid skin. Long ago it was a ribcage breathing in and out like an athlete. Over the years its level has dropped, exposing land that was once submerged. The cone of the volcano must be sucking in water, I think. A sort of dry throat slaking its thirst. I've had that sensation ever since I was a little boy and my mother would slip out of her clothes in the thicket and I would refuse to follow her in. And in fact, even though I was born on its shores, I never have dived in. Lake Albano and death are one and the same thing, as far as I'm concerned. And yet I live there. Perhaps because it offers me the final years I deserve, or am robbing myself of. It could all be over tomorrow though, if I corner that wild boar and put a bullet between his eyes.

Il Pozzo, the old disco, is on the left just past the railway leading to Rome. It used to be patronised by thieves and guys who raced hot-rod motorbikes, and girls who've been erased by the passing of time or got married and are now grandmothers. In front of that, at the roundabout, there's the La Lampara bar and, immediately to the right, the ruins of the grandstand from which you could watch the waterskiing during the 1960 Olympic Games. What was once a perfect structure has lost its colour now, bits of it have fallen off, rust has made its appearance. It's a broken set of false teeth. I've watched it getting old, year after year. Like a twin sister. Now it's a piece of rotting iron, but I'm fond of it. It's the thing I like best. Beyond it, there used to be just the road and the lake and a few small deserted beaches, but these days the area's full of restaurants and places you can rent canoes from, and a whole bunch of ludicrous crap. There are also hordes of joggers who do the entire circuit in places we used to be frightened to go, beneath the trees and the overhanging fronds. It has all changed and I hate it.

I've been thinking of writing for a while now. I'm not actually a writer. Although, yes, I have read books, and I did attend a variety of educational establishments. I was born near here, in Rocca di Papa, up in the meadows at Campi di Annibale, where you can see the lake for what

it is: a liquid-filled circle. My name is Alfredo Braschi and I'm not as young as I once was, but I am still strong. A man whose life resembles an emptied stomach. A guy who doesn't know what to do with the vitality and testosterone he still possesses. That's how things stand. We're talking about a man who's now ready to kill. Or to die. Doesn't matter which. If I kill, I die. If I die it'll be because life, or someone acting on life's behalf, will have done me in.

My family, in Rocca di Papa, were livestock dealers. They kept horses, out in the meadows at Campi di Annibale. There's a riding school there now, but it's no longer mine. I've also sold off my grandfather's house in the woods out towards Monte Cavo, up where, almost touching Lake Albano, you can see Lake Nemi. I've always loved Nemi. Nemi's my lake. As a kid, whenever I scrambled up to the top of that hill which once-upon-a-time belonged to Jupiter, I would imagine those volcanos exploding without warning, even if they were black diamonds now. 'They go boom!' my grandfather whispered in my ear. 'They go boom, Alfredo. And out comes a fire that swallows the Castelli Romani right up! And Rome.' It was Grandpa Leopoldo who brought me up, after my father died and my mother left home, vanishing into thin air.

I live in this little hotel called Miralago, which means 'lake view'. The lake's on the other side of the road. It's midway

between Rocca di Papa, the village of Castel Gandolfo and Albano. All within a radius of a few kilometres. From Rome you get here via the road where decades' worth of cretins have played magnets with their cars, letting their engines stall and coasting straight back down what should be an uphill stretch. I've got nothing left. What little there is sitting in my current account won't last much longer. All I own is a 6.35mm Beretta that belonged to my father, a friend's 9mm pin-fire revolver, and the captive bolt pistol they once used to kill steers, cows and horses at the municipal abattoirs in Marino and Albano. It's solid brass and chunky; it takes a 22-calibre blank cartridge, which releases a spring mechanism that propels a six-inch long bolt into the animal's head, right into the cerebrum, and then pulls it straight back out again. Strikes like a poisonous snake. It looks a little bit like a MAC-11 submachine gun and I take it everywhere I go. It's what I'll use to kill with, when the time comes.

I never married. I don't have kids. Actually, that's not quite true: there was a little girl who was born when I was very young. I could have had lots of children, but the women all had abortions.

The act of killing, and therefore death, is not exactly unfamiliar to me. My relatives owned butchers' shops

that required weekly supplies of fresh meat. While they pushed and pulled them around, the cows pissed and shat. They had eyes made of egg whites. It looked like they were trying to cry. The horses kicked out, so the abattoir workers whacked at their bellies with a stick. One day a bay reared up. He was seconds away from wedging his hooves into the chains and the ropes that held the hoist in place. When the slaughterman pointed the pistol at his forehead and fired, the animal collapsed instantly, his face covered in foam. But he carried on pissing a greenish liquid that ran into the grate that covered the drain. Then the horse or steer or cow or lamb would be strung up by their hind legs. From the severed belly, a mass of soft tubes spilled out. Those were the guts. As the skinners began to incise the hide, there was so much blood. They had to push it away with the rubber blade which splattered drops of it into the water.

They quartered the animals and loaded them into the vans. I must have been four or five when I started joining my Uncle Francesco, my father's youngest brother, on his rounds, taking the meat to my grandfather and the other butchers dotted around the Castelli Romani. I remember Ariccia's lovely square, with the Chigi family palace and the stalls selling *porchetta* and bread from Genzano. That was before they rebuilt the bridge that

people jump off every year as though they're diving into another lake – one that no longer exists; a lake that once formed inside another volcanic crater which we've all always called Vallericcia. Which is where the ancient Appian Way ran through the woods. One of my grandfather's delivery men took me there, when I was very tiny, and made me wait in the van. Underneath the arches of the bridge there was a shack which was home to a fat lady who whored herself out to the poorer residents of the Castelli. Marcaccio went in to see her and when he came back, ready to set off again, I could smell blood and a waft of vinegar on him. I had no idea what it was he'd been doing with the fat lady, nor, at the time, could I have possibly guessed that there, in the shelter of the bridge, in the spot where all those suicidal angels landed on their heads, the slaughtermen's tart plied her trade; yet I sensed that the blood and the vinegar were connected with something *potent*. Potent enough to make your eyes roll. The thick woods, the height of the overhead sky, the bridge rebuilt by the Germans during the war and the extinct volcano now a valley, all rolled into one. Marcaccio was whistling. He had pushed his shirtsleeves all the way up passed his elbows: he was a vigorous beast, born of the lava of one of those hundred volcanos.

I remember Marino being gorgeous. Perched on a cliff of black rock, it was always windy. I often go back there even now, to see my mate, Frenchy, who has a boxing gym and works as a bodyguard at a disco in Ciampino, underneath the bypass. He and I stroll around and he thinks I don't know he has a strongbox with gold and jewellery in it. Old gifts from friends long gone. The flower festival in Genzano also used to make me happy. It cleansed me of the death of all the animals I'd watched being slaughtered, even if the smell and the vision of the blood lingered on. The cab of the van was impregnated with them. And when Fortunato, the delivery man, heaved up the legs or shoulders or ribs and hooked them to the stone walls of the butchers' shops, the blood ran down into his woollen vest and soaked the towel covering his neck.

The light, in the towns of the Castelli, was a joy to see. Everyone was always laughing. As though death were an idea we'd never encountered. Yet, even back then, we were a band of delinquents. Now that I come to think of it: the death of all those animals generated a constant sexual tension that breathed its way into everything. Death, it seemed, encouraged sex. The light, the houses, the animals, the butchers, the butchers' boys, the delivery men, the women and the men who walked through the streets or appeared at the doors of shops and bars were all sticky

with death, sex and blood. And the light back then sprayed orgasms into the air, orgasms which fell to earth, freshly arousing bodies and minds already primed for another orgasm. And then another, and another.

As far as dying is concerned, the other day I remembered the words from that Pink Floyd song, “The Great Gig in the Sky”. I re-read them, actually. I found them on one of all those cards and bits of paper that re-emerge from the past or which they bring me, here at the hotel. The words go like this: *I'm not frightened of dying. Any time will do, I don't mind. Why should I be frightened of dying? There's no reason for it. You've gotta go sometime.*

Anyway, with any luck, I'll find that dirty bastard of a wild pig who did what I know he did. I've got to. And then I'll put a bullet in his face.

FALLING IN LOVE WITH A BANDIT

I was seventeen. She was sixteen. She'd come over from the South of France to see her father's Italian family. Catherine. I met her in the little piazza in Nemi. She wanted to eat the wild strawberries, late one summer afternoon. There was a gusty wind, like there is in autumn and in winter. I was there, just hanging around, because the goddess Diana's sacred lake is a place I've always loved.

I went back there today. It's small. Rugged. Wild. Black water. And the silence – which is the world in reverse. I've always thought silence is bigger than anything else, bigger than the ocean. And if a time ever comes when it can no longer be heard, we will disappear off the face of the earth. That's what I've always thought: it won't be war and famine, or even pollution, that destroys the planet and its inhabitants. No, what finally sees them all off will be the end of silence.

I've taken another look around the town, which is basically a boxful of souvenirs these days. But the lake, seen from that roadside shrine with the Madonna hugging Baby Jesus, is the same as it was in 1974. On the crest to the east, the houses of Genzano look out over it; to the left there's the Ruspoli palace. On the other side, where the rim of the crater dips down, the vista stretches out as far as the plain and the sea. The beaches are open hands holding back the water. The light is an eternal dawn. Along the line where the lake meets the sea, sunrise and sunset blend. As evening approaches and everything round it dims, a silvery light rises up from below and illuminates the water. A patch of sky sinks into the lake.

In my Uncle Francesco's Alfa GT which I drove without having a licence, Catherine and I embraced without talking. We confessed our thoughts, hopes and stories using bodies and kisses. I expected an unconditional and impossible love. Perhaps she did too. Catherine Danieli. Blond hair, eyes flecked with green. Breath-catchingly long legs. She came from a place near Marseilles. Nowadays those towns – and Nice is the worst – are full of hideous blocks of concrete housing, but back then not many people went there. The chic, the rich, the adventurers. Gangsters. I've come to associate that period with the fact that we were all skinny. Now everyone wants to be thin, so we go on diets.

In 1974, and for a long time afterwards, we were all very thin without needing to try. We didn't eat. Or, if we did, our bellies were filled with a fire that rapidly devoured any food. And having consumed the meal, it burned its way right through us.

I slept with Catherine in the wooden house behind Nonno Leopoldo's enormous home. Sometimes, at the risk of running into the carabinieri or the police, I drove over to Nettuno to pick her up at her relatives' place. Other times, Fabetto took me over there. He was barely five foot six, so we called him Little Fabio, but even then he weighed almost sixteen stone.

I'd heard about women from the butchers and the stablehands, who treated them all like whores. They mimed and described how they slid their cocks in. Everywhere bar the nostrils. The drivers who delivered the slabs of meat to the Castelli whistled at women from the windows of their vans. And shouted or whispered, depending how close they were, 'Sweetheart, I'd fuck your brains out any day.'

Even though I lived surrounded by blood-splattered wolves, I fantasized about *love*. I imagined the tenderness and violence it would bring. My fantasies were tragic ones. I secretly thought that if I ever did fall in love with a girl, she'd leave me anyway and I'd end up alone. Forever alone. The way I am now, basically. Looking back, I knew and

perhaps even hoped I'd end up alone. It was my destiny. The love I wanted, without even admitting it to myself, was *impossible*. It can't survive the impact with life. Sometimes it does, but that's a miracle. As far as women and sex were concerned, I heard and saw the jeers and profanities and licking of lips, but I knew next to nothing.

When Catherine and I began sleeping together out in the woods, late that summer, we started off wearing a vest, in my case, and a bra, in hers. In the end we were naked. When we embraced, our hipbones touched, jutting out because we were so thin. A few months were spent exploring and kissing. Kissing breasts that were firm and damp with sweat. And her lips kissing my neck. Until, without even meaning to, while we were wrapped in one another's arms astride a chair, I found myself slipping inside her with an ease that surprised us, and felt an unprompted gush of sweetness, unforced, uninhibited and uncontrolled. And Catherine called out my name, 'Alfredo, Alfredo', with nipples so hard that all the thickness of her skin seemed concentrated right there.

By then it was late October. One evening we went out to eat at a restaurant, Il Vecchio Fico, a couple of miles outside Grottaferrata. It was cold.

My uncle's Alfa Romeo GT was mine by then. Flame red. I parked round the side of the old coaching inn that

had been turned into a restaurant by Claudio, one of my grandfather's friends who had once been a groom and still runs the place today. A pre-historic fig tree stood out in the garden, holding up a pergola. It was chilly out in the garden, so we decided to go indoors where, beyond a buffet groaning with prosciutto, salami and ricotta, there was a series of interconnected dining rooms and an open fire. 'D'you like it? D'you like it?' I insisted, while she flicked her fringe out of her eyes and smoothed down her miniskirt. Claudio, who wore a moustache and a neckerchief, said, 'Kiddo!', and drew the sign of Zorro in the air with the carving knife he'd been using on the ham. The light that suffused the nearest of the dining rooms was fuchsia, the fire in the grate was as red as the Alfa GT, and black where the waiter had piled on fresh logs. Catherine and I sat three feet away from it. There was a couple sitting at the table next to ours.

I was wearing my shirt unbuttoned to show my chest, with a leather waistcoat and a sapphire on my ring finger. I went over to the buffet and grabbed a plate with some of the prosciutto Claudio had been slicing and a spoonful of ricotta. I looked back at Catherine and glanced over towards the other dining rooms. Il Vecchio Fico was warm as toast. I felt light as air. We'd spent the whole afternoon making love. As I walked back to the table I realised I'd

only brought over one starter, so I gave it to Catherine. I didn't eat. Skin and bones. The point was to look like a billiard cue. I don't know how it happened, but as I sidled round towards my side of the table my elbow briefly made contact with the man who had his back to me and the fire. He span round. An agile, welterweight's move. He had a smirk on his face. Blue eyes. Dazzled by those eyes, I said 'Sorry.' His smile became a frown. He glanced at my hands. I realised he'd noticed the ring. At that point he turned all the way round in his chair – meanwhile I'd sat back down in my own – and held out his own right hand, which was so smooth and manicured it could have been a young lady's. 'I see you like rings.' Only then did I spot his magnificent signet ring, on which a diamond sparkled. Then he said, 'Enjoy your meal,' softening that mocking smile and turning those blue eyes, with their inscrutable depths and glacial surface, round towards his lady friend.

I was pretty good at reading faces and body language. I reckon I learned how to do it in the slaughterhouses, watching the expressions of animals about to die, or in their death throes, or already dead; and those of the butchers and the slaughtermen. I replied, simply, 'Thanks.' I was drawn to and then impressed by this gentleman who ate his meal in silence alongside a delicate, raven-haired woman with marble-white skin and a slender neck.

When the meal was over, we happened to bump into them on the way out. At the door, I took a closer look at him. Five foot six at most, in a size thirty-eight jacket. Athletic torso. He smiled at me again with that odd grimace of a smile. I stood back to let him out first. Him and the lady. I kept my mouth shut. Stuck chatting with Claudio, Catherine was the last one out. As soon as the man with the mocking smile stepped down from the doorway, I saw that his right leg had a slight limp, like kids who've had polio or bone tuberculosis. There was a blue mole on his right-hand temple, and a De Niroesque one on his left cheek. He wore his hair long. Not much of it. Well combed. I would later find out it was curly and he straightened it. Catherine and I said, 'Goodnight,' as we walked off in the direction of the GT. But as soon as he saw it was the Alfa I was standing next to, he called out, 'I'm guessing you're a nippy little driver!' He'd said it while, on the other side of the street, he was opening the door of a purple Ferrari Daytona. From there, his voice a little louder and goading, he continued: 'C'mon, I can tell you're good. I'll race you to Grottaferrata.' It was a challenge made with amused and glacial eyes.

I was so hyped by the encounter with this mesmerising figure that those few words had me spellbound. I lined the GT up in the right-hand lane without a moment's hesitation,

ready for the off: it never crossed my mind that the two cars were unevenly matched. Inside the parked Daytona, he and the woman were in the left-hand lane, on the wrong side of the road. The minute I saw they'd climbed in, and without waiting for a sign or a nod, I shot off, tires screeching.

The Alfa's bucking and shuddering. A few seconds later I'm at the stop sign and, half way across the main road, still in third gear, I point the car left and then hard right, off towards Grottaferrata.

I reached the turning into the high street minutes later. No sign of the Ferrari. I heard the roar of its twelve cylinders and then caught sight of it only after I'd opened the car door and stepped out into the street. The man with the sports car drew up alongside me. I'd already crossed the road that leads off to Squarciarelli. He poked his head out of the car window and said, 'I like you. I guessed right, you're fast.' Then he wiped the grin from his face and drove off.

Not long afterwards, I learned that the man was Laudovino De Sanctis, born on 16th November 1936 in Collepardo. He was thirty-eight. Old enough to be my father. Instead, he was one of Rome's greatest robbers. He would go on to become the most ferocious bandit and criminal that ever lived. That evening I didn't know a thing about him. But I was smitten.

Aurelio Picca The Greatest Criminal in Rome Was a Friend of Mine

IL PIÙ GRANDE CRIMINALE DI ROMA È STATO AMICO MIO

*A look straight into the life of a criminal that has never been told before.
Fiction is intertwined with testimonies selected from courtroom trial documents.*

Seven homicides, four kidnappings, eleven sentencings, two successful escapes from prison. Ludovino De Sanctis is a name that made Rome tremble in the Sixties. Called “The Beast” as well as “Lallo the Lame”, he took part in robberies with the underworld Marsigliesi clan, and was a heinous assassin. Never has literature or cinema told his story before. The protagonist of this story is Alfredo Bianciardi, a man living in a small pensione on Lake Albano. At the age of twenty, not even, Alfredo meets Lallo and is stricken by him. He becomes his accomplice, except he has never killed. Today, while recalling his friendship and almost filial relationship with the ferocious criminal, Alfredo goes back over his own life. He goes around with a cattle-gun, and wants to kill or die. In his head there is only one track: the lullaby his daughter Monique used to sing as a child. Monique, like Lallo’s daughter, who has suffered violence, and must be revenged...

AURELIO PICCA was born in Velletri. He has published, amongst other works, the compendium *Per punizione* (1990), the collection of short stories *La schiuma* (1992), and the novels *L'esame di maturità* (1995), *I mulatti* (1996), *Tuffestelle* (1998, Premio Alberto Moravia, Superpremio Grinzane Cavour), *Bellissima* (1999), *Sacrocuore* (2003), *Via Volta della morte* (2006), *Se la fortuna è nostra* (2011, Premio Hemingway and Premio Flaiano). Bompiani has published *Addio* (2012), *Un giorno di gioia* (2014) and the civil poem *L'Italia è morta, io sono l'Italia* (2011).

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