
Mario Puzo's The Godfather: The Lost Years

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BOOK I

Spring 1955

Chapter 1

ON A COLD spring Monday afternoon in 1955, Michael Corleone summoned Nick Geraci to meet him in Brooklyn. As the new Don entered his late father's house on Long Island to make the call, two men dressed like grease monkeys watched a television puppet show, waiting for Michael's betrayer to deliver him and marveling at the tits of the corn-fed blond puppeteer.

Michael, alone, walked into the raised corner room his late father had used as an office. He sat behind the little rolltop desk that had been Tom Hagen's. The consigliere's desk. Michael would have called from home-Kay and the kids had left this morning to visit her folks in New Hampshire-except that his phone was tapped. So was the other line in this house. He kept them that way to mislead listeners. But the inventive wiring that led to the phone in this office-and the chain of bribes that protected it-could have thwarted an army of cops. Michael dialed. He had no address book, just a knack for remembering numbers. The house was quiet. His mother was in Las Vegas with his sister, Connie, and her kids. On the second ring Geraci's wife answered. He barely knew her but greeted her by name (Charlotte) and asked about her daughters. Michael avoided the phone in general and had never before called Geraci at home. Ordinarily, orders were buffered, three men deep, to ensure that nothing could be traced to the Don. Charlotte gave quavering answers to Michael's polite questions and went to get her husband.

Nick Geraci had already put in a long day. Two heroin-bearing ships, neither of which was supposed to arrive from Sicily until next week, had shown up late last night, one in New Jersey, the other in Jacksonville. A lesser man would be in prison now, but Geraci had smoothed things over by hand-delivering a cash donation to the pension fund of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, whose men in Florida had performed like champs, and by paying a visit (and a sizable tribute) to the Stracci Family capo who controlled the docks in north Jersey. By five, Geraci was exhausted but home in his backyard in East Islip, playing horseshoes with



his two girls. A two-volume history of Roman warfare he'd just started reading sat next to the armchair in his den, in position for later that night. When the phone rang, Geraci was a few sips into his second Chivas and water. He had T-bones sizzling on his barbecue pit and a Dodgers/Phillies doubleheader on the radio. Charlotte, who'd been in the kitchen assembling the rest of the meal, came out on the patio, carrying the phone with the long cord, her face drained of color.

"Hello, Fausto." The only other person who called Nick Geraci by his given name was Vincent Forlenza, who'd stood as Geraci's godfather in Cleveland. "I'd like you to be a part of this thing Tessio arranged. Seven o'clock at this place called Two Toms, do you know it?"

The sky was blue and cloudless, but anyone watching Charlotte rush to herd the girls inside might have thought she'd learned that a hurricane was bearing down on Long Island.

"Sure," Geraci said. "I eat there all the time." It was a test. He was either supposed to ask about this thing Tessio arranged or he wasn't. Geraci had always been good at tests. His gut feeling was to be honest. "But I have no idea what you're talking about. What thing?"

"Some important people are coming from Staten Island to sort things out."

Staten Island meant the Barzinis, who had that place sewn up. But if Tessio had set up peace talks with Michael and Don Barzini, why was Geraci hearing it from Michael and not Tessio? Geraci stared at the flames in his barbecue pit. Then it came to him what must have happened. He jerked his head and silently cursed.

Tessio was dead. Probably among many others.

The meeting place was the tip-off. Tessio loved that place. Which meant that most likely he'd contacted Barzini himself and that either he or Barzini had set up a hit on Michael, which Michael had somehow anticipated.

Geraci poked the T-bones with a long steel spatula. "You want me there for protection," he said, "or at the table or what?"

"That was a hell of a long pause."

"Sorry. Had to get some steaks off the grill here."

"I know what you're worried about, Fausto, but not why."

Did he mean Geraci had nothing to worry about? Or that he was trying to figure out what if any role Geraci had played in Tessio's betrayal? "Well, pilgrim," Geraci answered, in his best John Wayne, "I ain't so much worried as I am saddle sore and plum tuckered out."

"Excuse me?"

Geraci sighed. "Even in the best of times I'm a worrier." He felt a tide of gallows humor rise in him, though he spoke flatly: "So shoot me."

"That's why you're so good," Michael said. "The worrying. It's why I like you."

"Then you'll forgive me if I point out the obvious," Geraci said, "and tell you to take a route there you'd never ordinarily take. And also to avoid Flatbush."

Now it was Michael's turn for a long pause. "Flatbush, huh? How do you figure that?"

"Bums're home."

"Of course," Michael said.

"The Dodgers. Second game of a twin bill with Philadelphia."

"Right," Michael said.

Geraci lit a cigarette. "Not a baseball fan, eh?"

"Used to be."

Geraci wasn't surprised. Seeing the business side of gambling ruined sports for a lot of the smarter guys. "This could be the Bums' year," Geraci said.

"That's what I keep hearing," Michael said. "And of course you're forgiven."

"For what?"

"For pointing out the obvious."

Geraci lifted the steaks off the grill and onto a platter. "It's a gift I have," he said.

An hour later, Geraci arrived at Two Toms with four of his men and positioned them outside. He took a seat alone and sipped an espresso. He wasn't afraid. Michael Corleone, unlike his brothers-the brutish Sonny and the pathetic Fredo-had inherited the old man's deliberate nature. He wouldn't order a hit on a hunch. He'd make sure, no matter how long it took. Whatever test was coming, however galling it was to be tested by the likes of Michael Corleone, Nick Geraci would respond with honor. He was confident he'd emerge unscathed.

Though he'd never heard Salvatore Tessio say a bad word about Michael, Geraci didn't doubt that Sally had thrown in with Barzini. He had to be angry about the nepotism that made a Don out of a greenhorn like Michael. He had to see the folly of cutting the organization off from its neighborhood roots to move west and become-what? Geraci had taken over countless once-thriving neighborhood businesses built by industrious, illiterate immigrant

fathers and ruined by American-born sons with business degrees and dreams of expansion.

Geraci checked his watch, a college graduation gift from Tessio. Michael certainly hadn't inherited the late Don's legendary punctuality. Geraci ordered a second espresso.

Time and time again, Geraci had proven himself a loyal member of the Corleone organization and, still shy of his fortieth birthday, maybe its best earner. Once he'd been a boxer, a heavyweight, both as Ace Geraci (a boyhood nickname that he let stick, even though it mocked him for acceding to the American pronunciation of his name: Juh-RAY-see instead of Jair-AH-chee) and under numerous aliases (he was Sicilian but fair-haired, able to pass as Irish or German). He'd kept his feet for six rounds against a man who, a few years later, knocked the heavyweight champion of the world on his ass. But Geraci had hung around gyms since he was a little kid. He'd vowed never to become one of those punch-drunk geezers shuffling around smelling of camphor and clutching a little bag of yesterday's doughnuts. He fought for money, not glory. His godfather in Cleveland (who was also, Geraci gradually learned, the Godfather of Cleveland) had connected him with Tessio, who ran the biggest sports gambling operation in New York. Fixed fights meant fewer blows to the head. Soon Geraci was called on to give out back-alley beatings (beginning with two kids who'd assaulted the daughter of Amerigo Bonasera, an undertaker friendly with Vito Corleone). The beatings punished deadbeats and loudmouths who had it coming, and earned Geraci enough money to go to college. Before he was twenty-five, he'd finished his degree, left the enforcer racket, and was a rising man of promise in Tessio's regime. He'd started out with some dubious qualities—he was the only guy hanging out at the Patrick Henry Social Club who hadn't been born in Brooklyn or Sicily; the only one with a college degree; one of the few who didn't want to carry guns or visit whores—but the best way to get ahead was to make money for the people above him, and Geraci was such a gifted earner that soon his exotic flaws were forgotten. His most brilliant tactic was to exaggerate his take on every job. He handed over sixty or seventy percent of everything instead of the required fifty. Even if he had been caught, what were they going to do, whack him? It was foolproof. His overpayments were an investment with jackpot-level payouts. The more he made for the men above him, the safer he was and the faster he rose. The higher he rose, the more men there were underneath him paying him fifty percent. And if the greedy morons held out on him, he was smart enough to catch it. It became clear all over New York that there was a difference between getting hit by the toughest guy you ever fought and having your eye socket flattened into a bloody paste by a blow from a former heavyweight prizefighter. The threat of what Geraci could do became a part of the mythology of the street. Soon he rarely needed to do anything to get his money but ask for it. If that. Intimidation is a better weapon than a fist or a gun.

During the war, Geraci mastered the ration-stamp black market and held a draft-exempt civilian position as a loading-dock inspector. Tessio proposed him for membership in the Corleone Family, and at the ceremony his finger was cut by Vito himself. After the war, Geraci started his own shylock operation. He specialized in contractors, who at first never realized how



front-loaded their expenses were and underestimated how tough it was, at the end of jobs, to get everyone who owes you money to pay (here, too, Geraci could be of service). He also targeted business owners who were degenerate gamblers or had any other weakness that made them seek quick cash. Before long, Geraci was able to use those businesses to launder money and give wiseguys something to put on their tax returns—at least until the time came to bust the place out. For thirty days, deliveries would stream through the front door and go straight out the back: presents for wives and girlfriends, gestures of friendship to cops, but otherwise sold to bargain hunters from the neighborhood. Once the bills came, so, too, would a mysterious fire-dago lightning. Geraci hated both the term and the crude endgame strategy, and he put it to rest by working on a night school law degree and supplanting the fires with perfectly legal bankruptcy proceedings. He incorporated every business in question (Geraci had a guy in Delaware), sheltering the owner's personal assets. If the owner was a good sport, Geraci tossed in a thousand bucks and some land in Florida or Nevada. When Michael Corleone took advantage of his father's semiretirement and covertly got involved with prostitution and narcotics, the businesses Vito had refused to enter, he'd put Geraci in charge of narcotics and let him hand-pick several men from Tessio's regime and what was left of Sonny's. Within months, Geraci worked some things—with the great Sicilian Don Cesare Indelicato, with the powers-that-be on the docks in New Jersey and Jacksonville, and with airports in New York and the Midwest, where he operated several small planes owned by companies the Corleones controlled but did not on paper own. The Corleones, unbeknown to most of the men in their organization, were making as much from narcotics as anybody in America. Without that money, they could never have amassed a war chest big enough to go after the Barzinis and the Tattaglias.

Finally, just after nine o'clock, Peter Clemenza and three bodyguards walked into Two Toms and sat down at Geraci's table. Geraci took it as a bad sign that Michael hadn't come, that he'd sent his caporegime instead, the one who'd over the years supervised the family's most important hits. Which sealed it: Tessio was dead.

"You eat?" Clemenza asked, wheezing from the effort of the walk from his car to the table.

Geraci shook his head.

But Clemenza waved a meaty paw to indicate the restaurant's aroma. "How can you resist? We'll get a little something. Just a snack." Clemenza ordered and devoured an antipasto crudo, a plate of caponata, two baskets of bread, and linguine with clam sauce. Last of a breed, Clemenza, almost literally so—the last capo Michael had inherited from his father, now that Tessio was dead.

"Tessio's not dead," Clemenza whispered to Geraci on the way out.

Geraci's stomach lurched. They were going to make him pull the trigger himself, a test of loyalty. Geraci's certainty that he would pass was no solace at all.

Darkness had fallen. He rode in the backseat with Clemenza. On the way, Clemenza lit a cigar and asked Geraci what he knew and what he could guess. Geraci told the truth. He did not know, yet, that earlier that day the heads of the Barzini and the Tattaglia families had both been killed. He couldn't have known that the reason Clemenza was late was because he'd first had to garrote Carlo Rizzi, Michael Corleone's own brother-in-law. These and several other strategic murders had all been made to look like the work of either the Barzinis or the Tattaglias. Geraci didn't know that, either. But the things Geraci had been able to surmise were in fact correct. He took the cigar Clemenza had offered him but didn't light it. He said he'd smoke it later.

The car pulled into a closed Sinclair station just off Flatbush Avenue. Geraci got out, and so did everyone in the two cars that had pulled in beside them, one bearing Clemenza's men, the other Geraci's. Clemenza and his driver stayed in the car. When Geraci turned and saw them there, an electric ribbon of panic shot through him. He looked for the men who would kill him. Trying to guess how it would happen. Trying to figure out why his own men were standing by passively watching. Why they'd betrayed him.

Clemenza rolled down his window. "It ain't like that, kiddo," he said. "This situation here is just too-" He put both palms to his jowly face and rubbed it fast, the way you'd scrub a stain. He let out a long breath. "Me and Sally, we go back I don't want to think about how long. Some things a man just don't want to see. You know?"

Geraci knew.

The fat man wept. Clemenza made very little noise doing it and seemed unembarrassed. He left without saying anything more, waving to his driver and rolling up his window and looking straight ahead.

Geraci watched the taillights of Clemenza's car disappear.

Inside, toward the back of the first filthy service bay, two corpses in jumpsuits lay in a heap, their blackening blood oozing together on the floor. In the next bay, flanked only by Al Neri, Michael's new pet killer and an ex-cop Geraci had some history with, was Salvatore Tessio. The old man sat on a case of oil cans, hunched over, staring at his shoes like an athlete removed from a game that was hopelessly lost. His lips moved, but it was nothing Geraci could understand. He trembled, but he had some kind of condition and had been trembling for a year now. There was only the sound of Geraci's own footsteps and, wafting in from another room, thin, distorted laughter that could only have come from a television set.

Neri nodded hello. Tessio did not look up. Neri put a hand on the old warrior's shoulder and squeezed, a gesture of grotesque reassurance. Tessio fell to his knees, still not looking up, lips still moving.

Neri handed Geraci a pistol, butt first. Geraci wasn't good with guns and didn't know much about them. This one was heavy as a cashbox and long as

a tent spike—a lot more gun than seemed necessary. He'd been around long enough to know that the weapon of choice in matters like this was a .22 with a silencer—three quick shots to the head (the second to make sure, the third to make extra sure, and no fourth because silencers jam when you fire too many shots too fast). Whatever this was, it was bigger than a .22. No silencer. He stood in that dark garage with Tessio, a man he loved, and Neri, who'd once cuffed him, chained him to a radiator, punched him in the balls, and gotten away with it. Nick Geraci took a deep breath. He'd always been a man who followed his head and not his heart. The heart was just a bloody motor. The head was meant to drive. He'd always thought there'd come a time, when he was old and set, when he would move down to Key West with Charlotte and play the affluent fool.

Now, looking at Tessio, he realized that would never happen. Tessio was twenty-some years older than Nick Geraci, which until that moment had seemed like a long time. Tessio had been born in the last century. He would die in the next minute. He'd lived his life governed by his head and not his heart, and where had it gotten him? Here. A man who loved him was about to reduce that same head to blood and pulp.

"I'm sorry," Tessio muttered, still looking down.

This might have been directed at the Corleones or Geraci or at God. Geraci certainly didn't want to know which. He took the gun and walked around behind Tessio, whose bald spot, lit only by streetlights, gleamed in the darkness.

"No," Neri said. "Not like that. In front. Look him in the eyes."

"You're fucking kidding me."

He cleared his throat. "I don't suppose I look like I'm kidding you."

"Whose idea is that?" Geraci said. Neri didn't have a gun in his hand, but Geraci could not leave this scummy garage alive if he shot anyone but Tessio. From that back office, the television set erupted in a gale of tinny applause.

"Don't know, don't care," Neri said. "I'm just the messenger, sir."

Geraci cocked his head. This dumbass didn't seem witty enough to make a joke about shooting the messenger. But he did seem sadistic enough to take it on himself to make the killing as cruel as possible. And sir? How did he mean that? "Salvatore Tessio," Geraci said, "no matter what he's done, deserves more respect than that."

"Fuck youse!" Tessio said, loud now, but eyes still on the slimy floor.

"Look up," Neri ordered Tessio. "Traitor."

Trembling no worse, the old man did as he was told, eyes dry, staring into Geraci's but already far away. He muttered a rapid string of names that meant nothing to Nick Geraci.

Geraci raised the gun, both sickened by and grateful for the sight of his own steady hand. He pressed the barrel gently against the old man's soft forehead. Tessio did not move, did not blink, did not even shake anymore. His saggy flesh pillowed around the gun sight. Geraci had never before killed a man with a gun.

"Just business," Tessio whispered.

What made my father great, Michael Corleone had said at his father's eulogy, was that nothing was ever just business. Everything was personal. My father was just a man, as mortal as anyone. But he was a great man, and I am not the only person here today who thought of him as a god among men.

"What are you waiting for?" Tessio whispered. "Sono fottuto. Shoot me. You pussy."

Geraci shot.

Tessio's body flew backward so hard his knees made a sound like snapped roof shingles. The air was filled with a glowing pinkish gray mist. A yarmulke-sized piece of Tessio's skull caromed off the wall of the garage, smacked Neri in the face, and clattered to the floor. The tang of Tessio's airborne blood mixed with the smell of his shit.

Nick Geraci rubbed his shoulder-the pistol kick was like a savage right cross-and felt a wave of euphoria wash over him, obliterating the hesitation he'd felt. He felt no remorse, no fear, no disgust, no anger. I am a killer, he thought. Killers kill.

He spun around, laughing not out of madness but joy, more intense, better than the rush he'd gotten the time he sampled his own heroin. He knew what was happening. This was not the first man he'd killed. Sometimes when he killed he felt nothing at all, but even that might have been a lie, he told himself. Because the plain truth was that killing people felt good. Anyone who'd done it could tell you that, but they won't. They won't! A book Geraci had read about the First World War had a whole chapter on the subject. Hardly anyone would talk about it because for most people the bad feeling that came later, after the good feeling, shut them up. Plus, any shithead could guess that everything that would happen after a person proclaimed that it felt good to kill people, and after he convinced his listeners that he was serious, would be entirely bad. Still. It felt good. Almost sexual (another thing any shithead could guess would be bad to admit). You're powerful and the dead guy's not. You're alive and the dead guy's dead. You've done something that everyone on earth has at some heated moment wanted to do but most never will. It was easy, and it felt magnificent. Geraci practically skated across the scummy floor of that garage, certain that, this time, the bad feeling would not come later. There

would be no later. Everything would always be now. Everything is always now.

Geraci wanted to give every live man there a bear hug and a highball, but he settled for striding toward them, raising his pistol before they could raise theirs. Being the cowardly cocksuckers that at heart they surely were, they hit the ground, which gave him a clear shot through the doorway to the office at his target: the rectangle of hazy blue light behind them. Geraci fired. The shock he felt at the recoil (was Neri really stupid enough to give him a gun with more than one bullet? what a dumbass!) giving way a split second later to a dull pop, a puff of toxic smoke, a belched little fireball, and a tiny and satisfying afterglow of falling glass. Human beings have never built a machine more satisfying to destroy than a television set.

And then silence.

For Geraci, it seemed like an awfully long silence.

"Hey!" shouted a raspy-voiced man, one of Geraci's guys. "I was watching that."

It cracked everyone up. Just what the doctor ordered. Neri patted Geraci softly on the back. Geraci handed him the gun. Then everyone went to work.

Clemenza's men used a bone saw on the two corpses who'd been assigned to kill Michael Corleone. Geraci sat on the case of oil cans and watched, so flooded with ebbing adrenaline that everything seemed like the same thing. Grimy window. Calendar with topless wrench-wielding dairy maid. Fan belts on metal hook. Friend's corpse. Button on cuff. A universe of undifferentiated equivalency.

When the men finished, Neri handed Geraci the bone saw and pointed to Tessio's head. Around the gaping entry wound, the dead man's flesh was already proud.

Numb, Geraci took the saw and dropped to one knee. Later, he would look back on this moment with fury. But at the time, Geraci could have been checking the pH in his pool. When a man sees things for their essential literalness, how is sawing off the head of a dead father figure so different from separating a succulent turkey leg from the carcass? A thicker bone, true, but a bone saw is a better tool than some knife your brother-in-law got you as a wedding present.

Nick Geraci closed Tessio's bulging eyes and drew back the saw. Later had come-sooner rather than later, which in a moment of clarity Geraci recognized as later's way.

Neri clamped his hand on Geraci's forearm and took the saw.

"That was an order, too."

"What was an order?" Geraci said.

"Seeing how willing you were to do it."

Geraci knew better than to ask how willing he'd seemed or, worse, who'd given the order. He merely stood and said nothing, went blank and revealed nothing. He motioned toward the pocket of his bloodied suit jacket. Neri nodded. Geraci took out the cigar Clemenza had given him, a Cuban the color of dark chocolate, and sat back down on the oil cans to enjoy it.

Clemenza's men stripped the assassins naked and stuffed their clothing and the ten severed body parts into a suitcase. Tessio's corpse was left alone.

Which was when Geraci figured everything out.

There was no need to send a message to the Barzinis. Everyone involved with Tessio's betrayal was already too dead to benefit from messages. And of course the Corleones wanted Tessio's body found. This part of Brooklyn was identified with the Barzinis. The cops would presume that was who ordered the hit. The detectives would puzzle over the unidentifiable corpses of the assassins, and none of the conclusions they'd draw would involve the Corleones. The Corleones wouldn't even need to trouble their judges or their people in the NYPD. And it wouldn't take the usual forgiven gambling tabs and extended grace periods on loans to get the newspapers to fall in line. They'd play this just the way Michael Corleone wanted and feel virtuous about every squalid inch of type.

It was, Geraci had to admit, brilliant.

With a final glance back at the corpse of his mentor, Geraci got into the back of a car with Al Neri. Geraci wasn't afraid or even angry. For now he was only a man, staring straight ahead and ready to confront whatever came next.

In the weeks that followed the killings, Geraci worked closely with Michael Corleone. As he saw and helped administer the details of the ongoing war, Geraci learned how badly he'd underestimated his new Don. The Corleones had safe houses in every borough and a dozen suburbs, a constantly rotating inventory. They had underground garages full of cars and trucks with phony licenses and registrations. Some were armored and/or souped up with engines that could compete at Le Mans. Others were deceptively sound junkers that could break down at the flick of a hidden switch, snarling traffic and blocking pursuers. Some were destined to be crashed or fished out of rivers and swamps. Several were exact replicas of cars driven by high-ranking members of the Family, poised to mislead witnesses, enemies, or the police. They had arsenals of weapons all over the city: behind a rack of clothes at a dry cleaner's on Belmont Avenue, underneath bags of sugar and flour in the back rooms of a bakery in Carroll Gardens, inside crates at a coffin warehouse in Lindenhurst. Michael Corleone was out to gain full political control of a state (Nevada) and a country (Cuba), and the more Geraci learned, the more plausible such things began to seem. The Corleones had more law enforcement agents on their payroll than the FBI, and they had pictures of the FBI director in a dress, sucking the penis of his top assistant.



Michael's grand, intricate plan was this: peace, coupled with massive expansion and relocation, then organization of the crime families throughout the country, better than before, while at the same time strengthening and expanding business ties with Sicily, all on the way to legitimacy, complete with utter control of Cuba and access to the White House and even the Vatican. Everything new would be built with other people's money: "loans," much of it from the pension funds of various unions. Those truck drivers, electricians, and jukebox stockers would receive a greater rate of return than they'd have ever gotten from a racket like the stock market. The Corleones would put more and more layers between themselves and anything like street crime. Before long they could stop using fronts and operate in the open, indistinguishable from any of the master criminals known collectively to suckers everywhere as the Fortune 500.

The plan wasn't unworkable, Geraci thought. Merely unnecessary. They were already in the only business in the history of the world that turned a profit every year. But he went along. In the short run, he had no choice. In the long run, he couldn't lose. If things worked out, he'd get what he really wanted, which was to run Tessio's old regime: a traditional operation with roots in the neighborhoods. If the Corleones spread themselves too thin and fell apart, Geraci could just grab what was rightly his and take it from there.

He forced himself not to think about Tessio. A boxer learns quickly to put things out of his mind. Otherwise he's a sitting duck. Geraci had hated boxing the whole time he was doing it, but ten years after his last fight, he had to admit that it had served him well.

Over the course of that summer, Nick Geraci and Michael Corleone became something like friends. Had a thing or two gone differently, they might have stayed that way.

For example: If only Michael hadn't decided in August to make his brother, Fredo, his underboss, a position the Corleones had never used and that Michael intended as symbolic, a way of bringing Fredo, a good-hearted bumbler, back into the fold. If only Michael had let the top people in his organization—rather than no one at all—know it was only symbolic.

Or: If only Geraci had been from New York and not Cleveland. If only he hadn't had such ties to Don Forlenza. If only he'd been less ambitious. If only he hadn't, upon getting the news that Michael had appointed Fredo *sotto capo*, respectfully asked Michael if he'd lost his mind. If only his subsequent apology had made his intemperate remark go away.

If only Fredo had known his new job was symbolic, he might not have been so driven to have a piece of action that was all his. He might not have tried to create his own city of the dead in the swamps of New Jersey. He might have lived to celebrate his forty-fourth birthday.

If only Tom Hagen had been more involved with all aspects of the Family business, instead of being removed as *consigliere* so that he could try to become the governor of Nevada.



If only, twenty years ago in Cleveland, after Don Forlenza had been shot for the second time but before his first heart attack, he hadn't anointed a man his own age as his successor. If only one of Forlenza's many afflictions had killed him. If only Sal Narducci, a man of moderate ambition otherwise, hadn't had to spend two decades ready to take over any minute now.

If only Vito Corleone hadn't observed Narducci serving as consigliere at a dozen Commission meetings. If only, not long before Vito's death, he hadn't suggested to his son that installing Narducci as Don, rather than waiting for nature to take its course, would eliminate the Barzini Family's biggest ally outside New York.

Change one or two of those things, and-who knows?-maybe, as you read this, Nick Geraci and Michael Corleone would be out there somewhere, side by side, two leathery old goats beside a swimming pool in Arizona, toasting a life well lived, eyeing a couple sixty-something babes across the way, and busting out the Viagra.

History is a lot of things, but one thing it's not is inevitable.

Vito Corleone often said that every man has but one destiny. His own life was a powerful contradiction of his own cherished aphorism. Yes, he fled Sicily when men came to kill him. Yes, when a young neighborhood tough named Pete Clemenza asked him to hide a cache of guns, Vito had little choice but to comply. And, yes, when Vito committed his first crime in America, the theft of an expensive rug, he thought at the time that he was just helping Clemenza move it. All of these things had found him. This is not unusual. Bad things find everyone. Some might call this destiny. Others might call it chance. Tomato, tomahto. But Vito's involvement in his next crimes-hijacking trucks along with Clemenza and another young tough from Hell's Kitchen by the name of Tessio-had been a willful act. When they invited Vito to join their band of thieves, he could have said no. Saying yes, choosing to become a predatory criminal, sent him down one path. Saying no would have sent him down another, perhaps a family business his three sons would have been able to join without first becoming murderers.

Vito was a skillful, intuitive mathematician, a brilliant assessor of probability, and a man of vision. Believing in something as irrational and unimaginative as destiny was out of character. It was beneath him.

Still, what human being is above rationalizing the worst thing he ever did? Who among us, if directly and indirectly responsible for the killing of hundreds of people, including one of his own children, might not tell himself a lie, something that, unexamined, might even seem profound?

Both Nick Geraci and Michael Corleone were young, smart, creative, careful, and tough. Each had a gift for reinventing himself, at contriving to be underestimated and then taking advantage of it. It has often been said that they were too similar and destined to become enemies. It has often been said that wars are waged to create peace. It has often been said that the earth is

flat and that this way demons lie. Wisdom is a thing rarely said (the late Vito Corleone often said) and less often heard.

Michael Corleone and Nick Geraci might certainly have made other choices. Better things could easily have happened. They were by no means destined to destroy each other.