

SILENCE OF THE DAMNED

This girl is growing up in Europe's worst drugs den – a world of unspeakable violence and despair. Mark Franchetti meets the mafia traffickers who have Naples in a terrifying stranglehold. Photographs: Alex Majoli

Investigation

A 10-year-old girl (left), her sister and her mother, who live in a basement flat in Le Vele in northern Naples. The area is blighted by the drugs trade, controlled by the local mafia, the Camorra





The Le Vele complex in northern Naples – the location of Europe's biggest drugs supermarket

We are in Scampia, a working-class district on the northern outskirts of Naples controlled by the Camorra – the city's mafia clan. It is early afternoon on an ordinary weekday, but business is already brisk for the neighbourhood's drug traffickers. Several lookouts, young men on powerful scooters, stand guard outside the lyrically named Le Vele – the Sails, three monstrous concrete tower blocks.

Skilled at spotting undercover police and members of rival clans, the lookouts exchange hand signals and yell out commands. As if at a checkpoint in a war zone, they stop unfamiliar cars and question newcomers. Beyond this first ring of steel, more sentinels guard one of the building's entrances. Only a short drive away from the city-centre pier, where tourists board ferries to the idyllic island of Capri, the basements of Le Vele are crammed with mounds of uncollected rubbish picked at by stray dogs.

This sprawling maze is a beehive of hugely profitable activity. Beyond the lookouts, deep inside the building's bowels, drug traffickers employed or controlled by the Camorra openly sell cocaine, heroin, ecstasy pills and hashish to a constant flow of hardcore addicts who queue to

THE FLOOR OF THE HALL IS SPLATTERED WITH BLOOD AS PEOPLE HELP EACH OTHER TO INJECT

buy their latest fix. According to investigators, this is Europe's biggest drugs supermarket: more is sold at street level here than in any other part of Europe. Local police say it's a business worth half a million euros a day. Drawing on testimony from Camorra turncoats, investigators say that together with wholesale trafficking, up to 5,000 kilos of cut cocaine are sold there every month, for a street value of around €350m (£260m). Naples, 140 miles south of Rome, is among the top Mediterranean heroin and cocaine junctions.

Despite the alarmed rhetoric of local and national politicians, nobody seems able to control it. In stairwells, traffickers hold black pouches bulging with drugs and cash and ply their trade around the clock in eight-hour shifts. The business is kept running day and night and ceases only briefly whenever a police patrol car is spotted. The complex even houses a *siringaio* – a man who peddles syringes alongside chocolate bars, soft drinks and takeaway espresso.

Unperturbed, addicts shoot heroin in broad daylight in Le Vele's vast basements and along a nearby roadside ditch, where it is not uncommon for locals to stumble across bodies of overdose victims. Incredibly, the district's Carabinieri headquarters, one of Italy's three police forces, is less than 100 yards away.

In another Camorra-run piazza, as drug-dealing patches are called, buyers gather to shoot up in a one-storey disused kindergarten in the midst of a housing estate teeming with local residents. At any one time the abandoned building is crowded with up to 200 addicts.

The floor of the derelict and damp hall is splattered with blood as people help each other to inject heroin in the neck, legs, arms and even groin. The adjacent rooms, heavy with the stench of disease, are carpeted with layer upon layer of used syringes and bloodied needles.

Amid the filth and degradation, surreally, one addict sweeps the floor incessantly with a tattered broom, muttering to himself, while outside, young lookouts with hardened faces stand guard to protect the day's trade. Long inured to such scenes, a group of children come out to play football in the street, while above them, housewives hang their laundry.

The lucrative business is entirely in the hands of Camorra clans, a vast network of ►►►

Top: the siringaio's wares. Bottom: a former Le Vele drug-runner, using fake narcotics, demonstrates how the drugs are typically cut

organised-crime families and syndicates from the region of Campania, of which Naples is the capital. While less famous than its Sicilian counterpart, increasingly the Camorra is said to be no less powerful than the Cosa Nostra mafia.

Given its myriad clans – at least 78 in and around Naples alone, according to the latest official count – the Camorra is more fractious and prone to bloody turf wars than its centralised Sicilian big brother. In Naples' city centre, a labyrinth of noisy and colourful side streets, local clans kill each other's men over control of a single alley. As a result, Campania's murder rate is said to be the highest in Europe – an estimated 3,600 in the last 30 years. Last year, the city and its immediate surroundings witnessed 116 Camorra-related killings – one every three days.

Drug trafficking is only one of the Camorra's businesses. Like Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta, their counterpart in the region of Calabria, the Naples clans are also into loan sharking, construction, industrial waste disposal and racketeering. Estimates of their profits are sketchy, but according to a recent report by Italy's national retailers association, the country's mafias earn a staggering €90 billion a year – £67 billion – making them Italy's biggest business.

The greater the earnings, the more brutal the clan wars. So when, four years ago, a conflict broke out over control of Scampia and Secondigliano's drug trade, 60 contract killings followed in just a few months. Open war is over but, like aftershocks in the wake of an earthquake, revenge hits are still taking place and so far the clash has claimed around 90 lives.

Even more shocking than the death toll is the savagery of some of the murders. Several victims were decapitated, while others were tortured to death. One young girl, whose only crime was to have briefly dated a member of one of the warring clans, was mutilated, shot and burnt by his rivals. The mother of a Camorra foot soldier was shot 12 times in the face.

The viciousness appalled even high-ranking crime bosses. Targeting innocent relatives of clan members is supposedly against the unwritten rules of Italy's mafias. The Camorra syndicates of the area, however, had little time for niceties when they saw their status as rulers of Europe's single biggest drugs market threatened.

"Scampia and Secondigliano are a disgrace," said a senior anti-Camorra magistrate with an intimate knowledge of the area. "It's a place where hard drugs are sold in front of everyone around the clock, seven days a week. It's the largest drugs supermarket in Europe, where the only laws that count are those of the Camorra. We've arrested many key figures running the trade, only to see them replaced by others.

"I have only 20 investigators working there, trying to dismantle a massive and highly organised criminal structure that rakes in



THE BUILDING EVEN HAS A MAN WHO PEDDLES SYRINGES ALONGSIDE CHOCOLATE BARS

hundreds of millions. It's like trying to empty the sea with a bucket. The Camorra's roots are too deep. We'll never eradicate it."

Naples' problems have been the subject of heated political debate for decades. Italians blame the locals, who in turn blame the state, accusing it of turning a blind eye at best, of complicity and corruption at worst. Alarmingly, according to local investigators, the clans have long forged strong links with corrupt local civil servants and

politicians. Meanwhile, police have arrested thousands of *Camorristi*, including high-ranking bosses. Whenever wars become too bloody or election campaigns are near, the government is spurred into action – often threatening to send in the army. But few would dispute that Naples is nowhere near defeating the Camorra.

Earlier this year, I gained access to the Camorra drugs underworld of northern Naples through a local man who spent a total of 12 years in jail for robberies and drug trafficking. A former *capo piazza* – as those in charge of a drugs patch are known – he has long turned his back on crime and is now seeking to bring attention to the district's misery. After days of negotiation, a few drug traffickers employed by the Camorra, as well as former members, agreed to talk on the condition I did not reveal their identities. ➤➤➤

Paulo Di Lauro (top) and his son, Cosimo (middle), were both arrested in 2005. Cosimo's brother Vincenzo Di Lauro (bottom) was arrested in 2007

I also met a member of a leading local Camorra family, a boss who, after his latest stint in jail, has served a total of 20 years. In his fifties and still under strict police surveillance, he is adamant that he is no longer involved with the Camorra and is living an honest life.

In his family's fiefdom, however, he is still feared and respected. People often come to him for help and advice, or ask him to mediate in some conflict. I am given strict instructions not to be too pressing: to appear disrespectful would almost certainly create problems.

We meet in a small, modest office where I find him sitting behind a desk under the portrait of a local patron saint, a picture of him embracing his elderly mother and a couple of framed quotes by Toto, a native Neapolitan who died 40 years ago but is still Italy's most famous comic actor.

Two burly men with steely looks – *affiliati*, fully fledged Camorra members – loiter outside. Before our chat can begin, the boss insists we drink espresso, dispatching one of his men to the local bar. On his desk lies a copy of *Cronache di Napoli*, a daily that specialises in covering the Camorra's turf wars. Every day it has mug-shots of the latest victims plastered on the front page. There is also a CD of sentimental Neapolitan songs written by him, which he plays for me.

His face is weathered and hard, his nose broken and flattened like a boxer's. He tells me how he began his long career in crime as a young boy by stealing bicycles and was first jailed at 14.

"There is a big difference between now and then, between my generation and the one coming of age now," he says, drawing heavily on a cigarette. "There is too much money at stake. As a result there are no more values, no more rules or principles. Before, people kept their word and answered for their actions. We called them men of consequence. But now everyone wants to become a boss. Any young punk wants to have power, wants to be someone. They make a mess of things and don't want to carry responsibility.

"Say what you will, but the Camorra gives people jobs here. And everyone throws mud at this place but it's not the Fifth World, as some claim. The real dirt lies elsewhere. As we say in Naples, the head of a dead fish stinks more than its tail. Here, you are looking at the tail. To understand the full picture you must look at the head, to the world of politics."

He says he has had enough of "that life" and wants to live like an ordinary person. Before, he had a lot of money but always lived under stress. Now he is at peace and dreams not of power but of simple pleasures: a day at the seaside, an evening in a pizzeria with his wife and children – but he must report to the local police station daily and be home by 9pm or face rearrest.

Locals say only small fish can choose to sever their ties with the Camorra. This man, I'm told, cannot – his name is too heavy a burden. He



FAR FROM BEING DESPISED, CAMORRA BOSSES ARE OFTEN SEEN AS ROLE MODELS



becomes defiant. "I do what I want with my life. I have paid my due and owe no one. I don't have to answer to anyone, only God."

As he speaks, Antonio hangs from his every word. "What a great man," he says later as we watch him leave on an old Vespa scooter – police confiscated his driving licence. As an adolescent, Antonio dreamt of becoming an *affiliato*. Well-built and endowed with a powerful uppercut, he fought in underground boxing bouts attended by Camorra members – often addicted gamblers.

"I was destined for that world," said Antonio. "As a child I was fixated with the Camorra bosses. I looked up to them and was fascinated by their power. After all – they kill people. I studied how they dress, talk and move. The bosses are VIPs – people respect them, they've made it."

It is a view not uncommon among the young of Scampia and Secondigliano, where, far from being despised and ostracised, Camorra bosses

and their foot soldiers are often seen as role models. Antonio still retains contacts with underworld figures but, at 23, has chosen against joining "*il Sistema*" – the System, as the Camorra is called by its members.

Judging by his family history and his beliefs, however, Salvatore is unlikely to change his vocation. Barely 16, he has trafficked class-A drugs for four years. For as long as he can remember, his father has been in jail, while his brother, 24, one of Naples' most infamous street criminals, has been sentenced to life for murder.

His other brother, Pino, is also in the drugs business, and at the age of 22 has risen to *capo piazza*, employing his own small group of dealers and lookouts. Years ago, as a carpenter, Pino said he earned €150 a month, a sum he now makes on a slow day. After a life spent in the streets of one of Europe's toughest neighbourhoods, Salvatore's body language is that of a man. He is hard-bitten and cocksure, while his swagger and speech are of a boss in the making. A fatalist, he said he is destined to end up in jail or be killed.

Although he is too young to have a driving licence, he speeds around the streets of Scampia and its surrounding neighbourhoods on a powerful £11,000 racing motorbike capable of reaching 150mph, which he shares with Pino. As dictated by the Sistema's unwritten survival rules, the brothers never wear a helmet. Lookouts guarding the area become dangerously nervous if they cannot see the face of someone approaching – contract hits between rival clans are carried out by men on motorbikes who wear helmets to conceal their identity.


Salvatore is viewed by senior members of the local clan as a youngster of great potential. His boss – *lo zio*, or uncle, as the position is known in the Sistema's strict hierarchy – occasionally allows Salvatore to drive him around on the back of his motorbike. In the Camorra's lexicon of symbolic gestures, it is a coded message of public endorsement that locals read at once.

Salvatore addresses his clan's *zio*, a powerful figure in his mid-twenties, by using the third person, "*voi*" – an archaic expression of deep respect Italians stopped using generations ago.

"I live this kind of life because I love it. This is who I am," said Salvatore defiantly. "I wouldn't want any other life. I could never imagine having a normal job. I want to become a fully fledged *affiliato* and then make it big by rising to boss.

"The top guys in the Sistema are real men. They have balls and are respected. People see where I'm heading and who backs me. They're already showing me respect. Imagine later."

We discuss that sooner or later he will be asked to kill someone to prove his mettle and loyalty to the clan. Known as "*prova di fuoco*", it is an inevitable rite of passage. Without flinching, Salvatore nods. "But what if they told you to kill me?" asks my contact, who is more than 20 years Salvatore's senior and has known him since he was a toddler. "What would you do then?"

"Only because it's you," Salvatore answers matter-of-factly, "I'd tell you to pack your 

The burnt-out car of Gelsomina Verde, who was tortured to death by Cosimo di Lauro's henchmen

bags and disappear for ever. But I'd warn you only once. What has to be done has to be done."

We pass a group of young men chatting outside a bar. I'm told to look away to avoid attracting their attention. They're all *affiliati* and one is a hitman. Leaning against a wall, a loan shark dressed in a black leather coat waits for business. How do locals know when someone has joined the Sistema? I ask.

"In Naples what is not done is not known and what is done is known," replies a young trafficker, recently out of jail. "Knowing who is who is crucial, especially when war breaks out. You make enemies if you kill the wrong guy."

Behind each piazza is a complex system of remarkable efficiency and organisation which turns like clockwork, oiled by a strict hierarchy in which everyone knows his place. Not unlike a large corporation, it is considerably better managed than the Italian state, which in Scampia and Secondigliano has long been defeated by the Sistema – the area's single largest employer.

Each dealer splits the day's profits with his own group of lookouts. Work is divided into eight-hour shifts. Every few hours, dealers are supplied a fresh drugs consignment by couriers on powerful scooters. The next step up in the chain, they carry large quantities of drugs and are paid more – risking longer sentences if arrested.

The couriers pick up the drugs from a "*casa d'appoggio*", a safe house – usually the flat of an ordinary family with no criminal record, which is paid around €4,000 a month (£3,000). A steady and lucrative income in an area with average unemployment rates of 50%.

There are two kinds of *casa d'appoggio*, one where drugs are stored, the other where they are cut. Members of the Sistema who are allowed to cut are the clan's next layer of foot soldiers. Above them is the *capo piazza's* right-hand man, followed by the *capo piazza* himself. In turn he answers to the *tenente*, his lieutenant – a rank attained after having executed someone on behalf of the clan. The *tenente* takes orders from the *zio*, a figure who has direct contact with the boss. Each boss has more than one *zio*.

On an average week, a single piazza earns €50,000 (£37,000). The best patches can rake in twice as much. Barely 16, Salvatore already earns more than €2,000 a month. Each clan has its own death squad, which favours pistols and Uzi machineguns as they are more easily concealed under a windcheater. Hitmen riding as pillions on powerful motorbikes are taught to stand, turn and sit with their back against the driver's as they race away from a crime scene, so as to shoot more easily at rivals giving chase.

Unless a war breaks out, ordinary dealers are not armed, but all members are taught to handle guns. *Affiliati* are paid a monthly wage, which can reach six figures. Others are paid a fixed percentage and, as in a franchise, many dealers buy and sell drugs without being members.



COSIMO DECLARED WAR. NEARLY 60 CONTRACT HITS FOLLOWED IN LESS THAN EIGHT MONTHS

Dealers pay for their latest heroin or cocaine consignment only after they've sold it on the street. This way, if it is impounded in a police raid, the clan takes on the loss, not the dealer. When an *affiliato* is jailed, the clan deals with legal fees and pays his family a weekly allowance of €200. Funeral expenses are also taken care of. As a rule, Sistema racketeering does not include local shop owners – the proceeds are too small to warrant alienating the neighbourhood.

"Once I had paid my lookouts and the *casa d'appoggio*, I pocketed around €26,000 a month, [£19,000]" said Giovanni, who until recently worked as a *capo piazza*. "The profits being made are so huge you lose the value of money. The more I made, the more I spent, mostly gambling."

Born in Scampia, Giovanni began stealing at 12 and was only 14 when he carried out his first armed robbery in a high-street bank in Naples' city centre. He was wounded by a security guard and sent to a juvenile detention centre. When he came out he eagerly pursued his career up the ranks of the Sistema – until one of his brothers was gunned down in front of him during Scampia's bloody turf war.

"I used to be a passionate fighter for the Camorra," said Giovanni, still only 22, whose blank, hard stare makes him look a decade older. Still haunted by what he saw, he becomes jittery at the sound of a passing motorbike.

"I used to believe in the Sistema. As a young boy I saw the money, the cars, the flash motorbikes and expensive watches. I wanted to be a part of it. I was in awe of how the bosses seem to take care of their own, of their very real power. Now I understand that we are just expendable pawns. I am out of it, but here in Scampia there'll never be a shortage of recruits."

One man who knew early on how to turn the district's mass of young unemployed into a lucrative and ruthless workforce was Paolo di Lauro. Dubbed "Ciruzzo the Millionaire", he is credited with being one of the key men who turned Scampia and his heartland of Secondigliano into Europe's largest drugs piazza.

Described to me by one anti-Camorra investigator who met him as "a man with a diabolical criminal mind", Di Lauro was one of the first Naples crime bosses to move part of the city centre's drugs trade out to the depressed northern suburbs, a vast wasteland of tower blocks and council estates developed in the late 1960s to ease Naples' housing shortage.

A horror of urban design crammed with impoverished families, very few shops and no adequate social infrastructure, the area was the ideal location for Di Lauro, who was connected with some of the city's most powerful clans, to develop a new, industrial-scale, narcotics crossroads supplying drugs across Italy.

"A poor ghetto on the edge of the city brimming with unemployed young men – what better place?" says the anti-Camorra investigator, over his second espresso in one of Naples' most fashionable cafes, as two bodyguards look on.

Di Lauro, 55, was one of the first to establish a more direct contact with the drugs cartels of Colombia. As the market for heroin and cocaine boomed in the 1980s, Di Lauro's business flourished. A man of few words and cool temper who resorted to violence only when strictly necessary, he quickly became the undisputed ruler of the area's drugs trade – until 2002 when Italian police issued a warrant for his arrest, forcing him into hiding. He left Vincenzo, one of his children, in charge.

When Vincenzo was arrested, his brother Cosimo took over. A violent cocaine addict who modelled himself after the dark, black-clad action hero played by Brandon Lee in the Hollywood film *The Crow*, Cosimo failed to earn the respect of his father's lieutenants.

A small group of older members rebelled, splitting from the Di Lauro clan when ➤➤➤➤

Cosimo sought to end the autonomy allowed by his father and, in some cases, tried to replace them with younger henchmen. Led by Raffaele Amato, the “secessionists” broke off and set up their own drugs business.

In 2004, Cosimo – crazed, arrogant and lacking experience – declared war. Nearly 60 contract hits followed in less than eight months, followed by 40 revenge killings. Members of the two clans killed each other in front of their families in crowded public places. At the peak of the war, six killings took place in 24 hours.

“It was a bad time. I’d go out in the morning and didn’t know if I’d be alive by the evening,” said Giovanni – who sided with the Di Lauros. At one point he was whisked off to safety with other clan members to Greece and Germany.

“There was a curfew in Scampia and Secondigliano. People were switching sides every day and you had no idea if someone who was with you yesterday was now out to kill you. I saw a young guy executed in the head in a butcher’s shop in front of a crowd of shoppers. The killers were barely 20. Another time I witnessed a death squad fire 10 times at a man in front of his wife and children outside a shopping mall. I was also present when locals found three headless bodies wrapped in Cellophane. They’d been dumped in a field and had no bullet wounds, which means the victims were alive when they were beheaded. Then I lost my brother. He had done nothing wrong but they shot him twice in front of me.”

The goriest murders were blamed on Cosimo, an accusation that helped alienate him. Gelsomina Verde, a 21-year-old girl from Secondigliano who had briefly befriended a young secessionist, was abducted by Di Lauro’s henchmen. She was horribly tortured, shot in the back of the head and burnt in her car.

The brutal murder shocked the city, as did that of Carmela Attrice, whose son had also switched sides. Fearing revenge attacks, she never left her flat at the Case Celesti, a run-down housing estate and one of Secondigliano’s busiest drugs piazzas. To lure her, Cosimo’s killers had a 16-year-old boy Attrice knew ring the bell at her apartment block’s main entrance. Recognising the boy’s voice, she shuffled downstairs, still in her pyjamas. As she opened the door she was shot 12 times. Her killers have since been caught.

Under pressure to put an end to the violence, the Italian police launched massive raids and widespread arrests in the area, deploying 1,500 officers and even helicopters, often clashing with angry local residents, who in several incidents attacked officers to defend those being detained.

In January 2005, police arrested Cosimo by honing in on his mobile-phone signal and locating him in a flat in Secondigliano’s Terzo Mondo – an estate so named by locals because of its misery. For a while, adoring young men had Cosimo’s photo on their mobile-phone display.

The war went on, fuelled by his brothers. Paolo di Lauro’s turn came eight months later when he was arrested in Secondigliano in a raid

said to have involved Italy’s intelligence service. He had been on the run for three years.

Twenty-four hours later the body of the man suspected of betraying Di Lauro’s location was found. He had been beaten to death with a spiked club. In a message to other potential traitors his ears and tongue had been cut off, his eyes disgorged with a screwdriver, and a cross cut across his mouth.

Raffaele Amato, the former Di Lauro loyalist turned head of the secessionists was also arrested, as he played blackjack in a Barcelona casino. Incredibly, Amato was later released on a legal technicality and is now in hiding – Italian police have issued a fresh warrant for his arrest. Vincenzo was also released on a legal caveat only to be rearrested last year.

Known as “the Spaniard” because of his many years spent smuggling drugs into Italy from Spain on behalf of the Di Lauro clan, Amato won the war against his former bosses and is now said by members of the Sistema and anti-Camorra investigators to be the undisputed drugs tsar of Naples’ northern suburbs.

“I asked a jailed turncoat from the Di Lauro clan

**HIS EARS AND TONGUE
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SCREWDRIVER...**

what had changed in Scampia and Secondigliano after the war and the high-profile arrests we’ve carried out,” said the anti-Camorra magistrate. “‘Only one thing,’ he said. ‘The Pope.’”

The war is retold in an Italian blockbuster based on Gomorra, the bestselling exposé of the Sistema, written by Roberto Saviano, a young Neapolitan journalist and writer whose star status and public denunciations of the Camorra have brought him accolades, death threats and round-the-clock armed bodyguards.

When the film’s director wanted to shoot at Scampia’s Le Vele housing estate, security concerns were raised. Unexpectedly, however, a local fixer was summoned to a meeting with two high-ranking *affiliati*. The terrified man was questioned and a copy of the screenplay was examined, but permission to film was granted.

The largesse, say other members of the Sistema, can only be the result of vanity. No matter how critical, the film only adds to the fascination and awe felt by young Neapolitans.

Antonio, the former clandestine boxer, and Giovanni, the *capo piazza*, landed cameo roles in Gomorra, where they play young *affiliati*. The experience has helped them break with their life of crime – they are now taking acting classes.

They are not the only ray of hope amid the neighbourhood’s degradation, where in spite of everything, many families live an honest life. Local social and educational groups have sprung up, including an impressive theatre group that

seeks to bring the young of Scampia off the streets and into contact with other Neapolitan adolescents of more privileged backgrounds.

Fabrizio Valletti, a soft-spoken Jesuit priest, has been running a community centre in Scampia since 2001. He helps victims of the Sistema, visits jailed criminals and seeks to influence the very young before they become fascinated with the power of the Camorra. “If you are born here you are at a disadvantage from day one, because you are raised in a place ruled by lawlessness,” said Valletti, who was once asked by a group of dealers to bless a statue of the Virgin Mary located on their drugs piazza – he refused.

“There’s high unemployment, lack of social infrastructure, absence of civic sense. It’s also a cultural problem which hangs over us since the days of feudalism, when the owner, the boss, was almighty and could choose if someone lives or dies. We’re ruled by the Camorra. If you’re born into its world, you need real balls to get out.”

On my last day in the neighbourhood I meet Rosario La Rossa, a bright and articulate 20-year-old born and raised in the district’s Sette Palazzi, the seven tower blocks – another lucrative piazza. A university law student who wants to become a magistrate, Rosario has taken part in seminars and theatre workshops in an effort to show his fellow locals a different path.

He says he grew up thinking he could live a normal life despite the violent world outside his front door. Then, during the war, his seriously disabled cousin was shot dead by mistake by a group of Camorra killers, a tragedy that prompted him to write a book about growing up in the Sistema’s heartland.

“I always say that there are no real children here because, very early on, to survive you have to start behaving and thinking like an adult,” says Rosario. “You have to learn very early on who is who and with whom you need to behave in a certain way. The economic power of the Camorra is so enormous and so many people live off it in Naples that at times I wonder what would happen if it didn’t exist any more.”

Out of principle and unlike many other locals, Rosario is determined to stay, have a family and raise children in Scampia, because, as he put it, “If I came out okay, so will my children.”

As I finally leave the monstrous Le Vele, catching a last glimpse of the piazza’s addicts and lookouts, it is not Rosario’s hopeful words that resonate most, but the hardened resignation of Pino. “If I could feed my family in any other way I would do it,” said Pino, 22, who recently married and is father to a toddler. He has been dealing drugs since he was 15. “I’d like to live without the fear, the tension, the racing heartbeat at the risk of being caught and ending up in jail. Many think like me, but there’s no way out.”

“For all this to stop, you need to take away the drugs and destroy the Camorra. You’d need the world’s most powerful earthquake to strike this place. That will never happen.”

Hopeless though it sounds, Pino is almost certainly right ■