

*Poignant tale of a community in spiritual disarray and collapse.*

## **Merigan: A Novel**

By Mark Malvasi

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# Merigan

a novel

Mark G. Malvasi



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## **Prefatory Note**

People live by the stories they tell and the myths and fictions they create, for chaos lingers beneath all life. Without art disorder would prevail. The narrative that follows is such a fiction, a dramatized remembrance, a novel if you will. At certain points in the narrative, fiction becomes history, recounting the words and deeds, the attitudes and beliefs, the fears, aspirations, disappointments, failures, and sins of men and women who lived at a particular time in a particular place, and who live still in memory. I have tried to describe the mental and emotional climate of their lives and to understand, as Guy de Maupassant wrote, "the darker and deeper meaning of events." Whenever possible, I have permitted them to speak for themselves.

An explanation of the title is in order. Among the immigrants from the Mezzogiorno, "merigan" was a pun. It combined the slang for "American" with the Italian word "merda," which in polite language means "excrement" and in a more literal translation "shit." Anyone referred to as a "merigan" was coarse, unimaginative, lacking in feeling, sympathy, and compassion, concerned only with himself, with his own interests and ambitions, and with money: in other words, an American.

*PART ONE*

Chi lascia il vecchio e prendo il nuovo  
Sa che lascia ma no se che trova

Apulian Proverb\*

\*He who leaves the old and takes the new/knows  
what he leaves but not what he has in view.

# 1

May, 1960

Ghosts haunted the world Anthony knew. These were old country ghosts, Nonna had explained, come across the sea to America, angry at having been left behind. Were there no ghosts in America already, Anthony wondered, since from Nonna's telling Italy was crowded with them? Why was America any different?

Yes, Nonna had said, there were plenty of ghosts in America; the air was filled with them. It was just that the Americans didn't know it, didn't want to know it, didn't believe...

"Why not?" Anthony interrupted. His grandmother didn't answer.

"Grandma?" he said in an insistent, raspy whisper after a long time had passed.

The old woman sitting beside him on the glider stared out at the empty street and at the houses beyond it and said nothing. Her big, square hands rested motionless in her lap.

"Grandma!" Anthony repeated, growing more impatient.

"What? What you want, boya?" she asked finally, roused from her meditation by the vague sense that some distant, unknown voice had penetrated her shell.

"Why don't Americans know there're ghosts? Why don't they believe in 'em?"

"What? What you talk about, Ant'ony? Ghost?"

"Ghosts, remember? Ghosts. We were talkin' `bout ghosts before. Why don't Americans know there're ghosts?"

"Ghost?"

She repeated the word as if she hadn't understood it.

"Ghosts," he said.

She had, in fact, forgotten the conversation after they'd stopped talking. Ghosts were a part of her life. She didn't think much about them anymore. She felt their constant presence and, of course, witnessed the consequences of their acts, which baffled others. She knew; she knew. Yes. It was different for the boy, and to her sorrow she'd forgotten. Why had she opened that mouth of hers? "Damn you!" she cursed herself. He was aroused by talk of ghosts, and now he had questions and wanted answers. It was always that way with him. Tiresome, she thought. Why couldn't he just be satisfied and leave her alone to sink into herself and escape. But no, that would not do. He demanded answers and she would have to give them. She was too weary to talk and too weary to resist, and so couldn't hide the exasperation in her voice.

"Why don' L'Amerigans no believe ina the ghost? I don' know Ant'ony. How the hell I know? I don' know. What the hell! Ma'be it `cause L'Amerigans they got lots money, see, ana they,

they t'ink they canna do anyt'in', solve all they problems. Whatever. Be happy all the time. Amerigans no need be smart," she said. "They rich."

She thrust her hands forward, open-palmed, shrugged her shoulders, and grunted. "Hunh."

"They no needa believe ina the ghost. They no wanna believe. They live too much ina this worl' Ant'ony, too much ina this worl'! They know what they canna see, what they canna touch. But we, we know better, don' we, boya," she added with a look of such cunning that it sent a shiver radiating from the small of Anthony's back toward his shoulder blades. "I tol' you, they *are* the ghost in L'Ameriga. We no getta `way fromma the ghost by comma here. We don' canna 'scape ourselves, what we are, by comma L'Ameriga. L'Amerigans, jusa like us, the ghost haunt them, too. They give no rest forever. Forever! You see," she warned, "you see!"

She paused to catch her breath.

"L' Ameriga she'sa the cursa lan', Ant'ony," she said shaking her head slowly, her hands again resting in her lap. "It will be the death of us. Morte!"

Except for talk of ghosts and curses and death, Anthony and his grandmother sat beside one another on the front porch of the house on Scott Street without speaking. They had no need of words. Anthony watched the white curtains flutter in and out of the open windows, moved by some invisible force, and pushed his feet back and forth against the cement floor to sway the rockers of the glider. But when he scraped the heels of his sneakers in a syncopated rhythm along the



concrete, his grandmother raised her hand, signaling him to stop. He obeyed.

A black car passed on the street, slowing down in front of the house. Not much interested in cars (this one had a rounded hood and trunk, not fins, like the one his father drove) Anthony paid scant attention. Cars took people away someplace, he thought, and when they came back nothing was the same. His grandmother waved with languid familiarity at the driver, who returned the gesture with the same languid familiarity with which she'd offered it.

In May 1960 Anthony Malfiore was eight years old. He loved Nonna more than any person in the world; she was so strange, so unusual, so different from anyone he knew, so unlike other grandmothers, an artifact from another world and another time.

It was getting dark. Anthony abandoned himself to the silence and the darkness that began to envelop him, drawing them around himself like a blanket. Neither he nor the old woman spoke. Little by little, he surrendered his exuberance and resigned himself to keeping still and quiet for her sake, if not to please then at least not to annoy her.

May had been uncommonly warm and humid, and the air was sticky even after the sun started to go down. Perhaps it was the heat that explained his grandmother's lethargy. Even the breeze, which swirled sporadically, did nothing to cool them. Anthony was not bored sitting next to his grandmother. He was content to remain beside

her, watching the white curtains sway and slacken when the breeze died.

The sun descended behind the horizon, illuminating the clouds and turning the sky deep, mysterious shades of red, pink, and violet. Anthony peered into the gathering darkness, envisioning a large, unearthly ghost city arising before his eyes in the black density. There was no sound except the soft creaking of the rockers on the glider, and the music that had just then begun to play somewhere in the distance.

One of the neighbors, like them out on the front porch to escape the heat of the house, had turned on the radio or the phonograph. It was impossible to tell where the music came from, so faint and far away it sounded, breaking in fragments across the inert night air. "Do I hear it," Anthony wondered, "or do I only imagine that I do? Is the sound real or inside me, in my head, that soft, sad, ghostly music coming from so far away?" In other windows, electric lights broke the spell, flickering on against the darkening twilight.

Anthony's grandmother sat upright and still, her hands folded in her lap. Her eyes transfixed on some point in the hazy distance, she again had almost forgotten Anthony sitting beside her.

He was thinking about what she had said--about the ghosts. Her words confused and frightened him a little, but in the way that only small boys can savor the deliciousness of anxiety and fear. He had to admit that he had not really understood his grandmother's explanation. She was right, of course, because she was always right,

about everything. If she said there were ghosts, there were ghosts. But somehow Anthony had already known without her telling him that they were there lingering in the darkness, waiting for him to come to them. In the faint, fading music he heard their voices beckoning.

At that moment, though he didn't have the words to say it, Anthony felt a deepening sadness, an unreasonable, insane sense of loss, as if he had misplaced something that he would never find again and didn't even know what it was, as if everything had already happened and there was no life left to live but only memories--disconsolate memories--that he would sit on the porch beside his grandmother forever, listening to the fading, sorrowful, faraway music and recalling the flood of days, words, colors, aromas, and tears that men call life.



August, 1963

The shadow cast by the house was low, black, and still. Inside Giancarlo Mussolini was pacing back and forth and seething like the water that was nearing a boil in the sauce pan on the stove. Whistling and gurgling against the lid, it emitted slender ringlets of steam that circled upward and evaporated into nothingness. The noodles he had intended to cook now lay scattered and inert on the kitchen counter. He was no longer hungry.

Giancarlo Mussolini had had enough. All day long those goddamn kids had been tormenting him. He was sick. They had ridden their bicycles through the front yard. One of the arrogant little bastards had swiped a flower pot right off the front porch and smashed it to pieces in the street. Now they were outside, taunting him, ridiculing him. He shook an impotent fist at them. Although he couldn't make out the words, he could hear the pulsing chants and the obstreperous laughter that followed even through the closed windows, which he dared not open although he was suffocating in the heat. Giancarlo Mussolini had had enough.

The truth was that Giancarlo Mussolini had given up on the whole thing--everything, on himself, on America, on life, on God--a long time ago. He had never had much faith anyway. Here he

could neither recapture nor recreate the warm, earthy life of the old country, with its simple culture, its sober thrift and industry, its unhurried energy. In their loud, charmless vulgarity, these brats only confirmed his suspicions. What had happened to people in America--his people? What had America done to them? He didn't know them anymore, he thought, as he bit hard on the tip of his pipe. "Goddamn kids," he murmured. "Goddamn America."

Giancarlo Mussolini was a corpulent old man, with prominent, bulging, slow-moving eyes that were at once both piercing and impenetrable. He wore old-fashioned steel-rimmed glasses pushed down almost to the tip of a massive nose, bulbous and festooned with capillaries, a fleshy sack attached to his face. The corners of his broad mouth angled downward, giving him an expression of perpetual despondency. His appearance was slovenly. His clothes were rumpled and dirty, his shirt partially unbuttoned, exposing an expanse of fat, hairy stomach, and stained with spots of grease and food. The shoes he wore were dusty and cracked, misshapen by long use and turned uncomfortably upward at the toes. There was an atmosphere of weary sadness about him like an embarrassed ruin overgrown with moss, grass, and weeds.

Most of the time, he stayed moderately drunk. Some days he could hardly get out of bed or stand, on others he didn't try. In his old age he had become a frightened, embittered, dreadful, worn out, helpless man, timid prey for the pack of wolves

howling outside his door. No one loved Giancarlo Mussolini.

He was a disgrace, it's true, but even in his decline it was apparent to any who took the time to look that here was a man who must once have been astute, witty, and resourceful. He had some sort of education, that much his neighbors knew, for he spoke proper Italian and not the language of the peasants. There was even gossip that he had attended the university and studied to be a doctor. He had made a pile in the old country, they whispered, but had squandered it all on drink or some bewitching enchantress who enticed him with a love potion and kept him enthralled long enough to rob him blind. Afterward, he had come to America to escape his *disonore*, and had taken again to the bottle as his only remaining consolation.

Whatever the truth, his neighbors reviled and despised him and were heartened to see him suffer. In the case of Giancarlo Mussolini, they cast aside all discretion; no one feared that what they wished on him might one day come back to afflict them, making their future suffering in its irony doubly hard to bear. Rumors of his sophistication mocked their ignorance. Rumors of his wealth mocked their poverty. If that were not enough, his neighbors in the New World were southern Italians, from the Mezzogiorno, while he himself was from northern Italy, and more than one of them had said to his

face with undisguised contempt: "It's always the northerners who get lucky. *Rico sfondato!*"<sup>5</sup>

Giancarlo Mussolini detested the world because the world tortured him. He hated God because he thought God had abandoned him. Over the years, his torment had become his obsession. He cultivated it and took pleasure now only in expanding his misery, in that and in his garden, which he tended scrupulously as the rest of his world spiraled out of control. The garden and its plunder were the objectives of the miniature barbarians who now clamored at the doors and windows of his house, driving the old man mad with rage.

The whole business had been Anthony's idea. The vengeance he took on his fellows consisted of planning and executing bolder, more daring, and more perilous schemes to raid neighborhood gardens than had ever before been tried--schemes that went against all tradition and common sense. A favorite occupation among young boys in the world from which Anthony came, plundering gardens was not supposed to be conducted in broad daylight, but under the safe cover of darkness, during campouts when the victims were harmlessly asleep in their beds. Although he saw the trepidation in their eyes, Anthony knew his companions could not resist going along with his designs. Their cowardice and their vanity were far greater than their fear of punishment if caught. He had them now and would beat them at their own

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5 "Rolling in Wealth"



game, since they had no wills of their own and were destined always to follow the herd.

Anthony had earned their grudging respect by not implicating them--by not, as they said, "ratting them out." Even when Father Gaeta came to see him at the insistence of Jimmy's mother, Anthony said nothing. He didn't know the boys who had beaten them up was all he told the priest.

After that, whenever Anthony showed up on the street and shouldered his way into their tight assembly, no one pushed him out. And no one dared mention "the retard" save once. Anthony had shot a look overflowing with such venom that the offender lowered his eyes to evade it and mumbled an apology.

Anthony did all he could to show that he was one of them. He still refused to smoke cigarettes, but he had stolen a few of his father's Parodis, tiny Italian cigars that everyone who came within smelling distance called "Ginny stinkers." These he offered to his companions while he fumbled to light the one he had reserved for himself. They couldn't refuse. They smoked them together, turned green together, vomited together, and laughed about the whole episode together as soon as their stomachs stopped churning.

He drank the beer they pilfered, though never enough to get drunk. When one of the boys thoughtlessly tossed away a bottle and then was seized with panic lest his father, unable to account for the missing empty, grew curious and started asking questions, Anthony retrieved it and returned

it with indifference to his stricken but grateful companion.

Now he led them through the lengthening shadows cast by old man Mussolini's house, while the others created a diversion in front to cover their movements. They came around the corner, went over the fence, and found themselves sheltered in a garden lush with ripening tomatoes, peppers, pole beans, zucchini, onions, heads of lettuce and cabbage, and in the far back corner the treasure for which Anthony had come: peaches.

While the others scurried to carry off what they could, Anthony moved deliberately toward the two dwarf peach trees. He grabbed on to the lowest branch of the first one he came to, boosted himself up, and began to climb. As he neared the top, he whistled for his companions. "I'll throw the peaches down," he said in a raspy whisper, "and you guys gather 'em up." Even as he spoke, he was shimmying out onto a slender branch. It bowed under his weight, his hands already reaching for the fruit.

The peaches weren't anything to rave about. They were small and hard and would never mature in the brief growing season of northeastern Ohio summers. That didn't matter to Anthony; the peaches, small, round, and reddish gold, were a delight to his eye. Stealing them was brazen. No one else would have risked it. The peaches were Anthony's Golden Fleece, his forbidden fruit. He busied himself tossing them to the ground.

Anthony looked up only when he felt something sweep past his right ear. A second later,

he heard a loud crack. How strange, he thought, that a branch would just break off like that, even a small one. Had it snapped under his weight? The branch he was straddling was sturdy. He clasped his hands around the smooth bark to reassure himself. When he glanced up again, he saw that a part of the branch had torn loose and was hanging by a thread, the leaves wavering gently in the breeze. He reached out his hand to touch them; they were as soft and supple as young flesh beneath his fingers.

The world had begun to move in slow motion. Anthony heard another loud crack, and felt the leaves above his head stir fiercely this way and that. Then they were still. "Huh?" he grunted. "What gives?" On the ground his accomplices scattered like frightened birds, forsaking the desecrated peaches where they lay. "Where the hell are they going?" Anthony wondered out loud. They seemed to be yelling at him. What were they saying? Their words didn't reach his ears.

"Jump! Anthony! Jump! Jump!" Only when he saw the old man standing on the back steps did Anthony's mind begin at last to fathom what was taking place, but it moved sluggishly. His body reacted before he had time to think. He never saw the shotgun, but deduced it. He leaped from near the top of the tree, which was not tall, but was tall enough for a ten-year-old boy, bruising the soles of his feet on the thick roots protruding from the earth when he hit the ground. His knees buckled beneath him and he went down, scratching wildly and stumbling to his feet.

Slowly an idea formed in his mind. Run! Get up! Run! Get away! They were simple commands, and he wanted to obey them, but his legs didn't cooperate. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the others scrambling and disappearing over the fence as fast as they could. He heard a voice rising above the tumult: "You goddamma kids! Sonofabitches! I keel you! I keel you all!"

He was running now. Somehow (he didn't remember doing it) he had gotten to his feet and was running. He had just scaled the fence when he felt himself lifted into the air. He was almost giddy until the burning started in his lower back and spread throughout his body. His hands and feet went suddenly numb; his temples throbbed; his legs seemed to detach themselves from the rest of his body and to move in opposite directions. The ground was looming closer. He was falling, falling, falling.

Then it was as if he had run into a wall. The pain rose out of the earth and engulfed him. It was inside him and he lived only inside of it. He couldn't escape no matter which way he turned. The pain had a life all its own, and it had taken over his.

Anthony's knees buckled and skidded along the pavement, tearing a hole in his trousers. Raising himself on all fours, he examined the palms of his hands, first one and then the other. They were bleeding. He tried to rise, staggered, fell, and tried to get up again. Just as he was steadying himself another invisible blast lifted him off his feet and propelled him forward. This time he landed with a hard thud, face down, on his chest and

stomach, tearing anew the skin on his palms and knees and, he thought, gashing his chin.

His ears were ringing. From far away he heard screaming, and the sound of his own voice came back to him unfamiliar and remote. Someone was jerking his arm. He struggled, tried to free himself, and pulled away, but the grip didn't loosen.

"Anthony! Anthony! What's goin' on? What happened?" The voice and face were familiar, but were impossibly far away. It was Joseph who had appeared as if by some magic. "Where had he come from?" Anthony wondered, staring at him as if at a stranger. Joseph grasped both of his son's arms just above the elbows and shook him.

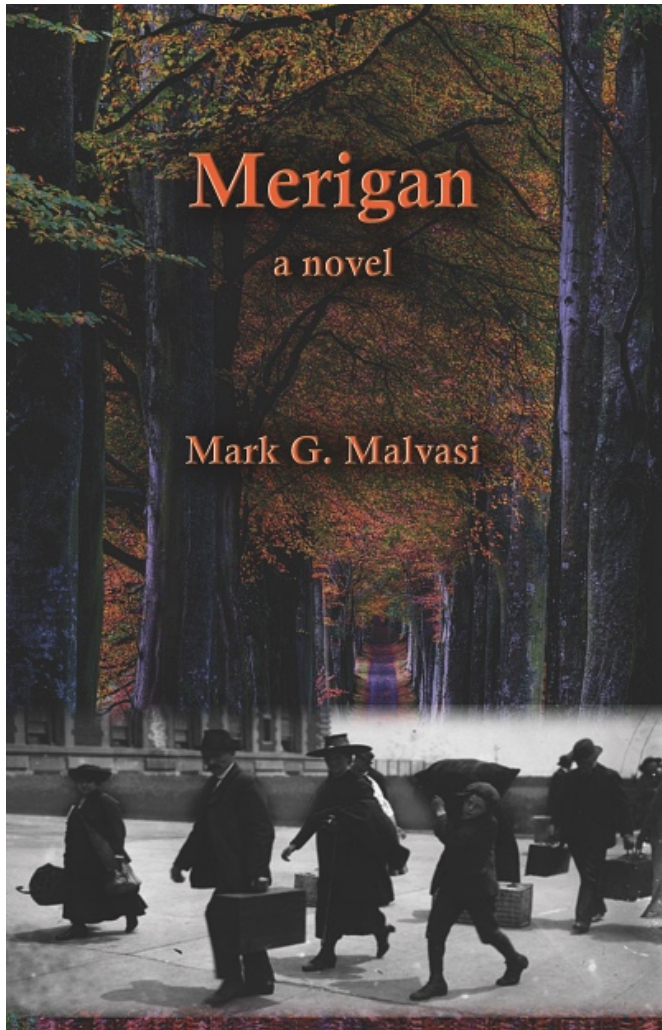
"Anthony," he repeated. "What happened? Are you alright? Who did this to you?"

Anthony was uncomprehending. His head dropped forward onto his chest and he felt his stomach heave, its contents spilling out over the front of his shirt. His father placed a hand under the boy's chin. The touch was tender.

"Anthony."

The boy looked up.

"Mussolini," he gasped, "Signore Mussolini." He tried to point in what he supposed was the direction of the house, but he was bewildered and in any event found himself incapable of raising his arm. "Signore Mus... Mussolini," he repeated, sobbing. "It was Signore Mussolini that shot me."



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