THE PIRANHAS

THE BOY BOSSES OF NAPLES

ROBERTO SAVIANO

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY ANTONY SHUGAAR

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX • NEW YORK

The protagonists of this book are imaginary, as are their life stories; therefore, any and all references to people or public establishments that may actually now exist or have once existed and which might be found in the text of this book can only be considered coincidental. Events mentioned in a historical or journalistic context, as well as nicknames that refer to people, trademarks, or companies, are used only to confer plausibility on the narrative, without any pejorative intent or, in any case, any prejudicial meaning for their possessor.

The same disclaimer that appears at the beginning of the movie *Hands over the City* applies to my novel: The characters and events that appear here are imaginary; what is authentic, on the other hand, is the social and environmental reality that produces them.

CHARACTERS

MARAJA	Nicolas Fiorillo
BRIATO'	Fabio Capasso
TUCANO	Massimo Rea
DENTINO	Giuseppe Izzo
DRAGO'	Luigi Striano
LOLLIPOP	Vincenzo Esposito
PESCE MOSCIO	Ciro Somma
STAVODICENDO	Vincenzo Esposito
DRONE	Antonio Starita
BISCOTTINO	Eduardo Cirillo
CERINO	Agostino De Rosa

The word paranza comes from the sea.

Those who are born on the sea know more than one sea. They are occupied by the sea, bathed, invaded, dominated by the sea. You can stay far away for the rest of your life, but you're still drenched in it. If you're born on the sea, you know there's the sea of hard work, the sea of arrivals and departures, the sea of the sewer outlet, the sea that isolates you. There's the sea of filth, the sea as an escape route, the sea as an insurmountable barrier. There's the sea by night.

At night people go out on the water to fish. Dark as ink. Curse words and not a prayer. Silence. The only noise is the engine.

Two boats set sail, small and rotting, riding so low in the water they practically sink under the weight of their fishing lamps. They veer off, one to the left, one to the right, while fishing lamps are hung off the bow to attract the fish. Lampare, they're called. Blinding spotlights, briny electricity. The violent light that punches through the water without a hint of grace and reaches the sea floor. It's frightening to glimpse the sea floor, it's like seeing the end of everything. So this is it? This jumble of rocks and sand that is covered up by this immense expanse? Is that all there is?

Paranza *is a word for boats that go out to catch fish through the trickery of light. The new sun is electric, the light occupies the water, it takes possession of it, and the fish come looking for it, they put their trust in it. They put their trust in life, they lunge forward, mouths open wide, governed by instinct. And as they do, the net that surrounds them spreads open, rushing swiftly; the meshes stand watch around the perimeter of the school of fish, enveloping it.*

Then the light comes to a halt, seemingly attainable by those gaping mouths, at last. Until the fish start to be jammed one against the other, each flaps its fins, searching for space. And it's as if the water had turned into a pool. They all bounce, and as they race away most of them run smack up against something, up against something that isn't soft like the sand, but which also isn't hard like rock. Something that seems penetrable, but there's no way to get through it. The fish writhe and wriggle up down up down right left and again right left, but then less and less and less, less and less.

And the light goes out. The fish are lifted, to them it's as if the sea suddenly rose, as if the seabed were rising toward the sky. It's only the nets being reeled up. Throttled by the air, their mouths open in tiny desperate circles, their collapsing gills look like open bladders. Their race toward the light is done.

THE NEW MAHARAJA

Forcella is the material of History. The material of centuries of flesh. Living matter.

It is there, in the folds of those narrow lanes, the *vicoli*, which carve it like a weatherbeaten face, that you find the meaning of that name. *Forcella*. Fork in the road. A departure and a parting of the ways. An unknown factor that always lets you know where you start out from but never where you'll arrive, or even whether you will. A street that's a symbol. Of death and resurrection. It greets you with an immense portrait of San Gennaro painted on a wall, watching you arrive from the façade of a building, and with his all-understanding eyes, it reminds you that it's never too late to get back on your feet, that destruction, like lava, can be stopped.

Forcella is a history of new departures, new beginnings. Of new cities atop old ones, and new cities becoming old. Of teeming, noisy cities, built of tufa stone and slabs of volcanic piperno rock. Stone that built every wall, laid out every street, changed everything, even the people who've worked with these materials all their lives. Actually, in fact, who've farmed them. Because people talk about farming piperno, as if it were a row of vines to water. Types of rock that are running out, because farming a type

of rock means consuming it. In Forcella even the rocks are alive, even the rocks breathe.

The apartment buildings are attached to other apartment buildings, balconies really do kiss each other in Forcella. And passionately so. Even when a street runs between them. And it isn't the clotheslines that hold them together, it's the voices that clasp hands, that call out to each other to say that what runs beneath is not asphalt but a river, crisscrossed by invisible bridges.

Every time Nicolas went past the Cippus of Forcella, he felt the same burst of joy. He remembered the time, two years ago, though it seemed like centuries, when they'd gone to steal the Christmas tree in the Galleria Umberto I and they'd brought it straight there, complete with all its glittering globes, which were actually no longer glittering because now there was no electricity to make them glitter. That's how he'd first caught Letizia's attention, as she left her apartment house on the morning of the day before Christmas Eve, turning the corner, she'd glimpsed the tip of the tree, like in one of those fairy tales where you plant a seed the night before and, when the sun rises, hey presto! a tree has sprung up and now stretches up to the sky. That day she'd kissed him.

He'd gone to get the tree late at night, with the whole group. They'd all left their homes the minute their parents had gone to sleep, and the ten of them, sweating over the impossible task, had hoisted it onto their puny shoulders, doing their best to make no noise, cursing softly under their breath. Then they'd strapped the tree onto their motor scooters: Nicolas and Briato' with Stavodicendo and Dentino in front, and the rest of them bringing up the rear, holding the trunk high. There'd been a tremendous downpour and it hadn't been easy to navigate the mud puddles on their scooters, to say nothing of the veritable rivers of rainwater spewing forth from the sewers. They might have had motor scooters, but they weren't old enough to drive them, legally. Still, they were *nati imparati*, born knowing how, as they liked to say, and they managed to maneuver the bikes better than much older boys. Making their way across that pond of rainwater hadn't been easy, though. They'd halted repeatedly to catch their breath and adjust the straps, but in the end they'd succeeded. They'd erected the tree inside the Forcella quarter, they'd brought it to where

THE PIRANHAS

THE BOY BOSSES OF NAPLES

ROBERTO SAVIANO

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY ANTONY SHUGAAR

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX • NEW YORK

they lived, among their people. Where it ought to be. In the afternoon the police Falchi squad had come to take the tree back, but by then it didn't much matter. Mission accomplished.

Nicolas sailed past the Cipp' a Furcella—a cippus, or short column, dedicated to St. Anthony, emblematic of the quarter—with a smile on his face and parked outside Letizia's building. He wanted to pick her up and take her to the club. But she'd already seen the posts on Facebook: the photographs of Renatino beshitted, the tweets of Nicolas's friends announcing his humiliation. Letizia knew Renatino and she knew he was sweet on her. The only sin he'd committed was to put some "likes" on several of her pictures after she'd accepted his friend request, which was unforgivable in Nicolas's eyes.

Nicolas had pulled up outside her apartment building, he hadn't bothered to ring her buzzer. The intercom is something only mailmen, traffic cops, detectives, ambulance drivers, firemen, and people not from the quarter bother using. When you need to alert your girlfriend to your presence, or your mother, your father, a friend, your neighbor, anyone who by rights considers themselves part of your life, you just shout: everything's wide open, as public as can be, everyone hears everything, and if they don't it's not a good sign, it means something must have happened. From downstairs Nicolas was yelling at the top of his lungs: "Leti'! Letizia!" Letizia's bedroom window didn't overlook the street, it faced onto a sort of lightless air shaft. The window overlooking the street that Nicolas was looking up at illuminated a spacious landing, a space shared by a number of apartments. The people climbing the apartment house stairs heard him yelling and knocked on Letizia's door, without bothering to wait for her to come and answer. They'd knock and continue on their way; it was a code: "Someone's calling you." If Letizia answered the door and there was no one there, she knew someone had been calling her from the street below. But that day, Nicolas called her with such a powerful voice that she heard him all the way back in her bedroom. She finally stuck her face out the window and bawled in annoyance: "Just get out of here. I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Come on, get moving, come down."

"No, I'm not coming down."

That's the way it works in the city. Everyone knows you're fighting. They can't help but know. Every insult, every raised voice, every high note resonates off the stones of the alleys and lanes, the *vicoli* of Naples, long accustomed to the sounds of lovers skirmishing.

"What did Renatino ever do to you?"

Nicolas asked, in a mixture of disbelief and pride: "You've already heard the news?"

Deep down, all he cared about was that his girlfriend knew. The exploits of a warrior are passed by word of mouth, they become news, then legends. He looked up at Letizia in the window and knew that his deed continued to resonate, ricocheting from flaking plaster to aluminum window frames, rain gutters, roof terraces, and then up, up, up among the TV antennas and satellite dishes. And it was while he was looking up at her, as she leaned on the windowsill, with her hair even curlier after her shower, that he got a text from Agostino. An urgent, sibylline text.

That put an end to the quarrel. Letizia watched as he climbed back on his scooter and took off, tires screeching. A minotaur: half man and half wheels. To drive, in Naples, is to seize all rights of way, yield to no one, ignore traffic barriers, one-way signs, pedestrian malls. Nicolas was on his way to join the others at the New Maharaja, the club in Posillipo. A majestic, imposing club with a vast terrace overlooking the bay. The club could have thrived as a business on that terrace alone, renting it out for weddings, first communions, and parties. Since he was a child, Nicolas had been drawn to that white building that stood in the center of a jutting rock promontory in Posillipo. What Nicolas liked about the Maharaja was its brashness. There it stood, clamped to the waterfront rocks like an impregnable fortress, every inch of it white, the door frames and window frames, the doors themselves, even the shutters. It looked out over the sea with the majesty of a Greek temple, with its immaculate columns that seemed to rise directly out of the water, buttressing on their shoulders that very same terrace, where Nicolas imagined the men he wanted to become one day strolling comfortably.

Nicolas had grown up going past the place, gazing at the ranks of cars, motorcycles, and scooters parked out front, admiring the women, the men, the fine clothing and displays of wealth, swearing that one day he'd

set foot in there, whatever the cost. That was his ambition, a dream of his that had infected his friends, who at a certain point had decided to dub him with a variant as his nickname: "'o Maraja." To be able to walk in, head held high, not as waiters, not as a favor someone could indulge them in, as if to say, "Go on, take a look around, but then get the hell out of here": no, he and the others wanted to be customers, ideally they wanted to be highly esteemed guests. How many years would it take, Nicolas wondered, before he'd be able to spend the evening and the night there? What would he have to give to get in?

Time is still time when you can imagine, and maybe imagine that if you save for ten years, and you win a civil service exam, and with some luck, and putting all you have into it, maybe . . . But Nicolas's father earned a high school phys ed teacher's salary and his mother owned a small business, a pressing shop. The paths cut by people of his blood would require an unacceptably long time to get him into the New Maharaja. No. Nicolas needed to do it now. At age fifteen.

And it had all been simple. Just as the important decisions you can't turn back from are always the simplest ones. That's the paradox of every generation: the reversible decisions are the ones you think through, consider carefully, weigh judiciously. The irreversible ones are made on the spur of the moment, prompted by an instinctive impulse, accepted without resistance. Nicolas did what all the others his age did: afternoons on his motor scooter in front of the school, selfies, an obsession with sneakers—to him they had always been proof you were a man with both feet planted firmly on the ground, and without those shoes he wouldn't even have felt like a human being. Then, one day a few months ago, in late September, Agostino had talked to Copacabana, an important man in the Striano family of Forcella.

Copacabana had approached Agostino because he was a relative: Agostino's father was his *fratocucino*, that is, his first cousin.

Agostino had hurried over to see his friends as soon as school got out. He'd arrived with a bright-red face, more or less the same vivid color as his hair. From a distance it appeared that, from the neck up, he was on fire, and it was no accident that they called him Cerino—Matchstick.

Panting, he reported everything he'd been told, word for word. He'd never forget that moment as long as he lived.

"Wait, do you even understand who he is?"

Actually, they'd only ever heard his name mentioned in passing.

"Co-pa-ca-ba-na!" he'd uttered, emphasizing each syllable. "The district underboss of the Striano family. He says he needs a hand, he's looking for *guaglioni*. And he says he pays well."

No one had gotten especially excited to hear this. Neither Nicolas nor the other members of the group recognized in this criminal the hero that he'd been for the street kids of an earlier time. They didn't care how the money was made, the important thing was to make lots of it and show it off, the important thing was to have cars, suits, watches, to be lusted after by women and envied by men.

Only Agostino knew a little more about the history of Copacabana, a name the man had earned by purchasing a hotel on the beaches of the New World. A Brazilian wife, Brazilian children, Brazilian drugs. What really elevated him to greatness was the impression and the conviction that he was able to get practically anyone to come and stay in his hotel, from Maradona to George Clooney, from Lady Gaga to Drake, and he posted pictures of himself with them on Facebook. He could exploit the beauty of the things he owned to tempt anyone to come there. That had made him the most prominent and visible of all the members of the Striano clan, a family in dire straits. Copacabana didn't even need to look them in the face in order to make up his mind who could work for him. For almost three years now, following the arrest of Don Feliciano Striano, Nobile, he had been the only boss in Forcella.

He'd emerged from the trial of the Striano family in pretty good shape. Most of the charges against the organization concerned a period of time when Copacabana had been in Brazil, so he'd been able to beat the charges of Mafia conspiracy, which constituted the biggest risk for him and others like him. That was the criminal trial. Next came the appeals court, which in Italy could be pursued by the prosecution. And that meant that Copacabana was up to his neck in it and the water was rising, so he had to get started again, find new, young kids to drum up business for him, show

the world he'd taken the worst they could throw at him. His boys, his *paranza*, the Capelloni, were good soldiers but unpredictable. That's the way it works when you rise too far, too fast, or at least when you think you've made it to the top. White, the underboss, pretty much kept them in line, but he was constantly snorting. The *paranza* of the Capelloni only knew how to shoot, they had no idea how to establish a market, open a piazza. For that new beginning, he needed more malleable raw material. But who? And how much were they going to cost him? How much was he going to need to keep on hand? Nobody ever sweats the details on business and the money you need to invest, but when it comes to your own personal money, that's quite another matter. If Copacabana had sold just a portion of the hotel he owned in South America, he could have kept fifty men on a regular salary, but that was his own money. To invest in business, he needed clan money, and it was in short supply. Forcella was in the crosshairs; prosecutors, TV talk shows, and even politicians were focusing on the quarter. Not a good sign. Copacabana had to rebuild from scratch: there was no one left to carry on the business in Forcella. The organization had imploded.

And so he'd gone to see Agostino: he'd tossed a small brick of hashish under his nose, just like that, first thing. Agostino was off school and Copacabana asked him: "A little brick, this size, how fast can you sling it?" *'Nu mattoncino accussì, in quanto te lo levi? Levarsi il fumo*—slinging hash—was the first step on the road to becoming a drug dealer, even though the apprenticeship to earning that title was a long one; slinging hash meant selling it to friends, family, anyone you knew. There was a skinny, skinny margin of profit, but there was practically no risk to speak of.

Agostino had ventured: "I dunno, a month."

"A month? You'll polish this off in a week."

Agostino was barely old enough to drive a motor scooter, but that was what interested Copacabana. "Bring me all your friends who're interested in doing a little work. All your friends from Forcella, the ones who hang outside the club in Posillipo. They've been standing there with their dicks in their hands long enough, right?"

And that's how it had all begun. Copacabana would arrange to meet them in an apartment house at the edge of Forcella, but he was never

there himself. Instead, there was always a man who was quick with words but very slow on the uptake; they all called him Alvaro because he looked like Alvaro Vitali, the actor. He was about fifty, but he looked a lot older. Practically illiterate, he'd spent more years behind bars than on the street: prison at a very young age back in the day of Cutolo and the Nuova Famiglia, prison during the gang wars between the cartels of Sanità and Forcella, between the Mocerinos and the Strianos. He was responsible for stashing weapons, he'd been a *specchiettista*, the one who fingers the intended victim. He lived with his mother in a *basso*, an airless ground-floor apartment, his career had never gone anywhere, they paid him a pittance and tossed him the occasional Slavic prostitute to bring home, forcing his mother to go over to the neighbors' house till he was done. But he was a guy Copacabana trusted. He was reliable when it came to taking care of business: he'd drive Copacabana places, he'd hand off the bricks of hash on his behalf to Agostino and the other kids.

Alvaro had shown him where they were supposed to stand. The apartment where they kept the hash was on the top floor. They needed to go down to the atrium. It wasn't like in Scampia, where there were gates and barriers, none of that. Copacabana wanted a freer dope market, less fortified.

Their assignment was simple. They'd show up on the spot a short time before the real activity began, so they could use their own knives to cut the hash up into various chunks. Alvaro joined them to chop up a few chunklets and big pieces. Ten-euro chunks, fifteen-euro chunks, fifty-euro chunks. Then they'd wrap up the hash in the usual aluminum foil and keep the pieces ready; they'd sort the grass into baggies. The customers would ride into the atrium of the apartment house on their motor scooters or else come on foot, hand over the cash, and turn to go. The mechanism was reliable because the quarter could rely on lookouts paid by Copacabana, and a vast number of people who would hang out on the street, ready to sound the alarm if they spotted cops, carabinieri, or financial police, whether in plainclothes or full regalia.

They'd do their dealing after school, but sometimes they didn't even bother showing up at school, since they were getting paid a percentage of what they sold. It was the fifty or a hundred euros a week that made all

the difference. And that money went to just one place: Foot Locker. They took that store by storm. They'd troop in, arrayed in compact formation, as if they were ready to knock the place off and then, once they were through the front door, they'd scatter. They'd grab ten, fifteen T-shirts at a time. Tucano would put the T-shirts on one over the other. Just Do It. Adidas. Nike. One symbol would vanish only to be replaced by others in a split second. Nicolas bought three pairs of Air Jordans at the same time. High-tops, white, black, red, all he cared about was if Michael was on them, slam-dunking one-handed. Briato', too, had gone crazy for basketball shoes; he wanted them green, with neon soles, but the minute he picked them up Lollipop had checked him, saying: "Green? What are you, a faggot?" and Briato' had put them down immediately and hurried over to paw through the baseball jackets. Yankees and Red Sox. Five per team.

And so all the kids who hung out in front of the New Maharaja had started slinging hashish. Dentino had done his best to stay out of it, but that had lasted only a couple of months, then he'd started peddling hash at the construction site where he worked. Lollipop was slinging hash at the gym. Briato', too, had started working for Copacabana, he'd do anything Nicolas asked him to. The market wasn't gigantic the way it had been in the eighties and nineties: Secondigliano had absorbed the whole market, then the business had flowed away from Naples proper, to Melito. But now it was migrating to the historic city center.

Every week, Alvaro called around and gave them their pay: the more you sold, the more you earned. They always managed to skim a little extra off the top with some sly maneuvers outside the regular dealing, breaking off some smaller chunks or ripping off some rich and particularly dim-witted friend. But never in Forcella. There the price was the price and the quantity was preset. Nicolas didn't do a lot of regular shifts because he sold at parties as well as to his father's gym students, but he'd started really bringing in money only when the students had started protesting and had occupied his school, the Arts High School. He'd started dealing hash to everyone. In the classrooms where there were no teachers, in the gym, in the hallways, on the stairs, in the bathrooms. Everywhere. The prices rose as they spent more nights in the school. Only now he was getting dragged into political discussions, too. One time he'd gotten into a

fistfight because, during a collective session, he'd said: "If you ask me, Mussolini was an impressive guy, because guys who know how to command respect are impressive. I like Che Guevara, too."

"You'd better not even dare utter Che Guevara's name," said one of the guys with long hair and an unbuttoned shirt. They'd chest-bumped, shoved each other, but Nicolas didn't give a damn about the jerk from Via dei Mille, they didn't even go to the same school. What did that guy know about respect and being impressive? If you're from Via dei Mille, you've assumed everyone respects you from the day you're born. If you're from lower Naples, you have to go out and fight for respect. The comrade might talk about moral categories, but to Nicolas, who'd just seen a few pictures of Mussolini and a few old film clips on TV, the words *moral category* had no real meaning, and so he'd slammed a head butt into the guy's nose, as if to say: here, let me explain it to you this way, you jackoff, you don't know what you're talking about. Just and unjust, good and bad. They're all the same. On his Facebook wall Nicolas had lined them up: the Duce shouting out a window, the king of the Gauls bowing down to Caesar, Muhammad Ali barking at his adversary flat on his back. The strong and the weak. That's the only real distinction. And Nicolas knew which side he was on.

It was there, in that very private narcotics market of his, that he'd first met Pesce Moscio. While they were smoking big bomber joints, there was a kid who happened to know the magic word:

"Oh, but I saw you out front of the New Maharaja!"

"Okay, so what do you know about it?" Nicolas had replied.

"I hang out there, too," then he'd added: "Listen here, listen to this music." And he'd initiated Nicolas, who up till then had only ever listened to Italian pop music, into the toughest American hip-hop, the vicious kind, the kind that vomits out an incomprehensible gush of words, every here and there jutting out a "fuck" just to keep things in order.

Nicolas really liked that guy, he was shameless but he treated him with respect. And so, after the end of the occupation, when Pesce Moscio had also started slinging hash at his own school, despite the fact that he wasn't from Forcella, every once in a while they'd let him work in the apartment house.

It was inevitable that sooner or later they would be caught. Right before Christmas there was a sweep. It was Agostino's shift. Nicolas was just arriving to relieve him and he hadn't noticed anything. The lookout had been caught off guard. The narcotics cops had pretended to stop a car to inspect it and then they'd come down on them just as they were trying to get rid of the hash.

They'd called Nicolas's father, who showed up at police headquarters and just stood there, contemplating the sight of his son with a blank expression that gradually turned into a glare of rage. Nicolas had kept his eyes on the floor for a good long while. Then, when he finally made up his mind to look up, he'd done so without a shred of humility, and his father had smacked him twice, once a straight-armed slap and the other the back of his hand, both powerful blows, longtime tennis player that he was. Nicolas hadn't uttered a single syllable, only a pair of tears had welled up in his eyes, the product of the physical pain, not from any sorrow or grief.

Only then had his mother come in like a fury. She'd appeared, taking up the entire doorway, arms thrown wide, hands on the door frame as if she were trying to hold up the building. Her husband had stepped aside to leave the scene to her. And she'd taken it. She'd crept slowly closer to Nicolas, with the gait of a ferocious beast. When she was finally right in front of him, as if she were about to embrace him, she'd whispered in his ear: "What a disgrace, what *scuorno*." And she'd continued: "What company have you been keeping, what company?" Her husband had heard without understanding, and Nicolas had lurched violently away from her, so that his father had lunged at him again, crushing him against the wall: "Now just look at him. 'O *spacciatore*—the drug dealer. How the fuck can this be?!"

"Drug dealer, my ass," his mother had said, pulling her husband aside. "Oh, the shame."

"So what do you think," Nicolas had blurted out, "that my closet turned into a Foot Locker display case just by accident? By working at a gas station on Saturdays and Sundays?"

"Nice asshole you are. And now you're going to do some jail time," his mother had said.

"What jail time?"

And she'd hauled off and slapped him, with less force than his father, but sharper, more resounding.

"Shut up, enough's enough. You're not going out again, you only go out under strict supervision," she'd said, and, to her husband: "Drug dealer, no way, you got it? No way, no way on earth. Let's get this taken care of and go home."

"Curse all the saints, to hell with them," his father had limited himself to muttering. "And I even have to pay the lawyer!"

Nicolas had gone home, escorted by his parents as if they were a couple of carabinieri. His father stared straight ahead, looking out for those who would be greeting them: Letizia and his younger son, Christian. Let them see the disgraced wretch, let them look him right in the face. The mother, on the other hand, stayed by Nicolas's side, her eyes downcast.

The minute he spotted his brother, Christian had switched off the TV set and leaped to his feet, covering the distance between the sofa and the door in three long steps, reaching out to shake hands the way he'd seen in the movies—hand, arm, and then shoulder to shoulder, like *duje brò*, a couple of brothers. But his father had glared daggers at him, jutting his chin. Nicolas had forced himself to keep from laughing in front of his younger brother, who idolized him, and told himself that later that night, in their bedroom, he'd have plenty to sate his kid brother's curiosity. They'd talk through the night, and then Nicolas would run his hands through Christian's hair, the way he always did before telling him good night.

Letizia, too, would have liked to embrace him, just so she could ask him: "But what was it? Why?" She knew Nicolas was slinging hash, and that necklace he'd given her for her birthday had certainly cost him something, but she didn't think things had gotten so serious so fast, even if things weren't really so bad after all.

She spent the following afternoon applying Nivea cream to his lips and cheeks. "That'll make the swelling go down," she told him. These were the kindnesses that had started to weld them together. He yearned to eat her alive, he'd tell her so: "I feel just like the vampire in *Twilight*!" but her virginity was just too important. He accepted that all the decisions

had to be up to her, and so they'd gorge themselves on kisses, oblique petting strategies, hours listening to music with one earbud apiece.

They sent them all home from police headquarters as persons under investigation, free on their own recognizance, even Agostino, who, caught red-handed in the middle of his shift, was probably in the worst shape legally. For days they spent their time trying to remember what they had written in the chat rooms to one another, because their cell phones had all been confiscated. In the end, the decision was an easy one: Alvaro would take the fall. Copacabana put together an anonymous tip, and the carabinieri found the whole drug supply in his *basso*. He even took responsibility for having given the hash to the kids. When Copacabana had informed him that he was going back to prison, he replied: "No! Again? What the fuck." Not another word after that. In exchange, he'd get a regular payment, a pittance, a thousand euros. And before he turned himself in at the front gate of Poggioreale prison, a Romanian girl. But, he'd asked, he wanted to marry her. And Copacabana had replied, very simply: "Let's see what we can do."

In the meantime, they'd gotten their hands on new smartphones for just a few euros, clearly stolen, just to start keeping the group together again. They'd resolved not to write anything about what had happened in the chat they'd just restarted, especially not a thought that had occurred to them all, but that only Stavodicendo had been able to put into words: "*Guagliu'*, sooner or later, Nisida Reform School is waiting for us. Maybe that's where we were bound to wind up."

At least once, each of them had imagined the trip toward the juvenile detention center aboard the police paddy wagon. Rumbling across the jetty that connects the little island to the mainland. In you went, and a year later, out you came, transformed. Ready now. A man.

For some, it was something you had to do, to the extent that they were happy to let themselves get caught on some misdemeanor. After all, once you were back out, there'd be plenty of time.

When all was said and done, though, the kids had held up their end, they'd kept their lips sealed, and apparently nothing had emerged from their chat that could be used as evidence. And so Nicolas and Agostino had finally been invited by Copacabana to come into the New Maharaja.

But Nicolas wanted a little something more, he wanted to be introduced to the district underboss. Agostino had worked up the nerve to ask Copacabana in person. "Sure, of course, I want to meet my kids," he'd replied. So Nicolas and Agostino had entered the New Maharaja accompanied by him in person: Copacabana.

Nicolas was meeting him for the first time. He'd expected him to be old, instead he was a man just a little over forty. In the car, on the way to the club, Copacabana told them how happy he was with the work they were doing. He treated them like his messenger boys, but still, with a certain courtesy. Nicolas and Agostino weren't bothered by it, their attention was fully absorbed by the evening in store for them.

"What's it like? What's it like in there?" they asked.

"It's a club," he answered, but they knew exactly what it was like. YouTube had instructed them, displaying events and concerts. By asking "What's it like?" those two kids were asking what it was like to be in there, have a private, reserved room, what it was like to be in the world of the New Maharaja. What it was like to belong to that world.

Copacabana ushered them in through a private entrance and led them to his reserved room. They'd spiffed up and dressed to the nines, they'd announced to parents and friends where they were going, as if they'd been summoned to an audience before the most illustrious court. To a certain extent, it was true, even the Naples of rich young jerks, the trendy little snot noses, really did socialize there. The place could have been a symphony of kitsch, a panegyric to the worst possible taste. Instead it wasn't. It managed to strike an elegant balance between the finest Campanian coastal tradition of pastel-hued majolica and an almost playful reference to the Far East: that name Maharaja, the New Maharaja, came from an enormous canvas at the center of the club, brought all the way from India, where it had been painted by an Englishman who had later come to Naples. The mustache, the curve of the eyes, the beard, the silks, the comfy sofa, a shield upon which appeared an assortment of gemstones and a moon facing north. Nicolas's life had begun there, in the fascination of the enormous painting of the Maharaja.

For the rest of the evening, Nicolas and Agostino feasted their eyes on the people in the club, with champagne corks popping, one after the

other, as background. Everyone who was anyone was here. This was the place where businessmen, sports stars, notaries, lawyers, and judges all found a table where they could sit down and get to know one another, crystal glasses to clink in toasts. A place that immediately took you light-years away from the local tavern, the typical Neapolitan restaurant, the place where they'd serve you an *impepata di cozze* and a family-style pizza, the places your friends know about, the places you'd take your wife. Instead, this was a place where you could meet anyone without owing anyone an explanation, because it was like bumping into them on the piazza. It was the most natural thing in the world to meet new people at the New Maharaja.

In the meantime, Copacabana talked and talked, and Nicolas kept stretching in his head a clear image, which added to the shapes of the food and the well-dressed guests the music of a word. *Lazarat*. The name of a village and its exotic allure.

Albanian grass had become the newest driving force. In point of fact, Copacabana had two lines of business: the legal one in Rio and the illegal one in Tirana. "One of these days, you ought to take me there," Agostino said to him, as he leaned forward to grab his umpteenth glass of wine. "It's the biggest plantation there is on earth, *guagliu'*. Grass everywhere," Copacabana replied, referring to Lazarat. It had become the platform for the largest possible harvests of marijuana. Copacabana told him how he'd managed to finagle major purchases, but it was never clear exactly how he transported them from Albania to Italy, just like that, without difficulty: the sea lanes and air routes from Albania were by no means secure. The shipments of grass moved through Montenegro, Croatia, and Slovenia, and managed to slip into Friuli. In his telling of it, it was all very confusing. Agostino, stunned by the dazzling world that swirled all around him, heard those stories and yet didn't hear them, while Nicolas would never have willingly stopped listening.

Every shipment was stacks and stacks of cash, and when that cash became a river in spate, there was no longer any way of hiding it. A few weeks after their night out at the New Maharaja, the investigation of the Antimafia Squad began, all the newspapers had headlined it: they'd arrested one of Copacabana's mules and now a warrant had been issued. He had no alternative but to go on the run. He vanished, perhaps to Alba-

nia, or else he'd managed to make it to Brazil. No sign of him for months. The Forcella market had run through its supply.

Agostino had tried to understand but, with Copacabana who knows where, and Alvaro in prison, it proved impossible.

"But 'o White's *paranza* is struggling . . . *Adda murì mammà*, if the shit doesn't come in," Lollipop had commented. May his mother die, was his phrase in dialect.

For Nicolas and his guys, where to go to get the dope, and how much of it, what type to sell, what shifts to work had become a problem. The city's drug markets were split up among the families. It was like a map, redrawn with new names, and each name marked a conquest.

"So now what are we going to do?" Nicolas had asked. They were in the back room, a no-man's-land created out of the junction of bar, tobacco shop, mini video arcade, and betting parlor. Everyone was welcome. Those with their noses in the air, cursing as they watched a horse gallop too slowly, those perched on stools with their noses stuck in demitasses of espresso, those who were busy flushing their salaries down the drain on the slot machines. And then there were Nicolas and his friends, as well as the Capelloni. White had just shot up, he was clearly wrecked on cocaine, which he no longer ingested through his nostrils but, with increasing frequency, through his veins. He was playing foosball all by himself, taking on two of his men, Chicchirichì and Selvaggio. He'd leap with agility from one handle to another, twisting the rods like a *tarantolato*, someone in the proverbial frenzy caused by a tarantula bite. Extremely talkative, but antennae picking up everything, every word that might chance to reach his ears. And he'd picked up on that utterance of Nicolas's: "So now what are we going to do?"

"*Vulite faticà, criatu'? Eh!*" he'd said, rolling a joint the whole time. "So you want to work, kid? Okay! You can work now, but as substitutes. I'll send you out, and you can work on some other market that needs you . . ."

They'd accepted unwillingly, but they really had no other option. After Copacabana was shuffled off the stage, the Forcella market was out of business for good.

They'd started working for anyone who had a hole to fill. Arrested Moroccan dealers, pushers with a fever, unreliable *guaglioni* dismissed

from the crew. They worked for the Mocerino clan of Sanità, the Pesacane family in Cavone, sometimes they even went as far as Torre Annunziata to lend a hand to the Vitiellos. The locations where they peddled had turned into a nomadic wandering. Sometimes it was Piazza Bellini, other times the main station. People would reach out to them at the last minute, their cell-phone numbers known to all the Camorra scum of the region. Nicolas had gotten tired, little by little he'd stopped pushing the extra hash and was spending more time at home. All the kids who were older than them were making money even if they really weren't much good at their work, people who'd been caught red-handed, people who shuttled in and out of Poggioreale: White offered third-rate working conditions.

Still, the weather vane of fortune had started to veer.

That, at least, was the meaning of the text Agostino had sent Nicolas while he, outside Letizia's apartment house, was doing his best to convince her that Renatino's humiliation had been nothing more than an act of love.

"*Guagliu'*, Copacabana is back in Naples," said Agostino as soon as Nicolas halted his scooter next to his and Briato's. They were idling there, motors running, at the last turn in the road before the New Maharaja. The club could just be glimpsed from that location, and when it was closed it looked even more imposing.

"And he's an asshole for coming back, because they'll take him down for sure," said Briato'.

"No, no, the reason Copacabana came back is something super-important."

"So we can start selling hash and grass!" said Briato', and he glanced at Agostino with a smile. The first one of the day.

"Yeah, ri-i-i-ight! Get serious . . . I swear to you, he's back to organize 'o Micione's wedding, he's going to get married to Viola Striano, *guagliu'*!"

"Are you for real?" said Nicolas.

"Yes," and he added lest there be any lingering doubt: "*Adda murì mammà.*"

"Which means that now the guys from San Giovanni are in charge here, at our house . . ."

"So what does that matter?" Agostino replied. "Copacabana is here and he wants to see us."

"Where?"

"Here, I already told you, and right now . . ." he said, pointing at the club. "The others will be here any minute."

The time to change their lives was now. Nicolas knew it, he could sense that the opportunity would arrive. And now here it was. You go, you answer the call. You have to be strong with the strong. He actually had no idea what was going to happen, but he could use his imagination.

ıad gone bad, but the truth
:nough with his thumb on

m to speed things up.

ey had no idea where, they
ers next to his and asking
ng on his face. Most of all,
d town with those weapons
d it certainly wasn't a safe
were ready for a war. Any

TRAINING

The road surface was uneven, potholes everywhere: they sprout in the dozens after every rainstorm, like mushrooms. Once they'd passed Garibaldi Station and turned into Via Ferraris, the *paranza* was forced to slow down.

Nicolas was going to see a young Eritrean woman who lived in Gianturco. She was the sister of the woman who helped his mother keep house. Her name was Aza, she was a little over thirty, but she looked fifty, easily. She lived in the apartment of a woman with Alzheimer's as a caregiver. In that part of town, even the Ukrainian women wouldn't come anymore.

Nicolas had a hunch that this could be the perfect hiding place for the *paranza*'s arsenal. But he said nothing to the others. This wasn't the moment. Everyone else followed his Beverly. Some of them had asked him, along the way, what they were going to be doing there. But once their first few questions went unanswered, they'd realized this wasn't the time for it, that they needed to follow and say nothing. When they pulled up in front of the apartment house, Nicolas parked his scooter and, when the others circled around him, revving and slamming on their brakes,

unsure whether to stop or continue, he said: "This is our new arsenal," and he pointed to the front door.

"Who is it, though?" asked Pesce Moscio. Nicolas shot him a glare so seething with rage that Pesce Moscio sensed that if he held his gaze, he'd be tempting fate.

Dentino hopped off the bike behind him and stepped between the two of them, putting an end to the matter. "I don't care who it is. All I need to know is that 'o Maraja considers this a safe house: if he thinks it's safe, then we think it's safe, too."

Pesce Moscio nodded, and so did the rest of them.

The building was one of those nondescript, sixties-era structures that blended into the larger cityscape. The street was lined with so many scooters that the five of the *paranza* were hardly noticeable. That's why Maraja had made up his mind to hide their weapons here: they could show up at any hour of the day or night without ever being noticed, and what's more, he'd promised Aza that with them around, the Gypsies were bound to steer clear. It wasn't true; the inhabitants of the Roma camp didn't even know who these brash young kids were, bold enough to promise protection in a quarter that already had a boss.

Nicolas and Dentino rang the buzzer and went up to the sixth floor.

Aza was waiting for them at the door. When she saw Nicolas, she grew alarmed: "Hey, what did you do to your face?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

They walked into a completely dark apartment, redolent of the smells of berbere spices and mothballs.

"*È permesso?*" called Nicolas, the ritual call of politeness when you enter a home. "Can we come in?"

"Keep your voice down, the signora is sleeping . . ."

He didn't detect in that apartment the odor that he was expecting, the distinctive smell of an old person's home; even though he was moving too quickly to focus on details, he still needed to understand. The aroma of Eritrean food did suggest a less-than-reassuring thought: by now, Aza was running the signora's home as if it were her own, the old woman might be about to die, which meant that the place would soon fill up with family members, it would be occupied by the staff of the funeral parlor.

"And how is the signora?"

"God willing, she's doing well," Aza replied.

"Sure, but what does the doctor have to say about it? Is she still healthy, will she go on living?"

"That's up to God Almighty . . ."

"Let's leave God Almighty out of it, what does the doctor have to say?"

"He says that her body is healthy, but her mind is pretty much gone."

"Fine, good to hear. So the signora will go on living for another hundred years."

Aza, who had already received instructions from Nicolas, pointed to a high nook. Ever since the disease had devoured her brain, decades ago, the old woman had never looked there or put a hand to it. They got out a stepladder and shoved the bags in the back of the nook, covering them with shepherds from a manger scene, wrapped in heavy cloth, followed by Christmas ornaments and boxes of pictures.

"Don't break anything," said Aza.

"Even if I break it, it strikes me that the signora isn't going to be using any of this stuff . . ."

"Just don't you break anything."

Before climbing down, he grabbed three pistols from one of the gym bags and a sack of bullets from the other.

"Don't do these things in front of me, I don't want to know anything . . ." she murmured, her eyes downcast.

"And in fact you know nothing, Aza. Now, when we need to come by, I'll tell you that we're bringing groceries for the signora and you tell us what time to come. We'll show up, get what we need, and leave. If anyone I send causes you any kind of trouble, you've got my number and you just text me, telling me what kind of problems they've caused you. Agreed?"

Aza tied back her drab curls with a scrunchie and went into the kitchen without a word. Nicolas repeated the question—"Agreed?!"—this time in a more peremptory tone of voice. She ran water over a kitchen towel and, still without speaking, walked up to him and ran it over his face. Nicolas yanked his head away in annoyance; he'd forgotten his wound, the cut cheekbone and the bloody nose. Aza stood there staring him in the eye,

with the stained rag in her hand. He touched his nose, looked at his fingers, then let her clean him off.

"Every time we come, you'll be given a present," he promised, but she seemed to pay no attention.

She pulled open the cabinet door under the kitchen sink and got out a bottle of alcohol. "I'll put on some of this. It needs to be disinfected." She was very familiar with wounds, an expertise she'd gathered at home in Eritrea, and which she'd capitalized on here, caring for the wounds and sores of old people. Nicolas didn't expect it; for that matter, he didn't expect the comment: "Your nose isn't broken, it's just a little dinged up."

He ventured a thank-you, but it seemed like too little somehow. And so he added a more heartfelt, more Neapolitan "*Grazie assai.*"

Aza shot him a smile that lit up her careworn face.

Nicolas stuck two pistols behind his back and gave one to Dentino. Then he said farewell to Aza, but only after giving her a hundred euros, which she tucked quickly into the pocket of her jeans before going back to the sink, where she rinsed the blood-reddened kitchen towel.

While they were hurrying downstairs, taking the steps three at a time, Dentino asked: "*Ma ch'amma fà, mo'?*" What are we going to do now?

Those pistols had been taken to be used immediately. In that rapidity, Dentino had recognized an order.

"Denti', you don't learn to shoot by aiming at dish antennas and walls."

Dentino's intuition hadn't been wrong. "Maraja, you say the word and we'll do what you tell us."

At the bottom of the stairs, Nicolas stood in Briato' and Dentino's way and repeated what he'd just said. He slowly and clearly uttered each word, staring at them as if they'd violated some fundamental stricture: "You don't get respect by shooting at dish antennas and walls, right?"

The kids knew what he was driving at. Nicolas wanted to shoot. And he wanted to shoot at living beings. But on their own, they didn't dare come to that conclusion. They wanted to listen to him stringing those words into a sentence. Putting it as clear as day.

Nicolas went on: "We need to do a piece of work or two, and we need to do it now."

"All right. *Adda murì mammà*, I'm in," said Dentino.

Instinctively, Briato' tried to argue: "Let's learn to use the guns better. The more we know, the better we can put the bullets where we want them."

"Briato', if you wanted to get training, you could have become a policeman. If you want to be in the *paranza*, you need to be born knowing what to do."

Briato' said nothing, afraid of winding up like Agostino.

"Adda murì mammà, I'm in, too. *Facimm' 'e piezze.*" Let's do these pieces of work.

Nicolas walked away from the two others and said, over his shoulder: "We'll meet directly in the piazza, in a couple of hours." He made an appointment where they always met, in Piazza Bellini. "See you there."

The motor scooters took off. The *paranza* was excited, they wanted to know what Dentino, Briato', and Maraja had said to one another, but they were willing to just twist the throttle and head for the piazza.

Nicolas, who'd been ignoring his cell phone until that moment, noticed that it was bursting with messages from Letizia.

Leti
My love, where are you?
My love, aren't you reading your messages?
Nicolas, where the fuck are you?
Nicolas, I'm starting to get worried.
Nicolas!!!????

Nicolas
Here I am, sweets, I was with the bros.

Leti
With the bros? For six hours?
But don't you ever look at your cell phone?
Don't say another word, I don't want to hear it,
you can just go fuck yourself.

Letizia was sitting on the saddle of Cecilia's scooter, a Kymco People 50. Her friend had covered the bike with stickers because she was ashamed

of it. But Letizia didn't feel an ounce of shame, because when she was beside Nicolas, she always felt like a queen. There were times when she felt like telling him to go to hell, and she did, but it didn't mean a thing, it was nothing more than a lover's game. What counted was the reflected light that many mistook for power.

Letizia's Kymco was parked right there, at the foot of the statue of Vincenzo Bellini, surrounded by dozens of other motor scooters dotting the crowd of young people talking, drinking beer and cocktails, and smoking joints and cigarettes. Nicolas never rode his Beverly all the way here, he always parked it on Via Costantinopoli, and then he'd walk the rest of the way to the piazza. That wasn't the horse to ride in on before an audience.

He tipped his head in Letizia's direction, signifying: "Get off and come over here."

She pretended she hadn't noticed the gesture, hadn't received the order, and so Nicolas was forced to walk over to her.

He came closer to her. His aching nose brushed against Letizia's, and she didn't even have time to say, "My love, what have you done to yourself?" before Nicolas had kissed her hard, a lengthy kiss. Then, hooking two fingers around her chin, he pushed her away spitefully.

"Leti', *adda murì mammà*, don't you ever dream of telling me to go fuck myself. You got that?" And he turned and left without another word.

Now it was up to her to follow him. He expected it, she knew it, and so did everyone around them. And that's the way it went. It started with his brisk step, and her chasing after him. Then it was the other way around, with her turning her back on him as she sulked, and him pursuing her, with blandishments, and so it went, in a continuous alternation of fronts and backs, voices raised, fingers pointed, hands clasped, kisses stolen. All the while wearing down the basalt pavement of the city's historic center, wandering along the narrow *vicoli*, with "You shut up" or "Don't you dare" glossed by "My love, look me in the eyes, have I ever lied to you?"

The whole *paranza*, in the meantime, had assembled on Piazza Bellini.

While Nicolas was making peace with Letizia, Dentino and Briato' were doing their best to upholster their anxiety with convulsive tokes on the joints the *paranza* was passing around. Who would be their first tar-

get? How would it go? Who'd be the first to come off looking like a fool? Biscottino broke the tension: "But what's become of 'o Maraja?" And Lollipop went on: "Denti', Briato', *marcat' 'a peste*? What the hell happened, what did Nicolas do, did he give someone else our arsenal?" Lollipop hadn't even finished the sentence before Briato' slapped him good and hard, a smack his own mother wouldn't have dared. Along with the smack on the terrace, this was the second one he'd received that day. "'O, *scie'*, hey, stupid, don't you dare to utter that word again in a public piazza."

Lollipop rummaged through his pockets, a standard overture before yanking out his switchblade. Dentino immediately drilled in on Briato', grabbing at his T-shirt, coming close to ripping it. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, you?!" he whispered harshly in his ear.

Lollipop, who had already pulled out *his* switchblade and flicked out the blade, found himself face-to-face with Pesce Moscio, forming a human barrier. "Oh, what's this? Now we have brothers stabbing each other?"

On the other side of the fray, Dentino said in an imperative tone to Briato': "Go apologize to him. This situation needs to get fixed here and now."

At that point, Briato' summoned up a smile: "Oh, Lollipo', sorry. *Ramm' 'a mano, jamme*. Let's shake hands, come on. Still, you were a little off, you know. The *paranza*'s business is strictly for the *paranza*. Not for half this piazza. *Controlla 'a vocca, 'o fra'*." Keep a lid on your mouth, bro.

Lollipop shook hands with him, gripping a little too tight: "It's all good, Briato'. But don't you ever think of putting your hands in my face again. Never again. But anyway, you were right. I need to zip my lips: *m'aggi' 'a stà zitto*."

Flames that flared up and died down in the space of an instant. But the tension persisted, it gusted over the *paranza* and spun everyone's emotions into little whirlwinds.

Dentino and Briato' no longer knew how to dampen the tension. Dentino could feel the pistol barrel, he'd shoved it into his crotch and it was scratching his ball sack. He liked it. He felt as if he were wearing a suit of armor, as if he were more than himself. There was a small group sitting next to them, and in exchange for the joints that the *paranza* was passing around, they offered slugs of rum and pear juice. Dentino and

Briato' were ripped on alcohol and hash. The piazza was starting to empty out. A few members of the *paranza* were answering their phones, replying to their parents' questions with lies: "Ma, don't worry, really, Mamma. No, I'm not out in the streets, I'm at Nicolas's house, I'll be home later."

The university students who recognized Pesce Moscio because they regularly bought hash from him in Forcella came over asking if he had any to sell them. He had little or nothing on him at the time, a couple of sticks of hash that he let go at fifteen euros apiece, instead of ten. "What an asshole I was not to come out with my underwear jammed full," and turning to Lollipop he said: "I ought to carry a kilo of hash everywhere I go, *perché cu 'a faccia mia m' 'o llevo tutto int'a mez'ora*." The last bit slid into thick dialect, as he boasted that with the face he had on him, he'd sling the whole key in half an hour.

"Take care or that face of yours will become familiar to the carabinieri, too. And then that face of yours will wind up behind bars in Poggioreale Prison."

"Me? Lollipo', they know my face in Poggi Poggi, believe me."

Now the piazza was empty. "*Guagliu'*, I'm out of here," said Pesce Moscio, who could no longer turn a deaf ear to the phone calls from his father, and so everyone in the *paranza* slowly made their way home.

It was three thirty by now and there'd been no sign of Nicolas. And so Dentino and Briato' went looking for him at the lair. The quarter was still teeming with noise. As soon as they were inside the apartment they started searching. At last they found a little baggie.

"We'll get two good lines out of this, no problem."

Two lines of yellow coke, *pisciazza*. They rolled up the bar receipt and made a short straw. Pisciazza was actually one of the best varieties, but its color always stirred mistrust. The nostril sucked up all the powder, like a vacuum cleaner: "It seems strange, doesn't it, to snort *'a pisciazza*," said Dentino. "But instead it's good, it's excellent. But why is it yellow like that?"

"Practically speaking, because it's all base paste."

"Base paste?"

"Yeah, without all of the processes that come later."

"What processes?"

"Oh, well. I'm going to have to give Heisenberg a call so he can swing by and give you a free lesson."

They were still laughing when they heard someone fooling around with the door. Nicolas appeared with a smile that cut right across his face: "You're snorting all the *pisciazza*, aren't you, you bastards?"

"Exactly. But what the fuck have you been up to till now!" Briato' welcomed him.

"Did you leave a little for me?"

"Sure enough, bro."

"We need to do a piece of work."

"But it's four in the morning. What piece of work do you want to do?"

"We'll need to wait."

"Right, let's wait, that's better."

"At five in the morning we'll go out and polish off a couple of pieces of work."

"Namely what and who?"

"The pocket coffees."

"The pocket coffees?"

"That's right, *guagliu'*, the pocket coffees . . . the blacks. We'll pick off a couple of blacks while they're waiting to catch a bus to go to work. We'll swing past and take them down."

"*Ua'*, nice," said Dentino.

"Just like that?" asked Briato'. "I mean, without even having an idea of who they are, we just swing by one fine morning and shoot a random pocket coffee in the head?"

"That's right, and we can be sure that way that they're not under anyone's protection. Nobody gives a fuck about them anyway. Who's even going to investigate to find out who killed some black?"

"So is it just going to be us three, or should we call the whole *paranza*?"

"No, no. The whole *paranza* needs to be present. But the three of us are going to have the only guns."

"But those other guys are at home sleeping now."

"Who gives a damn, we'll swing by and call them, and they'll get up."

"Why don't we just do it ourselves . . . and no one else."

"No. They need to see. They need to learn."

Briato' smiled. "But didn't you say that in the *paranza* we are all already born knowing what to do?"

"Start up the PlayStation, eh," Nicolas ordered without answering the question. While Briato' was switching on the PlayStation he added: "Boot up *Call of Duty*. Let's play Mission One. The one where we're in Africa. *Così mi riscaldo a sparà ncopp' 'e nire.*" That last line was about getting warmed up for shooting blacks.

Dentino sent WhatsApp messages out to everyone in the *paranza*. "*Guagliu'*, tomorrow morning," he wrote, "early morning errand for the game we need to play." No one replied.

There it is, the opening screen of the game. "The Future Is Black" is what's written. But the future belongs to those who remember to reload their Kalashnikovs before anyone else. If you get too close to the guys dressed in tank tops, you'll find yourself with your guts spilling out of a machete wound, and if there's one of these blacks, then that must mean something. Second rule: stay under cover. A boulder, a tank. Actually, all you need is the trunk of a double-parked car. And in reality, you're not going to have the air support to call in if things go to hell. Third rule, the most important one. Run. Always.

They started playing. The machine gun kept firing as hard as it could. The game seemed to be set in Angola. The main character was fighting with the regular army, he had a camo uniform and a red beret, the objective was to shoot against irregular troops, guerrilla fighters, in horrible tattered guinea-tees with submachine guns slung around their necks. Nicolas kept shooting manically. He took gunfire but just kept going. At a dead run. Constantly.

At five thirty that morning they hurried over to the homes of the other members of the *paranza*. They rang Lollipop's buzzer, and his father's voice answered: "Hello, who is this?"

"Excuse me, Signor Esposito, it's Nicolas. Is Lollipop there?"

"For real are you coming around at this time of the morning? Vincenzo is sleeping, and then he has to go to school."

"It's just that we have a field trip this morning."

"Vincenzo!" Lollipop's father yelled. He woke him up and the first thing Lollipop thought was that someone was there to take him down to police headquarters.

"Papà, what's happened?"

"Nicolas is here, he says you have to go on a field trip, but your mother didn't tell me anything about that."

"Oh, right, I forgot." Lollipop grabbed the intercom receiver while his mother rushed over barefoot waving her hands: "Field trip, but where?"

"I'll be right down, Nicolas, I'm on my way." From the balcony Lollipop's father was squinting, trying to peer through the darkness, but all he could see was a bunch of heads milling around below. The kids in the street were doubled over with laughter.

"Are you sure you're going on a field trip? Tere'," he said to his wife, "call the school."

Lollipop was already in the bathroom, ready to head out the door, certain that it would be hours before they realized there was no field trip, before there was even anyone at school to answer the phone.

It went the same for Drago', Pesce Moscio, Drone, and the others. They went to get them at home, one by one. And eventually the *paranza* became a genuine *paranza*, a long line of scooters and yawning kids. The only one who wasn't allowed out of the house was Biscottino.

He lived in a *basso* facing Loreto Mare, the hospital. The whole *paranza* showed up at his house, with their swarm of motor scooters. They knocked at the door. His mother answered, clearly on edge. She knew they wanted Eduardo.

"No, Eduardo isn't going anywhere, and especially not with people like you, you're all no-good *gente 'e sfaccimma*," calling them pieces of filth.

As if the woman hadn't spoken and wasn't standing right in front of him, Nicolas took advantage of the open door and said: "Biscottino, come on out, *ja'*."

His mother stood face-to-face with him in all her massive abundance, hair unkempt over her face, eyes bulging: "*Ue', muccusiello*," she said,

addressing him as the snotnose she took him for, "first things first, my son's name is Eduardo Cirillo. Second thing, don't you ever dream again of telling my son what he has to do when I'm standing here. *O pienze che mi fai tremmà 'a sottana?*" Her last outburst in dialect was a rhetorical question: she asked him if he thought he made her skirts tremble, and as she asked it she violently shook the hem of the nightgown she was wearing.

Biscottino didn't come out, in fact he probably never even got out of bed. His mother was scarier to him than Nicolas, scarier than the loyalty he owed the *paranza*. But Nicolas didn't give up: "If your husband were here, I'd talk to him, but you shouldn't get involved in this, ma'am. Eduardo needs to come with us, he has a commitment."

"Commitment, just what would this commitment be?" asked the mother. "And then I'll call straight over to your father, and we'll see. Don't bring my husband's name into this, because you don't even know who you're talking about."

Biscottino's father had been killed during an armed robbery in Sardinia. Actually, he was just driving the car, he hadn't done the robbery, all he'd done was work as the driver of one of the gang's two cars. And when he died he left a wife and three children. He worked for a janitorial services company at the Loreto Mare Hospital, which is where he'd met these coworkers of his, a gang that robbed armored cars in Sardinia. He was killed on his first job. The robbery had gone well, though, out of the members of the robbery crew, two had survived, and they had delivered to the widow a bag with fifty thousand euros, out of the million-euro take. And that was that. Biscottino knew all about it, and this story had been scratching at his gut for as long as he could remember. His father's coworkers were on the run, and every time he heard reports of their activities, he was sorely tempted to head out on their trail himself. Biscottino's mother had sworn an oath, as is so often the case with widows, to give her children a different future, not to let them be the kind of fool that their father had turned out to be.

To Nicolas, on the other hand, Biscottino's father, killed by the cops, fallen in the course of an armed robbery, was a martyr, a member of his personal pantheon of heroes who'd gone to get money for themselves—as he liked to say—instead of waiting for someone else to give them some.

"Edua', when *mammeta*—your mama—unties you from your bed,

give me a call and we'll come get you," he ended the conversation, and the whole swarm of the *paranza* buzzed off to where it was heading.

In the yellowish dawn, down semideserted streets, under sleeping windows and clothes and sheets left out to dry in the night air, the scooters, one behind the other, croaked in falsetto as if they were a procession of altar boys lined up for Mass, spitting out verdicts of undersized engines. To see them from overhead, you might think they were cheerful, as they went the wrong way up every one-way street they found between Corso Novara and Piazza Garibaldi.

They arrived at the bus stop behind the Central Station, a slalom through and around Ukrainians trying to find their bus for Kiev, and Turks and Moroccans, hunting for the bus to Stuttgart. At the far end, between the parking areas and the bus shelters, there were four immigrants; two of them were small and looked Indian—one slight, the other a little bulkier. Then there was a third with ebony skin, and the fourth might have been a Moroccan. They were wearing work clothing. The two Indians were certainly heading out into the countryside, they wore boots filthy with dried mud; the other two probably to construction sites, because their T-shirts and trousers were spattered with mortar and paint.

The *paranza* came roaring up, a swarm of motor scooters, but none of the men thought they were in any danger, since they had nothing in their pockets to rob. Nicolas gave the signal: "Go on, Denti', go, hit him in the legs." Dentino pulled the 9mm out from behind his back, where he had it pressed securely against his tailbone with the elastic waistband of his boxer shorts, quickly flicked off the safety, and fired three shots. Only one shot went home, and that was merely a flesh wound, it grazed the foot of the Indian. The man screamed only after feeling the impact. They had no idea why these people had it in for them, but they turned to run. On his scooter, Nicolas chased after the ebony-dark young man and fired. He, too, fired three shots, two that missed and one that lodged in his right shoulder. The young man dropped to the pavement. The other Indian lunged toward the station.

"*Ua'*, with just one hand I hit him," Nicolas was saying, as he drove the scooter with his left hand only.

Briato' accelerated and took off after the young wounded Indian who

was trying to get away. He fired three shots. Four shots. Five shots. It was no good.

At that point Nicolas shouted: "You're just no good." The young Indian dodged to one side and managed to get into hiding someplace. Nicolas fired two shots at the running Moroccan and hit him in the face, taking off a section of his nose, clipped in full just as he was turning around to see who was chasing him.

"We took down three pocket coffees."

"We took them down? I don't seem to remember that we did any complete piece of work," Pesce Moscio said in a tense voice. Not being one of the chosen shooters was chapping his ass.

Pesce Moscio wanted to do the shooting himself and instead Nicolas only wanted to make up for the pathetic showing he thought he'd made on the terrace.

"They're wounded, they're still trying to get away."

The Moroccan with the ravaged nose had vanished, while the African with the lacerated shoulder was on the ground. "Go on," he said, handing him the pistol, taking care not to burn his hand on the barrel, which was still smoking hot. "Go on," extending the grip toward him, "*fa 'nu piezzo*, finish him off, shoot him in the head."

"What's the problem?" asked Pesce Moscio; then he yanked his scooter up onto its kickstand and went over to the young man, who lay there, repeating a simple and fruitless cry: "*Help, help me. I didn't do anything wrong.*"

"What are you saying?"

"He's saying he didn't do anything wrong," said Nicolas, without hesitation.

"No, he didn't do anything wrong, poor little pocket coffee," said Lollipop. "Still, we need a target, don't we?" He revved his motor scooter and leaned down close to his ear: "You're not to blame for anything, pocket coffee, you're just a target."

Pesce Moscio went over to him, but not so close that he could be sure his shots were hitting the target. He chambered a round. And from a few yards away, he fired two shots. He was convinced he'd hit dead center, but actually the pistol had kicked in his hand, and he'd only grazed him: the bullet had passed through the side of his throat. The young man lying

on the ground was weeping and screaming. The roller shutters in the apartment house across the way were starting to open up.

"What is it, *guaglio*'? Weren't you able to finish your piece of work?"

In the meantime, he was out of bullets.

"I didn't want to wind up like John Travolta, taking a shit with his blood all over me."

The Indian who'd taken a bullet in his foot had managed to make his limping escape, and the young Moroccan man with his nose split in two had gotten away as well. The young African, with a bullet in his shoulder and his throat split open, lay writhing on the ground, in his death throes. On the square in front of the station a squad car appeared, proceeding in their direction from the front gates. The eyes of the SEAT Leon suddenly flicked on bright yellow and so did the whining curse of the sirens. It inched along like a worm. Someone had called the cops or, more likely, it was just patrolling among the departing immigrants, checking out the cafés opening early on Via Galileo Ferraris, and the already weary lights coming down from the apartments. The squad car had just chanced to venture up into the deserted piazza.

"Your mother can suck my dick," Nicolas shouted. "'*A bucchin' 'e mammeta*," and then, swearing, he led the charge: "*Adda murì mammà*, let's shoot these assholes."

They would never have done it, they were dangerously close to being caught, when Drone, who up until that moment had stood there watching, managed to stop the police car by unexpectedly drawing a pistol and emptying the entire magazine into the vehicle.

No one knew where he'd gotten the gun. He just started firing away, and his bullets hit the squad car's hood and windshield.

Briato' joined in the shooting, too, since he still had a few rounds in his pistol. One of the shots actually hit one of the two sirens on the squad car, not that he was even aiming at anything close. They managed to get away because at that point the police car slammed on its brakes instead of chasing them: not only because they'd seen smoke issuing from their engine, but because there were just too many *guaglioni*, and so they opted to call for reinforcements. At that point, the members of the *paranza* decided to go their separate ways.

"Let's split up, *guagliu'*, talk later."

They roared off, taking different routes, on the saddles of their scooters, with their fake license plates. They'd all already switched out the plates before getting caught in a police chase, but they'd done it only to avoid having to pay the insurance.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of the challenges of this novel is the use of dialect. The choice came naturally, but then the composition demanded work, cross-checking, patient listening.

I didn't want the "classic" Neapolitan dialect that is still what we find in the work of poets and authors writing in dialect, and in terms of transcription as well. At the same time, I wanted there to be a full awareness of that classical tradition. I therefore requested the help of Nicola De Blasi (professor of the history of the Italian language at the Federico II University of Naples) and Giovanni Turchetta (professor of contemporary Italian literature at the University of Milan), and I thank them both. Starting from that point, I sensed the malleability of that language; I felt that I could, here and there, force my way toward a living oral language, though reconstructed within the context of the written form. Where this deliberate manipulation moves away from the standard codes, it's because I've intervened as an author to shape, to filter, the acoustic reality of listening within the rendering of the dictation, an accomplice to the characters who were working with their "bastardized" dialect in my imagination.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In translating *The Piranhas* into English, there were two particular stumbling blocks. One was the title, originally *La paranza dei bambini*, literally "The Children's Paranza." A *paranza* is a procession of fishing vessels; it is also a mob crew, or a loose association of young men. It is an exquisitely Neapolitan term, even when used in Italian. The title we chose in English was different, perhaps, but similar in meaning and heft.

The second stumbling block was dialect. Although Roberto Saviano addresses the issue of dialect in his Author's Note, he is writing in Italian and speaking to an Italian audience.

Neapolitan dialect is a great and literary language, with a tradition dating back before English. It is now, as the old saying goes, a language without an army. But there once was a Kingdom of Naples, and it had both army and navy in its six glorious centuries of history.

Neapolitan dialect is largely foreign even to most Italian readers of the book's original Italian version. That is why I have chosen to leave a certain amount of dialect in its unique and distinctive original form.

—ANTONY SHUGAAR