The Making of The Godfather

Mario Puzo

An Original Essay

With a Foreword by Ed Falco
Author of *The Family Corleone*

The Making of *The Godfather*

By Mario Puzo, with an introduction by Ed Falco

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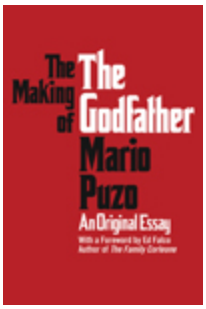

Introduction

Because Mario Puzo's essays are simultaneously buttressed and undermined by a wicked sense of humor, you can't take him literally. For example, in "The Making of *The Godfather*," he tells the reader that he went to Hollywood only to get out of the house. He promised his wife, he tells us, that if he ever hit it big, he'd get out from under her feet and go write someplace else. So what could he do? Having made his wife a solemn promise, he had no choice but to go to Hollywood and play tennis a lot while he hung out with celebrities and was feted as a famous writer. Ah, the sacrifices a man has to make for the sake of his marriage! This is funny, but the reader understands both that Puzo is entertaining us with an amusing version of the truth, and that he was cynical from the start about Hollywood and script writing, about movies and the powerbrokers who get movies made. Puzo asks the reader to see him as a likable schlub who also happens to be "one of the best technicians of the Western World" and, as the author of the acclaimed novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, an accomplished artist. He tells us that for most of his early life he was the family *chooch*, or *screwup*, and we sense that he still likes that designation. It allows him the freedom of a clown, though we also understand that he's an artist of substantial gifts. This picture he presents of himself embodies the tone of "The Making of *The Godfather*," which is both funny and serious, as well as passionate and cynical about writing and movie making and the connections between the two.

If we were to take Puzo literally in "The Making of *The Godfather*," we'd have to believe that he "never held it against Paramount that they got *The Godfather* so cheap,"

or that he didn’t disapprove of the fact that the William Morris Agency might have sold him down the river (his words) in making the Paramount deal. Nothing, apparently, riles this Mario Puzo. He is so calmly cynical and accepting regarding the machinations of those in power that when he saw *The Brotherhood*—a movie for which he was paid and credited nothing though he believes it was stolen from his outline—he tells us, “I wasn’t angry because I thought Paramount hustled me.” Nor was he angry, we’re told, when Lancer Books claimed to have sold nearly two million copies of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* though they paid him for approximately 30 percent of that amount. He accepts all of this as “perfectly reasonable business behavior.” This is a Mario Puzo who has nothing in common with the Sicilians he writes about, a people who hold slights and acts of disrespect close to their hearts, a people you’d be well advised not to abuse, a people for whom “revenge is a dish best served cold.” No, this Mario Puzo accepts the outrages and injustices of the world as matters of fact, as ordinary examples of the way, of course, the world operates. All this will strike the reader as true and not true, as funny and not really very funny at all. It is true that the world, as Puzo sees it and convincingly portrays it, is a place of ordinary corruption. It is impossible to believe, though, that Puzo wasn’t wounded by it—certainly not after reading the body of his work, novel after novel in which corruption leads to chaos and violence in the lives of men who—seeing that the world is rigged against them—go about creating their own justice, to terrifying effect. Puzo as a lovable comedian who slides amusingly through a world of corruption is funny; Puzo as a victim of unscrupulous businessmen is not really very funny at all.

The one thing Puzo ever truly believed in, he tells us, is art: “I didn’t believe in religion or love or women or men, I didn’t believe in society or philosophy. But I believed in art for forty-five years.” If we were to take him literally—which I have been arguing we should not—then at age forty-five he

gave up on art and went about writing books that would make money. Again, this is true and not true. Surely he wrote *The Godfather* to make money—and he succeeded magnificently. He wrote the screenplays to *The Godfather* and its sequels to make money, and again he succeeded. And, yes, it appears that every novel that followed *The Godfather* was written to make money and with an eye toward the film version—and in all of this he succeeded, writing several more bestsellers that went on to film or TV adaptations. But it is also not true that he gave up on art. In every one of his novels he continued to explore his obsessive themes: the power of those animal impulses that lead to the corruption of men and society, of the violence in the human heart and the hypocrisy of culture. To these themes, pursued through stories of the criminal underworld, Puzo remained a faithful artist. He did all that any artist can do, which is to explore the mind's and heart's obsessions honestly.

The essay that follows this introduction tells the story of Mario Puzo's, the writer's, journey to Hollywood, where he translated *The Godfather* into a feature film. The essay, like a good raconteur, shares amusing stories of the things that happened to Puzo in Hollywood. And while Puzo is busy at the work of entertaining the reader, he also takes some time to argue for the primacy of the writer in the construction of all narrative art, which is a lesson the film industry seems destined never to learn. But mostly the essay is, as the title makes clear, the story of the things that happened to Mario Puzo—including his famous and disastrous encounter with Frank Sinatra—along the way to the filming of *The Godfather*. It's a read no real *Godfather* fan can refuse.

Ed Falco
Blacksburg, Virginia
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The Making of The Godfather

The real reason I decided to write the piece that follows was, I think, because the wheels at Paramount refused to let me see the final cut of the movie when and how I wanted to see it. I hate to admit I have that much ego, but what the hell, nobody's perfect.

That incident as described also made me come to the decision that I would never write another movie unless I had final say. I so instructed my agent. Which in practical terms means I'm out of the movie business.

Before all this happened I signed to write two more movies, which at this time are almost done. So I think I'm qualified to say that the movie script is the least satisfying form for a writer. But like most everything else it's fun to try one time.

Most movies are lousy, and they are lousy because the people who have final say really don't know how story and character work. Hollywood still hasn't caught on that it's money in the bank to promote a writer to a status equal to that of producer, director, and (dare I say it) studio chief.

The Book

I HAVE written three novels. *The Godfather* is not as good as the preceding two; I wrote it to make money. My first novel, *The Dark Arena* (1955), received mostly very good reviews saying I was a writer to watch. Naturally I thought I was going to be rich and famous. The book netted me $3,500 and I still didn't know I had a whole fifteen years to wait.

My second novel, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, was published ten years later (1965) and netted me $3,000. I was going downhill fast. Yet the book received some extraordinarily fine reviews. The New York *Times* called it a "small classic." I even like the book myself and immodestly think of it as art.

Anyway I was a hero, I thought. But my publisher, Atheneum, known as a classy publishing house more interested in belle-lettres than money, was not impressed. I asked them for an advance to start on my next book (which would be a BIG classic), and the editors were cool. They were courteous. They were kind. They showed me the door.

I couldn't believe it. I went back and read all the reviews on my first two books. (I skipped the bad ones.) There must be some mistake. I was acknowledged as a real talent at least. Listen, I was a real writer, honest, a genuine artist, two acclaimed novels behind me, every word in them sweated over and all mine. No help from anybody. It couldn't be true that my publisher would not give me an advance for another novel.

Well, we had another talk. The editors didn't like the idea behind my new novel. It sounded like another loser. One editor wistfully remarked that if *Fortunate Pilgrim* had only had a little more of that Mafia stuff in it maybe the book

would have made money. (One of the minor characters was a mob chief.)

I was forty-five years old and tired of being an artist. Besides, I owed $20,000 to relatives, finance companies, banks and assorted bookmakers and shylocks. It was really time to grow up and sell out as Lenny Bruce once advised. So I told my editors OK, I'll write a book about the Mafia, just give me some money to get started. They said no money until we see a hundred pages. I compromised, I wrote a ten-page outline. They showed me the door again.

There is no way to explain the terrible feeling of rejection, the damage, the depression and weakening of will such manipulation does to a writer. But this incident also enlightened me. I had been naïve enough to believe that publishers cared about art. They didn't. They wanted to make money. (Please don't say, "No kidding.") They were in business. They had a capital investment and payrolls to meet. If some lunatic wanted to create a work of art, let him do it on his own time.

I had been a true believer in art. I didn't believe in religion or love or women or men, I didn't believe in society or philosophy. But I believed in art for forty-five years. It gave me a comfort I found in no other place. But I knew I'd never be able to write another book if the next one wasn't success. The psychological and economic pressure would be too much. I had never doubted I could write a best-selling commercial novel whenever I chose to do so. My writing friends, my family, my children and my creditors all assured me now was the time to put up or shut up.

I was willing, I had a ten-page outline-but nobody would take me. Months went by. I was working on a string of adventure magazines, editing, writing free-lance stories and being treated by the publisher, Martin Goodman, better than any other publisher I had ever had. I was ready to forget novels except maybe as a puttering hobby for my old age. But one day a writer friend dropped into my magazine office. As a natural courtesy I gave him a copy of the

Fortunate Pilgrim. A week later he came back. He thought I was a great writer. I bought him a magnificent lunch. During lunch I told him some funny Mafia stories and my ten-page outline. He was enthusiastic. He arranged a meeting for me with the editors of G. P. Putnam's Sons. The editors just sat around for an hour listening to my Mafia tales and said go ahead. They also gave me a $5,000 advance and I was on my way, just like that. Almost-almost, I believed that publishers were human.

As soon as I got my hands on the Putnam money, I naturally didn't work on the book. (Luckily part of the advance was payable on the handing in of the complete manuscript or I would never have finished it.) The thing is, I didn't really want to write *The Godfather*. There was another novel I wanted to write. (I never did and now I never will. Subject matter rots like everything else.)

All my fellow editors on the adventure magazine told me to get cracking on the book. They all were sure it would make my fortune. I had all the good stories, it was writing to my strength. Everybody I knew was sure it was the right thing to do and so finally I started. And quit my job.

It took me three years to finish. During that time I wrote three adventure stories a month for Martin Goodman on a free-lance basis. I sneaked in a children's book that got a rave review from *The New Yorker* magazine, the first time they knew I was alive, and I wrote a lot of book reviews. Also magazine pieces, two of which were for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine,* who, though they do not stuff your pockets with gold, treat your work with enormous respect. It is also, in my opinion, the best place to appear, if you're out to influence our society. Anyway in those three years I wrote more than in my whole previous life put together. And it was mostly all fun. I remember it as the happiest time of my life. (Family and friends disagree.)

I'm ashamed to admit that I wrote *The Godfather* entirely from research. I never met a real honest-to-god gangster. I knew the gambling world pretty good, but that's all. After

the book became “famous,” I was introduced to a few gentlemen related to the material. They were flattering. They refused to believe that I had never been in the rackets. They refused to believe that I had never had the confidence of a Don. But all of them loved the book.

In different parts of the country I heard a nice story: that the Mafia had paid me a million dollars to write *The Godfather* as a public relations con. I’m not in the literary world much, but I hear some writers claim I must have been a Mafia man, that the book could not have been written purely out of research. I treasure the compliment.

I finally had to finish *The Godfather* in July, 1968, because I needed the final $1,200 advance payment from Putnam to take my wife and kids to Europe. My wife had not seen her family for twenty years and I had promised her that this was the year. I had no money, but I had a great collection of credit cards. Still I needed that $1,200 in cash, so I handed in the rough manuscript. Before leaving for Europe, I told my publisher not to show the book to anybody; it had to be polished.

My family had a good time in Europe. American Express offices cash five-hundred-dollar checks against their credit cards. I used their offices in London, Cannes, Nice and Wiesbaden. My children and I gambled in the poshest casinos on the French Riviera. If just one of us could have gotten lucky, I would have been able to cover those checks that American Express airmailed back to the United States. We all lost. I had failed as a father. When we finally got home, I owed the credit card companies $8,000. I wasn’t worried. If worse came to worse we could always sell our house. Or I could go to jail. Hell, better writers had gone to jail. No sweat.

I went into New York to see my agent, Candida Donadio. I was hoping she’d pull a slick magazine assignment out of her sleeve and bail me out as she’d often done in the past. She informed me that my publisher had just turned down $375,000 for the paperback rights to *The Godfather*.

I had given strict orders it wasn't to be shown to even a paperback house, but this was no time to complain. I called my editor at Putnam, Bill Targ, and he said they were holding out for $410,000 because $400,000 was some sort of record. Did I wish to speak to Clyde Taylor, their reprint rights man, who was handling the negotiations? I said no; I said that I had absolute confidence in any man who could turn down $375,000. I hung around New York, had a very late lunch with Targ, and over our coffee he got a call. Ralph Daigh of Fawcett had bought the paperback rights for $410,000.

I went up to the adventure magazine office to quit my freelance job and tell all my friends there the good news. We had some drinks and then I decided to get home to Long Island. While waiting for my car, I called my brother to tell him the good news. This brother had 10 percent of *The Godfather* because he supported me all my life and gave me a final chunk of money to complete the book. Through the years I'd call him up frantic for a few hundred bucks to pay the mortgage or buy the kids shoes. Then I'd arrive at his house in a taxi to pick up the money. In rain or snow he never took a taxi, but he never complained. He always came through. So now I wanted him to know that since my half of the paperback rights came to $205,000 (the hard-cover publishers keep half), he was in for a little over twenty grand.

He is the kind of guy who is always home when I call to borrow money. Now that I had money to give back, he was naturally out. I got my mother on the phone. She speaks broken English but understands the language perfectly. I explained it to her.

She asked, "$40,000?"

I said no, it was $410,000. I told her three times before she finally answered, "Don't tell nobody." My car came out of the garage and I hung up. Traffic was jammed, and it took me over two hours to get home out in the suburbs. When I walked in the door, my wife was dozing over the TV and the

kids were all out playing. I went over to my wife, kissed her on the cheek, and said, “Honey, we don’t have to worry about money anymore. I just sold my book for $410,000.”

She smiled at me and kept dozing. I went down to my workroom to call my brothers and sisters. The reason for this was because every Italian family has a “chooch,” a donkey. That is, a family idiot everybody agrees will never be able to make a living and so has to be helped without rancor or reproach. I was the family “chooch” and I just wanted to tell them I was abdicating the family role.

I called my older sister.

“Did you hear?” I said.

My sister’s voice was pretty cool. I started getting annoyed. Nobody seemed to think this was a big deal. My whole life was going to change, I didn’t have to worry about money. It was almost like not having to worry about dying. Then my sister said, “You got $40,000 for the book. Mama called me.”

I was exasperated with my mother. After all those explanations she had gotten it wrong. Her eighty years were no excuse. “No,” I told my sister, “it was $410,000.”

Now I got the reaction I wanted. There was a little scream over the phone and an excited minute of conversation. But I had to get back to my mother. I called and said, “Ma, how the hell could you get it wrong? I told you five times that it was $410,000 not $40,000. How could you make such a mistake?”

There was a long silence and then my mother whispered over the phone, “I no maka a mistake. I don’t wanta tell her.”

When I got through with all the phone calls, my wife was in bed asleep. So were the kids. I went to bed and slept like a rock. When I woke up the next morning, my wife and kids circled the bed. My wife said, “What was that you said last night?” She had just grasped the whole thing.

Well, it’s a nice happy ending. But nobody seemed to believe me. So I called Bill Targ and drew an advance check

for $100,000. I paid my debts, paid my agents' commissions, paid my brother his well-deserved 10 percent and three months later I called my publishers and agent for more money. They were stunned. What about the huge check I had just gotten three months before? I couldn't resist. Why should I treat them any differently than I had treated my family all those lean years? "A hundred grand doesn't last forever," I said.

At least I could be a publisher's "chooch."

The Godfather to date had earned over $1,000,000, but I still wasn't rich. Some of the money was diverted to trust funds for the kids. There were agents' commissions and lawyers' fees. There were federal and state income taxes. All of which cut the original million to less than half. But before I grasped all this I had a great time. I spent the money as fast as it came in. The only thing was that I felt very unnatural being out of debt. I didn't owe anybody one penny.

I loved the money, but I didn't really like being "famous." I found it quite simply distressing. I never much liked parties, never liked talking to more than two or three people at one time. I dislike interviews and having my picture taken (with reason).

I got conned into doing the TV *Today Show* by an editor at Putnam's saying, "How do you know you don't like it when you've never done it?" That sounded reasonable. I did it. I hated it. So I was never tempted when offers came from the other talk shows. I don't think it was a reverse snobbism. Or a phony kind of humility. It's just damn uncomfortable. And nearly every writer I've seen on TV has seemed foolish; it's not a writer's medium.

Interviews come out sounding like someone I didn't even know; and I couldn't even blame the interviewers. I did make those dumb statements, but I didn't say them like *that*. So I quit on TV and all publicity, including interviews. And, thank God, I never went on those cross-country trips that are supposed to help a book to best-sellerdom. Not

because of other people but because of me. To meet a strange person is always a shock to my nervous system, but I think that's true of most people.

In the meantime I had made what turned out to be a very big mistake. Just before *The Godfather* was finished, I sold the paperback rights of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* for a $1,500 cash advance against the usual royalties. I sold them to Lancer Books, and one of the partners, Irwin Stein, was so agreeable he sent me the $1,500 in one whole payment rather than reserving half for publication date.

A bigger mistake was made long before publication when I had the first one hundred pages of *The Godfather* done. The William Morris Agency approved a contract with Paramount for the book for a $12,500 option payment, against $50,000 with "escalators" *if* they exercised the option. I had already switched to Candida Donadio as agent, but William Morris had signed the initial book contract and so represented me in the movie deal. They advised me against taking it. They advised me to wait. That was like advising a guy underwater to take a deep breath. I needed the cash and the $12,500 looked like Fort Knox. Let me say now that the fault was mine. But I never held it against Paramount that they got *The Godfather* so cheap.

Now all through this chapter I'll mention how people did things that seem like sharp practice, and the reader may get the impression that I resent it or was surprised or offended. Never. In the world and society we live in almost all these actions were perfectly reasonable. The fact that I feel that the William Morris Agency might have sold me down the river to Paramount Pictures does not mean that I disapprove, condemn, or even am resentful. I consider it perfectly reasonable business behavior on their part.

Anyway, to wind up. *The Godfather* became No. 1 best seller in the USA; sixty-seven weeks on the New York *Times* list; also No. 1 in England, France, Germany and other countries. It's been translated into seventeen or twenty languages, I stopped keeping track. They tell me it's the

fastest and best-selling fiction paperback of all times or will be when the new “film edition” comes with the movie–but one can’t believe everything publishers tell their authors. Though Ralph Daigh at Fawcett proved a straight guy and promoted the book like hell. Even paid me everything he said I sold. It’s a success all right and I remember one day when I was working on it. My wife sent me to the supermarket; my daughter asked me to drive her to her girlfriend’s; my son wanted a ride to football practice. I exploded. I said, “Jesus Christ, do you guys know I’m working on a book that could make me a hundred thousand dollars?” They looked at me and we all laughed together.

The book got much better reviews than I expected. I wished like hell I’d written it better. I like the book. It has energy and I lucked out by creating a central character that was popularly accepted as genuinely mythic. But I wrote below my gifts in that book.

The Movie:

I had read the literature about Hollywood, how they did in Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, and novelists in general.

I had already had one enlightening experience with Hollywood movie producers. Earlier that year my agent had called to ask that I come to New York to meet John Foreman, who produces most of the Paul Newman movies. I live fifty miles out in the suburbs and hate New York. But my agent said that John Foreman had read *The Fortunate Pilgrim,* was in love with the book, and wanted to make it a movie. He was a big wheel. I really should make the trip.

I did and it was worth it. John Foreman was dynamic. For three hours he talked about my book, how he loved it, how he was determined to do it as a movie. He quoted all the best parts. He liked all the right things. I was thrilled and impressed. The movie was definitely on. As he left, he said

he would call my agent the next day and arrange the financial details of the contract.

Nobody ever heard from him again.

So I was not interested at all in what Hollywood did to the book as a movie just so long as I didn't help them do it. But one day I picked up the paper and it said that Danny Thòmas wanted to play the role of *The Godfather*. That threw me into a panic. I had always thought that Marlon Brando would be great. So through a mutual friend, Jeff Brown, I contacted Brando, wrote him a letter, and he was nice enough to call me. We had a talk on the phone. He had not read the book but he told me that the studio would never hire him unless a strong director insisted on it. He was nice over the phone but didn't sound too interested. And that was that.

What I didn't know at this time was that Paramount had decided not to make the movie. The reason for this being that they had made a movie called *The Brotherhood*–also about the Mafia–and the movie was a critical and financial disaster. When I saw *The Brotherhood,* I felt that they had given the first one hundred pages of my book to a real cookie-cutter screenwriter and told him to write a switch. Then they got Kirk Douglas to play the lead, and to show that he was a lovable gangster they always had him kissing little children. Then they had his own brother kill him on orders of the higher-ups.

When I saw the picture, I wasn't angry because I thought Paramount hustled me. That was OK. Working for my magazines, I'd written some cookie-cutting switches in my time. But I hated the sheer stupidity of that movie, the writing, the whole concept, the whole misunderstanding of the Mafia world. What I didn't know at the time was that the financial disaster of the film made the studio brass feel there was no money in Mafia movies. It was only when *The Godfather* became a super best seller (the sixty-seven weeks on the *Times* best-seller list gave it this classification for the money boys) that they had to make the film.

Finally Al Ruddy, the producer, was assigned to the film, and he came to New York, saw my agent and said Paramount wanted me to do the script. It would be a low budget, he said, so they couldn't offer to pay me much. I turned the offer down. They found more money and a percentage and I agreed to see Al Ruddy. We met at the Plaza for lunch. He is a tall, lanky guy with a lot of easy New York charm.

He was so nice I thought it might be fun to go to California. He had to take some calls in the Plaza Edwardian Room and he apologized gracefully. "Christ," he said, "this is like the bullshit in the movies but I really gotta take these calls."

I chatted with his wife and was charmed when she produced from her handbag a miniature live poodle who let out a yip and had the handbag zipped over his head again before the enraged maître-d' spotted where the sound came from. It seemed Al and his wife took the poodle everywhere, with nobody the wiser. The poodle never let out a sound while in the handbag. At the end of the lunch I was enchanted by them and the poodle and I agreed to write the script.

Fellow novelists wondered why I wanted to make movies. I didn't like show biz. I was a novelist; I had my novels to write.

So how come? When I was poor and working at home on my books, I made my wife a solemn promise that if I ever hit it big I'd get a studio, get out from under her feet. She hated having me home during the day. I was in the way. I rumpled up the bed. I messed up the living room. I roamed around the house cursing. I came charging and yelling out of my workroom when the kids had a fight. In short, I was nerve-wracking. To make matters worse she could never catch me working. She claims she never saw me type. She claims that for three years all I did was fall asleep on the sofa and then just magically produced the manuscript for *The Godfather*. Anyway, a man is bound by solemn oaths. Now that I was a

big success, I had to get out of my own house during working hours.

I tried. I rented quiet elegant studios. I went to London. I tried the French Riviera, Puerto Rico and Las Vegas. I hired secretaries and bought dictating machines. Nothing happened. I *needed* the kids screaming and fighting. I needed my wife interrupting my work to show me her newest curtains. I needed those trips to the supermarket. I got some of my best ideas while helping my wife load up the shopping cart. But I had made a solemn promise to get out of the house. So OK. I'd go to Hollywood.

It's true–success really throws a writer. For a year I had wandered around having "a good time." It wasn't that great. It was OK but it wasn't great. And then remember that for twenty years I had lived the life of a hermit. I had seen a few close personal friends on occasion for dinner. I had spent evenings with my wife's friends. I had gone to movies. I had taught my children how to gamble with percentages. But mostly I had been living in my own head, with all my dreams, all my fantasies. The world had passed me by. I didn't know how much men had changed, women had changed, girls had changed, young men had changed, how society and the very government had changed.

Also I had always been very content to be an observer at the few parties I went to over the years. I rarely initiated a conversation or a friendship. Suddenly I didn't have to. People seemed genuinely delighted to talk to me, to listen to me; they were charming to me and I loved it. I became perhaps the most easily charmed guy in the Western Hemisphere. And it helped that the people were for the most part genuinely charming people. It was easy to stop being a hermit, in fact it was a pleasure. So I had the courage to leave for Hollywood.

The deal for the script was agreeable: $500 a week expense money, nice money, up front (sure money), *plus* 2½ percent of net profit. A fair deal in the marketplace of

that time, especially since Al Ruddy had gotten his job by saying he could produce the picture for only a million.

But the deal was not as good as it sounded. For one thing, a suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel was $500 a week, so that wiped out the expense money right there. Plus the fact that my 2½ percent was worth zero unless the picture became a big block-buster like *Love Story*. The way it works is that the studio usually legally snatches all profits from anybody working on a percentage of net profit. They do this with bookkeeping. If the picture costs $4,000,000, they add another million for studio overhead. They charge advertising department costs to pictures that make money. They have accountants who make profits disappear like Houdini.

Again, let it be clear that this is not to mean that Hollywood is less honest than publishing. The paperback publisher called Lancer Books makes Hollywood studios look like Diogenes. Lancer Books advertised that it sold nearly 2,000,000 copies of *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. It only paid me for approximately 30 percent of that amount.

Still OK. In America nobody blames any businessman who hustles. But then Lancer put out an original paperback called *The Godmother*. I figured that no matter what they told me about Hollywood, it could never sink that low. (Sure enough, it wasn't Hollywood. In Italy they made a film starring my idol, Vittorio De Sica, called *The Godson*.)

So I went to Hollywood absolutely sure it held no surprises for me. I was armored. *The Godfather* was *their* picture, *not mine*. I would be cool. I would never let my feelings get hurt. I would never get proprietory or paranoid. I was an employee.

California had a lot of sunshine and a lot of fresh air and a lot of tennis courts. (I'd just discovered tennis and was crazy about it.) I'd get healthy and skinny.

The Beverly Hills Hotel is for me the best hotel in the world. It is a rambling three-story affair surrounded by gardens, its own bungalows, swimming pool and the famous Polo Lounge. Also a tennis court whose pro, Alex Olmeda,

called me Champ. Of course, he called everybody Champ. Still….

The service is superb and friendly without being familiar. It is the only hotel I've ever been in that made me feel altogether comfortable. But it did wipe out my $500-a-week expense money and more besides.

My office was fun. I loved the Paramount lot with its fake Western town, its little alleyways, its barracklike buildings, its general atmosphere that made me feel I was in the twilight zone. I had my place on the third floor, out of traffic, just as I liked it. Al Ruddy had his much more elaborate HQ down on the first floor and we both could just run up and down the stairs to see each other.

My office wasn't really that great but I didn't mind. I had a refrigerator and an unlimited supply of soda pop free. And I had an adjoining office for my secretary and a telephone with a buzzer and four lines. This was living.

So I spent the next two weeks playing tennis and seeing friends of mine from New York who had settled in California. Also I had conferences with Robert Evans, the head of production for Paramount Pictures, and Peter Bart, his right-hand man.

I had read once a *Life* magazine article on Evans, a savage putdown. So I was surprised to find that he was easy and natural. I liked Evans right off for one reason. There were five of us having a conference in his office. He had to take a private phone call. So he stepped into a little closet to take it. Now Louis B. Mayer would have told the four of us to squeeze into the closet and shut the door so that we wouldn't hear him take the call at his desk.

Evans was unpretentious and usually said or seemed to say exactly what he thought. He said it the way children tell truths, with a curious innocence that made the harshest criticism or disagreement inoffensive. He was unfailingly courteous, to me at any rate. If this seems too flattering a portrait of a film studio chief, let me add that he was so

cheap about handing out his Cuban cigars that I had to sneak into his office when he wasn't around to steal some.

Evans was open to argument and he could often be swayed. He was of course charming but everybody in the movie business is charming, in fact everybody in California is charming, except: Peter Bart, who has a cold intelligence and is the only uncharming guy in the movie business whom I met. He didn't say much either. The reason for this (though I didn't know it at the time) is because he liked to think things out before voicing an opinion, and he hadn't yet picked up the California trick of being charming while he was thinking.

The first conference went over very well. There were Evans, Al Ruddy, Peter Bart, Jack Ballard and myself. Ballard is a Yul Brynner-headed guy who keeps track of production costs on a movie. Self-effacing, but producers and directors shook in their boots when he totaled tabs on their costs. Evans directed the meeting. It was a general conversation with a built-in pep talk intended for me. This was going to be the big movie for Paramount. I had to come through. This picture would "SAVE" Paramount. I love that kind of stuff, it makes me feel important and I work twice as hard. (I really wanted to "SAVE" Paramount but I was too late. *Love Story* did it before me.) Then we talked casting. I suggested Marlon Brando for the role of the Godfather. They were kind to me but I got the impression my stock had dropped 50 points.

Al Ruddy suggested Robert Redford for the role of Michael, and I didn't care how nice a guy he was, his stock dropped 50 points. I spoke out and was pleasantly surprised when Evans and Bart agreed with me. It was going to be a fair fight, I thought.

They had no director. I had to write the script before they got a director. Directors like to read scripts before they sign. Well, that was what I was in California for. I assured them I was one of the best technicians of the Western world (Not

bragging, technique can be measured. You can't brag about art).

All this had happened at the Paramount studio's plush head-quarters on Canon Drive. When Al Ruddy and I got back to his comparatively humble office on the Paramount studio lot, we were just like soldiers returning to the front lines and finally rid of the brass.

"You just do what you want to do," Ruddy said. "You're the writer. But do me a favor. Start off with a love scene between Michael and Kay." He still wanted Redford.

"Al," I said as I drank his whiskey and smoked his cigars, "you can't start *The Godfather* off with a love scene. It ain't fitting."

He recognized the tag line and he laughed. He was a New York City street guy and I felt comfortable with him.

"Listen," he said, "just try it. We can always cut it out later."

"OK," I said. I went back upstairs and read the contract and, sure enough, it said the producer can tell the writer how to write the script. I had to start off the movie with a youthful love scene. So I wrote it and it was lousy. I showed it to Al and he loved it.

That made me happy. Love my work, I love you. But I still knew he was wrong. I spent the next three days playing tennis. Hell, I spent the next two weeks playing tennis. Then I decided to go home for a couple of weeks. I missed my wife and kids. And this was April and spring is a good time to be in New York.

Ruddy took the decision like a gentleman. He even kept paying me the $500-a-week expense money while I was living at home. I stayed home for a couple of weeks and did some work and then flew back to California-with a stop at Las Vegas, where I lost what I had saved of my expense money.

So from April to August I led an ideal existence: California, tennis and sunshine–until I got homesick, then home again. Then when home life got on my nerves–back to

California. Nobody knew where I was or when. Meanwhile I was being charmed out of my shoes by all the people I met in California. Socially, I had round heels, there was no other word for it. I wasn't getting much work done, but nobody seemed to be worrying.

Now the fact that I was a hermit escaped from his hut after twenty years doesn't mean I was a complete innocent. But the fact is that the people in the movie world are genuinely charming even if their charm is sometimes not disinterested. One of the greatest surprises for me was to find actresses and actors so sympathetic. Writers and directors and producers always put performers down. Star actors are considered dunderheads. Actresses are always to be manipulated by power, in their personal and professional life. They are supposed not to have intelligence or sensitivity.

I quite simply found the reverse to be often true. I found many of them intelligent, quiet, sensitive and shy. I observed that at the beginnings of their careers and afterward they are badly exploited by their producers, studios and agents and assorted hustlers. They suffer the most profound humiliations just to get a chance to use their art. After seeing what they go through at the beginning of their careers and considering the long years of waiting, it is easy to excuse their excesses when they become famous and powerful.

From April to August of 1970 I cummuted back and forth from New York to Los Angeles, working on the script, playing tennis, getting a taste of the social life in Hollywood. All very pleasant. The time before a writer delivers the script is sort of a honeymoon time. Love is everywhere.

I used to enjoy watching the pretty girls making the rounds of the producers' offices to read for parts. Every studio has a gang of producers who rent offices on the lot while getting a picture ready for production. Nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand of these pictures never get made, but mean-while the producers have people

coming in to read and rehearse parts, study scripts, and have long earnest discussions on how to play the parts. Outside the studios there are another 10,000 hopefuls who have written scripts and carry three containers of film to shoot their own independent movie. They, too, are interviewing and rehearsing the 1,000,000 pretties, young women and men in America who have flocked to LA to get in films. All this, combined with the great weather and sunshine, gave Hollywood an ambience that was to me at least interesting.

Sometimes I'd see a movie in a private screening room. No fun. People took phone calls and messages while watching. Made jokes, talked. When I go to a movie I'm a true believer. Or I just walk out.

In the evenings I'd drop down to Al Ruddy's office and have a drink with him and his production staff. Al was an easy guy to be with, a great storyteller, and his people were agreeable. It was one of the nicest parts of the day. Ruddy was also in the middle of cutting his picture *Little Fauss and Big Halsey* starring Robert Redford and Michael Pollard, and he was always telling us what a great movie it was going to be and how many Oscars it was sure to win. Other people who had seen the rough cut agreed. I was anxious to see it and Ruddy said he would show me a piece of it first chance.

He did the next day, a ten-minute segment, and I loved it. My New York friend George Mandel, who was on assignment from *Life* magazine to do a piece on me, disagreed. He gave his reasons, and because I think he's the smartest guy in the world, I listened. But I still liked the segment. One of the hardest things for a person to do is really to listen to the smartest guy in the world.

When *Little Fauss and Big Halsey* came out, it was a flop. Everything George Mandel had said about the ten-minute segment proved to be true about the rest of the picture. I could see it when I saw the whole thing, but it took the smartest man in the world to figure it out from just seeing a ten-minute segment.

By this time I was anxious to give Paramount a great script and make a great movie. I was becoming possessive, it was becoming my movie after all. Of course I knew my place in the batting order (eighth), but I was so psyched up, I said the first draft was just rough and didn't count, which was equivalent to giving them a free rewrite worth about twenty-five grand. I wanted them to love me and to show I was really rooting for our side. I didn't know that as soon as I said the first draft was free nobody would read it.

Then two things happened that made me stop embarrassing them with such sentimentality.

One evening I dropped into Ruddy's office as he was on the phone. While talking, he rewrote a script he was about to produce for another studio. I watched, fascinated. He was actually writing while talking on the phone. I've always admired people who could do two things at one time. This was special. His closing words on the phone were "I think I got this script licked now."

Now this story is not meant to enrage writers. Nor is it meant to put down producers. But it restored my perspective. I went back to playing tennis for the next five days and let the script lay. It was *not* My movie.

I guess I should explain why I found this incident not annoying or threatening to me as a writer. You often read how a star rewrites his or her lines, how a director "fixes up" a script or a producer gives it a final polish. And yet if you really understand how it works, it's impossible to get angry. For example:

During World War II I was attached to the British Army, and at one point we met elements of the Russian Army in a northern German town. It seems this Russian division, recruited from some wild Asiatic province, had never seen plumbing. They were fascinated by water running out of a copper faucet. One fur-hatted Russian ripped the faucet off the wall and nailed it on a fence post. He was astonished when he turned on the faucet and no water came out. He assumed that water just came out of the faucet. The

concept of plumbing had never been revealed to him. You can laugh at it, but it wasn't native stupidity, it was simply innocence.

When a director, or a star, or a producer picks up a pen, I think the same thing happens. (There are exceptions of course.) They believe words come out of a pen. And again it's not stupidity. Simply innocence. They have no concept of how writing really works. So writers shouldn't get mad. They should just get the hell out of the movie business.

The second thing that threw me off involved Peter Bart. I had rented a house at Malibu for one of the summer months and brought my family out from New York. I was now seriously at work after goofing off for some four months. I had a secretary typing and I was zeroed in on the script–really in the groove. But I was past my deadline for the first draft. (If I hadn't given them a free first draft to show that I loved them, everything would have been OK.) But Bart knew I had been goofing off and started putting pressure on. I said OK, the end of the week. Naturally I wasn't ready at the end of the week. He insisted. There was still a final section that I wanted to rewrite and give it that extra polish and editing a solid piece of work needs. And then it wasn't finally so much that Bart or anybody else got tough; they were always courteous, always kind; it was just that all of a sudden I said to myself, "What the hell do I care? It's *not* MY movie."

So I told my secretary to just type out what I had already written. I didn't go over the last section. I then put on my bathing suit, and for the first time since I had moved into the house on the beautiful beach of Malibu, I took a dip in the ocean. I would enjoy a beautiful, luxurious swim.

Now this was very wrong of me. Instead of getting my feelings hurt, I should have just let them wait. Guilty conscience. I should have been more adult. It was also very wrong of me because I hate going into the ocean.

They had the script and everybody liked it. Of course, by contract, I had to do a revision. Now they had to get a director. This was in August, 1970. Meanwhile in the

following months while they looked for a director, I had a few adventures. The most interesting was with Frank Sinatra, rated as one of the ten most famous people in the world, a guy who had been my idol from afar. Despite this I had never wanted to meet him or be introduced. I just believed he was a great artist (singing, not acting) and that he had lived a life of great courage. I admired his sense of family responsibility, especially since he was a Northern Italian, which to a Southern Italian is as alien as being an Englishman.

In *The Godfather* the singer named Johnny Fontane has been assumed by many people to be based on Frank Sinatra. Before the book came out, my publisher got a letter from Sinatra's lawyers demanding to see the manuscript. In polite language we refused. However, the movie was another story. In the initial conferences with Paramount's legal staff they showed concern about this until I reassured them the part was very minor in the film. Which it turned out to be.

Now the thing was, in my book, that I had written the Fontane character with complete sympathy for the man and his life-style and his hang-ups. I thought I had caught the innocence of great show biz people, their despair at the corruption their kind of life forces on them and the people around them. I thought I had caught the inner innocence of the character. But I could also see that if Sinatra thought the character was himself, he might not like it–the book–or me.

But of course some people wanted to bring us together. At Elaine's in New York one night Sinatra was at the bar and I was at a table. Elaine asked if I would object to meeting Sinatra. I said it was OK with me if it was OK with him. It was not OK with Sinatra. And that was perfectly OK with me. I didn't give it another thought.

A year later I was working on the script in Hollywood. I rarely went out in the evening but this particular night I was invited to my producer's friend's birthday party at Chasen's. A party for twelve given by a famous millionaire. Just an

agreeable dinner. Everybody had been so charming to me the past six months I had gotten over some of my backwardness. So I went.

The millionaire turned out to be one of those elderly men always trying to be youthful. He wore red slacks and a miniature Stetson and had that five-martini affability I dread more than anything else in the world. As we were having a drink at the bar, he said Sinatra was having dinner at another table and would I like to meet him. I said no. The millionaire had a Right-Hand Man who tried to insist. I said no again. We finally went to dinner.

During the dinner there was a tableau of John Wayne and Frank Sinatra meeting in the space equidistant between their two tables to salute each other. They both looked absolutely great, better than on the screen, twenty years younger than they really were. And both beautifully dressed, Sinatra especially. It was really great to see. They were beribboned kings meeting on the Field of the Cloth of Gold; Chasen's is regally formal.

The food brought me back to reality. It was lousy. Christ, I'd eaten better in one-arm Italian joints all over New York. This was the famous Chasen's? Well, OK, the fancy French restaurants in New York had been a disappointment too. I was glad when we were finished and I started to leave.

But on the way out the millionaire took me by the hand and started leading me toward a table. His Right-Hand Man took me by the other hand. "You gotta meet Frank," the millionaire said. "He's a good friend of mine."

We were almost to the table. I still could have wrenched loose and walked away, but it would have been an obvious snub. It was easier, physically and psychologically, to be led the few remaining steps. The millionaire made the introduction. Sinatra never looked up from his plate.

"I'd like you to meet my good friend, Mario Puzo," said the millionaire.

"I don't think so," Sinatra said.

Which sent me on my way. But the poor millionaire didn't get the message. He started over again.

"I don't want to meet him," Sinatra said.

Meanwhile I was trying to get past the Right-Hand Man and get the hell out of there. So I heard the millionaire stutering his apologies, not to me, but to Sinatra. The millionaire was actually in tears. "Frank, I'm sorry, God, Frank, I didn't know, Frank, I'm sorry–"

But Sinatra cut him short and his voice was now the voice I had heard while making love as a kid, soft and velvety. He was consoling the shattered millionaire. "It's *not* your *fault*," Sinatra said.

I always run away from an argument and I have rarely in my life been disgusted by anything human beings do, but after that I said to Sinatra, "Listen, it wasn't my idea."

And then the most astounding thing happened. He completely misunderstood. He thought I was apologizing for the character of Johnny Fontane in my book.

He said, and his voice was almost kind, "Who told you to put that in the book, your publisher?"

I was completely dumbfounded. I don't let publishers put commas in my books. That's the only thing I have character about. Finally I said, "I mean about being introduced to you."

Time has mercifully dimmed the humiliation of what followed. Sinatra started to shout abuse. I remember that, contrary to his reputation, he did not use foul language at all. The worst thing he called me was a pimp, which rather flattered me since I've never been able to get girlfriends to squeeze blackheads out of my back much less hustle for me. I do remember his saying that if it wasn't that I was so much older than he, he would beat hell out of me. I was a kid when he was singing at the Paramount, but OK, he looked twenty years younger. But what hurt was that here he was, a Northern Italian, threatening me, a Southern Italian, with physical violence. This was roughly equivalent to Einstein pulling a knife on Al Capone. It just wasn't done.

Northern Italians never mess with Southern Italians except to get them put in jail or deported to some desert island.

Sinatra kept up his abuse and I kept staring at him. He kept staring down at his plate. Yelling. He never looked up. Finally I walked away and out of the restaurant. My humiliation must have showed on my face because he yelled after me, “Choke. Go ahead and choke.” The voice frenzied, high-pitched.

Different versions of this incident appeared in papers and on TV depending on who was doing the planting. It was at this time I realized how important a public relations apparatus is. Sinatra has a guy named Jim Mahoney and he must be good because every story version made Sinatra a hero. Which made me think. Was Everything I had admired about Sinatra a creation of Mahoney?

It must be pointed out that this incident was not Sinatra’s fault. He was eating dinner, minding his own business. The fault is partly mine. I could have pulled away and I wonder to this day why I did not. But the humiliation did me a lot of good. I was really beginning to think I was important. Also now I have an accepted excuse for not going to parties. Before that it was always hard to explain why. Now all I have to do is tell the Sinatra story and I’m excused. Everybody understands.

Incidents like this send the writer scurrying back to his workroom for safety. Make no mistake, writers become writers to avoid the pains and humiliations of the real world and real people. I started rewriting the script, playing tennis and reading quietly at night in my suite. If I was going to be a hermit, the Beverly Hills Hotel was a great hut.

I felt depressed too, because I thought Sinatra hated the book and believed that I had attacked him personally in the character of Johnny Fontane. But a few weeks later when Francis Coppola was named as director of the film, he too had an incident with Sinatra. They ran into each other in an LA club one night, and Sinatra put his arms around Coppola’s shoulders and said, “Francis, I’d play the

Godfather for you. I wouldn't do it for those guys at Paramount, but I'd do it for you."

That story cured my depression but Sinatra was still a presence in the making of the film. Some well-known singers turned down the part, one of them remarking he wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. Al Martino wanted the part, but for some reason it was first offered to Vic Damone. Damone accepted and then turned it down. Presumably out of loyalty to Sinatra and the Italian American League. But later Vic Damone admitted this was an excuse invented by the great Mahoney. He really turned it down because it was a small paycheck. Finally Al Martino got the part and, I thought, did it exactly right.

Another Sinatra-Coppola story was supposedly Sinatra calling up Coppola on the phone and Coppola just listening and then Coppola saying thoughtfully, "I never did like that line about him calling her a tramp." This referred to a line in the book where Johnny Fontane cursed his second wife out. It was never in any version of the scripts even before the call.

Some very famous directors turned *The Godfather* down because it offended their social consciences, because "it glorified the Mafia and criminals." When Costas Gravas, the director of *Z*, was approached, he said he would love to do it because it was an indictment of American capitalism. But he declined because it was too American and he felt that he, as a foreigner, couldn't handle the nuances.

Fair enough. I liked Costas Gravas' reaction. And I understood the others too. My first novel was called degenerate and dirty by a few critics, though others praised it as art. By now the only opinion about my work I worried about was my own. And I was a tougher critic than most, so my feelings were rarely hurt. What I didn't know was that there was some argument about making the movie as a cheapie and cashing in on the book's sales record.

Finally they decided to go all the way. Bart had written a critique of my first draft screenplay that made a lot of sense,

and also made up for his lack of California charm. In fact I found that I could most of the time get straight answers when I asked him questions. Which is not as comforting as charm of course but more useful. It was Bart who came up with the idea of using Francis Coppola as the director. Mainly because he was Italian and young. Stanley Jaffee, the president of Paramount Pictures, Bob Evans and Ruddy agreed. Again my cynical mind makes me wonder if they picked Coppola because he was a kid in his early thirties and had just directed two financial failures, and so could be controlled. At the time they were hoping to do *The Godfather* for between $1,000,000 and $2,000,000. (The picture finally cost over $6,000,000.)

When Al Ruddy told me the news, I had not yet met Coppola, but I knew him by reputation. He was considered a highly skilled screenwriter and later in the year was to win an Oscar for collaborating on the screenplay of *Patton*. (He and his collaborator never met.)

“The one thing Francis and I want you to understand,” Ruddy told me, “is that there is no intention of his rewriting your script. Francis just wants to direct and everybody is happy with your work.”

I knew *immediately* that I had a writing partner.

Sure enough. He rewrote one half and I rewrote the second half. Then we traded and rewrote each other. I suggested we work together. Francis looked me right in the eye and said no. That’s when I knew he was really a director.

I like him. And he earned his half of the screen credit. And I was glad to see him get it. I could blame all the lousy dialogue lines on him and some of the lousy scenes. He was never abrasive; we got along fine; and finally there was a shooting script.

The fun was over. Now everybody got into the act. Stars, agents, studio heads and vice-presidents, the producer, the associate producer, songwriters and assorted hustlers. Now I knew it wasn’t *my* movie.

The big question: Who was to play the Godfather? I remembered what Brando had told me so I had a little talk with Francis Coppola one afternoon. He listened and said he liked the idea. I warned him that EVERYBODY hated the idea. Some were afraid Brando would make trouble, that he was weak at the box office, and a million other reasons. I figured this director, with two losers behind him, couldn't put on the necessary muscle.

Francis Coppola is heavy-set, jolly, and is usually happy-go-lucky. What I didn't know was that he could be tough about his work. Anyway he fought and got Brando. And, incidentally Brando never gave any trouble. So much for his reputation.

The casting began. Actors would come in and talk to Coppola and exert all their art and skills to make him remember them. I sat in on some interviews. Coppola was cool and courteous to these people, but for me it was simply too painful. I quit. I couldn't watch them anymore. They were so vulnerable, so open, so naked in their hope for lightning to strike. It was at this time that I realized that actors and actresses should be forgiven all the outrageousness and tyrannies of their stardoms. Not to say you have to put up with it, just forgive it. But the one incident that made me check out of the casting stuff was when a quite ordinary nice-looking girl came into the office and chatted with everybody and announced she was trying to get a part. I asked her which part. She said, "Appolona."

The part of Appolona is a young Sicilian girl who is described in the book as quite beautiful. I asked this nice girl why she thought she wanted the part. She answered, "Because I look just like Appolona." This is when it started to dawn on me that all actors and actresses are crazy.

To prove the point. I got a call from Sue Mengers, who I didn't know was a famous agent. She wanted to have lunch. I asked why. She said she represented Rod Steiger and he wanted a part in *The Godfather*. I told her as the writer I had no power, she should talk to the producer and director. No,

she wanted to talk to me. I said OK, I couldn't make lunch but why not over the phone. OK, she said, Rod Steiger wanted to play Michael. I started to laugh. She got mad and said she was just stating her client's wish. I apologized.

Steiger is a fine actor, but, Jesus Christ, there is no way he can look under forty. And the part of Michael has to look no more than twenty-five.

Finally everything moved to New York. Coppola started shooting screen tests. Now the big problem was to find someone to play Michael, really the most important part in the film. At one time Jimmy Caan seemed to have the role. He tested well. But he tested well for Sonny, the other Godfather son, and he tested well for Hagen. Hell, he could have played all three of them. Suddenly it looked like he wouldn't get any of them.

Robert Duvall tested for Hagen and he was perfect. Another actor was perfect for Sonny. That left Jimmy Caan for Michael but nobody was quite satisfied. Finally the name of Al Pacino came up. He had scored a smashing success in a New York play but nobody had seen him on film. Coppola got hold of a screen test Pacino had done for some Italian movie and showed it. I loved him. I gave Francis a letter saying that above all Pacino had to be in the film. He could use it at his discretion.

But there were objections. Pacino was too short, too Italian looking. He was supposed to be the American in the family. He had to look a little classy, a little Ivy League. Coppola kept saying a good actor is a good actor.

Pacino tested. The cameras were running. He didn't know his lines. He threw in his own words. He didn't understand the character at all. He was terrible. Jimmy Caan had done it ten times better. After the scene was over I went up to Coppola and I said: "Give me my letter back."

"What letter?"

"The one I gave you saying I wanted Pacino."

Coppola shook his head. "Wait a while." Then he said, "The self-destructive bastard. He didn't even know his

lines.”

They tested Pacino all day. They coached him, they rehearsed him, they turned him inside out. They had it all on film. After a month of testing they had everybody on film. It was time to show it all in the Paramount screening room in the Gulf and Western Building.

Up to this time I had toyed with the idea of being a film mogul. Sitting in a screening room disabused me of the idea and gave me some real respect for the people in the business. Evans, Ruddy, Coppola and others sat in the screening rooms day after day, hour after hour. I took it for a few sessions and that finished me off.

Anyway what goes on in the screening room is instructive. I had been amazed at how well the scenes played live, but they were not so effective on camera. There were tests of the girls who had tried for the part of Kay, the young girl role. There was one girl who wasn’t right for the part but jumped off the screen at you. Everybody commented on her and Evans said, “We should do something with her–but I guess we never will.” The poor girl never knew how close she came to fame and fortune. Nobody had the time for her just then. Hell, I did but I wasn’t a mogul.

Some of the tests were terrible. Some of the scenes were terrible. Some were astonishingly good. One scene Francis had used was a courtship scene between Kay and Michael. Francis had written it so that at one point Michael would kiss Kay’s hand. I objected violently and Francis took it out. But in the tests every actor who tested kissed Kay’s hand or nibbled on her fingers. Francis called out teasingly, “Mario, I didn’t tell them to do that. How come they all kiss her hand?”

I knew he was kidding but it really irritated me. “Because they’re actors, not gangsters,” I said.

The irritation was not casual. I’d felt that Coppola in his rewrite had softened the characters.

On screen Pacino still didn't strike *anybody*–excepting Coppola–as right for the part of Michael. Coppola kept arguing. Finally Evans said, "Francis, I must say you're alone in this." Which I thought was the nicest "no" I'd ever heard. We would have to keep hunting for a Michael.

More tests were made of other people. No Michael. There was even talk of postponing the picture. Coppola kept insisting Pacino was the right man for the part (he never gave me back my letter). But it seemed to be a dead issue. One morning at a meeting with Evans and Charles Bludhorn I said I thought Jimmy Caan could do it. Bludhorn, head of Gulf and Western, which owned Paramount Pictures, thought Charlie Bronson could do it. Nobody paid any attention to him. Stanley Jaffee got so pissed off watching the tests of unknowns in the screening room that when asked his opinion, he jumped up and said, "You guys really wanta know? I think you got the worst bunch of lampshades I've ever seen." For days he had been patiently and quietly viewing stuff he hated without saying a word. So everybody understood.

All this astounded me. Nothing I had ever read about Hollywood had prepared me for this. Jesus, talk about democracy. Nobody was cramming anybody down anybody's throat. I was beginning to feel it was *my* movie as much as anybody's.

I had to go away for a week. When I came back, Al Pacino had the part of Michael, Jimmy Caan had the part of Sonny. The guy who had the part of Sonny was out. John Ryan, who tested better than anybody for the important role of Carlo Rizzi, was out. Even though he supposedly had been told he had the role. Ryan was so stunning in his tests of the part that I did something I had never done: I sought him out to tell him how great he played the part. He was replaced by a guy named Russo who had some sort of radio show biz background in Las Vegas. I never found out what happened. I would guess Coppola and the Paramount brass horse-

traded. I never got in on the horse trading. For some reason I had never thought of that solution.

Though the script was done, I was still on the payroll as consultant for $500 a week. Now the Italian American League began to make noises. Ruddy asked me if I would sit down with the league to iron things out. I told him I would not. He decided he would and he did. He promised them to take out all references to the Mafia in the script and to preserve the Italian honor. The league pledged its cooperation in the making of the film. The New York *Times* put the story on page 1 and the next day even had an indignant editorial on it. A lot of people were outraged as hell. I must say Ruddy proved himself a shrewd bargainer because the word “Mafia” was never in the script in the first place.

At about this time I quit the picture as consultant, not because of any of this, but simply because I felt I was in the way. Also, in most of the arguments I had lately been siding with management, rather than the creative end. Which made me very nervous.

The shooting of a motion picture is the most boring work in the world. I watched two days’ shooting; it was guys running out of houses and into cars that screeched away. So I gave up. The picture went comparatively smoothly and I lost track of it. It was not my movie.

Six months later the picture was in the can, except for the Sicilian sequences, which were to be shot last.

I started getting calls again. Evens wanted to know if the Sicilian sequences were really necessary. I could tell he wanted me to say no. I said yes. Peter Bart called me and asked if the Sicilian sequences were really necessary. I said yes. I then called up Coppola. He agreed with me. The money people thought the Sicilian sequences not necessary because why spend the money when it might easily be cut from the film?

It is to Evans’ and Bart’s and Jaffee’s credit that they went along and shot the Sicilian sequences. They did listen

to the creative point of view when they didn't really have to, when pressures were probably put on them to save money. And the Sicilian sequences really make the film, I think.

So they shot the Sicilian stuff and now the movie was ready to be cut and edited. Think of miles of film as a big chunk of marble and the director cutting a form out of it. Then when he's through, the producer and studio head starts carving his statue out of it; then the producer and his editors.

The cutting of the film had always struck me as primarily a writing job. It is very much like the final draft of a piece of writing. So I really wanted to be in on the cutting.

I saw two rough cuts of the movie and said what I had to say. Again everybody was courteous and cooperative. My movie agent, Robby Lantz, said I was treated as well as any new writer had been in Hollywood. So then, why was I still dissatisfied? Quite simply because it wasn't my movie. I was not the boss. But then really it wasn't anybody's movie. Nobody had really gotten their way with the picture.

From what I've seen it's an effective movie, and should make money, maybe even too much for those Einstein accountants to hide, and so they'll have to pay my percentage. But I never did see the final cut so I can't really plug it.

I had wanted to bring some friends to see the cut and Al Ruddy said, "No, not yet." I asked Peter Bart and he said, "No, not yet." I asked Bob Evans and he said yes, if the picture wasn't being pulled apart for scoring and dubbing and never mind how legitimate that excuse is. It was the second best nicest "no" I'd heard. The whole business was that they didn't want strangers to see it. Or maybe because I was opposed to the ending they used. I wanted an additional thirty seconds of Kay lighting the candles in church to save Michael's soul but I was alone on this. So I said the hell with it, if my friends couldn't see it with me, I didn't want to see it. Again kid stuff. Just because I still found it hard to accept one basic fact. It was not MY movie.

I wish like hell the script was half as good as the acting, even though half of it is mine.

The critics may clobber the film, but I don't see how they can knock the acting in it. Brando is very fine. So is Robert Duvall. And so is Richard Castellano. In fact all three, I think, have a shot at the Academy Award. And they are good. But the great bonus was Al Pacino.

As Michael, Al Pacino was everything I wanted that character to be on the screen. I couldn't believe it. It was, in my eyes, a perfect performance, a work of art. I was so happy I ran around admitting I was wrong. I ate crow like it was my favorite Chinese dish. Until Al Ruddy took me aside and gave me some kindly advice. "Listen," he said, "if you don't go around telling everybody how wrong you were nobody will know. How the hell do you expect to be a producer?"

While all this was going on, interviews and stories would appear in various publications. Always causing trouble. Ruddy gave an interview to a New Jersey newspaper, one section of which sounded like a savage putdown of me personally. Francis Coppola gave an interview to *New York* magazine that put both me and my book down. None of this bothered me because I'd been in the business and I knew that magazines and newspapers sort of twist things around to make a good story. I really didn't care and a good thing too. Because I got nailed for a phone interview, and when it came out it sounded like I was putting Ruddy and Coppola down and I hadn't meant to at all. And when word got out that I was putting this collection together, *Variety* ran a story that I was writing the piece as a hatchet job because I was not too happy with Paramount. Which was not true. (True, it's not Mahoney puff.) Anyway I never read this stuff unless it's sent to me. But all these news items invariably disturbed some of the wheels at Paramount.

The truth is that if a novelist goes out to Hollywood to work on his book, he has to accept the fact that it is not his movie. That's simply the way it is. And the truth is that if I

had been bossing the making of the movie, I would have wrecked it. Directing a movie is an art or a craft. Acting is an art or a craft. All special to themselves requiring talent and experience (always some exceptions).

And though it's easy to make fun of studio brass, those who study miles and miles of film, year after year, have to know something.

One interview I have to admit depressed me. Francis Coppola explained he was directing *The Godfather* so that he could get the capital to make pictures he really wanted to make. What depressed me was that he was smart enough to do this at the age of thirty-two when it took me forty-five years to figure out I had to write *The Godfather* so that I could do the other books I really wanted to do.

I had a good time. I didn't work too hard (script writing is truly not as hard as writing a novel). My health improved because I got out in the sunshine and played tennis. It was fun. There were a few traumatic experiences but all usable in a novel and as such to be accepted and even savored.

So much has been written about Hollywood people being phony that I'm almost embarrassed to admit I did not find them so. Not any more than writers or businessmen. They are more impulsive, more outgoing, they live on their nerves, which can sometimes make them abrasive. But they gave me some wonderful moments. Once when watching a private screening of a movie at Bob Evans' house, Julie Andrews was a guest. She had just had a couple of flops and was feeling hurt. As the white screen came rolling down, she started to hiss. It was funny and touching.

Another lovely scene was Edward G. Robinson and Jimmy Durante falling into each other's arms at a Hollywood party. I don't even know if it was personal, but they did it with such joy, the joy of two great artists who recognized each other's greatness. They are both now what are called "old men," but they had more vitality, more presence still, than anyone in that room. They had both been my childhood

idols and Edward G. Robinson gave me a final treat that night.

I was talking with a young, very personable agent when Robinson joined the conversation. He, too, was impressed by the young man and finally inquired as to his way of earning a living. When the young man said he was an agent, Edward G. Robinson looked him up and down as if he were still Little Caesar and the agent a squealer. The famous face registered surprise, disgust, contempt, disbelief and then finally mellowed into acceptance, a kindly acknowledgment that despite all, this was still a human being. Then Robinson put his forefinger up and said to the young man, “Love your clients. Do you hear? *Love* your clients.”

A lot of funny things happened around my office while I was writing *The Godfather* script at Paramount. There were times when I was faked right out of my shoes.

Most instructive was a neophyte. One day a young girl came into my Paramount office. She was very pretty, very bright, a wholesome charming kid of about sixteen. She told me her name was Mary Puzo and she had come to see if we were related. Especially since the name is spelled with only one Z, which is truly unusual.

Well, I may have been a hermit for the last twenty years, but by this time I had four months of Hollywood under my belt. She didn’t even look Italian. I said so. She whipped out her driver’s license. Sure enough. Mary Puzo. I was so delighted that I called my mother in New York and put Mary Puzo on the extension. We all compared notes, what town the different parents and cousins had come from, but were disappointed to find no consanguineal connection. But the girl was so nice that I gave her an autographed copy of *The Godfather* before she left.

Two hours later I was surprised to meet her still on the lot, walking toward the gate. We stopped to chat. She volunteered that she had stopped by the casting office to put her name down. “By the way,” she said, “I said I was your niece. Is that OK?”

I smiled and said sure.

Well, what the hell, she was only sixteen. And she didn't know she was on the wrong track. That she should have said she was Ruddy's or Coppola's or Brando's or Evans' or Bart's niece. She didn't know I was batting eighth.

Another funny story–to me anyway. While making the movie, Bob Evans gave a newspaper interview in which he took the position that the *auteur* theory was not one of his stronger beliefs. In fact, that maybe pictures were more successful when directors did not have much say.

The next day Francis Coppola was mad as hell. As soon as he saw Evans, he said, "Bob, I read where you don't need directors anymore." Evans just let it pass by.

It was funny to me because by this time I didn't believe in the *auteur* theory either unless it was Truffaut, Hitchcock, De Sica and guys like that. I didn't believe in the "studio chief cut" either, never mind producers. By this time I thought the writer should have final cut. But of course I was a little prejudiced.

One strange thing. Pauline Kael writes the best movie criticism in American letters (though she does not share my enthusiasm for the work of some young beautiful actresses). I never once heard her name mentioned in the two years I was in and out of Hollywood. I find that extraordinary. Not that I would expect them to love her. She is a very tough critic. But she is so smart and she writes so beautifully that I'll still love her even if she murders the movie which she probably will.

It is true that personal relationships in Hollywood are geared to the making of movies, that most friendships are functional. But within this frame of reference I found many I worked with likable and in some areas warmhearted and generous. A great deal of the personal selfishness I understood because you have to be selfish to get books written.

I signed to do two original screenplays which at this writing have been completed. And I have instructed my

agent that I won’t do any others unless I have complete control of the movie and get half the studio. So I guess I really don’t want to have all that fun. Or it’s because I realize I really didn’t behave as professionally as I should have on the movie.

I have resumed work on my novel. The thought of spending the next three years as a hermit is sort of scary, but in a funny way I’m happier. I feel like Merlin.

In the King Arthur story Merlin knows that the sorceress Morgan Le Fay is going to lock him in a cave for a thousand years. And as a kid I wondered why Merlin let her do it. Sure I knew she was an enchantress, but wasn’t Merlin a great magician? Well, being a magician doesn’t always help and enchantments are traditionally cruel.

It sounds crazy to go back to writing a novel. Even degenerate. But much as I bitch about publishers and publishing, they know it’s the writer’s book, not theirs. And New York publishers may not have the charm of Hollywood movie people, but they don’t demote you down to partners. The writer is the star, the director, the studio chief. It’s never MY movie but it’s always MY novel. It’s all mine, and I guess that’s the only thing that really counts in an enchantment.

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1

Fall 1933

Giuseppe Mariposa waited at the window with his hands on his hips and his eyes on the Empire State Building. To see the top of the building, the needlelike antenna piercing a pale blue sky, he leaned into the window frame and pressed his face against the glass. He had watched the building go up from the ground, and he liked to tell the boys how he'd been one of the last men to have dinner at the old Waldorf-Astoria, that magnificent hotel that once stood where the world's tallest building now loomed. He stepped back from the window and brushed dust from his suit jacket.

Below him, on the street, a big man in work clothes sat atop a junk cart traveling lazily toward the corner. He carried a black derby riding on his knee as he jangled a set of worn leather reins over the flank of a swayback horse. Giuseppe watched the wagon roll by. When it turned the corner, he took his hat from the window ledge, held it to his heart, and looked at his reflection in a pane of glass. His hair was white now, but still thick and full, and he brushed it back with the palm of his hand. He adjusted the knot and straightened his tie where it had bunched up slightly as it disappeared into his vest. In a shadowy corner of the empty apartment behind him, Jake LaConti tried to speak, but all Giuseppe heard was a guttural mumbling. When he turned around, Tomasino came through the apartment door and lumbered into the room carrying a brown paper bag. His hair was unkempt as always, though Giuseppe had told him a hundred times to keep it combed—and he needed a shave,

as always. Everything about Tomasino was messy. Giuseppe fixed him with a look of contempt that Tomasino, as usual, didn't notice. His tie was loose, his shirt collar unbuttoned, and he had blood on his wrinkled jacket. Tufts of curly black hair stuck out from his open collar.

"He say anything?" Tomasino pulled a bottle of scotch out of the paper bag, unscrewed the cap, and took a swig.

Giuseppe looked at his wristwatch. It was eight thirty in the morning. "Does he look like he can say anything, Tommy?" Jake's face was battered. His jaw dangled toward his chest.

Tomasino said, "I didn't mean to break his jaw."

"Give him a drink," Giuseppe said. "See if that helps."

Jake was sprawled out with his torso propped up against the wall and his legs twisted under him. Tommy had pulled him out of his hotel room at six in the morning, and he still had on the black-and-white-striped silk pajamas he had worn to bed the night before, only now the top two buttons had been ripped away to reveal the muscular chest of a man in his thirties, about half Giuseppe's age. As Tommy knelt to Jake and lifted him slightly, positioning his head so that he could pour scotch down his throat, Giuseppe watched with interest and waited to see if the liquor would help. He had sent Tommy down to the car for the scotch after Jake had passed out. The kid coughed, sending a spattering of blood down his chest. He squinted through swollen eyes and said something that would have been impossible to make out had he not been saying the same three words over and over throughout the beating. "He's my father," he said, though it came out as *'E mah fad'*.

"Yeah, we know." Tommy looked to Giuseppe. "You got to give it to him," he said. "The kid's loyal."

Giuseppe knelt beside Tomasino. "Jake," he said. "Giacomo. I'll find him anyway." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to keep his hands from getting bloody as he turned the kid's face to look at him. "Your old man," he said, "Rosario's day has come. There's nothing

you can do. Rosario, his day is over. You understand me, Jake?"

"*Si*," Giacomo said, the single syllable coming out clearly.

"Good," Giuseppe said. "Where is he? Where's the son of a bitch hiding?"

Giacomo tried to move his right arm, which was broken, and groaned at the pain.

Tommy yelled, "Tell us where he is, Jake! What the hell's wrong with you!"

Giacomo tried to open his eyes, as if straining to see who was yelling at him. " 'E mah fad'," he said.

"*Che cazzo!*" Giuseppe threw up his hands. He watched Jake and listened to his strained breathing. The shouts of children playing came up loud from the street and then faded. He looked to Tomasino before he exited the apartment. In the hall, he waited at the door until he heard the muffled report of a silencer, a sound like a hammer striking wood. When Tommy joined him, Giuseppe said, "Are you sure you finished him?" He put on his hat and fixed it the way he liked, with the brim down.

"What do you think, Joe?" Tommy asked. "I don't know what I'm doing?" When Giuseppe didn't answer, he rolled his eyes. "The top of his head's gone. His brains are all over the floor."

At the stairwell, atop the single flight of steps down to the street, Giuseppe stopped and said, "He wouldn't betray his father. You gotta respect him for that."

"He was tough," Tommy said. "I still think you should've let me work on his teeth. I'm telling you, ain't nobody won't talk after a little of that."

Giuseppe shrugged, admitting Tommy might have been right. "There's still the other son," he said. "We making any progress on that?"

"Not yet," Tommy said. "Could be he's hiding out with Rosario."

Giuseppe considered Rosario's other son for a heartbeat before his thoughts shifted back to Jake LaConti and how the

kid couldn’t be beaten into betraying his father. “You know what?” he said to Tomasino. “Call the mother and tell her where to find him.” He paused, thinking, and added, “They’ll get a good undertaker, they’ll fix him up nice, they can have a big funeral.”

Tommy said, “I don’t know about fixing him up, Joe.”

“What’s the name of the undertaker did such a good job on O’Banion?” Giuseppe asked.

“Yeah, I know the guy you mean.”

“Get him,” Giuseppe said, and he tapped Tommy on the chest. “I’ll take care of it myself, out of my own pocket. The family don’t have to know. Tell him to offer them his services for free, he’s a friend of Jake’s, and so on. We can do that, right?”

“Sure,” Tommy said. “That’s good of you, Joe.” He patted Giuseppe’s arm.

“All right,” Giuseppe said. “So that’s that,” and he started down the stairs, taking the steps two at a time, like a kid.

2

Sonny settled into the front seat of a truck and tilted the brim of his fedora down. It wasn't his truck, but there was no one around to ask questions. At two in the morning this stretch of Eleventh Avenue was quiet except for an occasional drunk stumbling along the wide sidewalk. There'd be a beat cop along at some point, but Sonny figured he'd slink down in the seat, and even if the cop noticed him, which was unlikely, he'd peg him for some mug sleeping off a drunk on a Saturday night—which wouldn't be all that far from the truth since he'd been drinking hard. But he wasn't drunk. He was a big guy, already six foot tall at seventeen, brawny and big shouldered, and he didn't get drunk easily. He rolled down the side window and let a crisp fall breeze off the Hudson help keep him awake. He was tired, and as soon as he relaxed behind the wide circle of the truck's steering wheel, sleep started to creep up on him.

An hour earlier he'd been at Juke's Joint in Harlem with Cork and Nico. An hour before that he'd been at a speakeasy someplace in midtown, where Cork had taken him after they'd lost almost a hundred bucks between them playing poker with a bunch of Poles over in Greenpoint. They'd all laughed when Cork said he and Sonny should leave while they still had the shirts on their backs. Sonny'd laughed too, though a second earlier he was on the verge of calling the biggest Polack at the table a miserable son-of-a-bitch cheater. Cork had a way of reading Sonny, and he'd gotten him out of there before he did something stupid. By the time he wound up at Juke's, if he wasn't soused he was

getting close to it. After a little dancing and some more drinking, he'd had enough for one night and was on his way home when a friend of Cork's stopped him at the door and told him about Tom. He'd almost punched the kid before he caught himself and slipped him a few bucks instead. Kid gave him the address, and now he was slumped down in some worn-out truck looked like it dated back to the Great War, watching shadows play over Kelly O'Rourke's curtains.

Inside the apartment, Tom went about getting dressed while Kelly paced the room holding a sheet pinned to her breasts. The sheet looped under one breast and dragged along the floor beside her. She was a graceless girl with a dramatically beautiful face—flawless skin, red lips, and blue-green eyes framed by swirls of bright red hair—and there was something dramatic, too, in the way she moved about the room as if she were acting in a scene from a movie and imagining Tom as Cary Grant or Randolph Scott.

"But why do you have to go?" she asked yet again. With her free hand she held her forehead, as if she were taking her own temperature. "It's the middle of the night, Tom. Why do you want to be running out on a girl?"

Tom slipped into his undershirt. The bed he had just gotten out of was more a cot than a bed, and the floor around it was cluttered with magazines, mostly copies of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Grand*, and *American Girl*. At his feet, Gloria Swanson looked up at him alluringly from the cover of an old issue of *The New Movie*. "Doll," he said.

"Don't call me doll," Kelly shot back. "Everybody calls me doll." She leaned against the wall beside the window and let the sheet drop. She posed for him, cocking her hip slightly. "Why don't you want to stay with me, Tom? You're a man, aren't you?"

Tom put on his shirt and began buttoning it while he stared at Kelly. There was something electric and anxious in her eyes that bordered on skittishness, as if she was expecting something startling to happen at any moment.

“You might be the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“You’ve never been with a better looker than me?”

“Never been with a girl more beautiful than you,” Tom said. “Not at all.”

The anxiousness disappeared from Kelly’s eyes. “Spend the night with me, Tom,” she said. “Don’t go.”

Tom sat on the edge of Kelly’s bed, thought about it, and then put on his shoes.

Sonny watched the light from a cast-iron lamppost shine off the parallel lines of railroad tracks dividing the street. He let his hand rest on the eight ball screwed atop the truck’s stick shift and remembered sitting on the sidewalk as a kid and watching freight trains rumble down Eleventh, a New York City cop on horseback leading the way to keep drunks and little kids from getting run down. Once he’d seen a man in a fancy suit standing atop one of the freights. He’d waved and the man scowled and spit, as if the sight of Sonny disgusted him. When he asked his mother why the man had acted that way, she raised her hand and said, “*Sta’zitt’!* Some *cafon’* spits on the sidewalk and you ask me? *Madon’!*” She walked away angrily, which was her typical response to most questions Sonny asked as a kid. It seemed to him then that her every sentence started with *Sta’zitt’!* or *V’a Napoli!* or *Madon’!* Inside the apartment, he was a pest, a nudge, or a *scucc’*, and so he spent all the time he could outside, running the streets with neighborhood kids.

Being in Hell’s Kitchen, looking across the avenue to a line of shops at street level and two or three floors of apartments above them, brought Sonny back to his childhood, to all the years his father got up each morning and drove downtown to Hester Street and his office at the warehouse, where he still worked—though, now, of course, now that Sonny was grown, it was all different, how he thought of his father and what his father did for a living. But back then his father was a businessman, the owner with Genco Abbandando of the Genco Pura Olive Oil business.

Those days, when Sonny saw his father on the street, he charged at him, running up and taking his hand and jabbering about whatever was on his little kid's mind. Sonny saw the way other men looked at his father and he was proud because he was a big shot who owned his own business and everyone—*everyone*—treated him with respect, so that Sonny when he was still a boy came to think of himself as a kind of prince. The big shot's son. He was eleven years old before all that changed, or maybe shifted is a better word than changed, because he still thought of himself as a prince—though, now, of course, as a prince of a different sort.

Across the avenue, in Kelly O'Rourke's apartment over a barbershop, behind the familiar black latticework of fire escapes, a figure brushed against the curtain, parting it slightly so that Sonny could see a strip of bright light and a white-pink flash of skin and a shock of red hair, and then it was as if he were in two places at once: Seventeen-year-old Sonny looked up to the curtained second-floor window of Kelly O'Rourke's apartment, while simultaneously eleven-year-old Sonny was on a fire escape looking down through a window and into the back room of Murphy's Bar. His memory of that night at Murphy's was vivid in places. It hadn't been late, maybe nine thirty, ten o'clock at the latest. He'd just gotten into bed when he heard his father and mother exchange words. Not loud—Mama never raised her voice to Pop—and Sonny couldn't make out the words, but a tone unmistakable to a kid, a tone that said his mother was upset or worried, and then the door opening and closing and the sound of Pop's footsteps on the stairs. Back then there was no one posted at the front door, no one waiting in the big Packard or the black eight-cylinder Essex to take Pop wherever he wanted to go. That night Sonny watched from his window as his father went out the front door and down the front steps and headed toward Eleventh. Sonny was dressed and flying down the fire escape to the street by the time his father turned the corner and disappeared.

He was several blocks from his home before he bothered to ask himself what he was doing. If his father caught him he'd give him a good beating, and why not? He was out on the street when he was supposed to be in bed. The worry slowed him down and he almost turned around and headed back—but his curiosity got the better of him and he pulled the brim of his wool cap down almost to his nose and continued to follow his father, leaping in and out of shadows and keeping a full block between them. When they crossed over into the neighborhoods where the Irish kids lived, Sonny's level of concern ticked up several notches. He wasn't allowed to play in these neighborhoods, and he wouldn't have even if he were allowed, because he knew Italian kids got beat up here, and he'd heard stories of kids who'd wandered into the Irish neighborhoods and disappeared for weeks before they turned up floating in the Hudson. A block ahead of him, his father walked quickly, his hands in his pockets and the collar of his jacket turned up against a cold wind blowing in off the river. Sonny followed until they were almost to the piers, and there he saw his father stop under a striped awning, in front of a freestanding sign for Murphy's Bar and Grill. Sonny ducked into a storefront and waited. When his father went into the bar, the sound of laughter and men singing rushed out onto the street and then hushed when the door closed, though Sonny could still hear it, only muted. He crossed the street, moving from shadow to shadow, storefront to storefront, until he was directly across from Murphy's, where he could see through a narrow window the dark figures of men hunched over a bar.

With his father out of sight, Sonny crouched in a shadow and waited, but after only a second he was moving again, tearing across a cobblestone street and down a garbage-strewn alley. He couldn't have told you precisely what he was thinking beyond that there might be a back entrance and maybe he'd see something there—and indeed when he came around behind the back of Murphy's he found a closed

door with a curtained window beside it and yellowish light shining out to the alleyway. He couldn't see anything through the window, so he climbed onto a heavy metal garbage pail on the other side of the alley and from there he leapt to the bottom rung of a fire escape ladder. A moment after that he was lying on his stomach and looking down through a space between the top of the window and a curtain into the back room of Murphy's Bar. The room was crowded with wooden crates and cardboard cartons, and his father was standing with his hands in his pockets and speaking calmly to a man who appeared to be tied to a straight-back chair. Sonny knew the man in the chair. He'd seen him around the neighborhood with his wife and kids. The man's hands were out of sight behind the chair, where Sonny imagined they were tied. Around his waist and chest, clothesline cord dug into a rumpled yellow jacket. His lip bled and his head lolled and drooped as if he might be drunk or sleepy. In front of him, Sonny's uncle Peter sat on a stack of wood crates and scowled while his uncle Sal stood with arms crossed, looking solemn. Uncle Sal looking solemn was nothing—that was the way he usually looked—but Uncle Peter scowling was something different. Sonny knew him all his life as a man with a ready smile and a funny story. He watched from his perch, fascinated now, finding his father and his uncles in the back room of a bar with a man from the neighborhood tied to a chair. He couldn't imagine what was going on. He had no idea. Then his father put a hand on the man's knee and knelt beside him, and the man spit in his face.

Vito Corleone took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face clean. Behind him, Peter Clemenza picked up a crowbar at his feet and said, "That's it! That's it for this bum!"

Vito held a hand up to Clemenza, instructing him to wait.

Clemenza's face reddened. "Vito," he said. "*V'fancul'!* You can't do nothin' with a thickheaded mick like this one."

Vito looked at the bloodied man and then up to the back window, as if he knew Sonny was perched on the fire escape watching him—but he didn't know. He didn't even see the window and its shabby curtain. His thoughts were with the man who'd just spit in his face, and with Clemenza, who was watching him, and Tessio behind Clemenza. They were both watching him. The room was brightly lit by a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, its beaded metal pull chain dangling over Clemenza's head. Beyond the bolted wood door to the bar, men's loud voices sang and laughed. Vito turned to the man and said, "You're not being reasonable, Henry. I've had to ask Clemenza, as a favor to me, not to break your legs."

Before Vito could say anything more, Henry interrupted. "I don't owe you wops a thing," he said. "You dago pricks." Even drunk his words were clear and full of that musical lilt common to the Irish. "You can all go back to your beloved fucking Sicily," he said, "and fuck your beloved fucking Sicilian mothers."

Clemenza took a step back. He looked surprised more than angry.

Tessio said, "Vito, the son of a bitch is hopeless."

Clemenza picked up the crowbar again, and again Vito raised his hand. This time Clemenza sputtered, and then, looking at the ceiling, issued a long string of curses in Italian. Vito waited until he was finished, and then waited longer until Clemenza finally looked at him. He held Clemenza's gaze in silence before he turned back to Henry.

On the fire escape, Sonny pulled his hands close in to his chest and tightened his body against the cold. The wind had picked up and it was threatening to rain. The long, low howl of a boat horn floated off the river and over the streets. Sonny's father was a man of medium stature, but powerfully built, with muscular arms and shoulders from his days working in the railroad yards. Sometimes he would sit on the edge of Sonny's bed at night and tell him stories of the days when he loaded and unloaded freight from railroad cars.

Only a madman would spit in his face. That was the best Sonny could do to reconcile something so outrageous: The man in the chair had to be crazy. Thinking that way made Sonny calmer. For a time he had been frightened because he didn't know how to make sense of what he'd seen, but then he watched his father as once again he knelt to speak to the man, and in his posture he recognized the steady reasonable manner that he employed when he was serious, when there was something important that Sonny was to understand. It made him feel better to think the man was crazy and his father was talking to him, trying to reason with him. He felt sure that at any moment the man would nod and his father would have him turned loose, and whatever it was that was wrong would be solved, since that was obviously why they had called his father in the first place, to fix something, to solve a problem. Everybody in the neighborhood knew his father solved problems. Everybody knew that about him. Sonny watched the scene playing out below him and waited for his father to make things right. Instead, the man began to struggle in his chair, his face enraged. He looked like an animal trying to break its restraints, and then he cocked his head and again he spit at Sonny's father, the spit full of blood so that it looked like he somehow managed to do some damage, but it was his own blood. Sonny'd seen the bloody spit shoot out of the man's mouth. He'd seen it splatter on his father's face.

What happened next is the last of what Sonny remembered about that night. It was one of those memories, not unusual in childhood, that are strange and mysterious at the time but then get cleared up with experience. At the time Sonny was perplexed. His father stood and wiped the spit from his face, and then he looked at the man before he turned his back on him and walked away, but only a few feet, to the back door, where he stood motionless while behind him Uncle Sal pulled, of all things, a pillowcase out of his jacket pocket. Uncle Sal was the tallest of the men, but he walked with a stoop, his long arms

dangling at his sides as if he didn’t know what to do with them. *A pillowcase*. Sonny said the words out loud, in a whisper. Uncle Sal went behind the chair and pulled the pillowcase over the man’s head. Uncle Peter picked up the crowbar and swung it, and then whatever happened after that was a blur. A few things Sonny remembered clearly: Uncle Sal pulling a white pillowcase over the man’s head, Uncle Peter swinging the crowbar, the white pillowcase turning red, bright red, and his two uncles bent over the man in the chair doing stuff, untying the cords. Beyond that, he couldn’t remember a thing. He must have gone home. He must have gotten back in his bed. He didn’t remember any of it, though, not a thing. Everything up to the pillowcase was pretty clear, and then after that it got fuzzy before the memory disappeared altogether.

For the longest time, Sonny didn’t know what he had witnessed. It took him years to put all the pieces together.

Across Eleventh Avenue the curtain fluttered over the barbershop, and then it was yanked open and Kelly O’Rourke, framed by the window, looked down over the avenue like a miracle—a quick shock of light on a young woman’s body surrounded by black fire escapes, dirty red brick walls, and dark windows.

Kelly looked off into the darkness and touched her stomach, as she had found herself doing unconsciously again and again for the past several weeks, trying to feel some flutter of the life she knew was rooting there. She ran her fingers over the still tight skin and muscle and tried to settle her thinking, to pull together the stray thoughts careening everywhere. Her family, her brothers, they had already disowned her, except Sean maybe, so what did she care what they thought anymore? She had taken one of the blue pills at the club and it made her feel light and airy. It scattered her thoughts. In front of her there was only darkness and her own reflection in the glass. It was late and everyone was always leaving her alone all the time. She flattened her hand over her stomach, trying to feel

something. Hard as she tried, she couldn't pull her thoughts together, keep them still and in one place.

Tom stepped around Kelly and closed the curtains. "Come on, sweetheart," he said. "What do you want to do that for?"

"Do what?" Kelly said.

"Stand in front of the window like that."

"Why? Worried somebody might see you here with me, Tom?" Kelly put a hand on her hip and then let it drop in a gesture of resignation. She continued pacing the room, her eyes on the floor one moment, on the walls the next. She seemed unaware of Tom, her thoughts elsewhere.

Tom said, "Kelly, listen. I just started college a few weeks ago, and if I don't get back—"

"Oh, don't whimper," Kelly said. "For God's sake."

"I'm not whimpering," Tom said. "I'm trying to explain."

Kelly stopped pacing. "I know," she said. "You're a baby. I knew that when I picked you up. How old are you anyways? Eighteen? Nineteen?"

"Eighteen," Tom said. "All I'm saying is that I have to get back to the dorms. If I'm not there in the morning, it'll be noticed."

Kelly tugged at her ear and stared at Tom. They were both quiet, watching each other. Tom wondered what Kelly was seeing. He'd been wondering about that ever since she'd sauntered over to his table at Juke's Joint and asked him to dance in a voice so sexy it was as if she were asking him to sleep with her. He wondered it again when she invited him after a few dances and a single drink to take her home. They hadn't talked about much. Tom told her he went to school at NYU. She told him she was currently unemployed and that she came from a big family but she wasn't getting on with them. She wanted to be in the movies. She'd been wearing a long blue dress that hugged her body from her calves to her breasts, where the neckline was cut low and the white of her skin flared in contrast to the satiny fabric. Tom told her he didn't have a car, that he was there with friends. She told him that wasn't a problem,

she had a car, and he didn't bother to ask how an unemployed girl from a big family has a car of her own. He thought maybe it wasn't her car, and then when she drove them down to Hell's Kitchen, he didn't tell her that he'd grown up a dozen blocks from where she parked on Eleventh. When he saw her place, he knew the car wasn't hers, but he didn't have time to ask questions before they were in bed and his thoughts were elsewhere. The events of the night had proceeded rapidly and in a way that was foreign to him, and now he was thinking hard as he watched her. Her manner seemed to be shifting by the second: first the seductress and then the vulnerable girl who didn't want him to leave, and now a toughness was coming over her, something angry. As she watched him her jaw tightened, her lips pressed together. Something in Tom was shifting too. He was preparing himself for whatever she might say or do, preparing an argument, preparing a response.

"So what are you anyway?" Kelly said. She backed up to a counter beside a white porcelain sink. She lifted herself onto it and crossed her legs. "Some kind of Irish-Italian mutt?"

Tom found his sweater where it was hanging on the bed rail. He draped it over his back and tied the sleeves around his neck. "I'm German-Irish," he said. "What makes you say Italian?"

Kelly found a pack of Wings in a cupboard behind her, opened it, and lit up. "Because I know who you are," she said. She paused dramatically, as if she were acting. "You're Tom Hagen. You're Vito Corleone's adopted son." She took a long drag on her cigarette. Behind the veil of smoke, her eyes glittered with a hard-to-read mix of happiness and anger.

Tom looked around, noting carefully what he saw—which was nothing more than a cheap boardinghouse room, not even an apartment, with a sink and cupboards by the door on one end and a cot-size bed on the other. The floor was a mess of magazines and pop bottles, clothes and candy-bar wrappers, empty packs of Wings and Chesterfields. The

clothes were far too expensive for the surroundings. In one corner he noticed a silk blouse that had to cost more than her rent. “I’m not adopted,” he said. “I grew up with the Corleones, but I was never adopted.”

“No difference,” Kelly said. “So what’s that make you? A mick or a wop, or some kind of mick-wop mix?”

Tom sat on the edge of the bed. They were having a conversation now. It felt businesslike. “So you picked me up because you know something about my family, is that right?”

“What did you think, kid? It was your looks?” Kelly flicked the ashes from her cigarette into the sink beside her. She ran the water to wash the ashes down the drain.

Tom asked, “Why would my family have anything to do with this?”

“With what?” she asked, the smile on her face genuine, as if she were finally enjoying herself.

“With me taking you back here and screwing you,” Tom said.

“You didn’t screw me, kid. I screwed you.” She paused, still grinning, watching him.

Tom kicked at a pack of Chesterfields. “Who smokes these?”

“I do.”

“You smoke Wings and Chesterfields?”

“Wings when I’m buying. Otherwise Chesterfields.” When Tom didn’t say anything right away, she added, “You’re getting warmer, though. Keep going.”

“Okay,” Tom said. “So who’s car did we drive here in? It’s not yours. You don’t own a car and still live in a place like this.”

“There you go, kid,” she said. “Now you’re asking the right questions.”

“And who buys you the classy threads?”

“Bingo!” Kelly said. “Now you got it. My boyfriend buys me the clothes. It’s his car.”

“You ought to tell him to put you up in a nicer place than this.” Tom looked around as if he were amazed at the tawdriness of the room.

“I know!” Kelly joined him in appraising the room, as if she shared his amazement. “You believe this rathole? This is where I’ve got to live!”

“You ought to talk to him,” Tom said, “this boyfriend of yours.”

Kelly didn’t seem to hear him. She was still looking over the room, as if seeing it for the first time. “He’s got to hate me, right,” she asked, “making me live in a place like this?”

“You ought to talk to him,” Tom repeated.

“Get out,” Kelly said. She hopped down from the counter and wrapped herself in a sheet. “Go on,” she said. “I’m tired of playing with you.”

Tom started for the door, where he had hung his cap on a hook.

“I hear your family’s worth millions,” Kelly said, while Tom still had his back to her. “Vito Corleone and his gang.”

Tom pulled his cap down tight on the back of his head and straightened it out. “What’s this about, Kelly? Why don’t you just tell me?”

Kelly waved her cigarette, motioning for him to go. “Go on, now,” she said. “Good-bye, Tom Hagen.”

Tom said good-bye politely, and then walked out, but before he’d taken more than a couple of steps down the corridor, the door flew open and Kelly was standing in the dark hallway, the sheet she had been wearing someplace in the room behind her. “You’re not such a tough guy,” she said, “you Corleones.”

Tom touched the brim of his cap, straightening it on his head. He watched Kelly where she stood brazenly just outside her door. He said, “I’m not sure I’m entirely representative of my family.”

“Huh,” Kelly said. She ran her fingers through the waves of her hair. She looked confused by Tom’s response before

she disappeared into her apartment, failing to close the door fully behind her.

Tom pulled his cap down on his forehead and started for the stairs and the street.

Sonny was out of the truck and hustling across Eleventh as soon as Tom stepped out of the building. Tom reached behind him for the door, as if he were trying to duck back into the hallway, while Sonny bore down on him, put an arm around his shoulder, and yanked him onto the sidewalk, pulling him toward the corner. “Hey, *idiota*!” Sonny said. “Tell me one thing, okay, pal? Are you trying to get yourself killed, or are you just a *stronz*? Do you know whose girl that is you just did the number on? Do you know where you are?” Sonny’s voice got louder with each question, and then he pushed Tom back into the alley. He cocked his fist and gritted his teeth to keep from knocking Tom into a wall. “You don’t have any idea the trouble you’re in, do you?” He leaned toward Tom as if he might at any moment descend on him. “What are you doing with some mick slut, anyway?” He threw his hands up and turned a small, tight circle, his eyes to the heavens, as if he were calling to the gods. “*Cazzo!*” he shouted. “I oughta kick your ass down a goddamn sewer!”

“Sonny,” Tom said, “please calm down.” He straightened out his shirt and arranged the sweater draped over his back.

“Calm down?” Sonny said. “Let me ask again: Do you know whose girl you were just screwin’?”

“No, I don’t,” Tom said. “Whose girl was I just screwing?”

“You don’t know,” Sonny said.

“I don’t have any idea, Sonny. Why don’t you tell me?”

Sonny stared at Tom in wonder, and then, as often happened with him, his fury disappeared. He laughed. “She’s Luca Brasi’s twist, you idiot. You didn’t know!”

Tom said, “I had no idea. Who’s Luca Brasi?”

“Who’s Luca Brasi,” Sonny repeated. “You don’t want to know who Luca Brasi is. Luca’s a guy who’ll yank your arm off and beat you to death with the bloody stump for looking

at him the wrong way. I know very tough guys who are scared to death of Luca Brasi. And you just did the number on his girl."

Tom took this information in calmly, as if considering its implications. "Okay," he said, "so now it's your turn to answer a question. What the hell are you doing here?"

Sonny said, "Come here!" He wrapped up Tom in a smothering embrace and backed up to get a good look at his brother. "How was she?" He waved his hand. "*Madon'!* She's a dish!"

Tom stepped around Sonny. On the street a sleek roan horse pulled a Pechter Bakery wagon beside the railroad tracks, one of the spokes on the wagon's rear wheel cracked and broken. A fat man at the reins cast a bored glance at Tom, and Tom tipped his cap to him before he turned to Sonny again. "And why are you dressed like you just spent the night with Dutch Schultz?" He fingered the lapels on Sonny's double-breasted suit and patted the rich fabric of the vest. "How's a kid works in a garage own a suit like this?"

"Hey," Sonny said. "I'm doing the asking." He put his arm around Tom's shoulder again and directed him out to the street. "Serious, Tommy," he said. "Do you have any idea the kind of trouble you could be in?"

Tom said, "I didn't know she was this Luca Brasi's girlfriend. She didn't tell me." He gestured up the street. "Where are we going?" he asked. "Back to Tenth Avenue?"

Sonny said, "What are you doing hanging out at Juke's Joint?"

"How'd you know I was at Juke's Joint?"

"Because I was there after you."

"Well, what are you doing hanging out at Juke's Joint?"

"Shut up before I give you a smack!" Sonny squeezed Tom's shoulder, letting him know he wasn't really mad at him. "I'm not the one's in college supposed to be hitting the books."

"It's Saturday night," Tom said.

“Not anymore,” Sonny said. “It’s Sunday morning. Jesus,” he added, as if he’d just reminded himself how late it was, “I’m tired.”

Tom wrestled out from under Sonny’s arm. He took off his cap, straightened out his hair, and put the cap on again, pulling the brim low on his forehead. His thoughts went back to Kelly pacing through the tiny space of her room, dragging the sheet behind her as if she knew she should cover up but couldn’t be bothered. She’d been wearing a scent that he couldn’t describe. He squeezed his upper lip, which was something he did when he was thinking hard, and smelled her on his fingers. It was a complex odor, bodily and raw. He was stunned by everything that had happened. It was as if he were living someone else’s life. Someone more like Sonny. On Eleventh, a car rattled up behind a horse-drawn cart. It slowed down briefly as its driver cast a quick glance toward the sidewalk and then swerved around the cart and drove on. “Where are we going?” Tom asked. “It’s late for a stroll.”

“I got a car,” Sonny said.

“You’ve got a car?”

“It’s the garage’s. They let me use it.”

“Where the hell’s it parked?”

“Few more blocks.”

“Why’d you park way up here if you knew I was—”

“*Che cazzo!*” Sonny opened his arms in a gesture that suggested amazement at Tom’s ignorance. “Because this is Luca Brasi’s territory,” he said. “Luca Brasi and the O’Rourkes and a bunch of crazy micks.”

“So what’s that to you?” Tom asked. He stepped in front of Sonny. “What’s it to a kid works in a garage whose territory this is?”

Sonny shoved Tom out of his way. It was not a gentle shove, but he was smiling. “It’s dangerous around here,” he said. “I’m not as reckless as you.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he laughed, as if he had just surprised himself.

Tom said, “All right, look,” and he started walking up the block again. “I went to Juke’s Joint with some guys I know from the dorms. We were supposed to dance a little bit, have a couple of drinks, and head back. Then this doll asks me to dance, and next thing I know, I’m in bed with her. I didn’t know she was this Luca Brasi’s girlfriend. I swear.”

“*Madon’!*” Sonny pointed to a black Packard parked under a streetlamp. “That’s mine,” he said.

“You mean the garage’s.”

“Right,” Sonny said. “Get in and shut up.”

Inside the car, Tom threw his arms over the back of the bench seat and watched Sonny take off his fedora, place it on the seat beside him, and extract a key from his vest pocket. The long stick shift rising from the floorboards shook slightly as the car started. Sonny pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes from his jacket pocket, lit up, and then placed the cigarette in an ashtray built into the polished wood of the dashboard. A plume of smoke drifted into the windshield as Tom opened the glove box and found a box of Trojans. He said to Sonny, “They let you drive this on a Saturday night?”

Sonny pulled out onto the avenue without answering.

Tom was tired but wide-awake, and he guessed it would be a good while before he’d be doing any sleeping. Outside, the streets ticked by as Sonny headed downtown. Tom said, “You taking me back to the dorms?”

“My place,” Sonny said. “You can stay with me tonight.” He looked over at Tom. “You thought about this at all?” he said. “You got some idea what you’re going to do?”

“You mean if this Luca character finds out?”

“Yeah,” Sonny said. “That’s what I mean.”

Tom watched the streets hurry by. They were passing a line of tenements, the windows mostly dark above the glow of streetlamps. “How’s he going to find out?” he said, finally. “She won’t tell him.” Tom shook his head, as if dismissing the possibility that Luca could find out. “I think she’s a little crazy,” he said. “She was acting crazy all night.”

Sonny said, “You know this ain’t all about you, Tom. Luca finds out and comes after you, then Pop’s got to go after him. Then we got a war. And all ’cause you can’t keep your zipper closed.”

“Oh, please!” Tom shouted. “You’re lecturing me about keeping my zipper closed?”

Sonny knocked the cap off Tom’s head.

“She’s not going to tell him,” Tom said. “There won’t be any ramifications.”

“*Ramifications*,” Sonny mocked. “How do you know? How do you know she doesn’t want to make him jealous? Did you think about that? Maybe she’s trying to make him jealous.”

“That’s pretty crazy, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Sonny said, “but you just said she was crazy. Plus she’s a dame and dames are all nuts. ’Specially the Irish. The whole bunch of them are lunatics.”

Tom hesitated, and then spoke as if he had settled the question. “I don’t think she’ll tell him,” he said. “If she does, I’ll have no choice but to go to Pop.”

“What’s the difference if Luca kills you or Pop kills you?”

Tom said, “What else can I do?” Then he added, the thought just occurring to him, “Maybe I should get a gun.”

“And what? Blow your foot off with it?”

“You got an idea?”

“I don’t,” Sonny said, grinning. “It’s been nice knowing you, though, Tom. You been a good brother to me.” He leaned back and filled the car with his laughing.

“You’re funny,” Tom said. “Look. I’m betting she won’t tell him.”

“Yeah,” Sonny said, taking pity on him. He knocked the ash off his cigarette, took a drag, and spoke as he exhaled. “And if she does,” he said, “Pop’ll figure out a way to fix it. You’ll be in the doghouse for a while, but he’s not lettin’ Luca kill you.” After another moment, he added, “Of course, her brothers…,” and then he laughed his big laugh again.

“You having a good time?” Tom said. “Hotshot?”

“Sorry,” Sonny said, “but this is rich. Mr. Perfect’s not so perfect. Mr. Good Boy’s got a little bad in him. I’m enjoying this,” he said, and he reached over to rough up Tom’s hair.

Tom pushed his hand away. “Mama’s worried about you,” he said. “She found a fifty-dollar bill in the pocket of a pair of pants you brought her to wash.”

Sonny slammed the heel of his hand into the steering wheel. “That’s where it went! She say anything to Pop?”

“No. Not yet. But she’s worried about you.”

“What did she do with the money?”

“Gave it to me.”

Sonny looked at Tom.

“Don’t worry,” Tom said. “I’ve got it.”

“So what’s Mama worried about? I’m workin’. Tell her I saved the money.”

“Come on, Sonny. Mama’s not stupid. This is a fifty-dollar bill we’re talking about.”

“So if she’s worried, why don’t she ask me?”

Tom fell back in his seat, as if he were tired of even trying to talk to Sonny. He opened his window all the way and let the wind blow across his face. “Mama don’t ask you,” he said, “the same way she don’t ask Pop why now we own a whole building in the Bronx, when we used to live the six of us on Tenth Avenue in a two-bedroom apartment. Same reasons why she don’t ask him how come everybody that lives in the building happens to work for him, or why there’s always two guys on the front stoop watching everybody who walks or drives by.”

Sonny yawned and ran his fingers over a tangle of dark, curly hair that spilled down over his forehead almost to his eyes. “Hey,” he said. “The olive oil business is dangerous.”

“Sonny,” Tom said. “What are you doing with a fifty-dollar bill in your pocket? What are you doing in a double-breasted, pin-striped suit looking like a gangster? And why,” he asked, moving quickly to shove his hand under Sonny’s suit jacket and up toward his shoulder, “are you carrying a gun?”

“Hey, Tom,” Sonny said, pushing his hand away. “Tell me something. You think Mama really believes that Pop’s in the olive oil business?”

Tom didn’t answer. He watched Sonny and waited.

“I got the bean shooter with me,” Sonny said, “because my brother might have been in trouble and might have needed somebody to get him out of it.”

“Where do you even get a gun?” Tom said. “What’s going on with you, Sonny? Pop’ll kill you if you’re doing what it looks like you’re doing. What’s wrong with you?”

“Answer my question,” Sonny said. “I’m serious. You think Mama really believes Pop’s in the business of selling olive oil?”

“Pop *is* in the business of selling olive oil. Why? What business do you think he’s in?”

Sonny glanced at Tom as if to say *Don’t talk like an idiot*.

Tom said, “I don’t know what Mama believes. All I know is she asked me to talk to you about the money.”

“So tell her I saved it up from working at the garage.”

“Are you still working at the garage?”

“Yeah,” Sonny said. “I’m working.”

“Jesus Christ, Sonny…” Tom rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. They were on Canal Street, the sidewalks on either side of them lined with empty vendor stands. Now everything was quiet, but in a few hours the street would be crowded with people in their Sunday finery out for a stroll on a fall afternoon. He said, “Sonny, listen to me. Mama spends her whole life worrying about Pop—but about her children, Sonny, she doesn’t have to worry. Are you hearing me, hotshot?” Tom raised his voice a little to make his point. “I’m in college. You’ve got a good job at the garage. Fredo, Michael, Connie, they’re still kids. Mama can sleep at night because she doesn’t have to worry about her children, the way she has to worry, every waking moment of her life, about Pop. Think, Sonny.” Tom held one of the lapels of Sonny’s jacket between his fingers. “How much you want to

put Mama through? How much is this fancy-tailored suit worth to you?”

Sonny pulled onto the sidewalk in front of a garage. He looked sleepy and bored. “We’re here,” he said. “Go open the door for me, will you, pal?”

“That’s it?” Tom said. “That’s all you got to say?”

Sonny laid his head atop the bench seat and closed his eyes. “Jeez, I’m tired.”

“You’re tired,” Tom repeated.

“Really,” Sonny said. “I’ve been up since forever.”

Tom watched Sonny and waited, until he realized, after a minute, that Sonny was falling asleep. “*Mammalucc’!*” he said. He gently grabbed a hunk of his brother’s hair and shook him.

“What is it?” Sonny asked without opening his eyes. “Did you get the garage yet?”

“You have a key for it?”

Sonny opened the glove box, pulled out a key, and handed it to Tom. He pointed to the car door.

“You’re welcome,” Tom said. He stepped out onto the street. They were on Mott, down the block from Sonny’s apartment. He thought about asking Sonny why he was keeping the car in a garage a block away from his apartment when he could just as easily park on the street outside his front door. He thought about it, decided against it, and went to open the garage.

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* * *

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