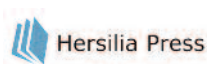


Maurizio de Giovanni

**I will have
vengeance**

Translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel



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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

About the author

Maurizio de Giovanni lives and works in Naples. In 2005, he won a writing competition for unpublished authors with a short story set in the thirties about Commissario Ricciardi, which was then turned into the first novel of the series. The last book in the series has been shortlisted for the Premio Scerbanenco and has won the Premio Camaiore. His books have been successfully translated into French, Spanish and German, and are now available in English for the first time. He is a staunch supporter of SSC Napoli.

About the translator

Anne Milano Appel, Ph.D., a former library director and language teacher, has been translating professionally for over fifteen years, and is a member of ALTA, ATA and PEN. Many of her book-length translations have been published, and shorter works that she has authored or translated have appeared in other professional and literary venues.

To my mother

I

The dead child was standing motionless at the intersection between Santa Teresa and the museum. He was watching two boys who were sitting on the ground, playing *Giro d'Italia* with marbles. As he watched them, he kept saying, 'Can I go down? Can I go down?'

The man without a hat knew the dead child was there even before he saw him; he knew that the boy's left side was intact while on the right the skull had been crushed by the impact, that the shoulder had been driven into the thoracic cavity, staving it in, and that the pelvis was twisted around the broken spinal column. He also knew that a small balcony was closed off on the third floor of the corner building that cast a chill shadow on the street that early Wednesday morning, a black cloth still draped over the low railing. He could only imagine the sorrow of a young mother who, unlike him, would never see her son again. She's better off, he thought. All this anguish.

The dead child, half obscured by the shadow, looked up when the man without a hat passed by. 'Can I go down? Can I go down and play?' he asked him. A three-storey fall, a blinding pain quick as a flash. He lowered his eyes and hastened his pace. He passed the two boys who went on playing their game, their expressions serious. Poor children, he thought.

Luigi Alfredo Ricciardi, the man without a hat, was Commissario of Police with the Mobile Unit of the Regia Questura di Napoli. He was thirty-one years old, the same number of years that marked that century, nine of them under the fascist regime.

The child, who had been playing alone in a courtyard of the

family home in Fortino, in the province of Salerno, one July morning a quarter of a century ago, was not poor. Little Luigi Alfredo was the only son of Baron Ricciardi di Malomonte; he would never have any memory of his father, who had died quite young. His mother continually suffered from nerves and died in a nursing home when he was a teenager, studying at a Jesuit college. His last image of her was her dark complexion, her hair already white at just thirty-eight, and her eyes feverish. A tiny woman lost in an oversized bed.

But it was that July morning that changed his life forever. He had found a piece of wood, which his fantasy transformed into the sabre of Sandokan, the Tiger of Malaysia. Mario, the steward of the estate with whom he spent long hours, wide-eyed and breathless, was an enthusiastic fan of Salgari and his stories were quick to become reality. Thus armed, the boy had no fear of ferocious beasts or enemies, but he needed a jungle. There was a small vineyard adjacent to the courtyard, where he was allowed to go. He liked the shade of the broad vine leaves, the unexpected coolness, the hum of insects. Little Sandokan, bold with his sabre, advanced into the darkness, prowling silently through his imaginary jungle. Instead of cicadas and hornets he pictured colourful parrots, and he could almost hear their exotic calls. A lizard dashed across the path streaking the gravel; he followed it, bent slightly forwards, the tip of his tongue protruding, his green eyes intensely focused. The lizard veered, changing its course.

Sitting under a vine, on the ground, he saw a man. He was in the shadows, as if seeking respite from the fierce heat of that stifling July in the jungle. His head inclined, arms hanging loosely at his sides, hands resting on the dusty earth. He seemed to be asleep, but his back was rigid and his legs, stretched out on the path, were somewhat disjointed. He was dressed like a farmworker, but as if it were winter: a wool vest, flannel shirt with no collar, heavy pants tied at the waist with a cord. Little

Sandokan, sabre in hand, registered those details without noticing anything out of place. Then he saw the handle of the large pruning knife sticking out of the man's chest, on the left side, like the branch of a tree. A dark liquid stained the shirt, dripping to the ground, where a small puddle had formed. The Tiger of Malaysia saw it clearly now despite the shade of the vines. A little further on, the lizard froze and was eyeing him, almost disappointed at having the chase interrupted.

The man, who must have been dead, slowly raised his head and turned to Luigi Alfredo, with a faint creaking of vertebrae; he looked at him with filmy, half-closed eyes.

The cicadas stopped chirping. Time stood still.

'By God, I didn't touch your wife.'

It wasn't because of the unexpected encounter, or the handle of the pruning knife or all that blood; Luigi Alfredo ran away screaming because he wanted to leave behind all the sorrow that the farm labourer's corpse had showered on him. No one ever told him that the crime that had occurred in the vineyard five months earlier was the result of another worker's jealousy. The man fled after killing his young wife as well; they said he joined a group of bandits in Lucania. They attributed the child's fright and terror to his excessive imagination, his solitary temperament, and the gossip of the local women who sat sewing under the window of his room in the evening, seeking a breath of cool air in the courtyard. They referred to it as the Incident.

Luigi Alfredo became accustomed to using that same word when thinking of what had happened to him: the Incident. Since the Incident had occurred... As the Incident had made him realize... The Incident that had oriented his existence. Not even his *tata* Rosa, the nanny who had devoted her entire life to him and who still looked after him, had believed him at the time. Her eyes grew sad and then a flicker of fear appeared, as though she had a premonition that the little boy

too was destined to suffer the same malady as his mother. And so he understood that he would never be able to speak about it to anyone, that he was the only one who bore this mark on his soul: a sentence, a damnation.

In the years that followed, he set about defining the limits of the Incident. He saw the dead. Not all of them, and not for long: only those who had died violently, and only for a period of time that revealed extreme emotion, the sudden energy of their final thoughts. He saw them as though in a photograph that captured the moment their lives ended, one whose contours slowly faded until they disappeared. Better yet, he saw them as in a film, like those he sometimes saw at the movies, only the same scene kept playing over and over again. The image of the dead man, bearing the marks of his wounds and his expression at the very last moment before the end; and his final words, repeated endlessly, as if to conclude something the soul had begun before being torn away.

He felt their emotion more than anything else. Each time he grasped their sorrow, their surprise, their rage, their misery. Even their love. On nights when the rain beat against his window and he couldn't get to sleep, he often recalled a crime scene where the image of a baby, sitting in the washbasin in which he had drowned, reached out his little hand toward the exact spot where his mother had stood, seeking help from his own murderer. He had felt the baby's unconditional, absolute love. Another time he was confronted with the vision of a man's corpse, stabbed by an insanely jealous lover at the moment of orgasm. He had seen the intensity of the pleasure and had had to leave the room hurriedly, pressing a handkerchief over his mouth.

This was what the Incident, his life sentence, was like. It came upon him like the ghost of a galloping horse, leaving him no time to avoid it; no warning preceded it, no physical sensation followed it except for the recollection of it. Yet another scar on his soul.

