FOREWORD.
London 1962.

“You’re a lucky young man to have a job with us.” He smiled at me paternally, Mr. Brewster, the elderly, exceedingly civil senior partner in the law firm that I was working for. Why, I wondered? It was an ordinary kind of job: unkept half-promises about improvements in pay, status and working conditions. Being obliged to act on behalf of objectionable clients, like C Ltd, a south London property company that ‘sold’ homes to inexperienced West Indian immigrants on a ‘mortgage’ arrangement – a document with much legal small print that in the end, on very close inspection, turned out to be a hire purchase agreement; that is, the two-up two-down houses along the railway lines, or the dilapidated villas in SE24, remained the property of the company until the final instalment of the non-existent ‘loan’ had been paid – *never never* in the expressive slang of those days. So the unfortunate husband and father who got behind lost all the money he’d paid in, and the value of the house as well, which reverted to the company. Mr. Brewster’s firm employed me to explain this scam to the victims: the bewildered black railway workers and car mechanics, confronted by the educated young white man in the cut-price three-piece suit.

“We wouldn’t normally take people who’ve been to Oxford or Cambridge.” Why, again? *“Because they ask too many questions.”* Mr Brewster was a man of the nineteen-thirties, the best decade the English business classes had ever known. Services and goods getting cheaper, often better, wages getting lower. Weak unions, deferential workers who knew their place. Motoring at weekends and holidays down empty roads (with a clear conscience about emissions), golf on uncrowded courses.

Things had changed by 1960. Most of my friends in London and myself were struggling to get a foot on the ladder and lived from week to week, from hand to mouth. We ‘had no money’: this could mean a variety of conditions, ranging from literally having to ‘borrow’ tins of baked beans from the kitchen shelves of the other people in the shared flat you lived

in, or having just enough not to have to do this; earning £5 a week (a room could be had for £4 in those days), or £10; having professional expectations (a helpful uncle), or financial ones (£ 10,000 on attaining the age of 25, or marrying). I was near the lower end, but greatly assisted by my ability to 'think like a fox' (the modern term for *lateral thinking*), a quality that lay unsuspected behind my innocuous exterior.

I had been a 'scholarship boy' with the result that I had enjoyed an elite education that had thrown me right out of the provincial middle-middle-class orbit from which I'd originated. 'Home' was a strange, unsettling experience, for me and even more for my unfortunate parents (as they perceived themselves) on the occasions when I was around. I had indeed been a lucky young man to have been awarded those prestigious scholarships, one at the age of 12, one at 18, duly reported in the Times ("our friends take the Telegraph" said my parents): and I had now got a job in Mr. Brewster's firm – through a friend of a friend, the way things were done. One of the spin-offs of my education was to show me that C Ltd., who employed the standard medium-term forward thinking characteristic of such concerns, had not chosen the right way to promote sustainably good race relations in South London. A less positive result was the fact (a slow realization) that my education had been *deficient*. The Cuba crisis in 1962, for example. The diplomatic manoeuvres, the logistics, the brinkmanship, the moral imperatives – all familiar territory. But the main issue in back somewhere (distribution of wealth? land ownership? the role of the Church? – how Mr. Brewster would have loved the 'somewhere'!) seemed to be missing, and at this juncture my life history jumped out of the comfortable sociological studies of the phenomenon of the scholarship boy, and into the real-existing present – in the shape of the approach to the Polish People's Republic at Słubice (my education had failed at this point too), marked (in the late summer heat) by a sudden, dramatic widening and emptying of the East German motorway.

Poland isn't *on the periphery,* but I've decided to honor the place that completed my education, and which arrested the process of Brewsterian

personal invalidation by rounding off this collection with an envoi from the land of clear days and cloudy skies.

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Why Sicily and Hungary? They are both of course ‘on the edge’ – of the Arab world, of the Slav world – and both enjoy Mediterranean climates. But there’s also this: put back to back, the events I describe happen often to throw features of the other society into relief.

Finally, the stories are bound together by everyday themes like money and work, and by personal ones like music and the need to believe in something.

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1965-1966. Vinti

I was paid 85.000 a month in the seriously beautiful bills of the local currency. My room, furnished with three beds and two young Sicilian men, cost 30.000. This was good for practicing Italian and coming to terms with the local dialect. There was no heating in the house, and indeed nothing much else at all. A cup of coffee in the town cost 100. The simplest pizza 250. A liter of local red wine (bring your own bottle) 100. I had a low-prestige, white-collar job which meant laundry expenses; it was peripatetic, which meant four or five appointments every day in different parts of the large town, which in turn meant petrol expenses. One might have supposed, looking at this breakdown, that drunkenness would have been the answer to the poverty trap: however, in Sicily even the slightest sign of being unbuttoned – a smile, a cheerful word – was frowned upon.

I was fractionally above the level of white trash, and the fact that I was English and not American – this was always one of the first questions, and at street level always the very first – ensured that I received the appropriate down-grade from local society, street-traders, and similar punters. An advantage. It also made my decision easier to commute between two states, that of being actual white trash, and on a couple of days a week temporarily rising to a half-acceptable middle social status.

It is well known that Italians know how to build roads, tunnels, and railways on scientific engineering principles and with style. This virtue, exceptionally, extends southwards down to Sicily – so much so that the railway station at Acireale, about twenty kilometers north of where I was working, figured recently in the good taste pages of the Saturday edition of the London Financial Times. In Catania itself the railway runs over one of the main arteries on a most elegant viaduct, from where, perhaps on an April evening in 1966, you might have seen young people playing a ragged kind of football in the street, with me among them. It was said to have been a red-light district; if so, without any of the activity that one normally would associate with such a place.

I had two friends. One was Andrea, in charge, but not the owner, of the Bar Corsaro, a small backstreet place. A have-not. He worked eighteen hours a day – I was often there at six in the morning, or at midnight – with one day off. He lived in a single room somewhere outside the town with his wife and two children. He was a small, outwardly cheerful man: inwardly worried about his marriage, his wife's health, his children, and how he might improve things. Apart from serving customers, he did the baking too, so that the Corsaro was warm in winter and I suppose he was able to 'take home' some of the flour. On his day off he liked to walk around the local countryside shooting small birds for his wife to cook.

Andrea on his day off.

Harsh societies like Sicily throw up saints here and there. Andrea was one of these. Modest, charitable: also chatty, unlike my other friend, a regular at the Corsaro called Franca – a solidly built lady in early middle-age who looked after the needs of the local men, doing her business in a manner that I found impossible to pin down. Who called (approached?)

whom? Without anything ever been said, she sensed my poverty and pushed over cakes and glasses of brandy in my direction whenever business was slack.

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After a while I found that I couldn't after all survive on the 85,000. I moved to a place ten kilometers up the coast in the direction of Acireale. The room in the barrack-like block cost 10,000. A long, dark room with a metal bedstead, and a small space at the far end containing a cooker (one plate), a stone sink and an open, seatless toilet-bowl. This close proximity of the 'loading' and the 'unloading' functions of the body (the picturesque wording comes from the Russian) – which could also be found in the Corsaro – might have been commended in an earlier intellectual age as an example of the 'natural life'. But disagreeable to me, as were the outsize insects that inhabited the place, and the climate which had transformed itself from winter to summer in a space of a week or two. I had other concerns, too. The unsmiling faces that I had got used to in Catania were accompanied in this village by serious ill-health, which the inhabitants ascribed to the 'bad air' (*mal' aria* in the village dialect) emanating from Mount Etna. Biology lessons that I had had at school suggested another reason, the swarms of flies that commuted between the bodies of dead cats and dogs that were left in the main street and the meat on open display in the village butcher's shop. Other things too – like the exasperated mother that I saw one day force-feeding her baby with simple boiled pasta, details of which procedure I'd like to spare the reader.

Old intellectual habits told me that lack of education was to blame (children did not appear to attend school regularly in Sicily), and my Protestant upbringing that I ought to 'do something about it'. I had by now some good contacts among the senior staff in the city hospital. I can't remember how I packaged the invitation – an interesting socio-medical view of authentic village life, a sea-side fish dinner? – but to my surprise the deputy director of the hospital accepted and came out one

Saturday evening accompanied by his Swedish wife. We sat near the beach in the village restaurant. Night fell. The grubby beach – soiled stones and pebbles, the untreated detritus of decades (no rubbish collection, no tide), the odd small boat, bits of sacking and old rope, a discarded shoe – dissolved into the darkness. The first half of the evening was developing into a qualified success. Then I came to the point: I had in mind an 'information evening' dealing with simple matters of hygiene, along the lines of presentations that I'd seen in Women's Institutes in English villages. A naïve suggestion.

'Of course not. This is not the affair of the hospital.' (from the deputy director)

'But just one hour, one evening. With your authority, much suffering would be spared. The people here have no information.'

'The people here are fishermen.'

'Danilo Dolci has written…' This Italian sociologist was famous in the liberal circles I moved in in London at the time.

'A dangerous man, a bad one. Yes, I believe his opinions have come to the attention of foreigners. I suppose you have enough money to buy a return ticket to England. I advise you to do that.'

'But…'

'*Sono pescatori*.'

He was partly right. A few were indeed fishermen. We had eaten well enough. The connections drawn by the deputy director were those of a society far older than the one I came from. That is, if modern English society can be said to have been put on course with the Great Reform Bill of 1832. I recalled Mrs. Alexander's lines, written in the mid-19th century:

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate
He made them, high or lowly,
And order'd their estate.

The title of this hymn, which I sang as a young school-boy without understanding the implication of the words, in particular 'estate', was All Things Bright and Beautiful.

The most interesting participant in this discussion of social and political principles was, needless to say, the Swedish wife. She said little, but her persona took up more space than the deputy director or myself. Like me she was evidently enlightened. Well-dressed, well-mannered, soignée, class. But a long way from the legendary Miss Finland in the 1970s, who, asked by a reporter what she'd most like, replied: *"I would like there are better people."*

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I could have called this story *'pescatori'* but there weren't many fishermen in the village and I hardly ever saw one of the boats on the shore going out for that purpose. I suppose the deputy director would have said *'contadini'* had the land around the village been less arid, less friable, and able to offer the inhabitants something to do.

Italians who came to Sicily from the mainland, not only from the north but also from the *mezzogiorno* south of Rome were even more disturbed by what they encountered than me. I formed a close friendship with one of these, an insurance salesman from Naples, another Andrea. He had the appearance of a Mediterranean petty criminal: a sharp dresser, a thin hard face, thick oily black hair, the sideburns too long. He volunteered to take me for a drive in the country on Sundays when he was free, having noticed my lonely demeanor and poor Italian. I suspected his motives at first, quite unjustly: he wanted to help me along, and within three months I could speak Italian like a near-native. He also liked to use the expression *la mentalità* as a catch-all for the confusing cultural differences – and *vinti* for what had happened to the Sicilians. He wasn't referring to defeat in war. As time went on I noticed that the other Andrea in the Corsaro and the village people that I got to know also used the word *vinti,* to describe themselves.

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I'd been wondering how far to go back down the long stony road of history to find out what *vinti* might have meant. The Vandals, the Normans? Perhaps to 1943, when the Allies and the Axis forces battled it out in the summer heat with the rightful inhabitants of Sicily looking on as spectators, aware that they'd done nothing wrong, but equally nothing to deserve gratitude from either combatant. I'd fallen into the trap of thinking of military matters.

More to the point, and moving up to modern times, I'd recently witnessed an enormous fascist rally in the main square of Catania devoted to the memory of Mussolini. Everything was taken for granted: there was no checking of credentials, no police; it was easy for me to join in, to pick up and take away an outsize poster, which I still have today. The rally was very well attended, several thousand people. Right arms were thrust out, hands stretched. The poster shows Il Duce in familiar pose – steadfast, firm jaw, altogether a man you could trust to zap the opposition – his head and shoulders, in the form of a Roman bust, surmounting a list of desirable things that he'd wanted to give back to the Italians: pride in achievement, culture, cleanliness, order, virtue (*virtù,* which includes the notion of manliness, like in Roman times) and *una gioventù non corrotta*, uncorrupted youth. Unlike Hitler, he had an interesting selection of hats and caps: in the photo on my poster, what he has on carries a resemblance to an old Finnish army flapped cap that I picked up in a secondhand shop in Jyväskylä many years ago. It's still in good shape. Sewn into the inside padding is a picture of a bear, which provides the link to Mussolini. One of his well-documented 'virtues' (also unlike Hitler) was his ability to give sexual satisfaction to women, who queued up for his attentions and are rumored to have given him the nickname *orsachiotto.*

Americans say that people need to have a 'dream' in order to feel that they have a country. In my first few days in Catania, in the cold January weather, I frequently observed groups of women sitting on the pavements, trying to warm their hands in the evenings over scraps of paper