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Opening Extract from...

No Mortal Thing

Written by Gerald Seymour

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NO MORTAL THING

Gerald Seymour



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For the many friends I rely on when I stray into areas beyond my experience – they know who they are – and whose patience, kindness and advice I value greatly.

PROLOGUE

The boy kissed his cheeks, first the right, then the left, and Bernardo smiled. He felt a sort of happiness at the love shown him by the boy, and the respect.

He had told him that afternoon what he wanted of him. The boy was Marcantonio, his grandson. Bernardo was now seventy-four years old and owned a wealth of experience from the life he had lived, but there were matters – at present – that were beyond his powers to achieve. A few years back, ten certainly, he would not have required the assistance of his grandson, but he did now. He was slightly built, maintained a good head of hair and his arms were muscled. His stomach was without flabby rolls, and his eyesight was good. His hands were broad, and calloused from the work he did in the garden at the back of his home. But he had lost a little of his strength and his breath was shorter. He had asked his grandson to do what he would have preferred to do himself. Some four years ago he had realised he could no longer strangle a man with his bare hands when his victim had writhed and kicked and he had had to call the boy to finish the job.

His grandson grinned, then hugged him once more, touched his arm and turned on the step at the kitchen door.

A few years before, Bernardo had taken Marcantonio to a car park by the beach on the Ionian coast where they had met a man he supplied with cocaine. It had been a familiar story, a cash-flow shortage, a contract broken. There was no indication as to when the debt would be paid. The man would have believed he was dealing with an elderly *padrino*, once strong but now in failing health and with only a teenage boy in support. The man had had, in the car park and evident from the glow of the cigarettes in the

darkness, an escort of three. As instructed, the boy had ambled towards the second car, taken the pistol from the back of his belt and used it to smash the windscreen. He had poked his arm inside and had held the pistol tight against the front passenger's temple. No one had challenged him. From the interior lights on the dashboard they would have seen his face, its expression, and prayed to the Madonna. He had reached inside the car and started to squeeze the fleshy throat.

In his youth, Bernardo had been able to kill, by strangulation, in less than three minutes. He had walked the few paces across the car park, relieved his grandson of the pistol, then gestured with a jerk of his head towards the man's car. His grandson, still at school and shaving only once a week, had gone and done the work. A minute, perhaps. One guttural croak, one last kick inside the footwell, then silence. He had thought it similar to taking the boy to a brothel, in Locri, Siderno or at Brancaleone, to lose his virginity, a rite of passage he had facilitated the year before.

The escort had gone and the body had been buried in scrub above the beach. Bernardo had driven his own car, a nine-year-old Fiat Panda City-Van, up into the foothills of the mountains while Marcantonio had driven the victim's. After they had set fire to it, they had gone home, grandfather and grandson showing less emotion than if they had been to a football match. The boy had made no fuss, shown no excitement. It had been a job well done.

Now Bernardo stood by the door. The winter was over but it was still cold. Marcantonio paused, half turned, then gave a little wave. The light came from behind Bernardo and caught the scar – the only blemish in his grandson's smooth skin. There had been a dispute with a shoemaker in the village; drink might have given the man more courage than was good for him because he was rude about the principal family. Marcantonio and a gang of *picciotti* had gone to his house and beaten him, then wrecked the main room. They had been leaving when a child, who had followed them out, picked up a stone and flung it after them. It had struck Marcantonio's chin, had needed two stitches. They would have

taken revenge but a *carabinieri* car had happened on the scene. Marcantonio, a handkerchief pressed to the wound, and his fellows had slid away into the darkness. The shoemaker's family were gone by the morning, their possessions loaded into a lorry, with an escort to see them out of the village.

Further down the track that led away from the house, a car engine coughed into life.

They had talked about it in the kitchen, the radio on, and the television at the other end of the room. They had sat opposite each other at the table, their heads close. Mamma had been behind him, mixing the sauce that would go with the pasta she would serve after they had eaten slices of cured ham and spiced sausage. The boy did not interrupt but sometimes gazed out of the window at the fading view of the wooded crags behind the house and the distant peaks of the Aspromonte mountains. Bernardo had said what should be done, how and where. Then he had questioned the boy: did he understand? There had been a nod. Mamma did not comment. He did not require her opinion so she was quiet. She, though, had packed Marcantonio's grip. The sports holdall had bulged with clothes, trainers, a well-filled washbag, and a framed picture, protected with bubble wrap, of the Madonna at the shrine of Polsi, in a steep-sided valley to the south-west. The boy smoked at the table, which irritated Bernardo's chest but he said nothing. The boy was his future: he had killed five times already in his life, would do so twice that evening. At the end, the boy had not answered him but the delicate fingers of his right hand rested reassuringly on Bernardo's wrist: the old man worried too much . . .

When Marcantonio had stood up, thin and sleek, Mamma had wiped her hands decisively on her apron, enveloped him in her arms, crushing him close to her, then abruptly released him. The radio had been switched off and the TV had been turned down. She had laid the table and Bernardo had poured wine from the Crotone region: a good measure for himself, another for Mamma, but half a glass for the boy, who had tasks to fulfil that evening. The bag went into Stefano's car.

Exhaust fumes spilled from the old Lancia, and the headlights captured the path that led to the vegetable garden, the chicken coops, the shed, whose roof was unstable, and the dry stone walls, which bulged outwards. The first buds were on the trees and the branches swayed in the wind. The last autumn leaves scurried over the path and whipped against the shed door. The boy walked to the car and did not look back.

His elder son, Rocco, was Marcantonio's father, married to Teresa. She was at home, a kilometre down the track. She had not been asked to attend the last meal before her son's long journey. Rocco had not been there because he was detained in the maximum-security gaol at Novara in the north, subject to the brutal regime of Article 41*bis*, by which the authorities could hold men in isolation from fellow prisoners. The problem confronting the family was not with Rocco and Teresa, but with Bernardo's younger son, Domenico, husband of Annunziata and father to Nando and Salvo. It involved *honour*, and could not be ignored or shelved. Domenico was in gaol at Ascoli, also subject to Article 41*bis*.

The problem centred on Annunziata's behaviour. Some women took hard the imprisonment of their husbands – sent down for twenty years or more. A few took to drink, and some suffered nervous collapse. One or two sought a lover . . . which was unacceptable. Bernardo, the *padrino*, leader of the Cancello clan, had condemned his daughter-in-law. A simple enough solution. He could not kill her himself and, shut in their cells, neither could his sons. And it was beneath his dignity to order lesser men to carry out killings when the issue nudged at the very centre of his power. She was a fine-looking girl, Annunziata. She had worn well after the birth of her children. Slim waist, a brittle smile, which seemed always to show that her thoughts were elsewhere. Her clothes, bought in Milan or Rome, were not suitable for the village or her home, which was three hundred metres down the track from Rocco and Teresa's. If it were known that his son, in gaol, had been betrayed by his wife, it would reflect on the whole family and gnaw at their power.

He heard the car door slam, and Stefano – at the wheel – began the three-point turn. God's truth, he would miss the boy.

Stefano was two years younger than Bernardo, and had been at his side from the day that Bernardo's father had been shot dead in the covered market at Locri. He would take Marcantonio to the first targets. The man who had sex with his daughter-in-law was the owner of a small picture gallery in Catanzaro. Bernardo had learned of a beach hut to the south of Soverato, where the pair met, copulated, ate a picnic and drank wine, then locked up and went their separate ways. The man was always there first, and his arrival would coincide with Marcantonio's. Marcantonio would have with him a sharpened kitchen knife and a lump-hammer. The man first, then Annunziata . . .

The car went away down the hill. Stefano always drove slowly. Bernardo saw the headlights bounce from the trees. He knew each of those trees, and every metre of the stone walls flanking the lane. He went back inside and closed the door. The house, expanded now, had been his father's and his grandfather's. He was in the kitchen.

He had seen a photograph of the gallery owner. A short man, he had a beard, which was carefully trimmed. From the photograph, Bernardo reckoned that he took time each morning to tidy it. Within two hours the dark hair would be blood red. Stefano would rip the man's trousers down to his knees, and Marcantonio would use the knife to slice off his penis, then force it into his victim's mouth. He would hit the man with the heavy hammer, one blow or two, to stop the struggling, then leave him in the beach hut. It might be weeks before he was found. The job would be done quickly, any shrieks carried away on the wind – they might sound like the cries of gulls. He imagined it all and felt only satisfaction.

Mamma was at the sink, washing up, even though they had a dishwasher. She washed his and her clothes by hand, too, and didn't use the German washing-machine built into the kitchen units. Their daughter, Giulietta, was with Nando and Salvo, as she was every time Annunziata went out at night. Each Tuesday, Giulietta took care of the children and was like a mother to them. She would not have her own. She was ugly, he thought, especially

with the large-framed spectacles she wore. She knew that by midnight the children would have no mother, and approved. Giulietta was skilled with a computer. She knew how to deal with passwords and cut-outs.

Bernardo should not have been in the house. He had been conceived and born, in the big bed at the front with the view down the track towards the centre of the village. His boys and Giulietta had been born in it too. It was the bed in which Mamma slept, when Bernardo slipped away to the narrow divan in his hiding place, where he felt safest. It hurt him that he could not be in his own bed, with Mamma's heavy hips against him.

He checked through the window. The car lights had gone. By now Annunziata would have left for the coast. He felt his age in his bones, especially his knees.

Bernardo was of the older generation of clan leaders and enjoyed the discipline of tradition in language, behaviour, or in the drawing up of agreements where a man's word was his bond the spoken word pledged a deal. Tradition applied also to methods of killing. A favourite of this group of clans, a loosely tied association known as the 'Ndrangheta of Calabria in the extreme south of Italy, was the *lupara bianca*. The *lupara* was the sawn-off shotgun used by goatherds against wolves, but *lupara bianca* meant something different. Marcantonio had been told that in particular circumstances a body should never be found and no announcement of a death would follow. Bernardo had determined that Annunziata would suffer *lupara bianca*. He glanced at his watch. Soon the gallery owner would open the beach hut, spread the rugs, light the candle and open the wine.

He had nothing to read. There were no submissions from bankers, accountants or investment managers that he could pore over. He fidgeted. Bernardo, a clan leader, held information in his head: he kept no compromising documents in a safe at his home.

He and Mamma had been married for forty-three years: she had not waited for his death to replace her coloured clothing with black blouses and stockings, skirts and cardigans. Marcantonio

was Mamma's creation. She had shaped and moulded him from the time he had sat on her knee.

Annunziata would receive no mercy from her nephew. She was from a clan family herself, had come no more than twenty kilometres to her new home. Now she might have travelled a thousand kilometres but her own people would not have saved her. She had broken the disciplines that were valued by her own and her husband's family. Her eyes showed a challenging haughtiness, as if she thought herself superior to the peasant society into which she had married. Marcantonio would pinion her while Stefano bound her legs and arms. They would show her the corpse of the gallery owner and push her head down so that she could see the blood in his beard and what filled his mouth. She, too, would be allowed to scream.

Bernardo went outside and filled a watering can from the tap, then the plastic jug that held the chickens' feed. He moved warily, his three dogs close to him, their ears back as they listened for disturbance. They would hear if a fox was close enough to threaten the chickens. He was between a line of trees and the sheets that Mamma had hung out, which would not dry that evening.

He had called for a *lupara bianca*. A family in a village higher in the mountains owed him a favour, and tonight he would call it in. It was about disposal and disappearance. Several families kept pigs, which would eat anything, alive or dead. But the family that owed him the favour owned a tank of strengthened steel. It was available to him, he had been told, and might contain sulphuric acid or the chemical that unblocked clogged drains. That was where Annunziata was going tonight . . . The chickens hustled towards him. Each had a name and he cooed at them. He was bonded to each fowl and the dogs that were close to his heels. The last unwanted litter of puppies had been put into a sack two years before and Marcantonio had carried it, oblivious of the squeals from inside, to the stream below the house.

The family had relations in Berlin, the German capital. Marcantonio would spend a useful period – several months – out of sight, far from the *carabinieri*. He could learn the arts of cleaning

money and evaluating potential investments. Questions would be asked after the boy's aunt had disappeared and an inquiry launched, but he would be far away. He had said to his grandson that he must be discreet in the city and not attract attention.

When they went to the building, with the woman tied and weeping, knowing already that pleas for her life were in vain, Stefano and Marcantonio would carry her inside. Then Annunziata might see the tank and smell its contents. She would know that, by morning, she would be sludge at the base. He would almost have guaranteed that she would be alive as she went into the liquid, eased down so that she did not splash them. She would go in slowly, probably feet first. Who in that part of the mountains would report hearing screams in the middle of the night? No one. When the next visit to Domenico was due, Mamma would go to Ascoli with Giulietta. Although their conversation would be monitored with microphones and cameras, he would be told. It was possible to give serious news to a prisoner held under Article 41*bis*, and Domenico would be glad to hear that his wife had been punished for her treachery. She would go in alive.

Afterwards, Stefano would drive fast to Lamezia airport. There was a late flight to Rome, which met a connection to Berlin's Tempelhof. Bernardo had never been outside Italy – never outside Calabria. He tipped the last of the feed onto the ground and the chickens scurried and pecked around him. The dogs sat quietly. God's truth, he would miss the boy, yearn for him to return.

Now it was time for him to go to his bunker, sneak away like a rat to its den . . . He saw again the grin that had played on his grandson's lips and hoped the boy would heed his advice. A camouflaged door opened. His torch showed a tunnel made from concrete pipes. He went to bed.