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Guilt Goroups

Lannoo

Tracing Guilty Grounds

My fascination with organised crime began with a growing curiosity about what exists beyond the frame. I was drawn to the structures, the codes and the loyalties that hold these organisations together. Above all, I was intrigued by the quiet way these groups move through society. During my photography studies, I had the chance to explore this further through a project on motorbike clubs, where I encountered a tight, insular subculture governed by its own rules, rigid hierarchies and a fierce loyalty that binds it all together.

This project only fuelled my curiosity, encouraging me to read more widely about organised crime. It was through this research that I first came across articles about mafia organisations and became fascinated by their history, structure, and the ways they operate in secrecy. There is always more beneath the surface. Complex networks, hidden codes and underlying patterns that require attention and patience to uncover. As with photography, each layer revealed a new story, every detail a clue to the structures shaping what is visible.

During my research I came across the names of Italian mafia organisations. Names etched into the collective memory for decades, familiar from films, books and news reports. Yet another name kept surfacing, one I barely knew myself. One that had rarely taken centre stage in the stories I had read until that point: 'Ndrangheta.

What struck me immediately was not only my own ignorance, but also the fact that this ignorance was so widespread. As I read further, it became clear that the 'Ndrangheta had long been structurally underestimated in the world's eyes. Not because it was any less violent, but because it remained largely invisible. Its strength lay in invisibility, in family bonds, in silence and in patience.

The name 'Ndrangheta is believed to come from the Greek term *andragathía*, associated with bravery or honour. The 'Ndrangheta is organised around family-based clans, known as 'ndrine, the basic units of power tied by blood or marriage. Membership is predominantly hereditary, and strategic marriages between different families strengthen alliances and extend influence. A landscape of geographic isolation, poverty and limited state presence in Calabria helped shape this structure, embedding these clans in daily life.

There, in that terrain, in the rugged mountains of Aspromonte National Park, I came across one of the darkest and most defining chapters in the history of the 'Ndrangheta: the kidnappings. From the late 1960s until the beginning of the 1990s, they served as a systematic source of income, carried out with almost

businesslike precision. People were taken from their daily lives, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away, and hidden for months or even years. These weren't isolated incidents, but a strategy.

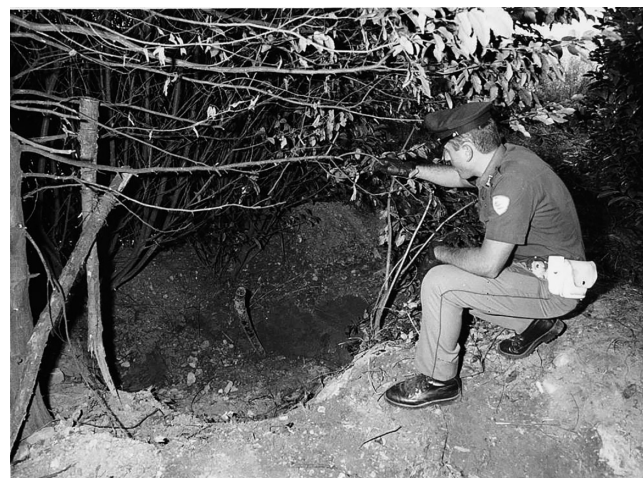
The conditions were harsh. Victims were hidden in remote mountains, sometimes confined to pits or chained in isolation. Beauty and violence coexisted in the same space. The terror prompted legislative action. In 1991, Italy introduced measures allowing authorities to freeze assets connected to kidnapping cases, aiming to disrupt the financial leverage of kidnapers and prevent ransom payments from sustaining criminal structures. Families could no longer freely access funds to pay ransoms. The state intervened more directly in an attempt to break the economic logic of abduction.

In the late 1980s and especially during the 1990s, the 'Ndrangheta gradually shifted its economic focus.

Kidnappings declined as a primary source of income and were replaced by large-scale international drug trafficking, particularly of cocaine. By establishing direct connections with producers in Latin America,

the organisation transformed into a global network, capable of generating far greater profits through distribution rather than ransom.

The terror of these kidnappings – and the heavy silence around them – continues to linger in the mountains. Yet they barely exist in the collective memory, even though they were crucial to the power and wealth on which the 'Ndrangheta continues to build. These stories have mostly unfolded out of sight, beyond the frame, carried by fear and by the code of silence known as *omertà*, an unspoken law demanding loyalty, discretion and secrecy.



The Beginning

I made the decision to travel to Calabria to see it with my own eyes, to test whether the idea I carried could withstand the reality of the place itself. Calabria is the birthplace of the 'Ndrangheta, the region where the organisation first emerged and where its

structures were shaped. Long defined by isolation, economic hardship and a fragile relationship with state authority, this landscape offered fertile ground for a criminal system built on family ties, territorial control and silence.

It was essential to find out whether the ideas I had developed could be translated into images. Whether the layers I sensed in archives and testimonies were still present in the terrain itself. Whether the silence, so central to the history of the 'Ndrangheta, could be

approached visually.

In mid-October, after the tourist season had

“Almost every day helicopters circled above the village, searching the mountains for victims.”

ended, I set off for Calabria, carrying a quiet tension with me. Even though I had done my research and knew which places I wanted to visit, I wasn't sure where to begin. From Amsterdam, I flew to Reggio Calabria, a journey that required a stopover as there were no direct flights. The airport is small and simple: a single short runway, a modest terminal and very few amenities. It felt like a place you would only find if you were really looking for it.

As the plane began its descent, I looked out the window and watched Calabria's rugged landscape unfold below: mountains rising abruptly from the sea, narrow roads twisting like veins through the terrain. By the time I landed, rain was pouring down. I collected my hire car and drove to my accommodation, a charming property of several small houses along the beach, a paradise when the sun shines. In the rain, however, the place took on a different character. The houses looked desolate.

Dragging my heavy suitcase through the rain, I hurried towards one of the small houses. Each unit had its own front garden with a covered patio, the roofs connecting them into a continuous row. One of my neighbours was sitting outside, absorbed in a book. He looked up as I passed and we exchanged a brief greeting. His dialect sounded familiar, but at the time I didn't give it much thought. Tired from the journey, I just wanted to get inside. The day was late, and I was starting to get hungry. I had no desire to get back in the car, and with the rain finally letting up, I decided to take a long walk along the beach to the nearest pizzeria. The sea stretched out grey and restless beside me. That evening, a lonely feeling washed over me, and doubt began to creep in. Had I made the right decision in coming here? The unfamiliarity of the place wrapped itself around me, dense and insistent. The next morning, I felt lighter. As I stepped outside, the sun touched my face and the air was warm and gentle. On the table were two freshly picked oranges, their bright colour contrasting with the plastic table covered in a floral vinyl cloth.

As I walked towards the beach, I passed my neighbour, a middle-aged man leaning on two crutches. We started talking, and it quickly became clear that speaking was physically difficult for him. He moved his hand towards his throat with almost every word. At the same time, English was clearly not his first language. After a few sentences, I recognised his dialect, the same one I had noticed yesterday. A fellow Dutch traveller, living 150 kilometres from my hometown, yet here he was in one of the southernmost corners of Italy, just like me. There was something quietly thought-provoking about encountering a familiar voice so far from home, a reminder of how small the world can feel. I soon understood that it was he who had left the two oranges on the table, a small, kind gesture.

He asked me fairly quickly, "What is a young woman doing here alone in Calabria?" I immediately understood what he meant. Calabria is not an especially touristy region; apart from a handful of coastal towns, it is quiet, at times almost deserted. The place where I was staying was particularly remote, far removed from the city. And no obvious destination for a young woman travelling on her own.

Somewhat nervously, I explained why I was there. "I'm a photographer, working on an art project about the 'Ndrangheta, though I doubt that name means much to you." Saying it aloud unsettled me. He was the first person in Italy with whom I shared my intentions. His eyebrows rose, and almost immediately he started talking about what he had read about this Calabrian mafia organisation. The conversation shifted naturally to my project: the way I work, the places I hoped to visit, and how I planned to move through the region. Only when we said goodbye did I learn his name, Bert. I thanked him for the oranges and offered to give him a lift if he wanted to explore the area. I had a hire car, after all.

As I stepped onto the patio the next morning, a sheet of paper lying on the ground caught my eye. It must have been slipped under my door the night before. A handwritten letter from Bert. In it, he had shared all his tips about Calabria: the places I should see and the foods I shouldn't miss, especially the *pesce spada*, the swordfish which is prized along this coast. He also shared news stories about the 'Ndrangheta that had stayed with him over the years, including one of the most notorious killings that took place in Duisburg, Germany, in 2007. Six Italian men were executed in cold blood at an Italian restaurant on 15 August, a date that was deliberately chosen. In Italy, this day is known as Ferragosto. Ferragosto marks the height of the Italian summer. Originally introduced by the Roman as *Feriae Augusti*, a period of rest after the labour of the land, the feast was later adopted and shifted by the Catholic Church. What was once celebrated on 1 August now coincides with the Assumption of Mary on 15 August. Today, it is a



















Mariangela Passiatore

On a warm August evening in 1977, Mariangela Passiatore sat down to dinner with her family and a few friends in the seaside town of Brancaleone, about fifty kilometres from Reggio Calabria, where they were spending a summer holiday. The meal had barely begun when five armed men burst into the house. They moved with rehearsed brutality. Money and jewellery were taken in seconds, drawers emptied. But the theft was only a prelude. They had come for her. Amid shouting and confusion, Mariangela was seized and dragged away. One of the men stayed behind until two o'clock in the morning, guarding the bound and helpless family and friends, making sure no alarm could be raised.

Mariangela was forced to walk nearly ten kilometres across rough, uneven ground to Bova Superiore, where the Ionian coast gives way to the rising flanks of the Aspromonte mountains. The land there is steep and stony, sparsely inhabited, a geography that swallows sound and erases traces.

At first, the kidnapers demanded a ransom of one hundred and fifty million lire. After a few days, communication dwindled. Then came a silence that lasted thirty-five years. In 2012, fragments of the truth emerged. The plan had been to hide her in a pit dug into the earth. She had been left in the hands of young *picciotti*, low-ranking foot soldiers of the Calabrian mafia, men too inexperienced to manage a captive in distress. Mariangela was fragile, undergoing medical treatment and prone to anxiety. One of the kidnapers would admit that he had gone to Africo, a small town a little further, to find medication for her. She cried.

She screamed. She tried to escape. She was too nervous, agitated and panicked. Unable to control her panic, they found her screaming and beat her with wooden sticks as though she were a stubborn animal. She died from her injuries. Clues leading to the location of her body end at the cemetery in Staiti, where investigators later discovered the clothing she had worn on the night of her abduction.

Buried in an unknown place, Mariangela Passiatore vanished into the earth. She was forty-four years old. Her body has never been found.

