

A
WOMAN
To Blame

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V I N C E N T P A N E T T I E R E



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**Man supposes that he directs his life
and governs his actions,
when his existence is irretrievably
under the control of destiny.**

Goethe

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I am grateful to Dunya Bean, Joan Howlett, Walter Queren and Lynn Smith for their encouragement and support as the story progressed.

Most especially I am grateful to my wife Penny for her love and support through the ages.

During the six months Hegan and Lucy had lived together he learned not to object or resist when the wind was at her back, otherwise he'd play Wile E. Coyote to her Road Runner. But, if he was creative, and he knew he was, there were alternatives to slavish submission.

Hegan displayed a grumpy reluctance as he heavily tromped up the steps while watching moisture slide off the thick rubber tops of his boots. He joined Lucy waiting for him at the front door of Madame Stella's studio, then made his move. He looked at her with a smile of compliance on his face and not a bone of resistance in his body.

"I see your point. About dancing. And, would love to take lessons with you." Lucy's face was flooded with expectation like a child discovering presents under the Christmas tree. Oh, what a good boy am I he thought.

"But, look . . ." Hegan pointed to his thick-soled boots. "Can't. See?" He began a few jerky movements, his feet never once leaving the floor.

Lucy's nod spoke of understanding, but not disappointment. She produced a pair of Hegan's tasseled loafers from the gym bag slung on her shoulder. Her smile was more "up yours" than beatific.

"*Après-vous monsieur*", she said not knowing how to say gotcha in French.

Caught and trapped, Hegan slowly pushed the door open a crack, clinging to his freedom for another moment.

A shout pierced the opening and echoed in the hall. He stopped trying to enter when he heard:

"D. E. A. D!"

Hegan listened at the door. No music. Scattering footsteps. Persons fleeing. He popped the snaps on his jacket and reached for his holster. Lucy pushed by him and threw open the door.

Madame Stella, fortyish, with a sheaf of red hair tied up above her head by a black velvet ribbon, stood in the middle of the studio with her arms gesturing wildly.

"That's it! D.E.A.D!"

Hegan reached for Lucy's shoulder to pull her to safety until he could determine what bizarre ritual was sucking them into its vortex. She slipped past him to get a better view.

"DROP EVERYTHING AND DANCE," Madame Stella encouraged about ten teenagers who immediately turned into a twirling, gyrating explosion of humanity—consumed and directed by their own inner music.



"D.E.A.D" Hegan murmured to no one as he awoke and adjusted his eyes to the refracted glare of the Caribbean sun. He felt movement and slowly turned to find Charles approaching. Charles was his pathfinder, his brother in arms. Charles was his taxi driver on the island of St. Vincent.

"They are here," Charles said with a solemnity in his voice Hegan regretted hearing. He followed the turn of Charles' head to find an electric baggage tug being driven slowly across the tarmac of the island's Amos Vale airport. Two baggage carts were connected to the tug.

The airport had a runway only long enough to accommodate commuter planes from Barbados and outlying islands in the Grenadines chain. It would never be mistaken for O'Hare.

The lone plane on the runway was the de Haviland turboprop that would initiate the first leg of Hegan's trip back to Chicago. Two coffins were lashed to the top shelves of the carts as the tug stopped before the plane's open cargo door.

Hegan wondered yet again what took him to this island in the Caribbean; a speck eighteen miles long and eleven wide which he imagined must look like a poppy seed from outer space.

Of course, he remembered.

Burnt fish.

Seven dead.

Two bodies traveling with him to Chicago.

All died because someone cooked and burned fish.

There was an eighth fatality.
For that dead woman, he would always feel completely to blame.



Johnny Faraci had new neighbors. He heard them moving in one night after ten. Several days later he smelled what he thought was their dinner. Before the latest inhabitants of condo 32C, which had a partial view of Lake Michigan from high above Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, actually appeared before him in material form he judged them to be "loud and stinky."

One morning, weeks later, Faraci did not expect to notice an imbalance in the molecular particulate of his air. Though he tried, the offensive odor was difficult to ignore as it began to slip into his condo, 32A with a one hundred and eighty degree view of the Lake. Faraci, now remembering his earlier experience, was convinced the odor wafted from Mr. and Mrs. Ivanov's condo. He knew their names from the directory in the lobby because they were never courteous enough to formally introduce themselves. This lack of civility Faraci added to his carefully maintained list of personal slights.

What was worse, he wondered, the disturbing and unsettling beginning of his morning or last month's disruption of his nocturnal solitude?

Faraci shuddered remembering how the splintering of his front door by the movers became an "introduction" to his neighbors. They never apologized, causing another black mark against their names. Instead, they sent the building manager to arrange for a replacement. The anger that rose in him as a result of such irresponsibility brought Faraci back to the odor.

He tried guessing some kind of meat. Could food that malodorous enhance appetite? His mind visited the possibilities. Liver? The few times he had calves' liver, he didn't remember its smell being so foul. Kidneys? Never had. Pigs feet? Never had.

Fish! Had to be. He remembered the dish of dry cod and potatoes his paternal grand-mother made for his father because

Faraci's mother refused to cook any dish that made her nauseous when not pregnant. The cod looked like a wooden plank and smelled like a burning rubber tire.

On the rare, very rare, occasion when his father returned home after visiting Grandma Maria with a jar of—what to call it—“stuff” was the only apt description, made especially for her ‘sonny boy’, Mrs. Faraci, Jr. - his mother - refused to heat it or stay in the same room while his father ate. Such was her revulsion that even in the winter all the windows were open. The wind could blow the curtains up to the ceiling and their breath could freeze into icy droplets. No window was shut until his father had finished eating that repulsive dish, and its remains immediately wrapped in newspaper and buried at the bottom of the trash barrel in the back yard.

During the winter before Grandma Maria died, Faraci remembered, his father ate the dreaded cod dish at the dining room table with his overcoat, hat and gloves on.

From those early years sprang Faraci's aversion to offensive odor. No matter the source, including his own person. His cigar smoke excluded. He paid a bundle to have Cohibas, the real thing, smuggled across the border from Windsor, Ontario and anyone who didn't like his cigar smoke could blow smoke up their own ass. Nevertheless, Faraci took a solemn vow never to be offensive—at least in the odor department.

Faraci started the day at peace with himself. After showering he slipped into the black trousers of his silk suit, put on a starched white shirt and added an Italian silk tie. For extra comfort he wore his new, silk smoking robe. Hefner wore a robe over pajamas and stupid Gigante wore a moth-eaten one before his conviction. Faraci's was made of a maroon silk delicately festooned with a pattern of gold Griffiths that were embroidered with actual fourteen carat gold thread.

Faraci eased his spare frame into a comfortably matured leather armchair in the corner of his forty foot living room. He took great pride in maintaining his weight proportionate to his height. Measuring four inches below six feet, he weighed one hundred

and fifty five pounds. That frame enabled him to wear contoured Italian silk suits and shirts.

His living room was decorated in the manor of an exclusive British club, the kind he remembered from the movies of his youth. Chippendale this and Chesterfield that. Precisely what didn't matter. He cared about totality more than specifics.

The only exception to the decor was the lead-lined drapes. Faraci believed this precaution would prevent him from being harmed by the ultra violet rays of satellite spy cameras while keeping his exposure to electronic surveillance to a minimum. Certain that many leaders of multinational corporations were safeguarded in like manner, Faraci never considered such precautions to be extreme.

Faraci considered himself part of the managerial class. He directed people and events, took issue when subordinates made mistakes and meted out appropriate censure. His methods most likely would not be the subject of a Harvard Business Review story—not yet.

If at any time in his life Faraci had ever recited “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world”, that’s what he would have repeated this morning as he opened the Chicago Tribune. As was his custom, he turned first to *Doonesbury* because the strip aggravated him. With luck, that would be the only *agita* he got.

As a noxious odor reached his lungs, Faraci sensed the comic strip would be offensive as a burp. He prided himself on an excellent sense of smell and paradoxically, considering his cigar smoking, an educated palate as well. He enjoyed fine food and wine, His olfactory glands and taste buds could distinguish the ingredients of any dish, including its herbal content.

In the twenty years he'd owned the condo, never had he been so offended, which was his second rule of life. Don't offend and don't be offended, almost but not quite do unto others.

Before acting in haste or pre-judging the Ivanovs, he was determined to eliminate all possibilities; sniffing the drain in the sink, the refrigerator and vegetable crispers. The trash can still

had a deodorant wafer affixed to the inside. He could check off the kitchen.

The drain in the bathroom sink didn't smell and neither did the drain in the shower. He sniffed above the toilet confirming no odor came from the bathroom.

When he returned to the living room, the smell became stronger. Faraci lit a four inch Cohiba earlier than usual. He saw no other option. He was in the midst of a malodorous fog that threatened to permeate every porous surface—from drapes to sofa fabric to his prized smoking robe. Better the smoke on my robe should come from my Cohiba he reasoned.

As he drew in and expelled the rich, comforting smoke, Faraci thought he saw the odor actually filter through his walls like in some cheap horror movie and started to panic. But, after a few more puffs, he remembered the windows were sealed shut and dismissed any hysterical notions. The only area he had not checked was outside his front door.

With the cigar in his mouth smoking like propitiating incense, Faraci, resolved to know the source of the outrage, headed for the front door. He took big puffs and blew clouds of cigar smoke to deodorize the air and provide a protective wreath around his head. As he put his hand on the door, the possibility that the CIA was trying to smoke him out of his condo, using noxious fish odor gas, made him stop.

Faraci was a very private man, though his business made him a public figure. As he approached his seventieth year, he wanted more privacy than ever before. More than anything he was determined to prove his mother wrong. She foretold his death when he was fifty. There was the possibility, and he eagerly embraced it, that since she was a native-born American, learning Sicilian dialect from her immigrant Aunt Evelyn, his mother may have mispronounced the word and actually he'd lived years longer than expected.

No matter. He wasn't taking chances. He was too young, too healthy and too ambitious to die just now. And certainly, not at

the hands of the CIA or any of the other alphabet soup subsidiaries of Uncle Sam.

Worse than the offensive odor penetrating his smoking robe and the condo; worse than the odor pouring through his walls as if they were made of mesh was the thought that the Feds would trick him and haul his ass to some security max dungeon. Just in case, he took a snub nose .38 from the drawer of the lamp table in the foyer and dropped it into the pocket of his robe. Then he felt like a stunatz—a first class jerk. They're outside—night scopes on M-16s with infra red sights and grenade launchers—and I've got a .38 as big as my limp dick, he thought.

Nothing mattered. If they killed him, he'd die with a fusillade of bullets turning his body into chopped chuck. If he stayed inside he'd puke himself to death on their putrid gas. Faraci pushed his right hand into his pocket and gripped the pistol, then flung open the door.

Blam! He was engulfed in smoke. No Feds. The hall was empty, but the door of his new neighbor was wide open, propped up by a three-foot tall silver samovar.

“Holy fuckin’ shit. They’re killin’ themselves and want me to die too.” The open door was four feet away and, as he reached it, the ghostly shape of what he assumed was the Mrs. half of M&M Ivanov, partially shrouded in smoke, appeared in the foyer waving the latest copy of Cosmo and driving the smoke straight into Faraci’s face.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he growled as the edge of Cosmo almost hit him in the nose. “That shit stinks. You’re killing me!” Faraci puffed furiously to mingle his smoke with hers. When she emerged from the smoke he was grateful they weren’t mingling bodily fluids.

Mrs. I wore a daffodil yellow house coat that matched her slippers. During her progress to the front door, her robe loosened. Thankfully, and here Faraci expressed rare gratitude to the Almighty, the robe didn’t open all together exposing the round mound of her being.

When Mrs. I saw Faraci puff she yelled “No! No! Out! Bad! Cancer!” But he continued to puff without speaking and pointed

to the interior of her condo, then pinched his nose with two fingers in a universal language that even she, he hoped, could understand.

“Schmelt”, she nodded and flashed an embarrassed smile exposing symmetrically placed gold teeth above and below each other. “Schmelt,” she repeated in case Faraci didn’t understand.

He did. “Yeah, I schmelt it and it schtinks cause its shit.” She looked at him quizzically—to smile or not smile.

At this moment, Faraci made a mistake that would set the wheels of fate in motion. They would move as inexorably as the troop trains positioned toward Sarajevo before the start and leading to the outbreak, of World War I.

Faraci held his nose with his left hand, leaving his right to communicate his displeasure and agitation. When events of such an emergency nature dictated, he was known to point at the offender in short punchy strokes. So, Faraci pointed with his right hand.

His right hand held the .38. It was unintentional, of course. How could he explain that to a fat woman who barely spoke English and cooked smelly fish? Nevertheless his gestures pointed the barrel of the .38 into Mrs. I’s face.

She was shocked and screamed. The robe fell open revealing an undulating form with more hollers and valleys than Kentucky coal country. She retreated and slammed the door. He quickly closed his and noticed immediately a twenty percent decrease in the odor’s intensity. Now, he could join Lenny for breakfast.

Faraci sat in last booth in the back of Benno’s, a small cafe off LaSalle in the financial district that had escaped the urban renewal bulldozer. Benno’s was a joint, a hangout where lawyers, politicians and others like Faraci could meet in solitude. He looked around and saw maybe five booths all together with another three or four tables down the center and one lonely table for two squeezed by the front window. The heat from inside met the window chilled by the January air steaming the glass opaque and making the joint more secluded. Faraci liked joints and didn’t feel the least bit uncomfortable eating in a suit that represented six weeks wages for fifty percent of the patrons and a mile beyond the aspirations of the workers.

He sat alone at the last booth in a corner next to the kitchen. This was his preferred spot for a number of reasons. His back was to the wall and he observed all who came in and out. If there was need to vacate the premises he was into the kitchen and away in a second. Last, and most important for Faraci—his seat being closest to the kitchen insured his food was hot. All the waiters knew who he was and how he was capable of ruining their day, if not their gainful employment, or, God forbid, their health if his food was not hot off the stove.

Lenny Santoro was five minutes late, which was unusual considering he taught accounting at the University and believed in being precise in all aspects of his life. Faraci and Lenny knew each other from another lifetime ago—high school.

Lenny graduated with a college degree in economics, found the field too aggressive and ultimately settled for a profession more suited to his personality. Faraci found a profession that was aggressive, but wasn't strictly speaking economics.

Lenny slid into the booth as Faraci looked away from his watch, one eyebrow raised. "So? This is abnormal, Lenny. Five minutes." Faraci spoke across the rim of his coffee cup.

Lenny was contrite and didn't realize Faraci was reliving their high school days when they would take turns "ranking out" the other. Faraci saw the mortification on Lenny's face and relented. "Come on. I know you, what, forty, more, years? So, you're late." His pronunciamento ended, Faraci waved for the waiter to take Lenny's order.

"Cappuccino," to the waiter.

He explained to Faraci, "I hate being late. You know I'd be here exactly as usual. I got delayed by a colleague. Nice guy. Family man. Tenured. Written a few papers. Speaks at symposia."

"No." from Faraci startled Lenny as he tentatively sipped from the steaming cup of Cappuccino. "No? What? No."

"I said no," Faraci insisted. "I won't marry him," what resembled laughter tinkled from Faraci's mouth. "Sounds like you're giving me his pedigree, what do you guys call it ceevee?" Considering the way his day began, Faraci attributed his good mood to the swift

and efficient solution to his odor problem. Faraci liked solving mysteries as much as he liked creating them.

“Curriculum vitae,” Lenny said, then slowly got to the reason for the biographical details.

“Johnny, you know all the years since high school, I never intruded on your business. Never. Whatever I learned from the outside. Didn’t matter. You were always Johnny of Johnny and the Harptones, the doo wop group we sang with down in the high school basement in that space near the boiler?” The alcove, Faraci corrected. “Yeah. So, I know this guy, the C.V. guy, who teaches math and got some trouble.”

Faraci shrugged. “He teaches math, he should be able to figure things out.” Lenny didn’t laugh and Faraci said seriously, “What kind of trouble?” When he saw the look on Lenny’s face that said ‘you know what I mean’, he added “because if he knocked up some coed, that’s not my line.” and smiled.

“Geez. You took comedian pills this morning. It’s the usual.” With that Lenny rubbed the thumb and forefinger of his right hand together rapidly, the universal non-verbal indication for money. “Sure,” Faraci agreed, “for you Lenny. Send him to my office. I’ll work something out, but not with a slide rule.” Again the tinkle of Faraci’s laugh to which he added a drum rim shot, ba dum bum, on the table with the tips of his fingers on both hands.

Tension eased from Lenny’s body and he managed a weak smile. “Thank you.” They ordered breakfast and then got into an argument over putting a dome on Wrigley Field. Lenny was pro based on economics. Faraci couldn’t care but argued violently against based on aesthetics. Faraci made Lenny pay for breakfast and they left convinced the other was an imbecile. Next week they’d find something else to argue about.



Vadim Ivanov got a call from his wife Ivana in the office of his commodities trading company before he’d had time to finish his second cup of coffee. She was in tears and he could barely

understand her rapid speech. The one word he did understand was gun. He rushed home, grateful she was alive and unharmed but worried nevertheless. Could it be a home invasion robbery, like in California? He hoped no one had discovered the concealed safe. He'd spent a million eight on the condo. They were supposed to provide the best security. As soon as he knew Ivana was safe, he'd call his lawyer and sue the bastards. Then he'd call Gregori who was more experienced in such matters.

He called out Ivana's name from the foyer. What the hell was she cooking? More importantly, why didn't she answer? Vadim searched the rooms to find Ivana cowering in the kitchen corner where the sink met the stove, a clump of shivering flesh, her eyes red from crying. He held his wife as he would a child who had been awakened by a nightmare. After she stopped crying, he gave her a shot of vodka from the bottle in the freezer. She refused, but he insisted she bolt it down. It would straighten her spine.

Ivana needed two more shots before all her vertebrae were aligned. It was then she told him every detail. She'd gotten a deep yen for fried smelts, the ones he'd caught ice fishing in Wisconsin the last weekend. The phone rang. Her shrug filled in the gap. The fish started to burn. Smoke billowed throughout the condo. As she cleared out the smoke, the man next door threatened her with his gun.

"The man next door?" he asked without indicating the one he hoped was not involved. "Ruski or Amerikanski?" Ivana looked at her husband of fifteen years with doubts about his sanity. Of course it was the American, who else would have a gun in his condo. "We do," Vadim reminded her.

They had to have a gun; she was quick to point out because all the Americans were armed. Weren't those stories in Pravda enough of a warning? Now, all she'd worried about before they left Kiev, came true. Her life had been threatened and she almost died because of a little burnt fish.

Vadim called Gregori and left a message. Only his brother could help them now.



Dr. Santoro's words during a phone call the day before echoed in Prof. Steve Gorman's head as he drove downtown toward Navy Pier. "I've got this friend. Says he can help you. Whatever you decide is okay with me. Your business. I know nothing and want to know less. You're a big boy. It's your call."

When Gorman heard the friend identified as Johnny Faraci, his emotions were jumbled. At first he felt too morally superior to sink so low. The newspapers called Faraci 'a reputed mobster.' Having to deal with that sort of individual was way beneath a tenured professor. Yet, the reality was he needed help and he needed it fast. Soon he was convinced that his greater intelligence would rule. Just as he'd gotten a good deal on a used car for his wife, that same combo of daring and intellectual brilliance would see him through to a successful and favorable for him, negotiation with Faraci.

Gorman smiled as he parked the car and, head down, forced his way against and through the icy wind blowing off of Lake Michigan toward the entrance to the Chicago Clipper, an old Lake Michigan steamer-ferry. Decommissioned, the Clipper now was a floating restaurant and catering hall. The veteran of Prohibition was permanently moored to provide barely edible food to tourists and conventioners. Two satellite dishes and other antenna were prominent aft of its smokestack. Gorman intent on visualizing a positive outcome to his negotiation with Faraci, never raised his head to notice.

Gorman's smile faded when he entered the foyer and encountered Jeff. With hooded eyes and a lean, angular face, Jeff presented an aura of controlled mayhem like a falcon ready to strike. Jeff asked Gorman if he wanted smoking or non-smoking. When Gorman asked to see Faraci, Jeff ordered "Stay right here!". Without hesitation, Gorman moved to the requisite location. Jeff disappeared.

After a few minutes of nervous waiting during which Gorman's eyes stayed riveted on the pattern of red velvet wall covering, Jeff instantly reappeared and beckoned for the professor to ascend a

dark staircase. What light there was shone off of a highly polished wood banister. Jeff flicked his head toward the top of the stairs and waited for Gorman to go first. After three steps, Gorman looked over his shoulder and saw Jeff follow. Eyes poking out from under heavy lids met Gorman's who broke contact only to note Jeff's hand inside his jacket, at the level of his waist. Gorman took the next ten steps as if prodded by the Devil's pitchfork and reached the top breathing rapidly.

The stairs led directly into Faraci's office. The large space, with a semi-circle of windows, had been the bridge of the former vessel. Faraci smiled across the room as Gorman tried to compose himself. Gorman inhaled deeply and noticed a bank of television monitors along a far wall. Even at this distance he observed horse races on two of the screens. Gorman didn't expect Old World manners, but he didn't get the barely intelligible speech of Tony Soprano, either. What the professor couldn't know was that Faraci liked to play "menace-the-pigeon" which kept all supplicants off balance and gave him an edge from the first sit down.

Faraci, very business-like, explained he was in the catering business and from time to time friends would recommend their friends for a helping hand. That was the occasion of their meeting. Considering the circumstances and nature of their mutual affairs, all involved must maintain decorum and discretion at all times.

Made perfect sense to Gorman, who had a reputation for being a take-no-prisoners professor. In his classes you performed or paid with a diminished grade point average. Across from him sat a man who shared a similar respect for responsibility.

Faraci let Gorman explain his difficulty, holding a long standing belief that words initiated and spoken in candor were the best traps. When he learned that some non-green card holding spic at the University was getting gobs of vigorish from students and faculty alike, he put his hand over his mouth to conceal his shock and surprise. Then, his anger rose. "That prick is a janitor?" As if social hierarchy should determine who was permitted to charge outrageous interest. Never bothered the banks. Gorman nodded in assent.

Gorman related he was two months arrears in payment and asked for more time. Trujillo, that was the prick's name, threatened to visit his wife at home when Gorman was teaching. "You got a preeeety wife," Trujillo leered as he saw the family photo on Gorman's desk late one afternoon as he went from office to office ostensibly emptying the trash, while also collecting bets and intimidating those he determined were dead beats.

"Maybe she need a man like me. A real hombre," Trujillo offered as he grabbed his crotch. Gorman stood up and impotently pushed the janitor, who blurted a derisive laugh in return and wagged a finger as reminder. "Maybe it better for her you no pay," and his hand shot to the inseam of his grey work pants. Gorman grabbed a calculus book and prepared to slam it on Trujillo's head when a student arrived for his four o'clock appointment.

Faraci listened to Gorman's tale of woe with inner glee. He was willing to help Gorman as a favor to his good friend Lenny. Gorman's look of relief sealed his fate. Unsaid was Faraci's ire that an interloper and worse, an illegal, non-citizen was usurping his income and decreasing his profits. American business could not sustain itself if healthy competition replaced cartels and monopolies.

Faraci had to do his part for the economy, but his attention to Gorman was replaced by action on one of the TV screens.

"See that?" Faraci pointed excitedly to a race in progress. "It's some horse running in bumfuck Missouri and I'm gonna win a bundle."

Gorman paused at the interruption, thinking the last subject he wanted to discuss was horse racing. Faraci persisted. "Know why? I bet the trainer." Faraci was pleased with himself and didn't allow Gorman to respond. "I got ten winners this month just betting on this trainer. The beauty part . . . she's a girl! Ariel something. A sure winner. Look it . . ."

They watched as Faraci's horse crossed the finish line in an easy gait by four lengths. "You was sayin'?"

Gorman related how he owed ten thousand dollars and each week the total increased by five percent. "That much?" Faraci was

being sarcastic, but Gorman was too consumed with his plight to notice. The dumb spic and the dumb college guy don't know what a cheap deal they had in five percent a week. And it never, he reminded himself, never pays to be an amateur. Faraci told Gorman not to lose sleep, the ten grand was his. No interest. No reimbursement. A gift.

Gorman was speechless, and finally blurted his everlasting gratitude. He thought a little humble prostrating was required even though he knew deep within it was the brilliance of Professor Steven Gorman that caused such a successful outcome.

But, it also wasn't a gift, gift. It was payment for information that would remove a predator from the scene. "How,?" Gorman gulped and expected Faraci to tell him the less he knew the better. But, Faraci surprised him. "You see the Discovery Channel program on wolves. No? Too bad. See, they catch the wolves, put a radioactive collar on them and relocate them to another neighborhood. Consider the spic "relocated."

Relocation was suitable to Gorman. He hoped Trujillo's new environment would be thousands of miles away from his wife and that the temperature never rose above minus forty five degrees. They agreed to think about a proper time and place to pay off Trujillo. Gorman left. A smile returned to his face as he reached the bottom of the stairs, but vanished as soon as Jeff appeared. Gorman waved at falcon eyes and quickly left the Chicago Clipper.



When finally Gregori returned his brother's call he apologized for the delay. His new Uzbekistan restaurant was about to open in two weeks and every day was another problem. He could sense the agitation in his older brother's voice, but when asked for specifics Ivan declined to speak on the phone. They decided to meet at the zoo.

An hour later, in front of the polar bear exhibit at the Lincoln Park Zoo, Vadim gave his baby brother Gregori a bear hug. The brothers were surprised to find the polar bears hibernating inside. Only the brothers Ivanov were dumb enough to stand outside in

the January cold. For what they had to discuss speaking outside in hushed tones was preferable. They were used to cold.

Vadim pushed Gregori an arm's length away and eyed him head to shoe. "Little brother, little brother. You a good lookin' guy. Like Putin." In fact, Gregori had the same slim build and angular face as Vladimir Putin. He exuded power, too, but on a lesser, non-nuclear, scale.

Though two months passed since their last meeting, the brothers consumed by their respective businesses, the relationship had not diminished.

"I hate you." Vadim blurted. Gregori wasn't surprised. He knew the reason and smiled. Vadim tried to grab Gregori's midriff, but couldn't. "You got nothing. No fet, no fleb." Vadim played his bulging stomach like a drum. "You eat like a musk ox and drink and smoke. Me, I'm wearing a pickle barrel under my shirt."

And so they ambled down the paths of the zoo, acting like a couple of forty something kids until Vadim got to the heart of the problem. All kidding stopped and Gregori paid more attention to his older brother than he did his professors at the polytechnic institute. Vadim recounted the entire story from the phone call to how Ivana slugged down three shots of vodka and then identified the gun wielder.

Gregori didn't offer a twitch or tick of expression and Vadim took this lack of response as either fear or impotency. Then he wondered if Gregori actually grasped the true nature and reputation of the neighbor in Condo 32A. "If this is too much to ask, Gregori, I'll understand. I just thought, considering your friends."

"Shh. Dear older brother. Consider it done. A way will be found. A serpentine way so that the victim will be totally at ease." Gregori had already formed a plan, his eyes told Vadim. "Do not take on this burden alone." Vadim advised. "You must keep me informed. Likewise, whatever I learn about my neighbor, you will know, too."

"Good. For now, my first call will be to Zendofsky, he changed his name to Zenda, but no matter." The brothers Ivanov fiercely embraced in a hug of affection and strength, each challenging