

FAUSTO
VITALIANO
LA SABBIA

BRUCIA

Le ultime indagini
di *Gori Misticò*



ROMANZO
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FAUSTO VITALIANO
THE BURNING SAND

translated from the Italian
by Alice Kilgariff

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San Telesforo Jonico
Stazione dei Carabinieri
March 2014

The train wasn't due into Vibo Valentia Centrale until 14:09, but Appuntato scelto Federico Costantino was awake by 05:15 and ready by 06:15 to go and collect Maresciallo Gregorio Misticò from the station. Bar any unforeseen obstacles along the road, a common occurrence along the Statale 106 Jonica, it would have taken him about an hour to get there, making him seven hours early. So, he had decided to wait, but by 11:30 he could no longer bear it and left. If he'd stayed in the office, he would have been checking the clock every five minutes to see how much time was left, so it was much better to just get going. Time passes more quickly when you are moving, no matter what theoretical physics might say. He didn't know Maresciallo Misticò personally, but he knew several things about him. The fact he was taking over command of the stazione dei Carabinieri at San Telesforo Jonico was significant, if not decisive for his professional career. He had begun his service in Calabria less than a year ago, a difficult place from which to launch any serious career developments. As a person without ambitious, the young corporal knew that every man's life had a trajectory to

follow— be it long or short, arching high or almost flat. There are those who say that we are the only architects of that trajectory and those who insist that the most we can do is adapt to the capricious jolts destiny has in store for us. Whatever the truth, Federico Costantino was often overcome by the feeling that he would never amount to much, that the most to which he — the youngest of five children, his father dead at fifteen and a carabinieri at seventeen — could aspire was to make peace with his lot. Lord knows there is nothing wrong with not asking for much, and yet, in his rush to accept it all, the years passed by quickly and he felt like the unsuspecting piece in a game of snakes and ladders. Just when he thought he was making good progress, a roll of the dice would see him slide all the way back down to the beginning.

But now, the new commander was coming, and he certainly wasn't the first. Gregorio Misticò, who at the age of twenty-three had already taken part in anti-mafia operations, investigations and arrests, and who recently had even infiltrated a terrorist cell. His arrival there, in San Telesforo Jonico, where the most that could happen was for two flocks of sheep coming from two different directions to get mixed up on the road so that no one could tell which sheep belonged to which shepherd, was a miracle, an inspiring and unexpected event.

He got into his service FIAT Panda with some difficulty, given his stature, and set off in time to see the line the sun drawn on the Ionian Sea, a long, thin carpet of light that went all the way to the straight line marking out that extreme boundary, knowing full well that it is only a boundary for the eyes who look upon it.

Vibo Valentia
Vibo Valentia-Pizzo Train Station

Gori Misticò was the only passenger getting off and his travelling companions had bid him goodbye with a confidence that, though not quite tipping over into familiarity, had overcome the caution the uniform demands. After all those hours spent sharing a confined space saturated with the smells of armpits, shoes and surreptitious farts, a sincere, albeit contained camaraderie had taken root between him and the other travellers. Someone had even plucked up the courage and asked him the very questions we all wanted to ask, but that out of reluctance or prudence, we did not. Essentially: Where the actual fuck are you going, Maresciallo? Are you going to Calabria on duty – to arrest someone? Or for personal reasons – going to visit a sick relative? Or for both – to arrest a sick relative?

Misticò was skilled at managing people's legitimate curiosity. He didn't want to be secretive, but to those two questions – 1. Where am I going? and 2. Why am I going? – he himself had to stick to simple, innocuous answers: 1. I'm going to continue my work elsewhere, and 2. I had no choice.

Julia had also asked him that question, albeit circumscribing it to more exact parameters. "But why there, Gregorio?", she had asked him.

“There where?”

“In your town.”

“It’s not my town, Julia”, he had answered.

“No?”

“No. I wasn’t born there and I left before I turned eighteen. I’ve been back four or five times. It’s my home as much as Spain is yours.”

“Yo soy española. Those are my roots.”

“You were born in Ceuta,” Misticò had retorted, enjoying himself somewhat.

“Ceuta is a Spanish city.”

“Of course, it is. And it’s surrounded by Morocco. And your surname is Chadli.”

She had looked at him with an air of defiance. “What are you saying?”

“That this whole idea about roots might have worked thirty years ago, but now, given what the world is like, it doesn’t work anymore, not for anyone.”

This wasn’t the answer she wanted. “Well then. If you don’t even have roots there, why are you going? Why not go to the Middle East? Or Africa?”

The right answer didn’t exist, because that wasn’t the real question. His companions on the train, which included an old man who had spent the entire journey carrying a cardboard box tied with string on his knees, wished him the best for the future and promised once more they would come to visit him, something that no one would actually do once they reached their destination. But as we know, it’s nice to say certain things even if we know they are a load of rubbish. Misticò descended the steps of the Intercity train and looked first to his left, then to his right. Nearby, standing in front of the door made from wood

and glass that led to the outside of the station, he spotted a beanpole in a uniform who was waiting for something. A young carabinieri as tall as a lamppost and equally thin, a hangdog expression but vigilant gaze. He greeted him from afar with a loud click of his heels, raising his right hand to the visor of his beret. Then, seeing that the other did not respond with a salute and was just standing there staring, he himself just stood there, perplexed. Eventually, as the situation was not resolving itself, he decided to move closer, also because standing there so still and embarrassed, he just looked like an idiot. If that was the much-awaited Maresciallo being transferred from Milan, it was his duty to welcome him. In the case it wasn't, he would have found a dignified exit strategy.

“Maresciallo Misticò, Gregorio?”, the young carabinieri asked cautiously.

“No. Admiral Nelson, Horatio,” Gori replied. He looked him up and down. It took him a while to get a full picture of the man, given how tall he was. “Are they all as bright as you at the station or have some of them recently recovered from a coma?”

The young man clicked his heels together once more and saluted him again. “Appuntato scelto Costantino, Federico.”

“And your first name is?”

“Federico.”

“So, we have a perfect adherence to the sacred rule that insists you give your surname first.”

“Pardon, *Comandante?*”, said the young carabinieri, confused.

“Nothing, let's go. Come on,” Gori told him. He blocked the young man's move to carry his leather briefcase. “I'll take that.” He pointed to his suitcase. “You can bring the luggage.”

Federico Costantino took hold of the handle of the suitcase with such force that he sent it flying across the platform. Gori stood there watching the suitcase as if he had suddenly been killed instantly by having his neck snapped. The young man tried to get the suitcase back into an upright position and after a number of attempts, he finally succeeded. Two trains crossed paths at full speed, each travelling to God knows where but both in agreement to ignore that particular station.

Along the platform, Gori Misticò walked a few steps ahead. “Answer me this, Appuntato. Are you planning to ask me for my transfer papers or do you trust me?”, he asked without stopping.

The other hobbled on his right foot, which moved in 4/4 time whilst his left moved in 7/8. The combination of the suitcase and the length of his feet (a wide size 12) made the whole thing even more complicated. The Maresciallo’s question, however, caused him to tense up. “Pardon, *Comandante?*”

“I’m asking if you are sure of my identity or whether you feel the need to check my documents.”

Misticò didn’t show any signs of irritation, the question was enough. Costantino realised that, shit, he had a point! He hadn’t asked for his transfer papers – something that he was absolutely supposed to do. And now? If he had asked the Maresciallo to show him the papers announcing his arrival now, well outside the acceptable timeframe, would that not seriously piss him off? And if he didn’t, would he be in for it?

Gori Misticò pulled out his documents and handed them to him. “Don’t worry. Here you go,” he said. “It was a long journey. I’m tired and in a bad mood.”

“Are you hungry, *Comandante?* Or would you like something to drink?”, asked Federico Costantino.

Gori pointed to a door, this one also in wood and glass, that faced over the platform. The sign above it read 'Bar'. "Do you think they have Brasilena? It's hard to find in Milan."

"I wouldn't know, *Comandante*." The young carabinieri seemed to have plunged once more into an abyss of uncertainty.

"Do you know what Brasilena is, Appuntato?"

"Not exactly, *Comandante*."

"That famous coffee-flavoured soft drink, a typical product from Calabria," Gori explained, as if reciting an advertising slogan.

Federico Costantino made a strange gesture with his hands.

"The only thing to do is ask."

They went to go in, but in front of the entrance Gori Misticò signalled at him to stop. Federico Costantino looked at him, intrigued, as if trying to classify him within the animal kingdom. "Do you actually like calling me *Comandante* or are you just following protocol?"

Federico Costantino was a smart guy who learned quickly, and in just those few minutes he had learned something, namely that this was a rhetorical question, as they say, one of those questions that the poor soul to whom it is posed doesn't actually have to answer. And he also realised that Maresciallo Gori Misticò would, from that day on, ask so very many rhetorical questions, enough to cause him indigestion. So, he didn't answer, he held the door open to allow the Maresciallo to enter and then entered himself, pulling the suitcase behind him, which ended up banging against walls and furniture as if it were a bumper car.

They didn't have Brasilena. The barman didn't even know what it was. Federico Costantino began to explain that it was a coffee-flavoured soft drink and a typical Calabrian product. The

young barman answered that the only coffee-flavoured drink they had was coffee. "I can really water it down so it quenches your thirst," he said, talking to the Maresciallo.

"Aren't you having anything?" Gori Misticò asked Costantino, who intimated that he was fine as he was and that, actually, thinking about it, he had never been better in his whole life.

Federico Costantino could barely fit in his service FIAT Panda. His cap got stuck in the doorframe and temporarily blocked his eyesight. In order to sit without his knees knocking against his chin, he had been forced to move the driver's seat back as far as it would go, and yet, when seen from outside the vehicle, he looked like an underweight giant trying to get into a toy car.

"Can you at least get to the gears?"

"All I would ask is that you kindly move over a little." His right kneecap was resting on the air duct whilst the tips of his toes scratched against the upper part of the driver's seat footwell, meaning he had to press the accelerator with his heel.

"Couldn't you request an automobile that better fitted your stature?", Misticò asked him, to which Federico Costantino let out a kind of laugh, assuming the comment was essentially a joke. After this, they finally managed to set off.

They crossed over hillsides that seemed to be bursting with life and colour due to the presence of so many trees, so many bushes, so many flowers, and others that were burnt and arid where nothing would ever grow again. The sky was bluer than that of Milan, but it was also bigger and deeper, like an upturned sea. And there, after a mountain, was the Ionian Sea, just as Misticò remembered it: a minute ocean, sweet and ferocious, like the earth it lapped against. Long, white beaches, deserted,

the ideal landing point for anyone wanting to be welcomed, or robbed. Even the land was loving and vengeful. If you loved it, it loved you, but as soon as you got distracted, it would brutally hold you to account. Its very shape was revelatory. Some insist it's shaped like a comma, but the truth is that Calabria is a closed bracket lacking an open one. You come here to end a discussion, not to start one.

Turned slightly towards the window, Gori Misticò observed the numerous examples of Calabrian postmodern architecture – houses that were never finished, grey pylons sticking up out of them like black serpents trapped in the cement, steel cables and visible bricks, doors and windows that looked like eye sockets. All of those missing constructions were declarations of intent that would never reach a conclusion, as if the architect, surveyor, foreman and labourers had realised the intrinsic vanity in putting up houses when it would take the forces of nature very little to raze concrete and breezeblocks to the ground.

“*Comandante*, if you don't mind, we have to stop for petrol,” said the corporal. “I should have filled up on the way. Unfortunately, the stations along the highway link road moving west were all closed.”

Gori Misticò carried on looking out the window. “And if I did mind, what would we do then?” he said, as if to himself. “Would you stop all the same or continue driving until the petrol ran out halfway round a bend?”

Costantino didn't know what to say, he kept one eye on the road and another on the fuel gauge, whose arrow was firmly in the red.

“Let's go, come on, stop wherever you need to stop,” Misticò told him. The world was already full of stubborn, ball-breaking

field Marescialli, inspectors and commissioners, and he had absolutely no intention of swelling their numbers.

The worker at the petrol station stamped and signed the fuel card and greeted the two carabinieri with the same courtesy one would use with the postman who has come to deliver a parking fine. Federico Costantino turned the key and the service Panda started immediately. He checked the fuel gauge, which was now pointing upwards in virile fashion. He felt relieved. And it was perhaps this that gave him the courage to say what he had wanted to the minute Misticò got in the car.

“I’ve read about you, Comandante.” Gori Misticò didn’t seem to hear him, or perhaps he had heard and hadn’t understood. Or maybe he had actually understood but wasn’t interested. “And I just wanted to say that for me it is, well, a privilege that you are my new commander.” After this Costantino exhaled, and had the sensation that he had been holding his breath for two hours. Now he could stay quiet for the rest of the journey – there were only twenty or so minutes left, depending on traffic. And the Maresciallo didn’t need to respond either. The young carabiniere had wanted to say that and he did. He was happy, both because he had spoken and because his service Panda’s fuel tank was full.

The link road led to the highway, then, at a certain point, it came up to a large roundabout from which two roads emerged: the one on the left, slightly downhill, led to the Marina, the one on the right led upwards towards San Telesforo Jonico Superiore. He entered the town via the cemetery road, taking him to the piazza from which you had travel back down for a short while in order to reach the *Stazione dei carabinieri*. The streets were almost deserted and Gori Misticò avoided the gaze of the few souls passing by, coming from who knows where and going where no one knows.

San Telesforo Jonico Entrance to the town

If you looked at it from above – from a hovering drone for instance, vertically stationary over the central square at around five, six, seven metres high – San Telesforo Jonico would seem like the smallest autonomous state in the history of humanity. The clear-cut, perfectly defined limit of its inhabited space, beyond which the rest of the world opened up. All towns, especially small ones, suffer or enjoy a similar syndrome: the illusion of being a world in itself, with laws and rules carefully studied to function only there. The idea of a specificity that is difficult to explain with words and that, nevertheless, rests on incredibly solid and true historical foundations. Even if they are unverifiable.

At that time there were just three old men sat at a table outside the Bar Centrale (named this way despite the lack of a Bar on the side), who seemed to have been placed there by a higher power to watch over the piazza, the petrol pump, the elm tree that provided them with shade, and, more generally, the entire town and its inhabitants. The table's strategic position was, in fact, ideal for raising the alarm in case of any foreign invasion. They cast a fleeting gaze over the car and its contents.

“The new Maresciallo,” commented the first, whose name was Mario Corasaniti but who was known as *‘u Filòsofu* because he

gave insisted on the primacy of human thought over any other manifestation of reality. “Finally, that layabout Maresciallo Di Ligno has left us in peace,” added the second, Peppa Caldazzo otherwise known as *‘u Sapùtu* due to the vast and varied technical and engineering knowledge he showed off at any opportunity. “Here with us you’ll find yourself more than comfortable,” concluded the third, whose legal name was Ciccio De Septis, but who everyone knew as *‘u Rinàtu* due to the fact that when the demon of the card game had plunged him into the abyss, he had rediscovered the word of God.

After this, the three mentally agreed a silent pause that Corasaniti interrupted by invoking Saverio Cozzetta, owner and only shareholder in the Bar Centrale, and ordering three coffees, one with whisky, three glasses of still tap water, as well as a pen and a piece of paper on which to write down a sudden thought that he did not want to forget, like the swallow that had just flown low over the piazza, elated by a joy that had no need for explanation.

Fausto Vitaliano

The Sand Is Burning

LA SABBIA BRUCIA

A melancholic main character in his beloved Calabria: in the second novel of Gori Misticò's investigations we go back in time and meet him at the highest of his career.

A first-class detective, a charming woman who tends to attract and use men with the attitude of a queen bee, a young colleague asking troublesome questions, the first symptoms of the illness: in San Telesforo Jonico summer will be hot.

Gori Misticò is back in Calabria, he decided to leave Milano even if he was at the peak of his career. But going home, in little San Telesforo Jonico, means meeting up with memories: the more you run away the more they are tenacious. And the fine sand of Pàparo beach burns more than alcohol on a wound.

FAUSTO VITALIANO was born in Calabria but has been living in Milan since forever. He is a screenwriter for Disney comics and published comic strips for Sergio Bonelli, Edizioni BD and BD Music. He worked for radios, TVs, newspapers, he translated books and edited Beppe Grillo's and Michele Serra's anthologies for Feltrinelli. With Bompiani he published Gori Misticò's first novel, *La mezzaluna di sabbia* (2020).



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Pages: 432
Publication: June 2021
Price: € 18,00