

Excerpt from
DONNAREGINA
by
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To Agata

"When you are told that you ... are mad
or a criminal ... you may be sure you have got into
an enchanted circle from which you will not escape.
You will try to escape and make things worse."
Anton Chekhov, "Ward No. 6," xvi.

PART ONE

CHAPTER

This is the story of Giuseppe Misso, known as *o' Nasone*, the Nose, accused of armed robbery, theft, criminal involvement, mafia association, and murder, 38 committed and 108 commissioned, though according to some many more.

My difficulty is to go and interview him with the intention of being impartial. To tell myself: interrogate the man – which man, the one who killed 150 people or more, the one who is accused (accused and acquitted) of carnage?

This is the story of Giuseppe Misso, spelled Missi in the birth registry – an error that was never corrected. Not to be confused with the much younger Giuseppe Misso Junior, *'o Chiatton*e, the fat kid, who can be found online; there are no current photos of our Misso, the most recent ones go back thirty years. Don't confuse him with Junior then, much less with Emiliano Zapata, a nephew who like Junior is also mistakenly mentioned as his descendant.

The newspaper is sending me to interview, not Junior, not Zapata, but the superboss. He doesn't want a court journalist, better a writer, even better if a woman. He agrees to talk on condition that the interviewer be someone unbiased.

Later I will understand that unbiased means someone who knows nothing about the Camorra, who is unfamiliar with its criminal history. Later still I will suspect that he is looking for someone who can be taken in, but this will be much later.

At the moment the newspaper chooses me.

Who better than me, after all, since I have never written about crime, but rather about family and adolescence; until now I have interviewed writers, occasionally singers.

So today, in a restaurant near the Pantheon, in Rome's historic center, I meet Giuseppe Misso.

Already on the street I'm afraid he won't like me. Seeing the normal woman I am, exposing my ignorance about the Camorra, not to mention Naples where I have never been, what if, in short, looking at me, he refuses to be interviewed? What if he says: *what would you know about it*. What if he has a gun?

I'm expecting an elegant figure – on the internet they mention his passion for clothes and watches. So when the man with mirrored sunglasses and a dark jacket approaches, I mistake him for a tourist.

At his side, very blonde, is Lina Di Maio.

In my world the name Giuseppe Misso means nothing.

I did some research: "former Italian mafioso, member of the Camorra, and founder of the now defunct Misso Clan. At one time boss of Naples' Sanità district" – *Wikipedia*.

"Link connecting Cosa Nostra, Camorra and right-wing terrorism."

I examined some court proceedings in which he was the defendant. I read his collection of poems, and the autobiographical novel *I leoni di marmo* in which he calls himself Michele Massa. I analyzed the passages on the Camorra war, skipped the pages on the shootings; I underlined passages such as: "if you take a child from Naples and bring

him to England, he will learn English, if you take an English child and bring him to the slums of Naples, he will learn the language of the streets.”

At the table Misso complains that there is no fresh fish in Rome.

We are at the best restaurant, I chose it on purpose – I say that, and it is partly a lie. Partly because, being close to home, it enables me to save time. Then, yes, it really is one of the best fish restaurants in the city – I assumed that the boss might like to eat fish outside of Naples.

This is the place where we celebrate special occasions – my daughter, my husband, and I, our family of three. Here over the years I watched the little girl who separated her fish from the vegetables; for a long time she did not eat green foods.

And so today, not with my family, not laughing at my daughter isolating the green because it’s radioactive, but with Peppe Misso and his wife, facing a reality that is unknown to me, seen only in TV series. I took a leap up, many would like to be in my place.

Whether picked at random or chosen, I am pulled out from the pack of journalists who cover innocuous subjects like culture, society.

This is what the superboss means to me: I leap forward, and ahead lies my career just now when it was stalled.

I ask if I can record, Misso says no.

To avoid giving the impression of an interrogation, I take a roundabout approach: family, father, mother, do you really think that a certain type of childhood influences your destiny?

He nods yes.

He speaks quickly, sometimes in rigorous Neapolitan dialect, so that I have to turn to Lina: *I don’t understand*.

So then, childhood.

At five, Peppe Misso steals food on the streets, at six, a nativity scene at the church of San Gregorio Armeno, some shepherds.

“Baby Jesus?” I ask.

He gets lost in his memories, stresses the images of poverty, he is skinny, in tatters, while I fidget.

I was hoping to finish early to go home during my daughter’s private lessons, since it’s the only time she leaves her iPhone out of the room, the only chance for me to read her messages.

But Misso’s youth is really long. Might as well get comfortable.

At fourteen he starts to commit serious crimes, thefts, robberies, not to brag but he invented certain techniques in the field, the use of the oxyacetylene torch, for example.

Of all the exploits, one image stays with me: him and Lovigino – at the time still Gigino – him and Gigino as kids lowering themselves down a hole in the floor with a rope.

On the floor below there are record players, car radios.

They are in an appliance store.

They snatch and grab, do without the TV set that Misso fantasizes about bringing to mamma Celeste one day, not now, too heavy. Until then they hadn’t seen many

televisions, only the one owned by Bianchina Amato who started a business in her basement, ten lire each to watch *Rin tin tin*.

There is *Canzonissima*, but they, kids from Naples, don't know the show. They don't know Adriano Celentano, Gianni Morandi. Anything outside of Naples doesn't exist.

But then four policemen burst into the apartment upstairs and arrest Gigino and the other kid.

They don't notice the hole and the third boy down below. The third kid who slips into a corner, wriggles in, hides. As soon as it's quiet above, he climbs back up the rope. He takes the stairs, makes it to the terrace. He jumps, scrambles up, vanishes over a wall, pops up on a rooftop, disappears and reappears – to anyone watching him, and there *are* some watching. Some who see him make off that time, and other times. Some who, observing the light-footed kid, can guess his fate: told you so – the eyes in the dark, the heads behind the windows: they always said so – the voices in the Sanità will say on the day of the coronation.

If in Naples they are used to certain types of kids, I am not. The courage, the daring, no fear of falling.

Well okay, in the morning three policemen accompanied by Gigino, go to arrest Peppe, who, unlike Gigino and the other boy, is old enough to be sent to prison – fourteen years and two days. But we'll leave him up there, let the last image be the *scugnizzo*, the street urchin, flying from roof to roof.

At this point in the story, skipping passages and leaving aside good manners, determined to get where court journalists have not, I ask directly: how many people have you, Giuseppe Misso, killed in your life?

“I fought a war in which many individuals were killed, I am not able to quantify.”

This is the story of Giuseppe Misso, accused of armed robbery, theft, murder, 182 confirmed deaths (according to some over a thousand): *Misso Giuseppe, 12,000 days (33 years) in prison, height 5'10", weight 168 lbs.*

Distinguishing features: photos prior to 1986 do not correspond to his current appearance, due to facial plastic surgery.

The nose for which he is known as *o' Nasone* has been bobbed.

CHAPTER

While voices from the TV and the iPad come from my daughter's room, on the kitchen table is the professor's post-it: "check expressions 1 and 4."

I reread the notes. Three hours interviewing. Leaps, digressions – I wasn't able to press him. An investigative journalist would have pressed him on topics of public interest. Not me, who for ten pages dwelt on the subject of pigeons.

Peppe Misso raises pigeons. As a boy on the terrace of Via Vico a Carbonara 6, and today, under a protection program, in a house with a secret location. Since he is forbidden to leave the region, except with the magistrates' permission, the pigeons are a big concern. He went on at length about it at the table: as travelers they need to fly.

It's up to Lina to resolve the problem: load the basket with the birds into the car, drive for miles (three hundred, five hundred, it's forbidden to give precise directions) to reach the place selected by Peppe on Google Maps, far-removed from any pollution.

As Misso spoke I imagined white doves, dozens of white doves who, set free, take flight as a sign of good luck – I'd wanted them at my wedding, my husband did not.

Still at the table, Lina shows me videos, identical images in sequence, except for a panorama that make me linger – that land, that horizon line. I ask her to rewind: on a clearing overlooking a stretch of water, a brunette Lina, a Lina with very dark hair, resumes. "Watch!" she says to Misso, the recipient of the video. "On this gorgeous sunny day, on this special day ... minus ten, nine – the hand lowers to the basket – three, two ... one! Freedom! – she shouts as she uncovers the basket, with the pigeons flapping their wings, colliding, blinded by the sudden light. The camera angle rises into the sky along with the birds, follows them from afar, even farther, Lina's voice in the background: "I can't explain it to you, everyone should try this at least once in their life."

"But is that Orbetello, are you in Orbetello?" I ask, revealing that it was the town where I was born.

Misso lights up, it's no coincidence, he says. We were fated to meet. He believes in signs.

Watching the video again, ignoring the pigeons that are not white, but gray, mice with wings, I scan the setting and yes, it is the very place where I was born.

I start leafing through the pages of the notebook again. Schizophrenic scribblings about pigeons, neomelodic singers. In the conversation Misso mentioned Nino D'Angelo, who went to his table at a certain restaurant to pay his respects to him. And Misso thought: what does this guy want?

A scene of no relevance that I nonetheless noted.

Among the Giulianos, the Licciardis, the Sarnos and the Mazzarellas, D'Angelo is the only name I know. Interviewed years ago, he, "the voice of the underclass," told me that the famous Neapolitan singer Sergio Bruni – who wanting to say that someone was talented would say he was 'yellow' – once told D'Angelo: you are extremely yellow. And the voice of the underclass was moved.

Via WhatsApp I advise my daughter to check those expressions.

I find her workbook on the floor, in front of the closed door. I am as disorganized as she is orderly. I am spellbound by the precision of her writing. Expressions 1 and 4, calculator in hand, wrong.

I intend to increase her tutoring lessons, she has to catch up, after all she's only bad at math.

I plan the future for her, and for me. But then I realize that the material on Misso isn't enough.

I feel defeated.

The days go by. I have to admit that I failed, call the newspaper to apologize, it was an act of presumption on my part, I shouldn't have agreed to interview the superboss, it was beyond my capability.

Then one morning I wake up determined to try again: do I want to restart my career or not?

I retrieve the email addresses of crime journalists, defense lawyers, and send out requests to meet with informants, Camorristi doing time in solitary under 41 bis,¹ anyone who had dealings with Misso when he was *'o Nasone*, *'o gioiello*.

While awaiting replies I again watch on YouTube the only interview he gave, his face covered, his voice disguised. I fast forward, I rewind. Asked how close he was to Luigi Giuliano, Misso says: "there was a real love, because I believe that in friendship there is always love, in love there is not always friendship, and I truly believe in this concept. So there was a real sort of love. We did things, we were together."

Of the more than thirty texts and emails sent, only Professor Isaia Sales responds. The first to tell me that Misso's story is all about the relationship with Giuliano. How brotherhood turned into hatred, how from a certain point on the two friends tried to kill each other, that's the story. Not just theirs, but that of the Camorra from the 1970s to the 2000s, with Maradona involved.

The professor tells me not to fall into the trap of self-absolving reasoning typical of criminals: growing up in poverty, family members killed.

Too late, I think: the kids down the rope, the escape over the roofs.

I call the newspaper, it is a delicate interview, Misso has opened up, I lie, he's providing new information; and with the tone of an investigator: we're not talking about just anybody, we're talking about a superboss, give me time.

Meanwhile, the email contains a response from Viola Anzaldo, a journalist for *Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno Napoli*. She will be my authentic access to the world of Peppe Misso, she who will guide me into the city, through the alleyways, amidst the people's bitterness towards the State ("politicians are all scumbags," testimonies I will collect).

Misso's is an atypical criminal profile, Viola informs me; look at the 2003 conviction, Giuliano accusing him of the murder of Giovanna Esposito.

She also confirms that the real story is that of a brotherly friendship that turned into a war. Misso and *Lovigino* – Giuliano's nickname, 'Love' plus 'Gigino', that's what

¹ The system devised to prevent organized crime figures from carrying out their illegal activities from prison.

foreigners crazy about him called him, have you seen the photos? – Misso and Lovigino had known each other since they were kids, the former eight years old, the latter six. While the Misso family was of working-class extraction, no criminal record, the Giuliano family was very well known in the city. Together with the Zazas and the Mazzarellas, the Giulianos managed cigarette contraband, the Forcella district was theirs. A historical period in which the Camorra did not exist, it was the mafia with its affiliations that governed illegal imports, and the institutions turned a blind eye.

Her take on Misso: extremely intelligent, ruthless, one of the few who were able to command, he deserves credit. Then, well, if you think about it, he is still feared today. Unlike other bosses, he is capable of killing. He didn't order murders, he committed them, even with his bare hands.

Hearing those words, I feel a satisfaction, a click in the brain, something like pride, and lack of fear.

Giving me Misso's email the editor-in-chief had told me to only use it for practical communications. Write, never call. Implicit: once the interview is over, throw away the number. He has an odd disposition, I'd been told, quick-tempered.

But I disobey – and my action feels like an escape too, like the kids in Naples who hop from roof to roof.

I leave a voice mail in which I explain that rereading the material I realized that I would like to ask him some more questions. Apologizing, flattering him: your life is so complex, Peppe.

And if Giuseppe Misso were now to get angry, feeling imposed upon, if Giuseppe Misso were now to complain to the newspaper, or react furiously with me, telling me directly never to bother him again, he would be right. He would be right, I think. I am on the bed in my room, while from a distance, from the end of the hall, the sounds of the TV and the iPad can be heard, bursts of music, my daughter's world behind the door on which hangs a sign with the name Camilla.

Her name was supposed to be Anita or Agata, we were undecided for a while. The day I reveal it to Misso he's delighted: a second coincidence (ignoring the Anita option)! First Orbetello, now Agata.

My daughter was supposed to be called Agata like his sister, Agata Misso, the little girl killed during the war in bombings by American planes which flew in low and targeted civilians.

CHAPTER

After three months in jail Misso gets out and goes to look for Luigi Giuliano towards whom he bears no grudge, he assures me: *I considered his betrayal a youthful mistake.*

They are fourteen and twelve years old. They are in Naples, one in Sanità, the other in Forcella, I write, trying to reorder the chronology. Here the real criminal career, recapped, begins:

1960s/mid-1970s, ROBBERIES: jewelry stores, fur shops, banks, I note.

+ elegance: custom-made suits, gold watches, luxury cars.

+ pigeons, in the notes I return to the pigeons. He maintained the largest pigeon breeding farm under the Naples' sky.

Unlike what I had feared, *Nasone* replied to the voice mail saying that he was available for any further information. *Write to me whenever you want, even at night, I don't sleep.*

We recognized the importance of the interview. For me it's an opportunity.

From admiring friends and my brother: *congratulations, you're fearless. You're not afraid of anything.* For the first time my brother shows interest in what I do.

In conversation I complete the notes, and at the same time, during the exchange, the quips and thank-yous, a sort of rapport is established between me and Misso. At a certain point he pronounces: you're a good person.

If someone were to listen to our conversations, and perhaps someone is (I think of it later, is it possible that Misso's phone isn't being tapped?), he would overhear this good person.

A worldly woman who asks about clothes and watches without insisting on the killings, never touching on the subject of bloodbaths.

First expensive watch?

The answer is the location of a jewelry store. At the map's little red arrow, seventeen-year-old Peppe Misso buys his first watch – I imagine. And I imagine wrong. The watch is part of the proceeds of a robbery at the jewelry store indicated by that arrow. A gold Cartier with a crocodile strap that he keeps for himself while the rest of the loot goes to the fence.

On the phone screen, on the map of Naples, below the red arrow, I see two kids running through the streets, tearing down shutters. Entering, ransacking. I see Misso reaching out to Lovigino from walls and holes, and pulling him up. A brotherhood. Viola attests that they were one another's shadow; it is said that Lovigino, injured during a theft, both arms broken, was cared for by Misso who kept him at his house, fed him.

Jewelry shops, banks, medical suppliers. The Misso gang specializes in medicines. On the phone at the bar, yellow pages on his knees, *o' Nasone* crosses out store after store with a pen. Bayer, Bracco. Misso and the others learn the names of the best dealers.

As a result, Misso notices Lovigino's mathematical skill; he's capable of calculating by eye how many medicines are in a box, along with the profit subtracted from the price on the black market, thirty percent for them.

Lovigino hasn't studied, he speaks only Neapolitan – Misso remembers when in the North he had to act as his interpreter because no one understood him. He did not study, he speaks only Neapolitan and yet Luigi Giuliano has a mathematical gift that he himself disregards, having grown up in a world where school is a waste of time.

Let's go back to the children, the one born in England, the one born in Naples; let's go back to Misso's hypothesis.

Two guys with class, Peppe and Lovigino. They frequent nightspots, they travel. Deposit money in numbered accounts in Switzerland, first millions, then billions, along with false documents in case of necessity, such as having to flee abroad. Giuseppe Fiore, the false identity most used by Misso.

I write, I streamline, sometimes I completely skip the robberies and shootings, dwelling on details that many will consider marginal.

Peppe and Lovigino show up at nightclubs. Lovigino wears ankle boots with heels and internal lifts to appear taller. Four inches shorter than me, says Misso. *Club 87* and *Club 21* are the dependable/go-to locales where the owners consider them important, and make sure they have a good time, in fact they rotate the hostess every 15 days. The most beautiful women of Naples and elsewhere pass under the eyes of Peppe and Lovigino. Sequins, high-cut leotards. For a time, skates. The girls at the nightclubs whizz by on skates, which annoys Misso, so he complains: the skates vanish.

They drink champagne, they choose the best women. Misso the petite ones, Lovigino the Valkyries.

Misso likes to say that no woman has ever complained about him. For him, sex was a release, beautiful, ugly, thin or fat women, not *femminielli*, unlike many of his pals who went looking for the trans types because anything was allowed with them. You whipped them, you spat on them. You threw ice water on them, then you threw them out the window.

It's the Seventies, the world is in their hands, says *Nasone*.

A world in great turmoil, the wake of the economic boom, progress.

A world where I am a few years old, and, taking advantage of my brother's absence while he's in the hospital for appendicitis, I join the beds, the room all to myself, the thrill of being an only child.

A world where the new President of the Republic, Giovanni Leone, is elected, and in America NASA announces the development of the Space Shuttle program, it will be possible to travel in space.

In this regard Misso says: those people go there without asking permission. (A statement that will be clear to me later on, which at the moment I accept as senseless).

The two friends' nights end in hotels with a view of the gulf, king-size beds with women whose names they don't remember whom they call "sweetheart." If only we could go back, enter those rooms, observe the floor scattered with undergarments.

Here is a wig that Misso trips over, and throws out the window, irritated, provoking an immediate reaction from "sweetheart" who whines: *it was real hair*.

In those rooms, on those nights, there was nevertheless tenderness, because he has always protected women. He held those girls in his arms.

But it is also the period of cocaine, which Peppe uses sporadically, he assures me, he never needed an artificial stimulant to get it up, “not like Lovigino” (a statement for which he takes full responsibility). Drug use being the reason why he had to keep an eye on Lovigino.

And now let’s hit pause where Misso would fast forward. It’s me who forces him to go back, who asks him to tell me more. The girl who loses her balance on her skates, the other one pirouetting, Capri on the horizon, a fish darting in the sea, a tuna, it must be a tuna. The morning that Misso finds Lovigino naked in bed. He had the maid open the door because Gigino wasn’t answering. He shakes him, *get up!* He tries to lift him up, when he notices the drawing. A red heart on his chest. Misso runs a finger over it, lipstick. *That bitch, fucking whore*, Lovigino, reawakened, curses (I’m trying to quote the Neapolitan).

He threatens: *I’m going to kill her*. Until Misso manages to calm him down, to make him sit up. Spitting on his fingers, *o’ Nasone* wipes the heart off Gigino’s chest. He rubs and rubs, a paternal gesture or not, and Lovigino lets him do it.

Life is imperfect – Misso philosophizes.

The nights go on until morning.

On those youthful nights Peppe and Lovigino are captivated. Looking at the sky, the sea, the psychedelic ceiling lights in the nightclubs.

And if we too stop, we see two brothers who grew up together, women in second place, as in second and third place are the blood brothers, disappointing idlers. And the fathers, absent, gone. This is the moment of maximum union between Giuseppe Misso and Luigi Giuliano. Under a sky of real and artificial lights. The lights in the skies of Naples and those in the nightclubs pulsate, they pulsate in place of hearts in their chests.