

GODFATHER?

Part 1

I was fourteen when, as a dare, I swiped a random hardback from a London bookstore. Bad luck it happened to be a memoir, but once I'd read it I couldn't get enough of the genre. The lives that excited me most were those set against a backdrop of danger and tagged "freighted by history." Exile from Cambodia worked well, as did China's Cultural Revolution. Whatever the geography, these stories ran to a pattern. If their authors had not been part of some country's bloody coup as toddlers, by the time they reached adolescence you could count on their family's having fled an oppressive regime and relocated to the more bohemian *arrondissements* of Paris or Jerusalem to spend languid summers thereafter under a canopy of orange trees, tersely debating the political issues of the day with a group of thinkers and activists, all of whom looked exactly like Arthur Miller—particularly the women.

The most compelling of these exiles would be appointed the author's godfather. He would teach her at thirteen to receive a compliment without simpering. On her sixteenth birthday, he would take her to a damp underground place where glasnost was understood to be a policy rather than an unattractive noise you made while sneezing. At the end of this evening, the young author's enlightenment would continue in his apartment, on a bed dusted with yesterday's philosophy, where she would be initiated into the symbiotic worlds of sex and self-loathing. And it would be her fractured, displaced past, alongside this mentor

relationship—never fully understood, forever tinged with sorrow—that would one day propel her to write a memoir lauded by critics as vivid and haunting.

OK, so I understood there was suffering involved, but to me these lives contained the poetry of every grand emotion I couldn't wait to feel. My own life, by comparison, seemed prosaic. London was full of dead buildings and depressed pigeons. Who were we there but misfits, hybrids, belonging to neither one country nor the other? New York had always been my city, and shut off from its corridors of light and mirror, I felt like an outsider, face pressed to the window of an achromatic world. A world where I no longer woke up happy and I no longer woke up curious.

The only oppressive regime my parents had fled was marriage, and though the grace with which they handled their separation was matched by the diplomacy of their subsequent divorce, a bloodless coup is still a coup, and we three children had been exiled to English boarding schools.

Summers were spent as they always had been, in feral isolation on a tiny Hebridean island off the coast of Scotland. Once the nub of jolly family holidays, it was now a place where my mother went on long windblown walks along the cliffs, and my father drifted in and out of our lives like the shiny treasure of a beachcomber. By then our kid ranks had swelled to seven, my mother having inherited three nieces and a nephew on the death of her sister. We were all a little lost in the years that followed, but somehow my mother re-grounded us in the remoteness of those islands.

I had a godfather. Who didn't? But neither he nor his wife looked remotely like Arthur Miller, and for my sixteenth birthday, instead of lessons in the art of seduction, I was presented with a five-pound book token from WHSmith, valid only in Glasgow.

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My introduction to sex came via a godfather of a different kind. Our house on the island had a library of well-thumbed paperbacks, a selection of which invariably found its way to the loo during the course of the summer. When I spotted a copy of Mario Puzo's crime masterpiece hidden between toilet bowl and flue, I was intrigued. The broken spine flopped open onto a torrid paragraph, which had Sonny, pants wrinkled around his ankles, pressing slutty maid of honour Lucy Mancini to the bedroom wall at his sister Connie's wedding.

And, cheeks burning, I read it, over and over and again.

But if *The Godfather* was my portal to sex, I was already well versed in the ways of the Mafia. Our New York City apartment had been located in a predominantly Italian neighbourhood with a smattering of eclectic shops: the Old Brewery on Lexington, a place on Madison where you could buy delicate hand-painted kites, and right next door the narrowest space ever leased, in which an old Russian called Chernoff sold warm piroshki and cheap caviar. Children cannot live on kites and piroshki alone, so for everyday items there was always the corner store, a blessing for my siblings and me had it not been for the foul-mouthed owner, Mrs. Picardi, whose loathing of children put the Child Catcher to shame.

"Might I please have a Twinkie?" my brother would ask prettily.

"*Jack of the harpsichord!*" Mrs. Picardi muttered, slamming one on the counter.

"And some Cheez Doodles for me?" my sister might add.

"*Mah! How even the lice cough loudly! Don't you filthy donkeys have somewhere better to be?*"

We hated and feared this she-devil, but every Thursday she would be cowed by a man in hat and overcoat, who entered the store and stood wordlessly at the till while Mrs. Picardi placed a brown envelope into his hand.

“Why does she act so scared?” I asked my father. “Who is he?”

“Mafia, I expect. She’s probably paying protection money.”

“What’s that?”

“He’ll hurt her if she doesn’t pay up.”

“Hurt like a smack?”

“No, no, more like toss her into the Hudson. Pull out her tongue perhaps.”

As a child I was troubled by nightmares. “Think happy thoughts,” was my mother’s sage advice, and the image that consistently worked for me was that of Mrs. Picardi roped to the shop’s countertop, wriggling helplessly while the man in the overcoat went to work in her mouth with a pair of pliers.

I can’t say for sure whether appreciation of organised crime was responsible for my marrying an Italian, but it surely helped. I was twenty-one by the time I met Giacomo, old enough to know better, too young to have a clue, and somehow running a small fashion company that I’d cobbled together with bits and pieces of borrowed know-how. Giacomo was an art dealer and a horse gambler, who’d been chased out of Italy by some bookies to whom he owed a frightening sum of money. He arrived in London, HANDLE WITH CARE stamped all over him, and soon, the pale, tender bones of young girls were being spat out of his lair.

“Stay away,” warned those who thought they knew me, and after that it was only a question of time.

Giacomo burned intensity as though it were fuel. But if his smile was animal, his glower might have been developed in Sing Sing. He was the beautiful maths equation I couldn’t solve and the first boy who made me feel as though my romantic future was not to be an exercise in painting by numbers.

As a gambler he was not interested in the moneyed graveyard of the roulette table. I was proud that he backed spirit and courage and heart. My professional world was full of colour and texture, enticing scraps to touch and shape. The world he roamed was dirtier, edgier, and I found it exhilarating. With each new experience we shared, my own heart, formerly a neat contained thing, began to unfurl like a plant in the heat, and I dropped feverishly into love.

On a weekend visit home, my mother diagnosed the vomiting that accompanied this fever as morning sickness. A wedding was hastily pulled together. One setback, though: Giacomo was Catholic, raised Jewish, engaged to a knocked-up Protestant who was toying with atheism.

“Given your religious backgrounds,” the local priest advised, “the Catholic Church will require lengthy preparations before your union can be considered.”

“What you mean ‘lengthy’?” Giacomo challenged. There was no doubt that his delivery tended a little towards the aggressive.

“At least a year.”

I looked down at my burgeoning stomach and giggled.

“You!” Giacomo stabbed his finger at the priest. “Fuck off and quickly,” although naturally he said this in Italian. “We find another way.”

“There is only one other way.” The priest flatlined his mouth into a condescending smile. “Permission from the Pope himself.”

Giacomo rose slowly. “The Pope, you say?” His eyes drilled into the oily sheen of the man’s head. “In that case, my father will speak with him this afternoon.”

This much I knew about my prospective father-in-law. Gilberto Algranti was shaved near to bald and drove a duck-egg-blue Rolls-Royce. As a boy, having already lost his parents to the camps, he’d been dragged out of hiding and put on a train with fifty other children bound for

Dachau. In a pre-arranged sting, an Italian guard unhooked their carriage and re-attached it to the rear of another train heading back into Rome, where the children were rescued and sheltered by volunteers all over the city. For the duration of the war, Gilberto was hidden deep in the basement of the Plaza Hotel, the very hotel in which we were now anxiously waiting to meet him.

The minute he swept through the lobby in his cashmere coat, I felt it—a magnetic charge so strong I could have sworn the chandelier crystals tinkled uneasily. Had I imagined it? No! Everything about Gilberto radiated power. As he approached, the now-ancient bellboy and bartender, formerly his protectors, began weeping openly. Gilberto embraced them, before finally turning to me.

“*Eccola,*” he rasped, sounding like an emphysemic prescribed a thousand cigarettes as a cure for laryngitis. He kissed me twice. “*Ma che bella figura.*”

I shifted from foot to foot like a pelican.

“No.” Gilberto pinched my cheek, a mark of affection that was to become a painful and oft-repeated habit. “The compliment is something every woman must learn to accept.”

Oh, how I wanted to be accepted by my father-in-law. It was as though every story I’d ever read had been in preparation for this relationship. I resolved to be the daughter he had never had, conveniently forgetting he already had three. I would be his *consigliera*, his trusted *tenente*. I alone understood the horrors he’d been subjected to—the murder of his parents, the destruction of his faith, the transcendental draft into the Israeli secret service. If anybody had struggled to find humanity in a godless world, it was Gilberto. As he released my cheek, his eyes dropped to my T-shirt.

“Nice titties,” he said, giving my right breast a generous squeeze.

Being felt up by their prospective father-in-law might make some girls a little tight-jawed, but I accepted that, as his son's *fidanzata*, by extension I belonged to him too. In the same way he felt compelled to interrogate a chef as to the cut and quality of his veal chop, the size and firmness of my breasts was the gauge of how good a wife I'd make his son. In retrospect, a little feminist grit might have served me better, but I had developed a thing about belonging. The yo-yo geography of my early years had invoked feelings of confusion and displacement not entirely dispelled by my parents' recent remarriage—back to each other. Who cared what world Gilberto belonged to as long as I could be part of it too? *Cosa Nostra and all that*.

"My father is not Catholic, he's Jew," Giacomo said later as we dressed for dinner.

"A Jew with a hotline to the Vatican?"

"That's his thing."

"But isn't that what *Cosa Nostra* means?" I had taken to leafing through an Italian-English dictionary for just these kinds of prenuptial spats.

"Why you say *stupido* things?" He scowled.

Giacomo was my love, my *amore*, but over the year we'd been together, I'd noticed anger flaring in him like bright red ribbons. So, soon after that, I stopped saying stupid things and only thought them instead.

My parents issued an invitation to Gilberto on stiff Smythson writing paper: "Come and stay before the wedding!"

I paled to think of the proposed itinerary. The brisk country walks, Bloody Marys, and a dinner of *pie of the cottage*, as Giacomo called it, after which would begin, I supposed, a protracted negotiation about my dowry or maybe my breasts, now arguably one and the same thing. Thank *Dio*, then, that from Gilberto there was no reply.

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Two hours before the wedding, a limousine with blackened windows swooshed up over the gravel.

“Christ, what now!” muttered my father, suffering a rare lapse in humour. On this special day, with his up-the-duff daughter marrying a foreigner—and a horse gambler whom he’d once taken for the local garage mechanic—he needed no further surprises.

“Your new father-in-law looks Middle Eastern,” my mother said, peering out the window. “And is that an Uzi he’s holding?”

“Why your mother say stupid things?” grumbled Giacomo. “That’s the chauffeur from Claridge’s hotel.”

The Claridge’s chauffeur opened the door of the limousine and out streamed Gilberto’s six other children like so many purple butterflies in their chiffon and frills. Out spilled Rosanna, Gilberto’s second wife, fragrant in lavender. Finally Gilberto himself emerged, hunched into his overcoat despite an energetic June sun. Again I felt the electro pulse in the air. The turtledoves hiccupped and the petals of the rose bush threw themselves one by one from their thorny stems.

As the two families faced off across the sitting room, even the air felt awkward. The Algranti brood, aged thirty down to five, stepped up in turn to receive glasses of Robinsons Barley Water while Gilberto coiled around my mother like a python, squeezing compliments into her ear. It was soon apparent that he had timed his arrival for an imagined pre-wedding feast. He kept surreptitiously glancing out to the hall as though expecting to see great dishes of *gamberoni* and marinated hearts of *carciofi* being carried by in the arms of comely peasant women.

“Do stay for lunch,” my mother offered gamely. “We’re having beans on toast.”

Gilberto clicked his fingers. The family rose as one. Out on the drive, the chauffeur sparked the engine.

Chipping Campden is one of those dozy Cotswold towns built from nostalgia, thatch and honey, in whose quaint dwellings, or so tourists are inclined to believe, hobbits still live, eating soup from a cauldron suspended over an open fire. A wedding is a big deal in the shires, and a couple of hours later the streets to the church were dotted with well-wishers. Of Gilberto there was no sign. Mindful of a hot and restless congregation, my mother urged the organist to play another round of Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze," though looking back I find it hard to imagine that sheep would ever again feel safe to graze, traumatised as they must have been by the limo streaking through their country lanes, the poor chauffeur feverishly scanning the horizon for a church spire, while Gilberto harangued him from the back. "*Sock filled with the dung of a rat! Are you stupid?*"

"*Cara,*" Gilberto purred, late by a full hour. "I am honoured you will marry my son." He nuzzled his shoe-brush moustache against my neck and poked at my cleavage.

"So big and swollen," he murmured. "*Brava, bellissima.* And may my firstborn grandson be both a male and masculine one."

Part 2

Like his father, Giacomo was an art dealer by trade. Vermeer's dimpled milkmaid or the humdrum life of a city vividly realised by Canaletto was not for the Algrantis. Their tastes ran bloodier—a nice Crucifixion, or John the Baptist's dripping head in the triumphant grip of Salome. After the wedding, we moved into Giacomo's tiny London flat in Mayfair, which doubled as his gallery. Every morning as I prepared

to stumble off to my office, my biblical morning sickness came face to face with Romanelli's *Massacre of the Innocents*. In the background a curly-mopped infant, head hanging by a sinew; in the foreground the sweetest of babes, intestines spewing onto marble. I begged Giacomo to turn it to the wall, like a portrait of an ex-girlfriend, but God knows we needed the sale. My fashion business looked good on paper, but it was not the sort of paper that bore the queen's head and a pound sign. Giacomo was cavalier about money. When his horse romped home first, he'd turn up for supper with an expensive gem from a Bond Street jeweller. When he lost, we lived on dust.

It was kind of cool.

The first few summers after the baby was born were spent in Gilberto's house in a tangled scrub of hills off the west coast of Italy. It was a low, whitewashed 1970s building with tall windows, guarded by sentinels of poplar and surrounded by juniper and prickly pear. Outside, a terracotta pool overlooked the sea. Inside, heated by a ferocious sun, the house was always oven-ready and had something of the feel of a compound, not helped by a large number of guard dogs, chained, thank God, whose psychotic chorus of snarling and slaving woke us every dawn without fail.

In the mornings there was a beach outing, Gilberto parting the crowds in elegantly patterned Speedos. Lunch was produced back home by a local woman, Paola, who wore a perpetually bewildered expression, which, after a number of days, I found myself unwittingly adopting.

Dressed in a string vest, clumps of wiry chest hair tufting through its holes, ending one phone conversation with "*Ciao!*" while simultaneously embarking on another with "*Dimmi!*" ("tell me"), Gilberto sat at the table moodily forking up spaghetti. Food for the rest of the

family arrived strictly à la carte from a menu that didn't exist. Gnocchi for one of Gilberto's small sons, ossobuco for his eldest daughter, a feminine slither or two of bresaola for Rosanna, my stepmother-in-law, slave to her *dieta*.

There was no conversation. Entertainment was either *Chew!* (physical theatre created from the everyday noises made by the eating and banging of cutlery) or *Grumble!* (an unstructured free-for-all, during which all family members would loudly empty themselves of a medley of grievances). When the volume became overpowering, Gilberto, or *Nonno* (grandfather), as I was now required to call him, would lean forwards and deliver a powerful slap to whichever of his children happened to be nearest. Chiccy chac, he called it. Chiccy chac was a counterproductive discipline setting off an even noisier chain reaction. Rosanna screeched. The abused child wailed. Giacomo swore. Paola the cook rattled her pans in disapproval. And finally Jesse, or rather Jesse *Gilberto*—for that was what we had cunningly named our firstborn male and masculine son—would start weeping.

Rosanna was a thoroughly decent human being. A doctor before retiring to marry Gilberto, she'd suffered an aneurysm during the birth of their youngest son and had fallen into a prolonged coma, during which she claimed to have struck up a friendship with God, eventually settling on a deal with him. If he permitted her to live, she would adopt a "retarded" child. When Rosanna awoke to find herself semi-paralysed, instead of negotiating with God for a rain check, as any lesser person might have done, she adopted a seven-year-old, whom, unsurprisingly, the entire family addressed as *Il Stupido*.

Jesse's puckered-up mouth was the prompt for Rosanna's latent doctoring skills to kick in. Her own chiccy chaced child might be

suffering a brainstem bleed from Nonno's left hook, but it would be little Jesse who she'd evaluate with shrewd professional eyes.

"*Ah, poverino*. He is sick?"

"I think he's just scared."

"*No, è malato!* I am sure of it!" She'd hunt down a thermometer from somewhere and mime sticking it up his butt. I'd mime back that it should go under his armpit, as in every other civilized country, but nothing short of up the butt would do.

Belonging to this world, even part-time, was harder than I'd imagined. Instead of thriving on the energy and tumult, I felt jolted by each cultural variance, as though it charged an electrical wire running through my body. I figured this would pass. My Italian had not yet progressed beyond the names of market produce, plus I was exhausted—from a bottleneck of work, from the heat, from the red-eye feeds of the baby, during which I'd invariably bump into my father-in-law, a raging insomniac prowling the house in his underpants, one phone in each hand, hoarsely shouting his *ciaos* and *dimmis* over the rabid barking of the mastiffs.

"Why the dogs?" I asked Giacomo. "Are they for protection?"

"Protection? What use would protection be?" Giacomo retorted. "Why you say stupid things? The only people who want to kill my father are already in this house."

And thus the days passed.

Every afternoon, siesta time for the rest of the family, Nonno would hold court behind closed doors, granting audience to a stream of cigar-smoking petitioners. During these protracted visits, the sitting room was declared a no-entry zone, until quite suddenly Nonno would loom in its doorway, cloaked in a fog bank of smoke and yelling for his son.

“*Ball-breaking old Jew, go and fetch mice!*” Giacomo muttered, rolling off me. It was never easy finding time for spontaneous lovemaking, with a new baby, an autumn/winter collection to design, Giacomo’s six half-siblings, four dogs, two roosters, and one father-in-law bursting randomly into our bedroom—no knocking deemed necessary.

“*Ciao, carissima.*” Nonno stroked my ankle under the sheet before turning to his son.

“You!” he thundered. “Go speak with Signore Federico.”

“*Mah, sei pazzo!* Why I must talk to this Signore Federico?”

“*Why? Why, you ask?* Because I tell him you catch a fifty-kilo barracuda, and now he want to know which rod you use.”

No one in the world has ever caught a fifty-kilo barracuda. Giacomo did not fish. His hand-eye coordination was such that he was incapable of removing a guppy from its bowl, even with the aid of a net. His thumb and forefinger would meet to form a circle, a sign that, before I’d witnessed it being thrust up another person’s nostrils, I’d taken to mean “everything’s OK.”

“Why you tell him that?” Giacomo snarled. “Are you stupid?”

“Me stupid?! Are *you* stupid?”

And they’d be off.

I once saw two crocodiles getting pretty snappy with each other at the Central Park Zoo. This was nothing compared to Algranti father and son. They shared a skill for pulling a grievance out of the ether, spinning it into a rage, and flinging it in any direction they chose. But if Nonno was egotistical, Giacomo was unpredictable. Even on our honeymoon—after a disagreement about the rules of backgammon—he’d packed his bags and left for the airport, the pink flower I’d given him still tucked incongruously behind one ear. Grand passions were all I’d ever wanted; nevertheless, I’d cried most of that night, clutching

the hard swell of my stomach and working through every literary heroine trying to recall one for whom being pregnant and abandoned had turned out well. When Giacomo reappeared in time for breakfast, he dropped his suitcase on the floor and, grinning, presented me with a sprig of honeysuckle, as though he'd stepped out only minutes earlier to cut it.

I told myself that rage was mostly theatre, but I had no frame of reference for mild irritation delivered as a metaphorical sock to the jaw. Giacomo's anger was chemical, irrational and it scared me. Even the lightest of skirmishes was presented as an epic confrontation. I come from a long line of sulkers. Our anger burns like dry ice, feels like cold war. We like to hover for months with our finger over the red button. We don't want to destroy the world—just make it a dark and miserable place for everyone else to inhabit.

The Algrantis were all about detonation, a blast impossible to contain in time or space. Even when it was not directed at me, there was fallout—a cloud of poison, absorbed like secondary smoke, that seeped into the hollow spaces of my bones and remained there, generating a crop of soft, slow-growing tumours.

I tried not to blame Giacomo. To be sucked into lies, to be torn between protecting himself or his father was not what he wanted. But Nonno commanded obedience. There was always an enemy to be punished or a business contact to be impressed.

"*Mah*, don't you see?" Giacomo would round on me should I risk taking his side against Nonno. His father's entire power structure might crumble should this conversation about barracuda fishing not take place.

And so, in the end, dutiful son enters the room where Signore Federico sits, perspiring in his ill-fitting clothes, his cigar a smouldering

thumb of ash on the table beside him. A weary smile is raised. A hand beckons. “*Eccolo! Venga, figlio.* Your father has told me! What a fish! What a fisherman!” And poor Giacomo, once again written into the small print of his family’s invisible contract, broods and fumes and broods some more.

“See why my father is not Mafioso?” he’d shout, pacing the bedroom at midnight. “If he were Mafioso, he would be *dead* by now with all his tricks and lies!”

Nonno’s driver was called Fabio the Ox. Outside a car he was a leaden draught animal, all hoofs and square head—a man born for pushing boulders up hills. Inside the car he was grace itself. His wheels never screamed, he had no need of a horn, he rarely touched the brakes. Occasionally, aware of doleful milky eyes watching me through the rearview mirror, I’d attempt to engage him in conversation. I fell back on English staples. Wasn’t the *tempo bello*? What were his thoughts about a little rain later that afternoon? There was never an answer, only the soft tap-tapping of perforated leather gloves on walnut, as though he were driving by Braille. The silence made me self-conscious. With my sneakers and careless ponytail, had he taken me for a poor example of a woman, compared with my Italian counterparts? Was I not good enough for the firstborn son of Nonno, the Godfather Grandfather?

“Nonno,” I asked one day. “Why won’t Fabio speak to me?”

“Ah, Fabio . . .” Of late Nonno’s voice had become so deep, it was as though he’d accidentally swallowed the ashes of his own fireplace. “Fabio has no tongue.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “Repeat, please?”

“No tongue.” Nonno made a slicing motion across his mouth.

I felt something inside me disintegrate. “Why? Why in God’s name, Nonno, do you have a driver with no tongue?”

Nonno twisted my cheek with great affection. “He very loyal, *cara*, very loyal.”

Later I mulled over the no-tongue thing. Was Fabio loyal because the state of tonguelessness afforded less opportunity for betrayal? Had Nonno specifically advertised for a driver with no tongue—as in, say, “no computer skills necessary”?

As these were *stupido* thoughts, I did not share them with Giacomo, but it was hard not to dwell. What did I really know of Nonno, Godfather Grandfather? Who was he outside the family circle? What complex system of chiccy chac did he employ to keep people quiet, to keep himself out of jail? So what if Nonno was Jewish and not Catholic? *Kosher Nostra*. That’s still the way it rolls.

Close-up, stripped of the warm tones of the cinematographer’s palette, without Nino Rota’s haunting music to distract from the moral ambiguities, this Godfather thing wasn’t quite like the movies. I thought of Mrs. Picardi, inert on the counter while the man in the homburg hat went to work with his pliers. I thought of the woman’s severed tongue, gasping on the floor like a dying fish. Poor Mrs. Picardi, poor Fabio, and poor Luca Brasi, who literally sleeps with the fishes.

Of course there was something of the big fish about Nonno himself. Who knew which of his stories were true, his paintings stolen, his children legitimate? All the murkiness, so toxic and intoxicating at the same time. What did it say about my own warped values that I was able to spin gold out of such grubby straw? But this was not a question I dared answer. It was not a question I wanted to answer. I loved Nonno and you could have pliered out my own tongue, and every one of my teeth too, before I lost faith in him.

It wasn’t just the Algranti men I’d fallen for—it was all of Italy. Rome, that citadel of crumbling ochre and verdigris—an entire city

of ravishing decay. All the hand kissing and burbling and wolf whistling and finger stabbing. How I loved the morning smell of coffee and bread, the winking medallions around the necks of Praetorian youths. I loved the tousled fawns on scooters, cheeks resting against their boyfriends' warm backs. I even loved the teak-coloured old men leering and preening on street corners, enjoying their gelato in a way they must have once enjoyed women.

It seemed to me that Rome was a giant Shakespearean playground, as though the Montagues and Capulets had decided that Verona was too small a stage for their reconciled families and had stormed the capital instead.

Under Nonno's protection we were all honorary Romans. Cue the soundtrack, observe the scene! as he breezes through the city, dispensing his ubiquitous *munificence*. Witness him inviting every barista, newspaper vendor and carabinieri to admire his family. *See my son, my successor! Brave slayer of the monstrous barracuda*, his proud expression demanded. *Behold my daughter-in-law with the nice titties, mother of the firstborn male, masculine grandson*. In Nonno's chosen restaurant, it is genuine charm he bestows upon the proprietor. How are the man's ailing parents? And his brother, "Hemorrhoids" Pornello, currently residing in Turin? Waiters dance attendance. Chef hurries from the kitchen. Washer-uppers nudge each other at the sink. Signore Algranti is here. No matter that there are other customers—well-heeled patrons all of them, waiting on their *branzino* with capers—for Signore Algranti, all work stops.

Nonno absorbed the crowd's adulation with a shrug—but you see, *la storia* was not about him, he'd say, whisking out little Jesse Gilberto as though unveiling a hitherto undiscovered Tintoretto before an assembly of museum curators. And because *bambino* equals miracle—no matter that thousands are born every second—because *bambino* is the

center of Italian life, faces would crease into smiles. *È un tesoro! Che bello, che intelligente!* A sly litany of compliments aimed at the grandfather directed through the conduit of the grandson.

I loved those lunches too, but sometimes, walking by the tables of magistrates and bankers, with their drifting smoke and dragon breath, I felt it—ruthlessness. Alongside the smell of garlic and rosemary was the whiff of corruption, of *Tangentopoli*. There were times though—no use pretending there weren't—when a black car would glide to a stop outside the entrance, and ever-watchful Fabio, driver with no tongue, would tense, his hand moving to his pocket for the dense, comforting weight he knew to be there. And I wondered—were I to snatch up little Jesse, dive for the *gabinetto*, would I return to find Fabio garroted and Nonno face down in his *spaghetti alle vongole*? I prayed not. I prayed like crazy for the long life of my Nonno, my Jewish-Italian, Mafioso, Mossad, Kosher Nostra papà-in-law, because his circle had finally closed around me, and in it I wanted to stay.

Part 3

Until I didn't.

In London the rest of the year, away from the opposing force of his father, the needle of Giacomo's rage increasingly shifted my way. I tried to deflect it but lacked the skill. We had another baby now, Samuel Peregrino, and the stakes of marriage had grown higher. I worked late hours in a world that held no intrinsic or cultural interest for Giacomo. He took no pride in the things I created. My black-market love, once so prohibited and desirable, was now too bitter to be sweet. It was my managing director, Gerry, who held my hair when I threw up with nerves before shows; Gerry who zipped up my dress before award ceremonies, at which I looked at Giacomo's empty seat beside me and

wondered what transgression would be most likely to set him off on my return home. I no longer felt centred in the spotlight of love. I felt like a prison escapee, trapped in the warden's searchlight. Move in any direction and risk a bullet.

Stick your foot into the snare of bad-boy love, and it's going to hurt pulling it out, but the pain of my failing marriage wasn't bloody and raw in the way I might have imagined. After three years, it was the gradual dulling of every nerve ending. After five, it was the agony of numb.

Sometimes, when I was sad, I'd watch all three Godfather films back to back, hoping to find the thread of whatever I'd lost. Through the thick glass of the television, I'd try to extract the smell of juniper from the air. If I could only reconstruct my reality out of the doomed romance of the Corleone saga. But there's little romance in wrong choices. I was immersed in this story the way I'd always wanted to be, except it was a different story. My body was not in danger but my heart was in dire trouble. I'd always heard it took two to dump a relationship at sea, but what did it matter who was to blame? I was an English scruff who had no idea how to be a wife, married to a man who needed to destroy the things he loved.

One evening I escaped to the movies with my dad.

"Tell me something, Froggins," said the father who never asked personal questions to the daughter who never invited them. "Are you having any fun in this marriage of yours?"

Whatever it cost him to pry, it cost what was left of my pride to say no.

Dad took my hand. "Then get out," he said gently, "right now."

Giacomo was not happy I wanted out. And because he was unhappy, he said *stupido* things. "I will call my father to come," he said, and Nonno

would take his first- and second-born male, masculine grandchildren back to Italy, where they would be hidden in the hills. “And you will never find them and you will never see them again.”

“But I thought your father wasn’t Mafia,” I wept.

“Of course my father is Mafia!” Then he made the sign of the fingers close to my nose.

Things got bad. Within the confines of our marriage we took to pacing separate enclosures, spitting and snarling. One of us needed to be shot with a tranquilizer dart and relocated somewhere far away, but who knew how that kind of thing worked? Some nights I heard him talking to his father on the telephone.

“Papà, I need your help,” he said. He spoke in thick, fast-flowing Italian. It no longer sounded exotic, merely lonely and foreign. “My father is coming for you,” he’d say each time he hung up. *Soon . . . in a month . . . sometime next week . . . any day now.* Nonno was coming to get me and I would be sorry.

I was already sorry. *Mio Nonno, beloved papà of my ex-amore!* I knew Gilberto loved me, but I had lost my right to belong, and in his world there were no second chances. So I was both sorry and scared, but I was no longer *stupida*. I alerted the police and customs, hid my children’s passports in a place I wasn’t revealing, and made sure the au pair knew how to dial 999. By day, the air between Giacomo and me grew dense with the spores of fresh grievance. At night I held my *bambini* under the covers and inhaled their damp, comforting smell. But as time ran on I forgot to eat and I forgot to breathe.

One morning I woke up trembling in the aftermath of a violent power surge. It was as if the earth had sneezed and the trees were shuddering inside their hoary barks. Outside, on London’s blackened sills, the

pigeons ceased their grumbling and shitting. A shadow was approaching our front door, and even distorted through the etched-glass panel he was recognizable. Behind me in the hallway, I heard footsteps.

“It is my father,” Giacomo said. “He has come.”

Upstairs the children were sleeping. I had a flash of the au pair throttled and the children carried off, one under each of Nonno’s arms, like two paper parcels stamped “Fragile.” But if one side of me was cold war, the other was claws and sabre teeth. I would kill before I let them be taken.

“Open the door,” Giacomo ordered.

People say everything happens quickly in situations like these, and people are right. Nonno came straight at me. There was the softest brush of wool against my cheek as he passed. I steadied myself. Turned in a daze. Behind me in the narrow corridor he had his son pinned against the wall with his forearm. Their faces locked.

“You!” Nonno snarled, and I saw the flecks of spit in his breath. “You pack your bag and get out.” Then he stepped towards me, eyes black as onyx. “And you . . .” He raised a gloved hand and I resolved not to wince. “You, *cara*,” he stroked my cheek with his finger, “you come with me.”

In the street, a car was purring. I wondered about rapping on the driver’s window, but the angle of parking was fractionally off so I knew it could never be Fabio.

“Where are we going, Nonno?”

I looked back at the window of the boys’ room. Nonno was ferocious but never callous. I knew that the children would be safe, that they would not be taken from me—and yet I shivered. It was a cold winter that year, and unhappiness made it colder still. In a gesture that felt achingly familiar, Nonno took my hand and placed it into the warm pocket of his coat.

“It’s OK, *cara*,” he said.

I understood something in that moment—that the father was some kind of metaphor for the son. I understood too that the romance of their world worked only within the context of its own mythology. In the here and now was another matter. I might belong to Nonno from afar, but I could never live with his son up close.

We ate lunch in Scott’s Restaurant in Mayfair, where everything is expensive, especially the fish. Nonno ordered two Dover soles, but I had to cut mine with a fork, because he still had hold of my hand.

I cried then, just a little.

“It’s OK, *cara*.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Why you sorry? I love my son very much, but I always know.”

I blew my nose on the starched napkin. “Know what?”

“It was impossible.”

“Why are you here, Nonno?” I asked after a while. “I mean, why are you here with *me*?”

“You?” he said softly. “With you?” And I think by then he was crying a little bit too. “Because you tried, *cara*, you tried.”

Time passed. Just when Giacomo and I thought we’d been clever enough to avoid litigation, Nonno offered me an Old Master painting for my share of the London house which turned out to be mortgaged to one of his businesses. The firm I went to for advice demanded the provenance of the painting.

“Show me the paperwork,” the lawyer said.

“Listen to me, *carissima*.” Maybe Nonno’s throat was especially sore, maybe the line was bad from Italy. “This paperwork . . . is question of trust. You are still family, and there must be trust and honour within

families. *Capito?* I come to London. I see this lawyer, and we will sign everything together, yes?”

“Yes,” I said. Because the code for our relationship had always been written around trust and honour.

“Don’t even think about taking the painting without papers,” my lawyer snorted. “And don’t meet with him either. The old man could get nasty. Put the screws on you.”

Here’s the lesson about trust and honour I was to learn. Later, when Giacomo had stopped spitting and snarling, he too found himself in a legal office. “Great news,” his lawyer told him. “Stroke of luck. Your wife’s legal team has screwed up. Forgot to file some form. Know what that means?”

“No,” Giacomo said.

“Means you are not legally bound to come up with a penny. Not for her, not for the mortgage, not even for the kids!”

Even now when I tell this story, I like to picture my *ex-amore* rising slowly, making the reverse OK sign with his fingers, and sticking it up the lawyer’s nostrils.

“*Anchovy brain! Are you stupido?* How you *dare* say I cheat my wife? How you *dare* say I don’t look after my children! Now fuck off and quickly!”

I, too, should have told my lawyer to fuck off and quickly. Instead, I shut my eyes and wondered where on earth my babies would sleep inside an Old Master painting.

“Protect your interests,” said my lawyer. “Go. Leave now before he arrives.”

I went, but I felt my heart, the heart I’d once been so proud of, wither to the size of a dried seed in my chest. As I scuttled through the glass and chrome maze to the exit, I caught a glimpse of Nonno,

motionless in his dark glasses and camel coat, rising on the escalator, staring straight ahead.

It was to be seven years before I saw Nonno again. He refused to take my calls. Never answered my letters. I got it, I supposed. We all destroy the things we love, and after all, where he was concerned, I'd been the one to pull the trigger first.

One fall afternoon, with the London sky mellow and lamplit, I was walking down New Bond Street when behind me I heard the guttural sound of "Ciao!" followed swiftly by "Dimmi!" I spun around. Coming towards me in a wondrously soft overcoat was Nonno—talking on two mobiles at once, flanked by an entourage of *guardie del corpo*, a new wife on his arm.

"Cara." His face broke into a smile, while I nearly wept to hear that familiar, if now barely audible, cheese-grater voice. He was once again living in the Plaza Hotel in Rome, he told me, but this time in the penthouse suite. Italy was going to the dogs, but business was good. He embraced me, though made no move on either of my breasts. *This relationship with Nonno, never fully understood, forever tinged with sorrow.*

"Enjoy life," he rasped. "Is the only thing that matters." Then he pinched my cheek and was gone. It was the last time I ever saw him.

Years later, long after I'd had a daughter of my own and Giacomo had become her adored godfather, Nonno died. I hadn't been sure whether I'd be welcome, but Jesse and Sam attended the funeral. In a vast, marble-columned church somewhere outside Rome, in an unholy and unusual alliance, they watched their grandfather's body washed and prepared by the rabbis before being handed over to the priests. The flesh had belonged to the Jews, but his soul to the Catholics.

In the cemetery, a tight circle of people stood around the coffin, discreetly chain-smoking, as it was lowered into the earth. Nonno's four wives, ranked from oldest down to youngest, stood in the fore-front holding hands and passing a single damp tissue backwards and forwards between them. At least twenty of the mourners, men in glossy dark suits, were unknown to them or indeed anyone else in the family.

Nonno had been eighty and active to the last. He died intestate. No one knew where his money or assets were kept. There was nothing to pass on, nothing to inherit, and thus in some ways the madness died with him.

Noting the look on Sam's face as concrete was poured into the open grave instead of soil, one of Nonno's nine children put a hand on his shoulder and, half tearful, half laughing, said, "Sammy, come on. You remember what my father was like alive? Imagine how he would be as the undead! The cement is to make sure he never comes back."

But, oh how I wished Nonno *would* come back, just as I wished to still belong inside his magic circle. Nevertheless, I liked to think of his soul leaving his body, those watchful eyes hidden behind shades, his stocky frame encased in his camel coat, and a phone to each ear, growling "*Ciao*" as he hung up on one life and "*Dimmi!*" as he embraced the next.

