

The den of wolves

This story is based on events really happened, but for the protection of privacy the real names of many people were replaced with fictitious names in any way the Author, with those hier reported, wishes to offend or undermined the dignity of third parties.

The opinion expressed by the Author is subjective and in no way wants to outrage the common moral feeling.

Sebastiano Privitera

THE DEN OF WOLVES

Novel

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*The burden is on the shoulders of those who carry out orders.
The weight of conscience, on the other hand,
is on those who say the last word.*

*But sometimes
money dries tears better
than handkerchiefs.*

Introduction

It was 1940, the year Italy prepared to face World War II. Tortorici is one of many Sicilian villages with a high mafia density scattered throughout the Nebrodi mountain range. My maternal grandfather, Domenico Cerami, known to friends as “don Mimì,” came from humble origins, the son of shepherds and an avid wolf enthusiast. Hence his nickname, “u lupu” (the wolf). It is said that when he met my grandmother, he went to a famous jeweller and commissioned two identical gold necklaces, crafted with a chain and featuring two wolves biting a large crucifix inscribed with the words: “God protect the Cerami.” My grandmother Cettina later convinced him to journey to Puglia to have them blessed by Padre Pio himself. After their marriage, thanks to her, he inherited a slaughterhouse and a sprawling farm nestled in the woods, converting the upper floors into living quarters and turning the lower ones into a highly renowned restaurant. He chose “La tana dei lupi” (The Den of Wolves). This also became the title of my novel. For many years, they lived as if in a fairy tale, but tragedy struck when Grandma Cettina died after giving birth to their last son, Uncle Ninuzzo. Left a widower, Grandfather welcomed his unmarried sister, Aunt Nunzia, into their home, who helped raise my mother and her two brothers. Carmelo was an inseparable friend of my grandfather, known to everyone as “u zù Carmelu.” They grew up on the same street, and their childhood mischief led them to become the two bosses of Tortorici over time. The war’s onset was like manna from heaven for them, as the “paisani” (the locals), who were called in the

city, no longer had to worry about money due to the black market. Their dealings spread across many Sicilian provinces, but when they reached Palermo, there was one rule that existed nowhere else: they had to sell their products only to the local mafia – essentially to the wholesalers – who wielded the power to decide who would eat and who would starve.

Grandfather had a theory about Palermo that he would occasionally share: “Why did that city have the highest concentration of mafiosos? Suppose it were merely a question of square kilometres. How come there were more mafia families in Palermo alone than in the rest of Sicily?” According to him, the Palermitan mafiosos were insatiable and, taking advantage of the war and the widespread hunger, on the one hand, amassed wealth. At the same time, they created an army of picciotti (young thugs) initiated into Cosa Nostra, who always needed to be fed. He would use this analogy when someone didn’t grasp this: “Su ti trasi nu lupu no recintu, si mangia na pecura ogni notti fino a quannu tu non ti cunti. Ma su invece di uno, ti trasi nu brancu sanu: finiti i pecuri, appoi i lupi si mangiunu fra iddhi stissi.” (If a wolf enters your pen, it will eat a sheep every night until you count them. But if a whole pack comes in instead of just one, once the sheep are gone, the wolves will end up eating each other.)

But let’s return to Grandfather: this new activity often kept him away from home, forcing him to leave his sister to manage the restaurant alone. Despite its isolated location, Grandfather was confident that no one in the village would dare harm him – he truly believed it. Unfortunately, one day, a group of fervent fascists arrived, who, during their meal, drank excessively and began to act unruly. In particular, “Màrietto,” the so-called “head of the fools,” made a reckless move on one of Aunt Nunzia’s treacherous curves. In retaliation, he received a spit in the face, followed by a solid “tùmbulata” (a slap in the face), and then a calm yet menacing knife threat in case he dared to react. Naturally, the gesture didn’t sit well with him, so

the next day, the black-shirted bastard had the unfortunate idea of returning. Thinking she was alone, he entered from behind, knocked her out with his club, and then violated her.

Meanwhile, the young assistant had gone to fetch eggs from the henhouse, and upon returning, he recognised Màrietto leaving, pants raised. When Grandfather returned, the assistant recounted everything, and unfortunately, Grandfather blurted out a death sentence. Màrietto had a habit of hunting but didn't realise he would be the prey this time. It was Sunday morning, the day my mother turned ten. Deep in the woods, Grandfather approached Màrietto with a ruse; first, he disarmed him and then, after strangling him with wire, waited until Màrietto's eyes bulged out. Then, when he stopped struggling, he took him to the restaurant, where he first cut him into pieces and then savoured the scene of feeding him to his pigs. (Unfortunately, as we would later discover, my mother was also present that night.)

After Màrietto's disappearance, throughout the war, people believed he had been captured and would eventually return. Thus, Grandfather continued to do business with "u zù Carmelu," all the while deciding to keep the horrific crime a secret. Naturally distrustful, one of the many sayings Grandfather would repeat to me was: "Vituzzo, non ti fidare nemmeno da to ombra." (Vituzzo, don't trust even your shadow.) Years passed, and it seemed he had escaped detection. But at the end of the conflict, the assistant who had pointed out Màrietto was caught stealing from the restaurant. Grandfather fired him, and he was arrested for cattle theft after a while. To exonerate himself, he became a spy for the barracks and, in his first statement, falsely claimed to have witnessed Màrietto's murder. Thus, Grandfather was arrested, and thanks to the mitigating circumstances of a crime of honour, he was sentenced to thirteen years in prison, which later became ten for good behaviour. During his sentence, the assistant also vanished under mysterious circumstances.

When the world conflict ended, history tells us of the advent of agrarian reform in favour of the peasants. In Sicily, the vast majority of princes, dukes, or landowners concentrated in the Nebrodi, like all other wealthy Sicilian feudal lords, believed it was time to hire ruthless picciotti who had no political leanings and, most importantly, would protect them from the threat of communists.

In nature, these picciotti could be compared to mountain wolves, who, throughout centuries of hunting, learned that to scatter the flock, one must scare or kill the lead dog. Thus, during those years, many communists and union leaders met their demise. Those who survived for a while included my father, Ettore Navarra, a committed communist. The Navarra family was well-off, owning two dairy farms and extensive pastureland. Before the war, Grandfather Vito had bought a plot of land adjacent to the restaurant, where he built a house where they spent their summer holidays each year. It was during one of those many summer retreats that he met my mother. As teenagers, they shared their first kiss, and when Dad proposed, my mother was only 15 years old.

However, the world conflict and her young age led Grandfather Domenico to vigorously oppose their marriage. In those times, however, there was a solution: a "Fùitina," which involved a reparative marriage that would make everyone happy. Everyone except Grandfather Domenico refused to escort her down the aisle. In turn, my mother cut off communication with him. She was the only family member who never visited him when he was arrested. A deep rift had formed between them, challenging to mend.

Meanwhile, after the war, Dad, a well-known communist, began distributing land to farmers thanks to agrarian reform. He ensured that some property also went to his brothers, who expanded their grazing boundaries. This did not sit well with some wealthy feudal lords. Dad received countless threats, but nothing ever came of them. The reason was simple: even though Grandfather Vito was