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My Own Private Godfather

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MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

RICHARD STUECKER

Leave the Gun; Take the Cannoli

I was rumbling about the Ricci's kitchen around 6 a.m. Sunday morning after Felix and Jackie's wedding when Ufillio appeared wraith-like in the doorway.

"What you look for Ricky?"

"I thought I'd make some coffee," I said.

"You want coffee? I take you to a place. Maybe a pastry, huh?"

"Sure," I said, "Thank you."

I couldn't tell if Ufillio liked me or not as we hadn't really talked all weekend. He was my future wife's Chicago cousin. She brought me as her date and I slept in his wife Rafaela's tiny sewing room. He had been busy with his son Felix's wedding and the house was stuffed pretty much like a cannoli with out-of-town guests. That morning he became my own private godfather. He pulled out his vintage 1959 black Pontiac Bonneville, a long car with fins protruding at the back that he kept simonized and detailed. He told me to get in.

"I take you for a little drive. To clear our heads," he said.

Barbara and I had recently seen *The Godfather* first run at the new Cinema 10 complex.

"I guess it's like home movies," I joked.

"We don't joke about that," she said. Then she laughed.

On the drive up from Louisville, just as we pulled off I-65, my soon-to-be father-in-law, Hercules, turned his head sideways from the steering wheel and said:

"A bit of advice: do not mention the words 'Mafia,' 'Black Hand' or 'Cosa Nostra' while we are here."

Privately, Barbara had told me that her family had no mob connections in the Windy City, but Felix and his buddies got around and he had friends who knew friends who knew

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

friends. Automatically, I checked out the backseat as I slid onto the bench seat of the Bonneville. Visions of Clemenza taking out Paulie danced in my head. It was Thanksgiving weekend and I was thankful for the empty backseat. Nina Rota's trumpet played in my head.

"I show you around a bit," he said.

Ufillio, who was called "Jimmy" by his friends, had a gravelly voice not too unlike Brando as Vito Corleone but not as soft. He stood about a foot shorter than I but his forearms were roped with muscle. He owned a tavern in the city. Most of his Italian family tree had passed through the tavern, working and living there on their way from Lucca to their American dream. He pulled the Bonneville up to a stone basilica-style church and school that appeared to have been built in Italy and flown over to the west of Chicago.

"You go in there a bit later and you see many in the congregation wearing sunglasses. It ain't from the glare. They drop thousand dollar bills in the collection on a regular basis," he said. "The children of certain families are safe there, protected, you know?" He laughed a growly laugh, "by the Sisters of Saint Agnes."

He pulled away from the curb and drove up a hill. We stopped at a red light. There was a Gulf Station on one side of the road and a Sunoco on the other.

"Do not go to the Sunoco to get gas, Ricky. He is my enemy. Always go to the Gulf. I can get you a deal."

"Yes," I said, "Thank you."

We were on our way to the Northlake Hospital. It had been built in the midsixties and, like Immaculate Conception, built of stone. We pulled over into the parking lot.

"I tell you a story, Ricky. You see how tall the hospital is?"

"About 5 stories."

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

"10," he said, "you can't count."

"No, math is a problem for me."

"It is a beautiful building, yes? I think you are smart, Ricky. There are 5 main floors and one more in the middle. Not 10. It is hard to see the 6th floor"

"Yes."

"It was built to patch up certain family members if there is trouble, you get what I mean?"

"Yes sir, Ufillio, I get it."

"You call me Jimmy, huh?"

"Yes, Jimmy, thank you." Relief broke over me.

"Anyway, these families, they did a search for a medical director in Italy and they brought him over. He was so very honored and happy. He was given a very distinguished office that had a very large cherry desk, a wonderful picture window, and they provided a very beautiful woman they knew from over in Chicago who mostly did her nails and answered the phone. The phone seldom rang. They staffed the place with some very wonderful doctors. But they also staffed this hospital with other offices. Each floor ran a different racket in the city. Gambling on one floor. Prostitution on another, numbers, Union membership, and I hate to say it but drugs also. You get what I mean?"

"Yes, Ufillio, I mean Jimmy, I believe I do."

"Yes, even though you don't know math, I think you are a smart boy. Now. Let me tell you, the fine doctor chief administrator knew nothing about this. He spoke very little English and the hospital departments were run by other doctors. But the good Italian doctor looked very good in pictures, you understand?"

"Now, about five years ago, not too long, the hospital was raided. And guess what?"

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

he paused. "The only one who took the wrap for the crime was the handsome doctor from Italy. He went to prison for 10 years, no one else." Uillio laughed until he coughed and choked. When he regained his breath he said:

"Of course the hospital was saved by a group of businessmen. It is a very fine facility. I go there myself."

At last he pulled his car in the front of the Lezza Bakery. In the windows there were gigantic wedding cakes.

"Felix, he get his cake from here, but not so big."

One of the cakes had seven tiers, flanked by two sides featuring working fountains. A wedding party of twelve attendants descended plastic stair cases from either side of the tiers, the bride and groom on the top level. Instead of fountains on the cake in the other front window were caged, real canaries. They sang a wedding song as we entered.

"*Due cappuccini, per favor,*" ordered Uillio, "and two dozen cannoli. For the sleepy heads back at the house." Around the small café, more men sipped on espressos wearing sunglasses. There was no glare.

"You take the cannoli, Ricky." He was the only one in my life who ever called me "Ricky."

"Let me tell you a love story, Ricky." The small tabletops were mirrors. Our faces looked up at us. I sipped on my cappuccino and listened.

"Mangia, Ricky." I pulled out a cannoli and bit into the crisp pastry. Ricocta cheese and bits of candied fruit spilled out the end onto the table.

"Here, Ricky, use this," he handed me a paper napkin from a dispenser in the center of the reflecting tabletop. I could see Jimmy laughing. I could see my embarrassed face.

"So, my love story goes back to just before the last war. Just before Mussolini declared

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

war. I was here already, but I went back to visit my family in Lucca. That's near Pisa, where the campanile leans. You know, like on the pizza boxes? It was in the garden of the Rossi family that I first spotted Rafaela. Every morning I saw this vision working among the tomatoes, the grapes or zucchini plants. It took me some time to gather the courage to say hello, and even longer for me to talk with Mr. Rossi to ask for her, you know?"

"Yes, I am working on that right now, you know?"

"Ricky, do not be afraid of Ercole. He is very excitable, but he is only full of life."

"Okay. I will think about what you say."

"Okay. I know. Is not very easy. But, when I explained about how I was buying my own house and I was building a business in Chicago, the tavern, and how his family might one day come to America and work at the tavern he was very happy to give me the hand of the beautiful Rafaela. I came back here and went back to Lucca two or three times. On the third trip we marry, in the small church up in my little hill town. As an American citizen I had to leave right away, to leave her behind with the money for her passage. All that way, my seventeen-year-old bride had to wait for her papers to be approved. Believe it or not, she sailed, all by herself across the ocean on the very last ship to come from Italy to America. I took the train to New York and met her at the docks. She was wearing the dress she wore for our wedding. She made it herself—she is still a dressmaker, you know—and it resides in our closet to this day, forty-five years later."

"That's a beautiful story, Jimmy."

"Yes, it is. Now, when you go back, you ask Ercole for the hand of Barbara. Respect the traditions. But do not be afraid of him."

Driving back I told my future family about my early morning drive with Uillio and about the church of the Mafia and the hospital and the bakery.

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

Herc smiled a big toothy grin.

“Do not believe everything you hear in Chicago,” he laughed.

“Do not disbelieve it either,” her mother, Halley, said and looked over to Herc, who stopped smiling.

Months later I was in the vestry before my own marriage to Barbara. Her mother appeared in the doorway, wraithlike.

“I want you to look in the back of the church before Barbara comes down the aisle. You will see two tall, thin men from Chicago. If we have any trouble with you, it’s one call to Jimmy Ricci. You get what I mean?”

Barbara; and I have been wonderfully married for just over 45 years.