

COMO LAKE MYSTERY

Book 1

MURDER ON THE FUNICOLARE

A Como Lake
Cozy Mystery



Paolo Casciato



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The cover photo is by Emanuel Haas, whom I thank.

To Letizia, for believing
before there was proof.

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Como: Natural Stage for my Mystery

I was born in Rome and lived there for more than thirty years: long enough to absorb its grand gestures, its noise, its contradictions, and its stubborn beauty.

Then life did what it usually does when you let it: it moved me: Bologna, Milan, other Italian cities, and years abroad, including four intense, formative, defining years in Russia and in several Eastern European countries that sharpened my sense of distance and perspective.

Living elsewhere does that: it forces you to notice what you used to take for granted, and it teaches you that places are never just backdrops: they are characters.

I've been living in Como for fifteen years, and when I began writing my first mystery novel, setting it on the lake felt inevitable. Not because it was "convenient" but because the place already carries narrative weight. I chose to live in this city for its charm, its history, its nature, its culture, and for the people, in all their warmth and complexity.

Como is not just a nice postcard: it's a living system: elegant, yes, but also layered, private, watchful. The kind of town where beauty and reserve coexist, and where a simple glance can feel like a verdict or an invitation.

The light, the water, the mountains: here, nature doesn't merely frame life: it shapes it. The lake is a mirror, but it's also a boundary; the mountains don't just decorate the horizon: they influence rhythm, weather, moods, and even the way voices carry. In a place like this, silence isn't empty: it's part of the language.

Como's culture is just as striking. The walled old town, in particular, still surprises me: compact, historical, almost theatrical in how quickly it shifts from open views to narrow streets, from wide squares to corridors of stone. It's a city built on transitions: between Italy and the world, between tourism and everyday life, between what is shown and what is kept behind closed doors.

And then there is the funicolare: practical, iconic, quietly dramatic. A line that connects two levels of the same landscape and, in fiction, two levels of the same truth. That's why *Murder on the Funicolare* belongs here.

Como Lake is undoubtedly beautiful. That doesn't make it innocent: it makes it perfect for mystery.

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Prologue

Como Knows

Como wakes up before it looks awake. At seven, the lake is still pretending to be innocent: flat, silvery, expensive, while the town starts moving in the way Italian towns do: quietly, efficiently, and with a low hum of opinion that never truly stops. Shutters lift; scooters cough into life; a first espresso is poured like a sacrament, and somewhere, a woman behind a counter says “Buongiorno.” in a tone that already contains a verdict. If you ask Como what it’s thinking, it won’t answer directly: it will show you: it will show you at any Bar in the centre, where the stools are cold and the croissants look like they’ve been blessed by crema and cioccolato. The regulars are already arranged like chess pieces: same spots, same nods, same rituals, while the TV above the counter mutters headlines nobody listens to until it confirms what they already believe.

“Valti arrives today,” the barista says as she slides a cappuccino across the bancone with the speed of someone who’s been doing this since before you were embarrassed by your own accent.

“Giorgio Valti,” a man repeats, like the name is a spice he’s not sure he wants: “The one from Milan.”

“Not Milan,” another corrects without looking up from the lines on *La Provincia* newspaper: “Everywhere. He’s everywhere.” They say it with the same tone you use for bad weather: it’s not personal, but you’re still going to complain.

A woman in a beige coat leans in, lowering her voice as if the marble columns might be listening: “They say he’s coming for the funicolare too.”

“Everything is ‘for’ something,” the man with the newspaper mutters: “The lake, the terraces, the views. And now the funicolare.”

The barista snorts: “The funicolare was here far before him.”

“Doesn’t matter,” the beige coat woman says: “He’ll make it his story.” She says *story*, because in Como, story is currency.

Outside, the air has that early-spring edge: still cold, but with a faint softness hiding underneath, like winter has started negotiating its exit. A couple of tourists pass, too early to be lost but already determined to look local; they stop to photograph the lake, as if it might vanish if they blink. A scooter threads between them, with perfect Italian confidence and no apology.

And in the *edicola* by the corner: half kiosk, half confession booth, the headlines are laid out like menus.

The *edicolante*, Franco, is the kind of man who knows everything and will deny it with passion. He's flipping through *La Provincia* when a young woman with a canvas tote arrives, cheeks pink from the cold and indignation. She grabs a leaflet from her bag and slaps it down on the counter:

**“NO AL CANTIERE,
COMO NON È IN VENDITA”**
**“STOP THE CONSTRUCTION SITE.
COMO IS NOT FOR SALE”**

Franco doesn't even look at it properly: "Again?"

"You saw the Comune's agenda," she says, voice sharp: "They're pushing it through."

Franco shrugs like politics is a drizzle: "They push. We complain. Then we drink coffee, and: *finito!*"

The woman's eyes flash with a sharp, knowing glance: "Not this time. They're planning to change the town."

Franco finally looks up, and his gaze slides past her shoulder toward the lakefront: "The town changes every time someone with money arrives."

"That's not change," she snaps: "That's extraction."

Franco opens his mouth to reply, then closes it: extraction is a big word for an *edicola* at seven-fifteen: it makes things feel too real.

A man in a dark coat approaches the kiosk, glances at the leaflet, and smirks without warmth: "You people hate development," he says, then adds, almost performative: "Mi dispiace." *I'm sorry for you.*

The young woman turns: "Fact is, we hate being treated like background."

The man's smile widens, polished: "Background is so beautiful here."

She stares at him like she wants to throw the leaflet at his face. Instead she says, slow and clear: "You should take the funicolare: it's small: you'll feel what it's like to be trapped."

He laughs as if she's joking.

Como notes the laugh. It files it away.

Two streets uphill, near the Broletto and the Duomo, the Comune is already vibrating with polite urgency.

The city hall building itself looks like it has survived too many versions of power to be impressed by the current one. Inside, people move with folders and lanyards and that particular municipal speed: fast enough to look busy, slow enough to never be blamed. Same as in large corporations.

A receptionist answers the phone with a smile that can be heard through the line: "Si, certo. The councillor will see you. No, I don't have the final list yet. Yes, I understand. Grazie."

Final list: always lists.

Down a corridor that smells faintly of paper and heated dust, a door is half open where it shouldn't be. A cleaner pauses, mop in hand, squints at the lock: it's not broken, it's not forced, it's simply... not shut. She pushes the door gently and sees a small room with shelves and a cabinet of old equipment: spare keys, archived badges, a stack of laminated passes for events past. Nothing looks stolen because the kind of people who steal here rarely take objects: they take access.

The cleaner hesitates, then does what most people do when something doesn't fit the day's script: she closes the door and tells herself she imagined it.

Como notes the hesitation too. It files it away next to the laughter. Back down by the lakefront, the funicular station sits at its usual spot, humble and functional, as if it doesn't know it's a symbol. The sign says [Como-Brunate](#), and below it tourists gather with the excited anxiety of people about to be pulled up a mountain by cable like a miracle.

On the platform, a staff member checks a panel with a frown. A light above the doorway blinks once, then steadies. He taps the plastic casing as if the machine can be shamed into behaving: "Non è niente," he mutters: *It's nothing*.

It's always nothing until it becomes something.

In the control office, the director is on the phone, voice tight: "Yes, I know: private ride. Yes, I know there will be media. No, we cannot 'guarantee' the ambience: it's a transport system, not a theatre"

A pause. Then, more carefully: "Yes, the lights are fine. We checked.". He hangs up and stares at the monitors for a second longer than necessary.

Outside, a man in a neat coat, too neat for the hour, lingers by the information board without actually reading it: he watches people's hands the way a jeweller watches wrists.

He doesn't speak to anyone. He doesn't need to.

In the lobby of the hotel up the street, the one that thinks of itself as an address rather than a building, there is a different kind of morning: it smells of polished wood, expensive perfume, and fresh coloured flowers that will be replaced before they dare to wilt.

A woman with perfect hair and a tablet, Federica, walks briskly across the marble floor like she's late for her own life: "Badges?" she asks without looking up.

A young man in a suit fumbles with a stack of lanyards: "Almost done."

"And the photographer?"

"Confirmed."

"And the councillor?"

"On her way."

"And Valti?" Federica's fingers pause on the tablet for half a beat: "He's never 'on his way': he arrives."

A receptionist glances up, catches the name, and lowers her eyes again: names like that don't belong to the lobby staff; names like that belong to the air above them.

Federica moves toward the lift, then stops abruptly as if she's remembered something: "The coffee vendor," she says.

The young man blinks: "The... coffee vendor?"

Federica's smile is bright and thin: "We need authenticity."

The young man nods as if he understands, which means he doesn't.

Federica taps her tablet: "There's that place: 'Books and coffee', the one run by the older woman."

"Sofia's," the receptionist offers quietly, surprising herself by speaking.

Federica turns her head slightly: "Yes. Sofia's."

The receptionist swallows: "Her niece is coming," she says, then immediately regrets the sentence.

Federica's eyebrows lift: "Is she."

"English," the receptionist adds, as if that explains everything.

Federica's smile deepens: "Perfect."

Here "perfect" is rarely a compliment: it often means "useful."

By late morning, the town's surface is fully awake: people walk faster, voices rise, the lakefront becomes a catwalk of sunglasses and intention.

Rumours begin the way they always begin: not with a single statement, but with a thousand small permissions.

At the bar: "I heard he's pushing the project through."

At the edicola: "Someone sneaky was in the Comune last night."

At the funicolare station: "The lights blinked again."

At the hotel: "There'll be a ride, a photo, a speech."

Nobody says how they know: they don't need to: no sources are required, but resonance.

The tension has an edge to it today because it isn't just about money: it's about identity: who gets to own the view, who gets to own the story, who gets to own the future.

The activists aren't just angry: they're tired; the business people aren't just confident: they're hungry; the officials aren't just careful: they're afraid of being caught on the wrong side of tomorrow.

Even the tourists, cheerful and oblivious, can feel it in the air without knowing what it is... they keep their voices a touch lower; they glance at locals more often; they smile too much, like people do when they sense they've walked into someone else's argument.

And then, around lunchtime, a small thing happens that nobody will admit matters: a man in a municipal jacket steps out of the Broletto with a folder tucked under his arm. He stops by the steps, looks left, looks right, and slips the folder into the hands of another man: this one not municipal, this one too clean, too sharp, too crisp.

It's quick. It's nothing: it's exactly the kind of nothing Como is built on. And not only Como: all of Italy, the *Bel Paese*.

Across the piazza, an elderly woman watches from a bench, expression unreadable. She isn't a spy, she isn't a detective: she's just old enough to recognise patterns. She turns her head slightly and mutters to nobody in particular: "Sempre la stessa storia." *Always the same story.*

At the same moment, down by the lake, the funicular car slides into the station with its familiar sigh. Doors open; people step out laughing, adjusting scarves, checking phones.

The lights above the door flicker once, so brief it could be imagined, then steady again.

A child points and says: "Mamma, look!"

His mother doesn't even turn: "Non è niente." *Nothing.*

Como doesn't correct her: it just remembers. Because Como knows what's coming long before anyone says it out loud.

Not the details, not the exact shape of the disaster but the pressure, the direction, the way people start moving when a story is about to become irreversible.

And somewhere between a leaflet on a counter, a door that wasn't shut, and a light that blinked at the wrong time, the town quietly chooses its favourite question: *who will pay for this?*

Como already has its answer ready; it just hasn't picked the name yet.

By dusk, the whispers have names.

Why a Mystery, Why Now

I have written more than thirty books in Italian and English: non-fiction built from studies, fieldwork, courses, and that stubborn hope that better communication can actually improve real life. So why a mystery novel, and why now?

At 60, I was born in Rome in 1965, I have started caring less about looking coherent and more about being honest with my own curiosity. For decades my work has been about people: what they say, what they hide, what they *think* they're saying, and the messy consequences that follow; I've trained teams, advised companies, led international communication functions, written as a journalist, and lived in different cities and contexts in Italy and abroad. In every role, I kept seeing the same truth: relationships are never just "soft stuff": they are the infrastructure of everything.

A cozy mystery is a perfect lab for that. It has let me test character, tension, bias, reputation, power, and loyalty without turning the page into a crime scene autopsy. And yes: *Murder on the Funicolare* has also been a personal challenge: a new genre for me, new rules, a different kind of discipline. I wanted to prove myself that I could build a story with pace, logic, atmosphere, and heart, without losing my voice.

Now I'd love to hear from you. How did you find the book, its setup, style, and plot? Did the characters feel real? Did Como Lake and the funicular setting work as more than a postcard backdrop? What stayed with you after the last page?

Thank you for trusting me with your time, and for the steady, loyal attention you gave these pages. I don't take that kind of reading lightly: in a world full of noise, choosing to follow a story up to the end is a quiet act of generosity. My hope is that this book doesn't end with the last line, but opens a small ongoing conversation between us: one made of impressions, questions, and shared curiosity.



Shall we stay in touch? I'd love that:
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I am a trainer specialising in relational skills, as well as interpersonal and business communication. I design and deliver dynamic, engaging training courses, often in collaboration with leading schools and training centres, aimed at business owners, directors, managers, secretarial staff, sales and support teams, independent professionals, business and industry associations, professional firms, students, and individuals undergoing career orientation, job placement, or employment reintegration programmes.

Since 2011, I have also worked as a consultant for companies, firms, and professional associations, specialising in communication, relations, marketing, and both on-line and off-line sales. My role involves analysing data, markets, target audiences, and business situations, as well as developing and implementing traditional and digital marketing and communication strategies, tactics, tools, and solutions to achieve business, institutional, and corporate objectives.

I have written more than thirty books in Italian and English, bringing together my studies, my ideas, my experiences, my courses, and my hopes. *Murder on the Funicolare* is my first crime novel.

Between 1996 and 2011 I led international Corporate, Business and Marketing Communications, Press Relations, and Public Affairs at two large multinational companies.

I began my professional and educational career in 1984 working for twelve years as a journalist and press officer. During this time, I contributed to Italian national and international newspapers, television channels, and press offices. I have been a member of the Italian National Order of Journalists since 1989.

When I was 7, I wrote and designed my first newsletter, including the titles, headlines, and images I had drawn.

I was born in Rome, Italy, and have lived and worked in various regions and cities across Italy, as well as abroad for several professional projects, including a four-year stint in Russia. I remain steadfast in my belief in the power of communication and interpersonal relationships, and I am unwavering in my commitment to these principles, even in the face of my own mistakes.

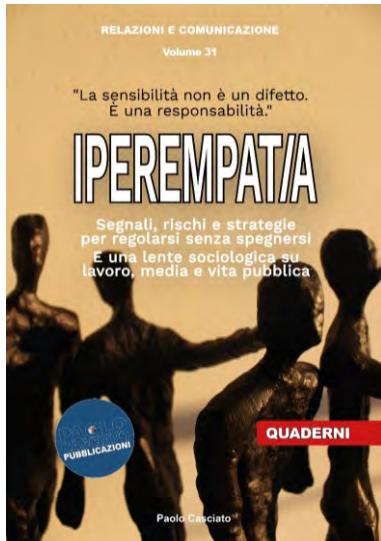
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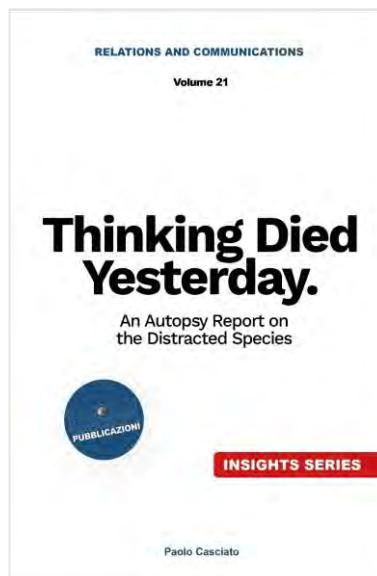
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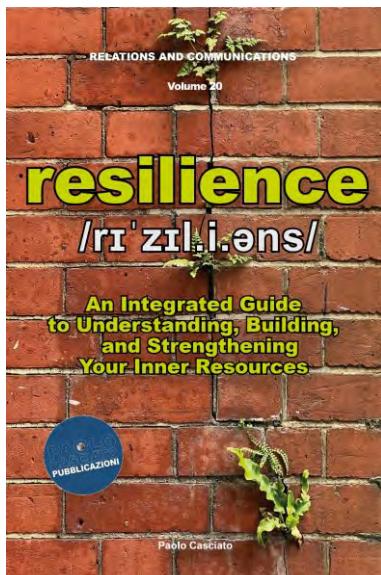
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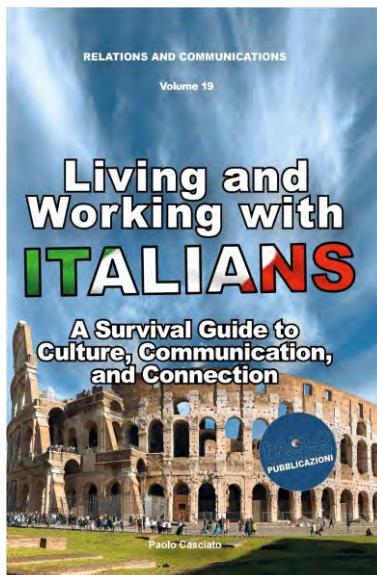
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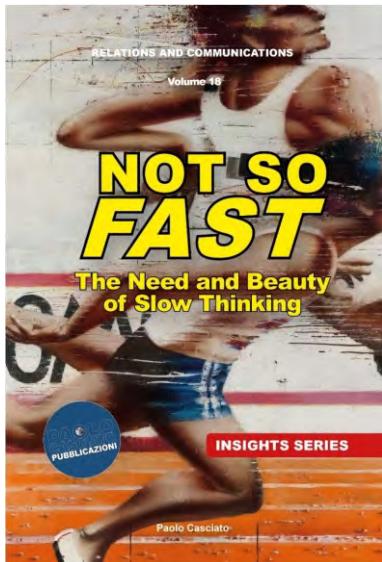
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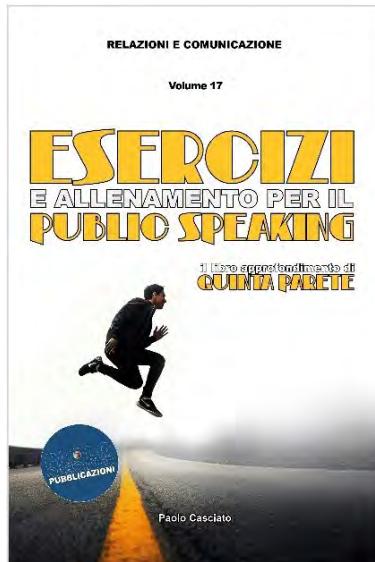
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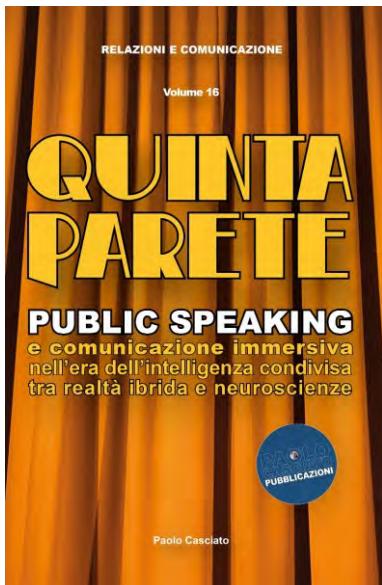
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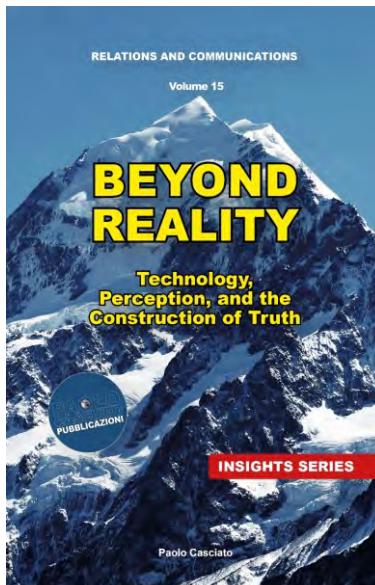
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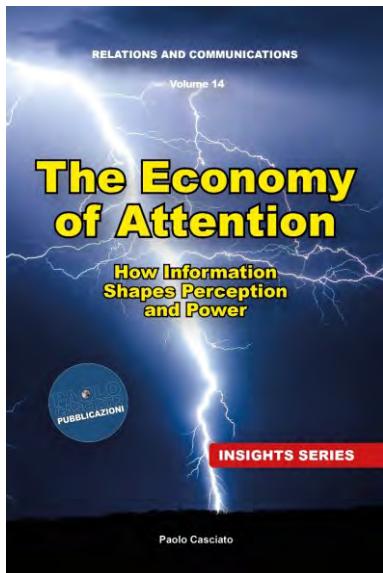
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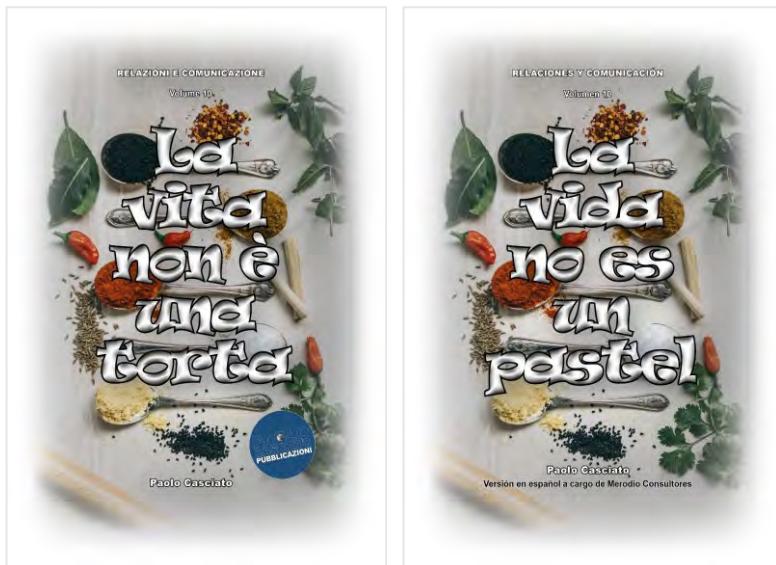
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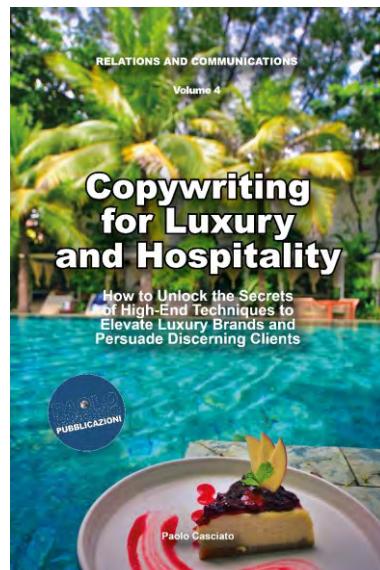
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