

ITALY

Life of a repentant



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p a r a l l e l o z e r o

«My name's Michele Vitagliano and I was born in Naples on 30 May 1985, in Piscinola, an area on the northern outskirts bordered by the neighbourhoods of Scampia, Miano and Marianella. In short, Piscinola is at the centre of an urban degradation caused by the complete absence of the state in that area [...] I still remember my first robbery: we stole a scooter. In two minutes we had earned 150 thousand lire each. I know, the money sounds laughable, but a lad of our age at that time would have earned between 80 and 100 thousand lire a week bent double picking fruit or working in a shop or a drinks warehouse for 12 hours a day. We had earned double a week's wages in two minutes [...] 150 thousand lire each, for us, was like a small bank account. We would steal cars – Fiat Pandas, the first Y10s, Fiat Unos – and then we would go to the beach or to the disco.»



Rione Traiano, Naples, 2019.

«It might seem strange to a young guy from another city or even just from another neighbourhood, but where I grew up most people think like this, and I just assimilated the subculture of that place. [...] I promised myself to write down all of that crude reality, even if it may seem bad, arrogant and destructive. But it's my life and even though I turned state's evidence and today I'm a different person, that was how I used to live.»

Scampia is a run-down area in the north of Naples. Here, at the end of the 1990s Michele began to work for the camorra clans selling drugs and carrying out robberies. It was the easiest way to make money and to pay for a lot of vices: women, gambling, cocaine and designer clothes. Then in 2009 Michele was arrested. By turning state's evidence he earned a reduced sentence and the possibility to begin a new life. In 2014 he was released and the state gave him an apartment in Milan where he lived with his mother and two sisters, under the witness protection programme. His return to society, however, was hard and complicated. Michele began to work as a pot washer, then he was hired as a cook but he never told anyone who he really was, keeping all relationships on a superficial level and having amorous adventures only with girls he met online.

According to a report by the state police department in 2016 (the most recent information available), the Italian "population of those under police protection" numbers 6192 people: 1277 are state witnesses or police informers and almost 5000 are family members that have accompanied them. The criminal organisation responsible for the highest number of informers is the camorra, with more than 600 "pentiti". In spite of the assistance offered in exchange for their collaboration, a genuine integration programme does not exist: faced with the difficulties of reintegration, many "pentiti" return to their old habits and end up back in prison.



Michele smokes a cigarette in the restaurant where he works as a chef. Milan, 2019.

Today Michele is a chef in a restaurant in Milan. He still isn't completely over his obsession for luxury brands and the need to display wealth. Sometimes the ghosts of the past return and the solitude afflicts him. The protection programme concluded at the end of 2019 and soon after Michele was no longer guaranteed a home by the state. Many like him cannot manage to achieve economic stability. They can't settle into a regular job or progress in a career and quickly burn through the money they earn, pursuing lifestyles beyond their means.

Photographer Giulia Mozzini met Michele at the end of 2018. "He trusted me," she explains, "and I was able to document his life for a whole year. Together we transcribed the diaries he wrote in prison on square papered notepads, the covers of which have long since disappeared. Diaries that describe his slow awakening and ultimate redemption." The images of this photo report are the fruit of that encounter and that collaboration. But there was an unexpected twist in this story: today Giulia and Michele are a couple and are planning a future together.



Michele, in his room, prepares to go out. Milan, 2019.



Cappella della Madonna dell'Arco, Piscinola, the outskirts of Scampia, Naples, April 2019.

«Drug dealing created the economy of the clan and contributed to wellbeing in the neighbourhood. Thanks to the streets, even the well-to-do people lived better, it kept the local economy turning over: behind every guy on the streets was a family that needed to be fed and clothed. You bought your phone, furniture and electrical appliances from the neighbourhood shops. You bought everything in the neighbourhood [...] The dealers then paid people to clean the neighbourhood, they bought plants and statues of saints, as well as the fact that shopkeepers didn't have to put up with extortion or theft. Many people didn't even have milk for their babies and we gave it to them for free [...] If we had to run away from the police we could hide in people's homes: one time during a blitz by the Carabinieri, an old man of more than 70 opened his door to me. I hardly knew him but he hid me there for 4 hours and even made me a coffee. When the danger had passed I wanted to give him some money and he said to me 'No thanks, lad. I did it because, after many years you made the new chapel for the Madonna dell'Arco and the Madonna blesses you'.»



Gucci is one of Michele's favourite brands.



Michele looks in the window of a jewellers near Piazzale Loreto, Milan, waiting to buy his first Rolex with his "honest earnings".

«We went outside his house and we riddled the window with bullets. It was a ridiculous hot-headed thing to do, just so reckless. Our adrenalin was pumping, my heart was racing: we had gone there to kill him but he had run away just in time. Years later I understood that innocent people could have been killed by a stray bullet. At that time the thought never even entered my head. Now that I have undertaken this journey through my memories, I can't fully get my head around how I used to be and all those things were part of my daily life.»



Chiaiano, a neighbourhood near Scampia, Naples, April 2019.



Michele's Rolex: the first one bought with "honest earnings".

«I managed to buy my first Rolex paid for with honest earnings. I always remember that the day I turned state's evidence I promised my mother that we would get what life had taken from us and that this time we would do it in an honest way. It was a watch that was part of a cheaper range, I didn't pay that much for it. I paid 2400 euros but it was more the value of what it represented. Between you and me, I didn't' really like it.»



Michele in a nightclub with a transgender acquaintance on a night out. July 2019.



Michele holds his Bible in his hand. In prison he used it to hide cash, a habit that he retains to this day.

«Finally that day arrived: 11 November 2011. I had been summoned by the penitentiary police to the matriculation office[...] The crimes I had been charged with were serious and ranged from drug dealing and trafficking hard drugs to belonging to an armed gang and even mafia association [...] My world collapsed around me. Also, the prison in Cassino didn't have a high security wing [...] I was put into isolation [...] I was really agitated, denied any type of thing and any human contact, I felt void, without strength, cancelled. I stayed in isolation for 10 days until they transferred me to Bellizzi Irpino to a high security wing among the most serious organised crime offenders. I was the youngest and the most innocuous, given that I had a curriculum much more lightweight than the average inmate.»



Michele in the kitchen while he manages his staff during service.



The street where Michele was arrested for the first time. Rione Don Guanella, Scampia, Naples, 2019.

«I got out of prison well aware of being light years behind everyone else. I would have made any sacrifice to integrate into civil society. I didn't even know about Facebook, to give an idea of how out of touch I was. [...] I wrote to the parole officer to request a detailed authorisation so I'd be able to find a job and work for a trial period before signing a contract. I rolled up my sleeves and in the mornings I began to hand out my CV (with false references, obviously) to any place that served food. I wasn't interested in the working hours, the tasks and the pay, I just wanted to work. After thousands of 'We'll let you knows', I began my first trial; the place was nice and right in the centre. The owner sent me to work in the basement washing dishes, cutlery, cleaning plates and chopping onions together with three guys from Bangladesh. That was OK with me: after all, it was my first job.»



The evening of his day off, Michele spends time with some of the regular customers at the restaurant where he works. Milan, 2019.



Milan, 2018.

«The Scampia feud happened between the autumn of 2004 and the winter of 2005. Dozens and dozens of deaths. Police and Carabinieri blocked buses full of drug addicts and searched them. Dealing on the streets was nearly all shut down: demand grew and supply was almost nil. At this point what came into play was the opportunism and criminal genius of the Lorussos. Drug addicts freaking out, Scampia paralysed. And so? There we were – Piscinola, Marianella, Miano – we filled our neighbourhoods with drugs, our streets, our homes. In that period the three neighbourhoods were supplied with all types of drugs: crack, cobret, heroin, hashish, weed.»



During the Christmas holidays, Michele prepares the Boxing Day lunch for his family. Milan, December 2018.



In his room, Michele shows the tattoos on his back. Milan, 2019.

«A few days had passed since my release from prison and I still hadn't had sex, six years had passed since the last time. I always dreamed of making love to my ex, the only person to have ever loved me, but after staying in touch for a while she told me that she didn't feel anything more for me. In my desperation I called a high-class escort. At my door appeared a young woman from eastern Europe, tall and breathtakingly beautiful. As soon as she arrived she told me her fee, I paid her, she undressed and I realised that I just couldn't do it [...] I got her to put her clothes back on and I asked her why she did that job. She smiled and she told me that she liked designer clothes and fashionable nights out. I saw in her that young lad from Piscinola. I accompanied her to the door and wished her good luck.»

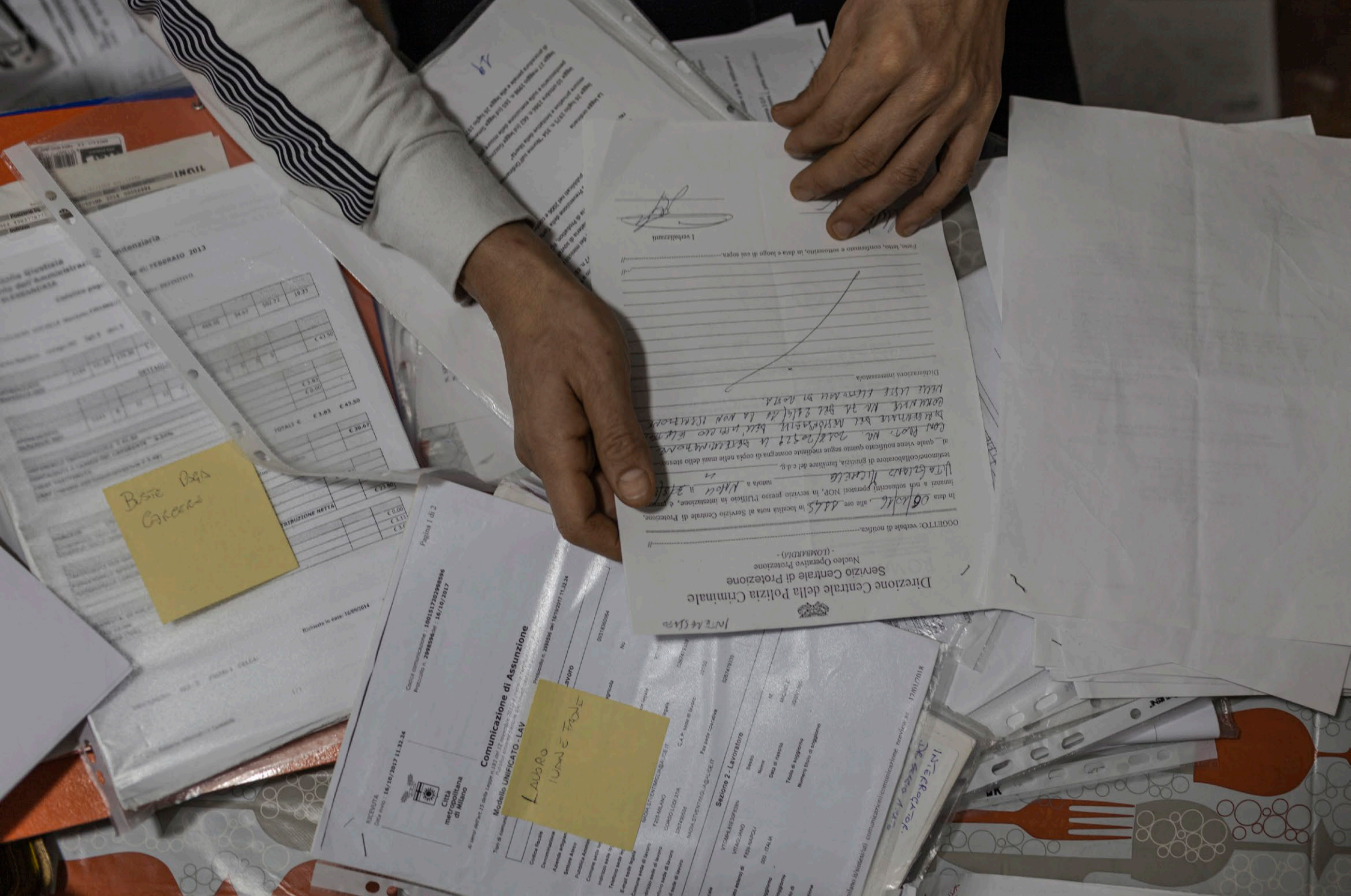


Michele talks with people in a bar. Milan 2019.



Milan, Michele in the kitchen.

«2018 began in the best of ways: I had a girlfriend, I had been released from prison and I had been promoted to chef. [...] In just three years I had achieved what people with qualifications and experience take ten years to do. [...] The chef had started to annoy me, so much so that I began to wind him up on purpose: a typical strategy of the Casalesi clan, after having listened to millions of stories of these criminals who would tell you how they would turn relationships in order to kill off an adversary. [...] I began pitting him against the management until it reached the point when he decided to leave his job: in the moment he handed in his resignation he expected me to do so too, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted his job [...] I took on the responsibilities that the other chef always ignored, my approach was completely different to his: I wasn't the boss of the kitchen but its leader, whenever there was a shitty job to do I would be the first to do it [...] I earned the respect of the Muslim staff by speaking well of their God, respecting their creed and greeting them as the Islamic religion requires.»



The Central Directorate of the criminal police sent Michele a notice: by the end of December he had to leave the apartment, the witness protection programme had concluded. Moreover, there was a huge sum to be paid to the tax authorities. The sudden news brought huge upheaval and caused Michele great stress, leading him to question himself once again.



Michele walks alone on his day off. December 2018.

«Some Carabinieri were corrupt, but unfortunately for us, most of them were honest. Every day seemed like a game of cops and robbers. Luckily the unmarked cars were always the same: we knew their number plates, the worst one was the white Fiat Panda: I still remember the number plate to this day [...] There were times when the police were hidden on the roofs, in buildings, even in the rubbish bins; doing all they could to arrest us, and often they succeeded. But for every drug dealer they caught, there was immediately another one ready to replace him. The money was very good and it appealed to everyone. On 15 July 2004 I was arrested for the first time, fortunately I was only carrying a small amount of drugs. I was held for one day at the station and the day after I was in court: a four month conditional suspended sentence and I was immediately back home.»



Michele, after having received the news one October evening. It was a period of tension and worry for the future. Which, however, was due to change sooner or later.

«I'm constantly at risk of being sucked back into that vortex that I was in before. I've given to everyone and I've given everything to show that I could make up for my mistakes. I haven't faced up to my pain, I've dived into a sea that is no longer mine: nights on the town with no rules, designer clothes, easy women. I'm in the phase in which just one small event could throw everything into doubt. I have to go through everything again, I have to push through my pain, I need to confront my ghosts once more.»



Michele does the ironing in his new home in Milan.

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